

New Hampshire Lawmakers Pass Bill to Ban Death Penalty; Legislation has enough support to override veto

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FULL TEXT

The New Hampshire state Senate voted to abolish the death penalty, sending the bill to Republican Gov. Chris Sununu with enough support to overcome a planned veto.

The state House passed the repeal bill with veto-proof numbers in March. Both chambers are controlled by Democrats and will have to vote again if Mr. Sununu vetoes, but supporters said they believed they had momentum to remove New England's last capital-punishment law after years of trying.

"Today is a good day for justice in New Hampshire," said Democratic State Sen. Martha Hennessey, who voted for the measure.

Thursday's tally was 17-6 with bipartisan support and one senator absent.

The legislature also passed a repeal bill last year, while under GOP control, but Mr. Sununu succeeded in vetoing it. Both legislative chambers flipped to Democratic control in the November election.

"Governor Sununu will continue to stand with crime victims, members of the law enforcement community, and advocates for justice in vetoing this bill," a spokesman for the governor said after Thursday's vote.

Repeal arguments in New Hampshire range from religious and moral grounds to worries the death penalty is an ineffective crime deterrent. Elsewhere, there are GOP-led efforts in several solidly red states, including Kentucky and Wyoming, to overturn death-penalty laws.

New Hampshire hasn't executed a prisoner in 80 years and has a narrow death-penalty law that can only be used in certain cases, including killing an on-duty police officer or judge. The state has one death-row inmate: Michael Addison, who murdered a Manchester police officer in 2006. The statewide death-penalty debate has focused heavily on how changing the law might affect his case.

The law is written to be forward looking and to affect future cases. But police groups and others arguing to keep capital punishment say states like Connecticut, where the state's high court in 2015 struck down exemptions to a death-penalty ban, show that changing New Hampshire's law could also eventually undermine Mr. Addison's sentence.

"Do not repeal the death penalty, do not let Michael Addison off death row," former Republican U.S. Senator Kelly Ayotte said in testimony against the bill in a March legislative hearing.

Laura Briggs, the widow of Mr. Addison's victim, Manchester Police Officer Michael Briggs, also asked lawmakers to keep capital punishment on the books.

"The death penalty is about protecting society from evil," Ms. Brooks said during her testimony at the same hearing. "It's not about an eye for an eye or revenge, it's about protecting our society from evil people that do evil things."

Death-penalty opponents in New Hampshire have been trying for many years to change the law, and they have come close before. Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D, N.H.), a former governor, vetoed another repeal measure in 2000. State Rep. Renny Cushing, a Democrat, is the lead sponsor on the latest repeal bill. His father was murdered in New Hampshire in 1980, and a brother-in-law was later murdered in Tennessee, but he said he had always

opposed capital punishment.

"I needed to not let the killer turn me into a killer," he said.

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Credit: By Jon Kamp

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