

# Human Rights Hero: Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf

By Virginia E. Sloan

Since the year 2000, six governors have suspended executions in their states. Facing sometimes extraordinary dissent from their constituents and political opponents, they decided to follow this courageous course because they could not ignore the facts, and they could not let a broken capital punishment system continue to devastate the lives of those in its wake. Whether for moral or practical reasons, they declared that a system pervaded by wrongful convictions, racial disparities, ineffective attorneys, prosecutorial misconduct, unwarranted costs, and other widespread problems could no longer be implemented to support executions in their states.

Governor Tom Wolf of Pennsylvania most recently followed in the path of five other courageous governors: George Ryan of Illinois, John Kitzhaber of Oregon, his successor, Kate Brown, John Hickenlooper of Colorado, and Jay Inslee of Washington, all of whom imposed a moratorium on the death penalty in his or her state.

Governor Wolf made his announcement on February 13, 2015, following an election in which he defeated the incumbent, who had made an issue of the likelihood of Wolf imposing a moratorium. Governor Wolf, once in office, acted only after eliciting the views of expert death penalty proponents and opponents, including national organizations that have carefully



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studied capital punishment. These included the ABA, which issued a *Pennsylvania Death Penalty Assessment Report*, and The Constitution Project, which published a report entitled *Irreversible Error*. He also noted the findings of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court's Committee on Racial and Gender Bias in the Justice System as a basis for his suspension of executions until the "significant and widely recognized defects" in Pennsylvania's capital punishment system are addressed. Citing justice for victims and their families as his first priority, he made clear that his decision to impose a moratorium was made in light of the "weighty responsibility assigned to the Governor . . . as the final check in the capital punishment process."

Not only did he impose a moratorium but, like other governors before him, Governor Wolf also used his executive clemency power to issue reprieves to inmates on death row. His actions resulted in an immediate court challenge, *Commonwealth v. Williams*. But in December

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2015, the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania rejected arguments that Governor Wolf had exceeded his constitutional authority by granting reprieves of an unlimited duration.

In many other states around the country, the death machine continues, as governors and other political actors ignore overwhelming evidence of the system's significant flaws. However, Governor Wolf and his peers who preceded him have recognized this widespread and troubling evidence, even though they sometimes faced tremendous resistance and political backlash. They stand out because they stood

up—for fairness, justice, and accuracy for defendants, victims, and the public at large. We are pleased to name Governor Tom Wolf, representing his fellow outstanding governors, as this issue's Human Rights Hero.

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