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Demonstrators are seen near the Federal Correctional Complex in Terre Haute, Ind., showing their opposition to the death penalty July 13, 2020. (CNS/Reuters/Bryan Woolston)

by Catholic News Service

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The executive director of the Virginia Catholic Conference, the public policy arm of the state's bishops, said he was pleased bipartisan support is growing for ending Virginia's death penalty.

"With our modern and advanced criminal justice system, we have other ways to provide punishment and protect society, without resorting to executions," Jeff Caruso, the conference's executive director, said in a Jan. 14 statement. "We hope this will be the year to enact death penalty abolition here."

A day earlier in his annual "State of the Commonwealth" address, Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam said he would support a bill just introduced in the General Assembly to abolish the death penalty, including for those persons currently under a death sentence.

The measure would remove the penalty of death for Class 1 felonies and change the sentence to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Under Virginia law, the most serious felonies are Class 1 felonies, punishable by life imprisonment and a fine of up to $100,000. The current law says if the defendant was over 18 at the time of the offense and not mentally impaired, Class 1 felonies also may be punishable by death. Examples of crimes classified as Class 1 felonies are capital and first-degree murder.

Virginia Progressive Prosecutors for Justice is a group of the state's attorneys general, said in a Jan. 4 letter to General Assembly leaders urged legislators to abolish the death penalty.

"The death penalty is unjust, racially biased and ineffective at deterring crime," the group said. "We have more equitable and effective means of keeping our communities safe and addressing society's most heinous crimes. It is past time for Virginia to end this antiquated practice."

The organization also called for other criminal justice reforms, including ending cash bail, mandatory minimum sentences and the "three strikes" felony enhancement for petty larceny offenses.

Northam in his address likewise cited racial injustices in the criminal justice system as a reason to end executions. In an interview with the Richmond Times-Dispatch newspaper, he said he is personally opposed to the death penalty and also is

motivated to see it end in the state because of the rash of federal executions carried out in recent months.

According to the state's Department of Corrections, two people in Virginia are currently on death-row. The last individual to enter death row was received in September 2011. No one new has been put on death row since October 2011.

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Contributing to this story was Brian Olszewski, editor The Catholic Virginian, newspaper of the Diocese of Richmond.

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