

**Testimony of Bonnita Spikes before the  
Maryland Commission on Capital Punishment**

August 5, 2008

Hello. My name is Bonnita Spikes.

I am a Maryland resident and I am honored to speak to you today.

Fourteen years ago, my husband, Michael Spikes, was shot and killed in a convenience store robbery. He was one of two fatalities in the shooting and others were injured.

Michael and I were married for 23 years. We were very happy with our family of four sons and had a middle-class life. Michael was a wonderful husband and father. We were comfortable and felt that things were going well. We took family vacations, and together were very active in our children's lives. My late husband has missed many graduations and will never see or hold our grandchildren.

The impact of the phone call, followed by the police escorting me to the hospital where he was pronounced dead, is a memory that will live with me forever. My life was changed in a matter of minutes. I would have likely had a breakdown myself, but my children needed me.

The police never found the person or persons who killed my husband. And I have had to learn to live with this lack of resolution. Our then 13-year-old son, Michael, was so devastated he tried to commit suicide and was hospitalized over the next three years with depression, and still struggles with it today. He has told me that the death of his father hurt him too much to want to live.

Today, this Commission is addressing issues of socio-economic disparities and the death penalty. **I want to emphasize the disparities on the victim's side.** My son Michael had great emotional and psychological needs after his father was so violently taken from his life. While I had health insurance, I quickly learned how limited our coverage was in relation to mental health care. After a suicide attempt, Michael was put in a state hospital. But, because I didn't have good enough insurance, I was told point blank, he would not be able to access treatment there. Essentially, they would medicate him and let my otherwise vibrant, intelligent young son exist like a vegetable!

It took my personal crusade to find my son the treatment he needed. This crusade took me to a judge who sat on the board of a non-profit, in-patient mental health provider. After I waited all day in the judge's chambers, he listened to my plea for help for

Michael. With his help, Michael was later transferred to a real treatment facility that meant he would have a hopeful future.

Over the last few years, my own experience has motivated me to reach out and work with Maryland families who have suffered the traumatic loss of a loved one to murder. My outreach has been focused in African American communities particularly in Baltimore City, where most Maryland murder victims fall. **Over and over, I have found families in dire need of support and traumatic grief counseling services.** Most don't have any insurance. Nor are they resourceful in knowing who to go and beg for help. I have come to know people, young and old, who have little or no access to professional help coping with their overwhelming loss. For most of these families, the notion of a death sentence for their loved one's murderer isn't even a remote thought. They are struggling to hold their households together, to help their families grieve and survive the trauma one day at a time.

I want to emphasize today these great and concrete needs of family members and, indeed, whole communities within Baltimore City traumatized by violence. We know that the death penalty costs millions of dollars more than a system that has life without parole as the maximum sentence. Just a fraction of the savings from repealing the death penalty could impact thousands of our citizens in need of support and grief counseling and hundreds more who, as my son's experience demonstrates, need much more intensive mental health care.

As a black woman, it is also important for me to point out the significant shift among black voters in our state regarding their views on the death penalty. Polling since 2005, for which I attach a summary, shows that a majority of black voters now oppose the death penalty and over three-quarters support replacing death with a sentence of life without parole. **This is important from a victim's prospective** because in the vast majority of murders in Maryland – nearly 8 out of ten every year – the victims are African American.

I hope you can hear what I am saying here: **Overwhelmingly, the people in our state MOST affected by murder believe that life without parole is a better alternative than the death penalty.**

You are going to hear from many victims' family members over the course of these hearings. It will be tempting to simply divide us into categories for or against the death penalty. But our reality is far more complex and our views are much more nuanced than you can know unless you've walked in our shoes. So, please don't try to put us into any one box. There is simply no right or wrong way to feel when someone you love has been murdered.

Yet what I believe all murder victims family members who have and will come before you can agree upon is this: Our state can and should do much more to support and

care for those of us left behind by murder. I urge you to recommend that our state repeal the death penalty and use the saving to make a real difference in the lives of families like mine.

Then Maryland will really be putting the needs of murder victims' families *first*.

**Attachment to Bonnita Spikes Testimony**

**Maryland's African American Voters and the Death Penalty**

The majority of African American voters now oppose to the death penalty and overwhelmingly support replacing it with life without parole. As polling numbers below demonstrate, from 2005 to 2007, opposition to the death penalty grew by six points to a majority of African American voters. Meanwhile support for life without parole as a substitute for death increased eight points.

African Americans fall in over 75% of state homicides every year yet *no one* currently on death row is there for the murder of a black victim.

**QUESTION: Do you support or oppose the death penalty?**

	<b>2007</b>			<b>2005</b>		
	<u>SUPPORT</u>	<u>OPPOSE</u>	<u>UNDECIDED</u>	<u>SUPPORT</u>	<u>OPPOSE</u>	
	<u>UNDECIDED</u>					
<b>STATE</b>	56%	34%	10%	56%	35%	9%
<b><u>SEX</u></b>						
Men	59%	34%	7%	61%	34%	5%
Women	53%	34%	13%	51%	36%	13%
<b><u>RACE</u></b>						
White	62%		29%	9%	62%	32%
	6%					
<b>Black</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>51%*</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>18%</b>

(\* Another March 2007 poll of 820 Maryland voters, conducted by Gonzales Research & Marketing Strategies in Annapolis, found that 61% of black voters oppose the death penalty while 29% favor it. See [http://www.gonzalesresearch.com/Surveys/Maryland\\_Media\\_Poll\\_March\\_2007.htm](http://www.gonzalesresearch.com/Surveys/Maryland_Media_Poll_March_2007.htm))

**QUESTION: As a penalty for murder, do you believe that the sentence of life without the possibility of parole is or is not an acceptable substitute for the death penalty?**

**2007** **2005**

	<u>IS</u>	<u>IS NOT</u>	<u>NOTSURE</u>	<u>IS</u>	<u>IS NOT</u>	<u>NOT SURE</u>
<b>STATE</b>	<b>61%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>16%</b>

**SEX**

Men	60%	31%	9%	60%	26%	14%
Women	62%	23%	15%	66%	16%	18%

**RACE**

White	56%	32%	12%	61%	23%	16%
<b>Black</b>	<b>77%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>69%</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>16%</b>

**QUESTION: If your Maryland state legislator voted to replace the death penalty with life in prison without the possibility of parole, would you be more likely to vote for them, less likely to vote for them, or would it make no difference in your vote choice?**

(This question was only asked in 2007 only.)

	<u>MORE</u>	<u>LESS</u>	<u>NO DIFFERENCE</u>	<u>DON'T KNOW</u>
<b>STATE</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>6%</b>
<b><u>SEX</u></b>				
Men	26%	27%	44%	3%
Women	32%	19%	40%	9%
<b><u>RACE</u></b>				
White	25%	29%	40%	6%
<b>Black</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>5%</b>

Sources:

*2007 polling: 625 registered voters interviewed statewide February 6-8, 2007 by Mason-Dixon Polling & Research, Inc. Margin for error is plus or minus 4%.*

*2005 polling: 625 registered voters interviewed statewide February 22-24, 2005 by Mason-Dixon Polling & Research, Inc. Margin for error is plus or minus 4%.*

*Both polls were commissioned by the Maryland Catholic Conference.*

