

**James Abbott** is the chief of police in West Orange, N.J. He was a member of the New Jersey Death Penalty Study Commission.

A Voice of Experience from the Cop Next Door

In 2007, New Jersey's legislature and governor replaced the death penalty with a sentence of life in prison without parole. No state had legislatively abolished its death penalty in more than 40 years, but since then New Mexico, Illinois and Connecticut followed suit. Our close neighbor Maryland just passed legislation to abandon its death penalty. Now I hear that Delaware is considering a bill to end capital punishment as well.

I want to share the view from where I sit: I am the police chief of West Orange, N.J., an older suburban town adjacent to Newark, where we see our share of violent crime. I am a proud Republican who has long supported the death penalty. I have dedicated my life to protecting the public and making our streets safer. And I put my life on the line every time I go to work. Believe me, sympathy for killers is nowhere in my vocabulary.

In 2006, the New Jersey Legislature set up a study commission to decide what to do with the death penalty. The capital punishment system was broken; some people wanted to fix it, while others wanted to abolish it.

I was asked to join the commission and help decide what to do. I pledged to keep an open mind, but I always supported the death penalty, and I didn't expect that to change. If there were fixes we could recommend to make it work better, I figured I could support that.

I was wrong.

I no longer believe that you can fix the death penalty. Six months of study opened my eyes to its shocking reality. I learned that the death penalty throws millions of dollars down the drain -- money that I could be putting directly to work fighting crime every day -- while dragging victims' families through a long and torturous process that only exacerbates their pain.

I want to share what I learned from the families whose loved ones were lost, because I believe their untold stories are the shameful, hidden secret of the death penalty.

One by one they came before me -- mothers, fathers, children and spouses. Their cries of pain were devastating.

The judicial process sentences victims' families to an indeterminate time in legal limbo, waiting, waiting, waiting, for the day that the punishment will be carried out. For most of them, it never will be. The death penalty was supposed to help families like these, but virtually everything I heard told me that the process was tearing them apart. If I learned one thing listening to their stories, it was this: Should I be killed in the line of duty, I would not want my killer to face the death penalty. Why? Because I now understand what my family would have to go through, and it's just not worth it.

Meanwhile, maintaining this charade of a system had cost New Jersey almost a quarter billion dollars -- money that could have been providing these victims with crucial services to help them heal, or funding law enforcement and preventing the crimes in the first place. The prosecutors who sat on the commission with me confirmed through direct experience that capital cases deplete their resources more than any other type of case. Studies in other states found the same thing -- I am sure Delaware is no different.

As a police chief, I find this use of state resources offensive. The death penalty is supposed to help me fight crime, but it doesn't. I say: Give a law enforcement professional like me the money that's being wasted on the death penalty and I'll show you how to reduce crime. The death penalty isn't anywhere on my list.

The problems we found are not unique to New Jersey, which is why I feel comfortable offering my experience from across the border. And most people, even in law enforcement, have not had the opportunity to examine the issue as thoroughly as I have.

In my heart, I still believe that capital punishment is justified in some cases. But I also know that in real life, there is no perfect death penalty, and in practice, it does more harm than good. Life in prison without parole is the better alternative, and it is what the vast majority of convicted killers get in this country. It is harsh, it ensures public safety, and it puts victims' families first.