



OUR VIEW: The state of Alabama may be short of the resources it needs to educate children, but it somehow has a scarce chemical on hand to carry out an execution on Thursday

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N Birmingham News editorial board



Alabama is a notoriously cheap state, as governments go. We skimp on everything from state troopers to schools, denying them the resources to deliver much beyond the basics and sometimes not even getting that far. But when it comes to capital punishment, Alabama is the land of the plenty.

Just this week, as the state prepared to put Phillip Hallford to death today, prison officials announced they had enough sodium thiopental to proceed with the execution even though a shortage of the anesthetic has snagged lethal injections across the country. In some states, executions have been delayed; last week, Arizona had to go overseas to find the drug so it could carry out a death sentence.

And the supply of sodium thiopental is but one example of Alabama's abounding investment in this form of punishment.

Alabama has consistently been one of the nation's leaders in issuing death sentences and carrying them out, and that is no cheap enterprise. While it may seem counterintuitive, studies across the country have shown that putting killers to death is a far more expensive proposition than locking them up for life.

A Duke University economist estimated that North Carolina would save \$11 million a year by dropping the death penalty. A Florida newspaper found the Sunshine State could save \$51 million a year by sentencing killers to life without parole rather than death. Ultimately, New Jersey scrapped its death penalty after a report found that capital cases over the course of two decades had cost taxpayers \$253 million above and beyond what the state would have paid to send the killers to prison for the rest of their lives.

Much of the extra cost stems from the extra legal attention required before the government can take a life as punishment for a crime. A review in Kansas -- which found median costs for capital cases to be \$1.26 million compared to \$740,000 for comparable nondeath cases -- concluded almost half the extra costs came from the original trial while appeals accounted for close to 30 percent of the added expense.

It's hard to know exactly how Alabama's costs stack up against these other states, because we skimp on prisons and indigent

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defense, too. But judging by the findings elsewhere, there is hardly any question capital cases are costing the state money it otherwise would not have to spend.

That's not why The News opposes the death penalty. We believe it is carried out in a way that is far too unfair and careless, and we believe that can't be tolerated if you subscribe to the notion (as we do) that life has value. And because life without parole is the legal alternative, we don't believe killing the killer is necessary to protect society.

We understand victims' loved ones may reach different conclusions. The family of Eddie Shannon, for instance, may understandably see today's scheduled execution of Hallford as a just and necessary punishment. Shannon was the boyfriend of Hallford's pregnant daughter. Hallford shot him to death in 1987. Shannon was just 16.

That's a senseless crime. We certainly are in no position to try to tell Shannon's family what it should feel about Hallford or his execution. But from the perspective of larger society, and as public policy, the punishment doesn't make sense -- not really from the standpoint of justice nor from the perspective of dollars and cents.

Alabama may perennially cut corners on vital services such as educating our children. But there always seems to be enough room in the budget to keep the state's death chamber stocked and ready for use. What a sad commentary on our priorities.

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