

Nebraska bishops urge Catholics, other voters to OK death penalty repeal

[Deacon Randy A. Grosse](#) [Catholic News Service](#) | Oct. 26, 2016

OMAHA, NEB.

Nebraska's three bishops made their position — and the church's position — on capital punishment clear in 2015 in their support for repeal of the death penalty through the Legislature's approval of a measure to eliminate capital punishment.

And as the November election draws closer, Tom Venzor, executive director of the Nebraska Catholic Conference, is focused on sharing that message again with Catholic and all other voters.

Nebraskans will vote Nov. 8 on whether to retain the measure, known as L.B. 268, which repealed the death penalty in Nebraska and replaced it with a life sentence without parole. State senators passed the bill last year over Gov. Pete Ricketts' veto. But a successful petition effort supported by Ricketts put the measure on the ballot as Referendum 426.

Venzor, who represents Archbishop George Lucas of Omaha and Bishops James Conley of Lincoln and Joseph Hanefeldt of Grand Island on public policy issues, announced plans for building awareness and educating voters on the death penalty referendum at a Sept. 29 news conference in Lincoln, the state capital.

Getting the bishops' message to the people began the week before the news conference, Venzor told *The Catholic Voice*, Omaha's archdiocesan newspaper, with the start of social media campaigns to educate and increase awareness among voters. The effort includes summaries of church teaching, quotes from church leaders and articles.

Venzor said the strength of the social media campaign will be in Catholics sharing the material with others.

Regular media — print and broadcast — also are vehicles for the message, he said.

And the message "advocating and urging a vote to retain the repeal of the death penalty," also is going direct to parishes across the state.

The state Catholic conference, working with the Catholic Mobilizing Network, has sent packets of materials, including posters and prayer cards. Videos of each bishop discussing the death penalty have

been created and distributed to parishes, and events featuring speakers and discussion were being held the week of Oct. 24 at each of the three cathedrals across the state.

The Omaha archdiocese also is helping pastors advocate the church's position, with materials including background information, homily helps, quotes and statements from church officials.

Venzor began the Sept. 29 news conference by reviewing the bishops' stand on the death penalty and the upcoming referendum.

"I am here today to make clear the position of the church and the three Nebraska bishops on the death penalty," Venzor said, noting the bishops' efforts in 2015 to eliminate the death penalty. At that time, the bishops of Nebraska in a joint statement "concluded that justice requires punishment, but it does not require that those who have committed serious crimes be put to death," he said.

In another joint statement in August 2015, the bishops also said "the (death penalty) issue -- like all life issues -- involves more than public policy. It involves our faith and the central principle that human life is sacred."

The bishops, Venzor said, "encourage and urge all Catholics and citizens of goodwill to join them ... and vote to 'retain' on Referendum 426."

Venzor said the bishops believe the death penalty is a broken system for several reasons:

- Execution of an innocent person. Venzor said 156 people in the United States have been freed from death row since 1976, many as a result of DNA evidence that showed they were wrongly convicted.
- Racial bias or inadequate defense -- a disproportionate number of racial minorities and the poor receive death sentences.
- Appeals extend the suffering of the victims' families.
- The costs of the death penalty, which some studies have shown to be considerably more than life imprisonment. "Even if the exact amount may be disputed, whether the cost is millions or mere cents, there can be no real price placed on the value of human life," Venzor said.

He was joined at the news conference by several priests and religious, including Mercy Sr. Jeanne O'Rourke of Omaha, who talked about her order's long-standing opposition to the death penalty.

O'Rourke said the Sisters of Mercy stand with the past three popes, the Nebraska bishops and priests in advocating for life, justice and mercy, and ask all Nebraskans to vote to retain the repeal of the death penalty.

She called the death penalty "ineffective and unfair" and said it's "incompatible with mercy."