



Demonstrators in Terre Haute, Ind., gather to protest the execution of Lisa Montgomery Jan. 12, 2021. She was put to death by lethal injection at the federal prison in Terre Haute, the first woman to be put to death in federal prison since 1953. (CNS/Reuters/Bryan Woolston)



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The Democrats' once-strong stance on the need to end capital punishment in the U.S. weakened considerably when the party's 2024 platform, approved by delegates at their convention in Chicago, omitted [any mention](#) of the death penalty for the first time since 2004.

In 2016, the Democratic Party formally advocated for abolishing the federal death penalty, describing it as "cruel and unusual," costly, and ineffective at deterring crime. By 2020, the party had [reaffirmed](#) this position, and Joe Biden, upon assuming the presidency in 2021, made history as the first president to [publicly oppose](#) capital punishment, a sharp departure from his [past stance](#) as a senator.

Republicans, particularly Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump, have taken a hardline stance in favor of capital punishment. If re-elected, Trump has said he plans to resume executions, a continuation of the spree that marked the end of his first term. His campaign's proposals include a controversial [expansion](#) of the death penalty, signaling a stark contrast to the Biden administration's more restrained approach.

'Do we talk about the death penalty as much as we do abortion?'

—Deacon Denny Davis

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Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, executive director of [Catholic Mobilizing Network](#), an organization that works to raise awareness among Catholics against the death penalty and advocates for an end to capital punishment, told NCR that it's "incredibly disappointing" that the 2024 Democratic platform did not include the abolition of the death penalty.

"I was in this position for seven years, so I was here under the Trump administration and their federal execution spree, where in the span of six months they killed [13 people](#). We worked on every single one of those cases. When the Biden administration came in, their platform talked about ending the death penalty, which was so encouraging. The Biden administration won the election, and amongst the first things they do is they impose a moratorium. One can imagine how exhilarating

that was," she said.

The group thought "there was a possibility to do more. We have now a candidate — Trump — with a very clear history and approach to federal executions and talk of expansion for drug traffickers and human traffickers. And then we have this Democratic convention and their platform. We were thinking, 'Well maybe there's a possibility that we have some promise to advance justice in a different kind of way.' And yet, nothing," she said, referring to the platform's silence on the issue.



Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, executive director of the Catholic Mobilizing Network, speaks to guests at the Vatican Embassy in Washington Oct. 10, 2019. Murphy told NCR that it's "incredibly disappointing" that the 2024 Democratic platform did not include the abolition of the death penalty. (CNS/Catholic Mobilizing Network/Jim Stipe)

Deacon Denny Davis, a leading voice against capital punishment in South Dakota, told NCR he was "not happy at all" about the lack of commitment to ending the death penalty in the 2024 Democratic Party platform. As the director of [South](#)

[Dakotans for Alternatives to the Death Penalty](#) and a deacon at St. Agnes Parish in Vermillion, Davis has spent 12 years working to abolish the death penalty in his state.

His work involves lobbying the state legislature, where efforts to repeal the death penalty or exempt the severely mentally ill from it have consistently failed. Despite these setbacks, Davis remains committed to introducing bills each year, hoping to keep the issue alive in a state dominated by Republican lawmakers.

Davis said the lack of vocal support from the Catholic Church in his diocese has been particularly noticeable, and that while many Catholics recognize Pope Francis' stance against the death penalty, there is little active advocacy from the clergy. In his view, abortion is seen as a safer issue for Catholics to oppose, as it doesn't invite the same level of controversy or pushback as opposing the death penalty does.

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"Whenever we bring a bill, the diocese does have a lobbyist," Davis said. "They would send a letter to the legislature so that all the people on the committee can read the letter. But beyond that, what I'm talking about is, do we talk about the death penalty as much as we do abortion? "I'm just saying the help is not enough. It has to come much stronger, and if the clergy is not speaking out, the people are not going to."

One case etched in Davis' memory is that of [James McVay](#), a severely mentally ill man who was sentenced to death after killing a woman during a psychotic episode. Davis told NCR that McVay, who had paranoid schizophrenia, had been released from solitary confinement shortly before the crime, without adequate mental health support. Despite his clear mental illness and a traumatic history of childhood abuse, McVay was given the death penalty, only to later take his own life in prison. For Davis, McVay's case is a tragic example of the flaws in the justice system, particularly its failure to account for severe mental illness in capital punishment cases.

"We continue to work," Davis said. "I brought a repeal bill last year, and it failed. I don't expect that in my lifetime it will happen here, but I want to continue to plant the seeds every year to keep it on the fire in the legislature."

Each year, Davis also participates in a Good Friday vigil at the prison alongside members of Pax Christi, a Catholic peace and justice organization. He is joined by Sr.

Patrick Leonard Murphy, a spiritual companion to two people on death row in South Dakota and Sr. Pegge Boehm, co-coordinator of Pax Christi South Dakota. Both Murphy and Boehm are members of the [Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary](#) in Aberdeen, South Dakota.



U.S flags and balloons are seen after Vice President Kamala Harris, the Democratic presidential candidate, gave her speech during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago Aug. 22, 2024. The 2024 Democratic Party platform approved at the DNC in August omitted previous platforms' calls to end the federal death penalty. (OSV News/Reuters/Brendan Mcdermid)

Murphy began her connection with death row inmates in South Dakota when she started corresponding with a young man she had known before he started school where she used to teach religion. He was convicted of being involved in the death of a prison guard. Though it was unclear whether he was directly responsible for the killing, he spent over a decade on death row.

Murphy initially supported him through letters, and eventually, at the request of his lawyers, began visiting him in person. Over several years, she maintained these visits, providing spiritual companionship until his execution. "I was present at his execution, which was very difficult, because I had known him since he was a child," she said. "It's an experience you would never, ever forget, even if you didn't know them like I did before."

Boehm told NCR that she approached her parish's Respect Life Committee, proposing a talk or presentation on the abolition of the death penalty. However, she has received no response to her initiative yet, which she interpreted as an indication of the work still needed at the local level.

Catholics who are vocal in their opposition to the death penalty often gather for prayer vigils outside state prisons, praying for the inmate who will be put to death.

That's what happened Aug. 29, when Loran Cole [was executed](#) by lethal injection at Florida State Prison for the 1994 murder of a college student. About 50 Catholics from the Diocese of Orlando gathered outside the prison to pray and to speak out against the execution.



A priest prays with a death-row inmate in 2008 at Indiana State Prison in Michigan City, Ind. (CNS/ photo/Northwest Indiana Catholic/Tim Hunt)

Anne Richter, a Catholic 83-year-old retired nurse midwife and council member of [Pax Christi Florida](#), took part in another demonstration outside the courthouse in St. Petersburg, Florida, at the same time, even amid thunder, lightning and heavy rain.

"I think that what's happening on the national level is reflective, in general, on what the church is doing with social justice issues," she told NCR. While Pax Christi remains active in organizing protests and raising awareness, she said, support from Catholic communities has dwindled.

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Richter said even peace activists have shifted their concern, with a renewed emphasis right now on the situation in Gaza. She acknowledged that while the death penalty remains a critical issue, it often fades into the background until an execution is imminent. Her group, however, continues its work, particularly in light of recent [legislative changes](#) that now allow executions in Florida with a non-unanimous jury, a policy change she called "a disgrace."

She said Pope Francis spoke "beautifully" in his 2020 encyclical [Fratelli Tutti](#) on the death penalty, but she pointed out that she has "never heard that being announced at our altar."

"We have a lot of Trump people at our church," she said. "They need to hear that off the altar."

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