

Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights

2008 Annual Report



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Introduction

In its 2008 year-end report, the Death Penalty Information Center noted a continued downward trend in both executions and new death sentences and observed, among other conclusions, that “Victims' families are increasingly dissatisfied with what the death penalty offers them.” More and more, victims' families are challenging the common assumption that the death penalty offers closure and that anyone who has lost a loved one to murder will automatically be a supporter of capital punishment.

Throughout 2008, victims' family members served on death penalty study committees, testified before legislative and commission hearings, were featured in large-circulation newspapers and magazines, and collectively addressed thousands of listeners at schools, churches, conferences, rallies, workshops, and other gatherings.

2008 was the fourth full year of operation for Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights and marks another year of organizational growth and accomplishment, including the launch of an organizing and advocacy project that has drawn in new members and allies and is already shifting public thinking on the death penalty. As a victim-focused abolition and human rights organization, MVFHR brings together all types of survivors to declare that the death penalty, a profound human rights violation, has no place in a just society. This year's annual report demonstrates that MVFHR continues to be an integral part of the movement against the death penalty and for victims.

U.S. Program

Policy Work

Because survivors of murder victims are commonly assumed to favor capital punishment, the voices of survivors who *oppose* the death penalty are in demand whenever the issue is under review or debate. Providing an organizational context and affiliation for individual family members to express their opposition to the death penalty, and helping victims speak out against the death at specific junctures in the debate, is a core part of MVFHR's work.

In July, the Maryland Governor appointed MVFHR board chair Vicki Schieber to the state's new Commission on Capital Punishment, making her the second MVFHR member to be asked to serve on a state's death penalty study

commission. Also in 2008, MVFHR members brought much-needed voices to the California Commission on the Fair Administration of Justice, testifying at a series of hearings, and to lawmakers in states where the death penalty was under review, such as Illinois, Montana, and New Hampshire.

As part of our “Prevention, Not Execution” project (see below), MVFHR took the initiative to convene a group of activists who are working in several states to introduce legislation that would ban the execution of people with severe mental illness. In addition to this new network, we continued to be active members of several groups and coalitions that came together to discuss strategies for opposing the death penalty: the Ad Hoc Death Penalty Network (a coalition of state and national groups), the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty affiliates, and the Northeast Regional Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty.

“They use the term ‘closure’ to try to persuade people that an execution will lessen their pain, perhaps end it. No way. There is just no way to end the pain, and certainly not by taking the life of another human being.”— *from members’*

comments in the special issue of MVFHR’s newsletter focusing on closure, Fall 2008

Public Education

Voices of victims who oppose the death penalty help move the minds and hearts of people who are considering the issue, and ongoing public education is central to our organization’s work. During 2008, MVFHR members spoke to a diverse array of audiences in a wide variety of venues: to attorneys at a special capital case defense seminar, to activists attending the U.S. Human Rights Network conference, to myriad new audiences along Pennsylvania’s “Voices of Hope, Agents of Change” tour and on the Montana Journey of Hope tour – and to hundreds of other school groups, church groups, conferences, and gatherings.

In 2008 we published a special issue of our newsletter challenging the idea of “closure,” and allies around the U.S. requested and distributed hundreds of copies of this new resource that helps advance public understanding about victims’ real needs in the aftermath of murder. We continued to add participants to our online Gallery of Victims’ Stories, and portions of the Gallery were displayed at theatrical events in New York and North Carolina. Several MVFHR members were also featured in a photo exhibit at the Texas Prison Museum.

Our “For Victims, Against the Death Penalty” blog, updated several times a week throughout the year, regularly presented our message of victim opposition to the death penalty through reports about our members’ work around the country, excerpts from their testimony, letters to the editor, op-ed pieces, and speeches, and summaries of relevant research and commentary.

“Prevention, Not Execution” Project

Early in 2008, MVFHR joined forces with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) to draw attention to the intersection between the death penalty and mental illness from the perspective of surviving family members. The project is part of a national campaign to end executions for persons with severe mental illness. NAMI, the nation’s largest grassroots organization for people with mental illness and their families, shares MVFHR’s belief that persons suffering from mental illness should be treated, not executed. Both groups are interested in preventing the conditions that lead to criminal violence and in raising public awareness about the effect of sentencing mentally ill offenders to death.

The project brings together family members of victims killed by persons with severe mental illness and family members of persons with severe mental illness who have been executed. Through their involvement with the project, family members who fit either or both of these profiles are able to give voice to their experience and, specifically, to offer a victim-based opposition to the death penalty for persons with mental illness.

After several weeks of research and outreach to families within our membership and to families new to MVFHR, we gathered a group together in San Antonio on October 3 to mark the official launch of the project. A private roundtable conversation was followed by a public ceremony and press conference. In the remaining weeks of 2008, we conducted in-depth interviews with project participants around the country, and that material will form the basis of a report that we will publish in conjunction with NAMI and release at NAMI’s annual conference in July of 2009.

The “Prevention, Not Execution” project opens up a new front against the death penalty, brings a victim perspective to a national campaign focusing on opposing death sentences for people with mental disabilities, and has attracted new members and new allies to MVFHR.

