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Ron McAndrew
Testimony in support of Senate Bill 185
Montana Senate Judiciary Committee

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, for giving me the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Ron McAndrew. I am here to testify in favor of Senate Bill 185.

As a second career and at age 41, I entered the Florida State Department of Corrections as an entry-level officer in 1979. By 1992, I had worked my way up through all of the gut level correctional positions to that of Warden. In 1996, I was asked to take over Florida State Prison in Starke, Florida. The Secretary of the Department had one question for me before I started my new post. He asked, "Are you going to have any problems carrying out the death penalty?"

"No Sir!" I replied.

I was a staunch supporter of the death penalty. Both my cousin and my sister-in-law had been murdered, and I had been in the prison system for 18 years by that time. I felt that murderers, rapists and barbaric people didn't deserve to be on this earth.

I thought I would not have any trouble carrying out the ultimate punishment.

But those of us who have lived through an execution know just what the death penalty does to those who must perform it. In my tenure as warden, I helped perform three electrocutions in Florida and oversaw five lethal injections in Texas. In both places, I saw staff traumatized by the duties they were asked to perform. Officers who had never even met the condemned fought tears, cowering in corners so as not to be seen. Some of my colleagues turned to drugs and alcohol to numb the pain of knowing that a man had died by their hands.

I myself was haunted by the men I was asked to execute in the name of the State of Florida. I would wake up in the middle of the night to find them lurking at the foot of my bed. One of them was literally cooked to death in a botched electrocution. I stood just four feet away watching flames rise out of his head, hearing the electrician ask me, "Is that enough? Should I continue?"

I never admitted it at the time. That would have shown weakness in a job that demanded strength. But as I've spoken out over the years, many colleagues have contacted me. Sometimes they approach me after a speech I've given, noticeably drying tears from their eyes. Others call me, and we spend hours at a time on the phone, trying to process the horror that we went through.

These aren't weak men. These are good 'ol boys who spent their life in careers that forced them to be hard. And yet we suffer now, crying through the pain and the intense guilt.

And so it wasn't until I left my post as warden that I finally sought counseling for the trauma I had been through.

Now I spend most of my time as a consultant to law firms, law schools, state agencies and others around the country and abroad, advising and assisting with prison and jail matters. Lately I've been struck by how hard our nation's prison officials are working in a time when state governments are slashing their

budgets, putting both workers and inmates at great risk. I can feel the stress of those keeping us safe while we sleep.

As the warden, it was my job to ensure the safety of the officers, staff and the prisoners in my care. I learned what it takes to keep a prison safe – consistently well-trained, professional staff that have adequate wages and benefits; state-of the art facilities that provide solid protection using the latest technologies in surveillance and security; and procedures that give staff the ability to deal with difficult situations through a close management policy that segregates difficult inmate populations.

Notice, I didn't say the death penalty. You think someone serving a long prison sentence is really threatened by the idea he'll get the death penalty? First of all, people, and prisoners especially, rarely think about the consequences of their actions, especially when in a heated moment. Second, what is really a threat to an inmate is the notion that his privileges will be taken away, that he won't be able to see his family, that he won't be able to have visitors, that he won't see the light of day, that he'll spend time in "the hole". *These* are the tools that officers use to keep themselves and other inmates out of harm's way.

I disagree with the notion that we need the death penalty to keep prisons safe. I don't believe there is a single qualified prison warden in this country that wouldn't trade the death penalty for more resources to keep his or her facility safe.

It has been proven that the death penalty costs significantly more than sentencing someone to life without parole. By keeping the death penalty, we are just a draining the resources that could be dedicated to the personnel, technology, and maintenance that truly keep prisons and those of us who dare work in them safe.

It's essential to have a system that keeps our communities and prisons safe, and life without parole does that. It's the most severe punishment you could give anyone – to lock them in a little cage made out of concrete and steel ... with a steel cot, a mattress that is 3 inches thick, a stainless steel toilet without a lid, and to leave them there for the rest of their natural life.

I know that legislators have proposed significant cuts to the department of corrections here in Montana. If you truly want to maintain safety in your prisons, abolish the death penalty. Ensure that prison officials aren't put through the trauma that I was, and dedicate the cost savings to adequately funding the workers and facilities that are our true public safety tool.