



# GOVERNOR JOSH SHAPIRO

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Governor Shapiro Announces He Will Not Issue Any Execution Warrants During His Term, Calls on General Assembly to Abolish the Death Penalty**

*Gov. Shapiro announced his position at the Mosaic Community Church in West Philadelphia, in front of community leaders and criminal justice advocates.*

**HARRISBURG, PA** – Today, **Governor Josh Shapiro** announced that he will not issue any execution warrants during his term and called on the General Assembly to join nearly half of the country in abolishing the death penalty for good. Governor Shapiro was joined by elected leaders – including Sen. Vince Hughes, Sen. Nikil Saval, and Rep. Rick Krajewski – community activists, and criminal justice advocates for the announcement.



**See below for the Governor's remarks as prepared for delivery:**

Senator Saval, Sen. Hughes, Rep. Krajewski, Mayor Kenney, Councilmembers Brooks & Gauthier.

The leaders and advocates who've joined us today, and make a difference in their communities each and every day.

I'm grateful you're here today.

Six months ago, I came to this very Church in West Philadelphia to have a conversation with many of you.

You told me about your neighbors and your friends.

And we talked about what we need to do make our system more fair and more just.

I listened and I learned from you.

I learned from people like Saleem Holbrook, who was incarcerated for over two decades and has dedicated his life to serving our community.

I learned from people like Ms. Dee Dee, whose own brother was murdered – but who believes his killer should live, albeit in prison.

This place means something to me because those are some of the stories and the lessons I learned here.

You cared enough about me and about Pennsylvania to work with me.

And so, I'm proud to be back at Mosaic Community Church today.

And I wanted to come back today, because last week, the first execution warrant came across my desk.

Under our system here in the Commonwealth, the Governor has the authority to sign off on executions.

Here's how the system works in Pennsylvania.

The death penalty can only be applied in cases where a defendant is found guilty of first-degree murder if aggravating factors are present in the conviction.

Once a conviction is handed down, a separate hearing occurs, where aggravating and mitigating circumstances are taken into consideration before a jury makes a formal sentencing – in this case, handing down the death penalty.

The case then goes through many layers of appeals, here in the Commonwealth and at the federal level.

If, through those appeals, the courts uphold the sentence, the case then comes to my desk.

And that brings us to today – and why we're here.

I am here to tell all of you, and the people of Pennsylvania, how I will handle capital cases during my time as Governor – and describe how I have come to this decision.

Before we begin, however, let me be absolutely clear on one point – this is not a statement on the integrity of individual capital convictions in Pennsylvania.

And as Attorney General, I enforced the law without fear or favor and pursued justice for victims.

The people who are on death row in our Commonwealth have committed serious crimes.

They deserve to be put behind bars for a good long time, if not for life.

They have been convicted by a jury of their peers and their cases have gone through rounds and rounds of appeals.

Those appeals often happen over years and decades, and dozens of hearings.

Today I speak not to the integrity individual capital convictions, but to the question of whether death is a just and appropriate punishment for the state to inflict on its citizens.

I want to be honest: My approach to capital punishment has evolved over time.

For more than a decade, including when I assumed office as Attorney General, I believed that the death penalty should be reserved for the most heinous crimes – but that it was, indeed, a just punishment for those crimes.

However, when the first capital cases came to my desk in the AG's office, I found myself repeatedly unwilling to seek the death penalty.

When my son asked me why it was OK to kill someone as a punishment for killing someone, I couldn't look him in the eye and explain why.

In 2018, a gunman walked into the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh's Squirrel Hill neighborhood and murdered 11 Jewish people as they worshipped, in the deadliest act of antisemitism in our nation's history.

It's hard to imagine a more heinous crime than murdering 11 people as they pray.

And candidly, my first reaction was that the killer deserved to be put to death.

Over time, however, my belief on this topic has evolved.

I've spoken to victims, to families, to advocates, and to community leaders.

I listened to the families of the 11 people slain at Tree of Life and was blown away by their courage and their fortitude.

They told me, that even after all the pain and anguish, they did not want the killer put to death.

He should spend the rest of his life in prison they said, but the state should not take his life as punishment for him taking the lives of their loved ones.

That moved me.

And that's stayed with me.

As Attorney General, I had the privilege of seeing our criminal justice system up close as the chief law enforcement officer.

Through that experience, two critical truths became clear to me about the capital sentencing system in our Commonwealth: The system is fallible, and the outcome is irreversible.

I have painstakingly considered every aspect of Pennsylvania's capital sentencing system, reflected on my own conscience, and weighed the tremendous responsibilities I have as Governor.

And I am here today in this Church to tell you I will not issue any execution warrants during my term as Governor.

When an execution warrant comes to my desk, I will sign a reprieve each and every time.

But I want to go further.

Through many administrations, Governors have called on lawmakers to reform the system.

To study what changes could look like.

They've been open to the idea that our capital sentencing system is flawed, but fixable.

I believe that misses the mark.

That's why today, I'm respectfully calling on the General Assembly to work with me to abolish the death penalty in Pennsylvania – once and for all.

I know that there are people on both sides of the aisle who agree with me on this, and there are those who don't.

I believe we should work together.

Pennsylvania should do what 25 other states have done in outlawing the death penalty or refusing to impose it – including many of our neighbors such as New Jersey, Maryland, and West Virginia.

This must be bigger than studying this issue or reviewing the system.

We shouldn't aim to just fix the system.

The Commonwealth shouldn't be in the business of putting people to death. Period.

I believe that in my heart.

This is a fundamental statement of morality. Of what's right and wrong.

And I believe Pennsylvania must be on the right side of this issue.

I know there is more work to be done, but today we are taking an important first step towards progress.

Thank you for your willingness to engage with me. To educate me, and to help me through this process.

I look forward to continuing this work with all of you.

Thank you.

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