Working with Colleague Organizations

In addition to the primary collaboration with the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the first phase of the “Prevention, Not Execution” project provided several opportunities to work closely with colleague organizations, particularly, in connection with organizing the San Antonio event, the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, the Texas After Violence Project, and the local Amnesty International Group. State groups in California, Florida, and Tennessee helped send participants to the event, and numerous groups around the U.S. helped to publicize it. As mentioned above (see “Policy Work”), toward the end of 2008 we convened a working group composed of those in the anti-death penalty and mental health communities who have taken a lead on this issue, and we continue to work

“We had no control over what happened to our daughter, but we can choose how we respond. For us, part of that response involves speaking out for violence prevention and against the death penalty for people with mental illness.”

– from the press conference announcing the launch of the “Prevention, Not Execution” project

collaboratively with those allies.

Apart from this specific project, we continued to work collaboratively with international, national, and local groups to amplify the voices of murder victims' family members and families of the executed within the death penalty debate. Whether we were working with a state group to organize victims' testimony for a hearing, referring member speakers, or participating in strategy discussions, our work throughout the year was closely connected to the work of other anti-death penalty activists in the U.S. and across the globe.

“The death penalty does not truly heal our anguish as surviving family members, and it does not make society safer. ... As victims' families, we all have reason to be angry and to work for change. I submit, however, that the death penalty serves as a distraction from victims' real needs, not a solution.”

— from MVFHR's letter responding to a series of articles in Caribbean newspapers, December 2008

Colleague organizations sought out MVFHR's perspective and contribution on several specific occasions, such as the interviews that Human Rights Watch conducted with MVFHR members for its 2008 report, “Mixed Results: U.S. Policy and International Standards on the Rights and Interests of Victims of Crime,” which analyzes how well the U.S. is meeting international best practices regarding treatment of crime victims, and the references to MVFHR material that are featured in Amnesty International's “campaign toolkit,” released in early 2008 and titled “The Death Penalty: The Ultimate Punishment.” As well, at the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (NCADP) annual conference, MVFHR members joined with other allies to offer trainings on the victim perspective in several workshop sessions: “Family Members of Murder Victims: Stakeholders in the Debate,” “Working with Murder Victims' Families,” and “Case Studies of Success.”

Media Work

“Families of Victims Reject the Death Penalty.” “Murder victims' families say death penalty exacts toll on their lives.” “Victim's Widow Testifies for bill on moratorium.” “Victims' families want to redirect death penalty funding.” These and other similar headlines from 2008 showcase media recognition of victim opposition to the death penalty. In addition to giving interviews to members of the print and broadcast media, MVFHR members wrote op-ed pieces and letters to the editor and were featured in films examining specific aspects of the death penalty and in National Public Radio's StoryCorps project.

Throughout the year we received frequent requests from U.S., European, and Asian journalists for a referral to a member in a particular area or for background information about victim opposition to the death penalty or the experience of families of the executed. The launch of MVFHR's “Prevention, Not Execution” project was covered by the *San Antonio Express-News* and by radio and television stations, including the Spanish-language network. Videos of MVFHR members were posted on The Hub, a site operated by the international human rights group WITNESS, through which human rights activists can share video and audio material. On World Day Against the Death Penalty, MVFHR videos were featured on the Hub's front page.

Listening to Each Other, Affecting Each Other

MVFHR members participate in conferences, lectures, workshops, and other occasions of public speaking in order to educate the public and shift public policy, but meeting and exchanging stories with one another also affects our members in personal and often quite powerful ways. Notable examples from 2008 include the MVFHR panel at the U.S. Human Rights Network conference, at which a victim's family member and a family member of someone who had been executed had a powerful personal exchange in front of the audience, and the gathering that launched the "Prevention, Not Execution" project (see above), at which participants affected by murder, mental illness, and the death penalty were so moved by the exchanges that took place that one later described the occasion as "one of the most extraordinary experiences that I have had the privilege of being part of" and another said it gave her "the most serene peace I've ever felt, a kind of peace you can't get anywhere else."

Each year at MVFHR we learn more about the relationship between these private moments of exchange and the public activism in which our members engage. Our organizational role is to harness the power of these transformative conversations into action, and resource materials, that lead to change.

International Program

After the 2007 launch of our first affiliate outside the U.S., the Japanese group Ocean, MVFHR continued its work in Asia by giving workshops at the annual meeting of the Anti-Death Penalty Asia Network (ADPAN) and giving public talks in China and Japan. In July, Ocean held its first public conference, and the Japan Catholic Council for Justice and Peace, together with the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan and the Religious Network Against the Death Penalty, published a Japanese version of MVFHR's Gallery of Victims' Stories.

MVFHR members also spoke in Italy and Spain in connection with the Community of Sant Egidio's Cities for Life-Cities Against the Death Penalty tour, and MVFHR worked with our Amnesty International colleagues in the Caribbean – a region that is seeing a resurgence of support for the death penalty – to provide a speaker for several events in Jamaica and to submit a letter about victim opposition to the death penalty that was published in the Bahamas' largest-circulation newspaper.

Throughout the year, we continued to serve on the steering committee of the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, and we participated in the group's 2008 General Assembly, which was followed by the World Human Rights Forum, held in Nantes, France. MVFHR was also part of a small group of U.S. activist who were invited to brief European delegates about the U.S. death penalty abolition movement. That event, held at the French embassy in Washington, DC, was the first seminar of its kind.

“On the first anniversary of the founding of Ocean, Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights would like to salute the group for its courage and dignity in serving as the collective voice of victims' family members who seek alternative responses in the aftermath of tragedy”– from MVFHR's statement at the first annual conference of Ocean, our Japanese affiliate group, July 2008

