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First in the South to ban capital punishment, Virginia has executed more people than any other state over its history

Greensville County—Governor Ralph Northam today signed legislation abolishing the death penalty, making Virginia the 23rd state, and the first in South, to stop executions.

Senate Bill 1165, sponsored by Senator Scott Surovell, and House Bill 2263, sponsored by Delegate Mike Mullin, prohibit the use of capital punishment for any violation of Virginia law.

Governor Northam signed the death penalty repeal into law during a ceremony outside the Greensville Correctional Center in Jarratt, Virginia. Prior to the bill signing, he toured the facility's execution chamber, where 102 people have been executed since its opening in 1991. The most recent execution in Virginia was carried out in 2017.

“Over our 400-year history, Virginia has executed more people than any other state,” said Governor Northam. “The death penalty system is fundamentally flawed—it is inequitable, ineffective, and it has no place in this Commonwealth or this country. Virginia has come within days of executing innocent people, and Black defendants have been disproportionately sentenced to death. Abolishing this inhumane practice is the moral thing to do.

This is a truly historic day for Virginia, and I am deeply grateful to those who have fought tirelessly and for generations to put an end to capital punishment in our Commonwealth.”

Virginia has executed over 1,300



Electric chair at the Virginia Penitentiary in Richmond, Virginia. Designed and installed by Adams Electric Co., Trenton, New Jersey. (Credit: Library of Virginia)

people in its history, more than any other state. Images of the now demolished Virginia State Penitentiary in downtown Richmond, where executions took place for nearly 200 years, are available here and below, courtesy of the Library of Virginia.

Studies have shown that a defendant is more than three times as likely to be sentenced to death if the victim of a crime is White, than if the victim is Black. In the twentieth century, 296 of the 377 defendants that Virginia executed were Black. Of the 113 individuals who have been executed in Virginia since the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976, 52 were Black.

“After years of fighting to bring Virginia in line with developed countries around the world, abolishing the death penalty today is a huge

accomplishment,” said Senator Scott Surovell. “It would not have been possible without the dogged work of many advocates and partners, as well as significant electoral gains across the Commonwealth and Governor Northam’s public support.”

“Eliminating the use of the death penalty here in Virginia is long overdue, said Delegate Mike Mullin. “The evidence is clear. Use of the death penalty is riddled with wrongful convictions, inadequate representation, and racial bias. I am thankful that with the Governor’s signature today, we have relegated this inhumane practice to the history books.”

The legislation signed by Governor Northam converts the sentences of the two individuals currently on death row in Virginia to life in prison without parole.