



Family Members and the Death Penalty

A Resource For Murder Victim Family Members

The Closure Myth:

The "Closure Myth" in relation to the death penalty suggests that executing a murderer can absolve the victims' families of their grief and trauma. In reality, the death penalty often prolongs the grief and often re-traumatizes families by taking them through this long, unpredictable process. Rather than spending thousands of tax dollars on these cases, these resources should be allocated towards support services to tend to the real needs of victims' families (Equal Justice USA, 2026).

What Murder Victim Family Members REALLY Think About the Death Penalty

"Don't make it worse for the alleged perpetrator's family by seeking the death penalty. It almost always leads to appeals and forces the victim's family — who are called murder co-victims — to endure the agony of the killing again."

The death penalty "is the last thing that victim family members need... The months prior to the executions of my sister's murderers were filled with relentless news coverage... I cannot be a part of something that brings suffering to families like my family suffered" (Parker, 2026).

— Sherrerd Hartness, whose sister, Carlotta, was murdered

For more information, go to SherrerdHartness.com.



Sherrerd Hartness



Yvonne Patterson

"When my brother was murdered I thought I was supposed to support the death penalty... Little did me and my family know then that when Michael Ryan was sentenced to death, we were sentenced too. Our sentence has been going on for 20 years and there has been no execution. For 20 years it has been all about Michael Ryan. He is all my family and I ever hear about. Jim is never mentioned... Having seen what the death penalty has done to my family, I have since changed my mind and now think it should be abolished."

— Miriam Thimm Kelle, whose brother, Jim, was tortured to death

"Nearly eight years since the jury delivered the verdict of death, I am still forced to focus on my mother's killer. If the killer were given life without parole, and I mean a true life sentence, I would not be here. I would not be forced to discuss the killer and the verdict and the ways in which my life has been affected. Each court date, each appeal, each write-up in the newspaper, revisiting and revisiting the pain, each event keeping me that much further from the curative process I and my family so greatly deserve."

— Sandra Place, whose mother, Mildred, was murdered in 1999

What do Victims & Survivors Actually Want?

1. Validation to know they are heard
2. Answers to make sense, find meaning, and heal
3. Speak their mind and "get things off their chest"
4. Access to supportive resources outside of law enforcement
5. Offenders to repair the harm they've caused to the best of their ability
6. To be safe
7. To know that the person who hurt them would never hurt anyone else

"I don't believe in capital punishment. What people need is rehabilitation, not to be thrown behind bars to then be executed. People deserve a second chance. We don't have the right to kill someone. When my kids were murdered, I was angry, but then I thought about it and decided that I wouldn't want to choose if someone lives or dies; I couldn't live with that on my conscience."

— Yvonne Patterson, whose son and daughter were murdered, and her brother, Raymond Patterson, was on death row

On average, capital cases costs between \$1 million and \$3 million more per case than life imprisonment cases (Quanrud, Death Penalty Information Center, 2026)

How else could we have used \$1 million

Average therapy session: **\$100 - \$250**

4,000- 10,000 therapy sessions

Average US college tuition: **\$38,270**

26 college tuitions

Average cost of drug rehabilitation per person: **\$13,475**

74 people can get rehab

Solving homicide cases is a better crime deterrent and can bring survivors a sense of closure by providing answers and establishing legal accountability, yet only **66.36%** of homicide cases have been solved (Murder Accountability Project, 2025). States without the death penalty have consistently lower murder rates than states with the death penalty (Death Penalty Information Center, 2025). Perhaps states should consider reallocating their resources to solve homicide cases rather than executions.



The death penalty is NOT worth the cost or time, victim services ARE.

Death Penalty

vs.

Victim Services

- The death penalty costs taxpayers 2.5 to 5 times more than life imprisonment
- There may be high reparations for wrongful convictions in death penalty cases. Ex: Glynn Simmons received \$7.15 million for his exoneration.
- Capital cases take 2 to 6 times longer in court than any other homicide case.

Source: Death Penalty Information Center, 2026.

- Services for victim family members may include trauma and grief counseling, time off work, financial assistance, child care, legal advocacy, shelter services, and more.
- Victim services are largely funded through the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA), which established the Crime Victims Fund.
- Crime Victims Fund DO NOT come from taxpayers. The fund primarily consists of penalties paid by individuals or corporations convicted of federal crimes, including deferred prosecution agreements.

Source: Equal Justice USA, 2026.

Here are some victim assistance programs available for South Carolina residents

SC Victim Family Member Services

SC Immigration Victim Coalition

SC Victims Assistance Network

Rainy Day Fund

Disability Rights South Carolina

SC Network of Children Advocacy Centers

SC Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault