

As warden, she oversaw executions; now she fights to stop them

Jacqueline Gilvard Landry | Feb. 8, 2012



Jeanne Woodford

OAKLAND, CALIF. -- The woman who oversaw four executions by lethal injection is fighting to make sure it never happens again.

Jeanne Woodford served as warden of San Quentin State Prison in California from 1999 through 2004. Now she is the chief law enforcement spokesperson for SAFE California, a ballot initiative that would replace the state's death penalty with life in prison without parole, require inmates to pay into a victims' compensation fund, and allocate \$100 million over three years to solving crime.

Capital punishment isn't effective, it's costly, it isn't efficient, Woodford said. Evidence shows that the death penalty costs more than housing prisoners for life, steals resources from solving other crimes, and hurts victims' families who wait for executions that may never happen, she explained.

"I think there's something about [the death penalty] to hate by everybody, whether conservative or liberal or somewhere in between," Woodford said.

Though she sticks to "data-driven" arguments, Woodford acknowledges compelling personal reasons for opposing the death penalty. A lifelong Catholic, Woodford said she always was against capital punishment. When San Quentin recruited her as a corrections officer in 1978 after she graduated from Sonoma State University, "no one believed there would be an execution in California, even inmates," she said, even though the state had just reinstated the death penalty.

But the following year an inmate was sentenced to death. When Woodford was appointed as warden, it was her job to plan the executions. "I had to remind myself several times that I wasn't there to judge, I was there to carry out my mission. And that isn't always easy," she said.

In fact, it became too hard after Stephen Wayne Anderson was executed in 2002. Woodford told herself she could never do it again. The emotional stress "had just built up," Woodford said, adding that every warden she knows who has been in her position shares her opposition.

?Killing a human being intentionally, planning for it, spending money on it when there?s just no legitimate purpose ... it doesn?t feel better, nor should it,? Woodford said.

Woodford left San Quentin when Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger appointed her director of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation in 2004; frustrated with barriers to implementing reform, Woodford said, she resigned two years later. She then served as the chief adult probation office for San Francisco until 2008 when she retired to work on criminal justice policy and reform.

Woodford became executive director of Death Penalty Focus in April 2011. The nonprofit is part of the SAFE California campaign, but its mission extends beyond California to abolish the death penalty nationally.

[Jacqueline Gilvard Landry is a freelance writer based in Oakland.]

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