

2019 Testimony from Carolyn Saenz Zimmerman  
A Murder Victim Family Member

I sincerely hope that Kansas will repeal the death penalty this year, and I have volunteered countless hours over the years working toward that goal. My stance on this issue usually surprises people because I'm the daughter of a man who was murdered. It was about this time of year – a snowy winter night 50 years ago – that my father was kidnapped during a robbery of his business. He was found stabbed to death in a lonely field outside of town. Although evidence pointed to several perpetrators, there were no suspects. No one was ever charged. My mother was left to raise my three younger siblings as a single parent. Thankfully, she had the help of her parents, but she lost the family business and struggled financially for years.

The common expectation is that murder victim family members support the death penalty. It's my experience that family survivors face reality in different ways. A conclusion that more of us are coming to, however, is that the death penalty is a false promise, which inflicts further pain on the families of murder victims by prolonging the legal process. I have been inspired to meet and work with people who, after horrific tragedy, have rejected the death penalty – people like Linda Hessman and her husband in Dodge City whose niece was murdered, and Bud Welch whose daughter was murdered in the Oklahoma City bombing. Like many others in that group, I support repealing the death penalty, because I believe the death penalty fails murder victims' families. An execution can never bring closure or bring back our loved ones, but instead forces murder victims' families to endure a difficult and seemingly endless legal process. We have a better alternative. Life in prison with no hope of parole is a severe punishment for capital murder that holds the offender accountable and begins immediately without years of delay.

I've asked myself: What seeds do we sow when we continue to keep the death penalty? My answer: the mistaken and simplistic notion that the death penalty meets the needs faced by murder victims' families. Celeste Dixon of Larned, Kansas, lost her mother to rape and murder in 1986. I think Celeste was wise when she wrote about the murderer's execution in Texas over 20 years later: "Killing him didn't bring closure, only sadness that the cycle of violence continues." I urge the 2019 Kansas Legislature to vote for repeal of the death penalty.