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The Richmond Commonwealth's Attorney's Office supports the abolition of the death penalty in the Commonwealth of Virginia, as proposed by Senate Bill 1165. The proposed bill creates the offense of "aggravated murder" for which the penalty is imprisonment for life, without the possibility of parole or conditional release. Richmond has seen horrific murders committed by Timothy Spencer, "The Southside Strangler" in the 1980's; by Christopher Goins against the Jones family in the early 1990's; by Cory Johnson in the early 1990's; and by Ray Dandridge and Ricky Gray against the Harvey family 14 years ago this month. The death penalty was imposed in each of those cases and while it prevented each of those men from causing further harm and recognized the retributive objectives of the community, the existence of the death penalty has not deterred other individuals from committing heinous homicides over the decades.

"My support for the abolition of the death penalty---the ultimate sentence that a community can impose on a killer---is not meant to diminish the value of those lives destroyed by vile and egregious acts of violence. The question is not whether someone "deserves" to die because of the depravity of their act, but whether we as a society are so convinced of the infallibility of our decisions that we should sentence an individual to death."

The standard of proof to obtain a conviction in a criminal case is the highest legal standard that exists, proof "beyond a reasonable doubt." There is no assurance that evolving DNA testing, or witness misidentification, or newly-discovered evidence will not create at some future time that "reasonable doubt" that the correct individual has been identified, convicted and sentenced to death. Death should not be imposed unless society can guarantee that new evidence will never prove that sentence incorrect. That guarantee cannot exist. Life in prison without parole---in effect, being sentenced to die in prison by the community you harmed--is a significant and just punishment. For all the reasons stated above, and regardless of the General Assembly's decision on the proposed legislation, the Richmond Commonwealth's Attorney's Office will not seek the death penalty in any future cases.

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