

**Organizing a Moratorium on Executions:  
Frequently Asked Questions  
(from Buddhist Peace Fellowship Prison Project)**

*What is a moratorium?*

A moratorium is a “time out” on executing prisoners while a fair evaluation of the current system is carried out. It is about the fundamental principles of the United States: due process, the right to a fair trial, and justice. The first moratorium in the U.S. in recent years was implemented by Governor Ryan of Illinois in January 2000 after the 13th innocent individual walked off of death row in his state. The purpose of the moratorium and the study is to avoid precisely this type of error, and to examine the inconsistencies in who gets sentenced to death and who lives.

*Who supports a moratorium?*

Not everyone who supports a moratorium is against the death penalty - some believe simply that there are strong reasons to further examine the fairness of the death penalty, to avoid the execution of innocent persons and to study discrimination based on race, place, and poverty.

*How do I organize a moratorium in my area?*

Before you begin your campaign, you should have a clearly defined strategy. After you have learned about your local and state laws, build a coalition. See if you can connect with anti-death penalty groups in your area, such as Amnesty International, the ACLU, or Death Penalty Focus. Talk to your community, your sangha, and your friends and family. Get petitions circulated and signed, then contact your city or county government. Once you have a substantial foundation built, you can contact your state representatives and governor to try and get a moratorium passed in the state.

## Steps for Local Organizing

**1. Form a coalition.** Ask your friends, family, sangha, and community members to join you in support of a moratorium. See if you can join up with any existing anti-death penalty groups in your area, and circulate a petition in your neighborhood.

**2. Gather community support.** Find volunteers to gather petition signatures. Recruit local organizations, labor unions, religious groups, and professional organizations to endorse the moratorium and work with your local coalition. (See the following pages for a sample resolution that you can use to help groups write their own.)

**3. Inform the media.** Send materials to local reporters and members of editorial boards to keep them informed of your efforts. Encourage them to profile your coalition and to cover newsworthy activities leading up to the vote (rallies, hearings, major endorsements, etc.). Write op-eds and letters to the editor explaining the need for a "time out" on executions and the importance of the local moratorium resolution.

**4. Involve the local government.** Work with your city council or board of supervisors to find out what would work best. Generate local awareness and urge residents to contact their representatives to show that support for a moratorium in their jurisdiction is strong. Meet with your city council to discuss what could be done. Bring them a list of endorsing organizations and the signed petitions that you have circulated.

**5. Inform surrounding counties and your state.** Once a city or county resolution passes, forward copies to your state representatives and governor. Write up a press release on the significance of the vote, and submit it to newspaper, television, and radio outlets, including the Associated Press.

## **Tips for Passing a Successful Resolution**

Work to gather grassroots community support prior to the vote--educate people on the death penalty.

Get to know your council members. Establish a relationship to a council member who supports your resolution and is willing to work with you to help get it passed. Find out who might vote against the resolution and how she or he might be swayed.

Understand and use to your advantage the ways in which the death penalty most negatively affects your city or county in particular (look, for example, at financial issues).

Know what other districts might be influenced by your city or county passing a resolution.

Keep track of local government resolutions in your state as they pass; added together, these can have a tremendous influence. Use passed resolutions to keep pressure on your local and state legislators and executives.

## **Using Resolutions Strategically**

Ideally, the resolution campaign builds support like a pyramid--starting from a broad base of grassroots organizations and faith communities, working up to city and county governments, until enough support exists to influence a moratorium at the state level, and finally, going national.

Local organizing can spark the introduction or help the passage of state legislation calling for a moratorium. If there is already legislation pending in your state, find out who supports it, as well as who doesn't yet support it, but might based on other issues they've supported in the past. Focus on getting those representatives on board first by demonstrating popular support for a moratorium in their district. Show them collected resolutions, signed petitions, and any other forms of support that you may have collected.