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ILLINOIS GOVERNOR PARDONS FOUR DEATH ROW INMATES, CRITICIZES STATE'S "BROKEN" DEATH PENALTY

WASHINGTON, DC -- Illinois Governor George Ryan today granted four pardons to death row inmates whose wrongful convictions he said are part of the state's failed justice system and "shameful scorecard" of wrongful convictions. Action on this limited number of cases affects the underlying convictions and should be distinguished from commutations of death sentences, which may still occur for a larger number of inmates. The decision, announced during Ryan's speech at the DePaul University College of Law, marks the largest number of death row pardons granted in a single day since capital punishment was reinstated in 1976.

"Governor Ryan's thorough review of these troubling cases revealed egregious violations of laws established to protect every American from wrongful conviction, and he made the right decision to grant these pardons in light of the facts," said Richard Dieter, Executive Director of the Death Penalty Information Center. "Police brutality, false statements made by single eye-witnesses with questionable reliability, and the state's with-holding of key evidence have no place in our system of justice and certainly should not serve as the basis of a capital conviction. Reforms should be enacted to eliminate the possibility that these problems will continue to taint the death penalty."

In December, Ryan pardoned two death row inmates who had been previously exonerated and released from death row, Rolando Cruz and Gary Gauger. They are among the 13 innocent inmates who were released from Illinois's death row in the same time that the state had executed 12. In 2000, Ryan declared a moratorium on executions based on his concerns about these cases of innocence, and he appointed a blue-ribbon commission to review the state's application of capital punishment. It is likely that Ryan plans to announce additional decisions resulting from his on-going review of clemency petitions filed on behalf of every death row inmate in the state before he leaves office on January 13.

Pardons in death penalty cases are very rare, though 102 inmates have been cleared by courts of the charge that put them on death row and freed since 1973.

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