OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

Governor Newsom's Open Letter
Regarding Commutation of All Death Sentences

November 5, 2026

To All Californians:

I have decided to exercise my constitutional clemency authority to commute all California death sentences to life without the possibility of parole.

After nearly 30 years in public office, I have come to understand the limits of what government can justly accomplish. I take this action because I firmly believe that state-sanctioned killing is incompatible with California's values, undermines the foundations of our legal system, and diminishes each of us. I know we cannot execute people in our imperfect legal system and remain true to our core values, first among them justice and human decency.

My decision today comes after nearly three decades of openly opposing state-sanctioned executions as an elected official. Soon after taking office as Governor of California, on March 13, 2019, I instituted a moratorium on executions. I could not remain true to my values and oversee the killing of people with death warrants in California. My action formalized the de facto moratorium on executions in place since 2006, the last year California executed anyone. While the moratorium has prevented any further executions, it left all death sentences in place. The 548 people now under sentence of death in California make up the largest death row in the Western Hemisphere.

The people sentenced to death in California caused indescribable suffering to victims, their families, communities, and our state as a whole. The harm they inflicted persists across generations. Many Californians feel that those who commit brutal crimes deserve to die. But as Governor, I have concluded the state cannot morally kill them. I do, however, pray that this action will finally separate the memories of the victims of these crimes from the fate of those who harmed them. We can now let these offenders die in obscurity while we forever remember and honor their victims.

Faithfulness to our values is measured by how we act when it is most difficult to uphold them. For me, this is one of those instances. By every measure, California's system for administering the death penalty is a failure. It has not been and cannot be fairly applied and has resulted in the conviction of innocent people. Decades of efforts to repair the system have only compounded its stagnation. Because the death penalty is inherently incompatible with our legal system's commitment to justice, I have determined that this clemency decision, while difficult in many respects, will ultimately affirm the strength and integrity of our state and its justice system.

This decision is among the most difficult of my career, not because I doubt its necessity for our state but because I know its announcement may surface excruciating memories for victims' families. I deeply respect the views of those who will strongly disagree with my decision, including some families of victims who have suffered the worst possible loss. I hold this painful truth along with the belief that this is a righteous action. Today I am acting on my long and deeply held conviction that individually and collectively we are stronger as a society when we reject state-sanctioned killing.

I follow the moral leadership of past presidents, including our Founding Fathers, and governors across America, from all political parties, who used their executive authority to commute death sentences. I have also listened to crime victims and survivors, public safety experts, and religious, civil rights, and other community leaders. They do not speak with one voice, but from these conversations, with parents and children of murder victims, prison wardens, and jurors who served in capital cases, I have taken counsel and I am grateful. I will remember their voices long after I leave office.

I have decided to commute every death sentence. Some have said I should not grant clemency to people who committed the "worst of the worst" crimes. I carefully considered different categories of capital crimes and offender characteristics. I have learned, however, from speaking with the victims harmed by these crimes, that each experiences their loss as the worst of the worst. I have concluded that attempting to distinguish among crimes and offenders for clemency would inadvertently create two classes of murder victims—those whose perpetrators deserve the death penalty and then the rest.

I will therefore issue the same commutation to every condemned person—life without the possibility of parole, the most severe punishment I can lawfully impose and the state of California can ethically enforce. These offenders will die in prison but not by our hand.

This action will bring to a close these capital cases, some of which have been languishing in the courts for more than 40 years. I acknowledge that this

finality may bring comfort to some victims, but finality is not closure, something many victims have told me they never experience after a shattering crime. And while this clemency action will help redress the costly failure of the death penalty in our state, that is not the reason I am acting. California does not put a price on justice or the healing of victims.

California voters have voted to keep the death penalty on the books, and I respect that. I recognize the limits of this clemency action, which does not repeal the death penalty and is limited to commuting California's current death sentences. The power to repeal the death penalty rests with the Legislature and voters. The discretion to seek, impose, and uphold death sentences in individual cases remains, as ever, in the hands of prosecutors, juries, and courts. But the constitution also gave every governor clemency authority, and that power exists for moments when law as applied cannot be squared with justice. For me, this is that moment.

California's Constitution requires the Supreme Court's review of clemency grants to those twice-convicted of a felony. My decision to commute all death sentences therefore compels the involvement of the Chief Justice and Associate Justices in a unique inter-branch constitutional process. While I am confident this act of categorical clemency is consistent with California law, I acknowledge that my decision to exercise my constitutional clemency authority requires the Justices to participate in a weighty decision they did not choose to take up and with which they may personally disagree. I profoundly appreciate the integrity and expertise the Court brings to the task of clemency review.

Many in our state, from all political backgrounds, have concluded that the death penalty is inconsistent with California's legal values and public safety goals. I also acknowledge that this clemency action will anger and hurt some Californians. This will always weigh heavily on me. As Governor, I alone bear responsibility for this decision and its impact, just as I alone would bear responsibility for each execution. For this reason, I am compelled to follow my conscience and, as authorized by our Constitution, take this action for the welfare of the State of California.

Sincerely,

Gavin Newsom
Governor of California

For more information, please visit gov.ca.gov/clemency.