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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:



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Death Penalty and Mental Illness:

Families of Victims Speak out at National Convention; *Double Tragedies* Report Released

San Francisco, CA—For the first time, families of murder victims have joined with families of persons with mental illness who have been executed to speak out against the death penalty.

Double Tragedies, a report being released today at a special session on the first day of the annual convention of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), calls the death penalty “inappropriate and unwarranted” for people with severe mental disorders and “a distraction from problems within the mental health system that contributed or even directly led to tragic violence.”

The report calls for treatment and prevention, not execution. It is available online at www.nami.org/doubletragedies.

The U.S. Supreme Court has already ruled the death penalty unconstitutional in cases involving defendants with mental retardation (*Atkins v. Virginia*, 2002) and juvenile defendants (*Roper v. Simmons* 2005).

The report, a joint project of NAMI and Murder Victims’ Families for Human Rights (MVFHR), is based on extensive interviews with 21 family members from 10 states: California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Tennessee and Texas.

“Family opposition to the death penalty is grounded in personal tragedy,” said MVFHR executive director Renny Cushing. “In the public debate about the death penalty and how to respond in the aftermath of violent crime, these are the voices that need to be heard.”

“Most people with mental illness are not violent,” said NAMI executive director Mike

Fitzpatrick. “When violent tragedies occur they are exceptional—because something has gone terribly wrong, usually in the mental health care system. Tragedies are compounded and all our families suffer.”

At least 100 people with mental illness have been put to death in the United States and hundreds more are awaiting execution.

The report identifies an “intersection” of family concerns and makes four basic recommendations:

- Ban the death penalty for people with severe mental illnesses.
- Reform the mental health care system to focus on treatment.
- Recognize the needs of families of murder victims through rights to information and participation in criminal or mental health proceedings.
- Families of executed persons also should be recognized as victims and given the assistance due to any victims of traumatic loss.

Other resources:

www.namisandiego.org

www.mvfhr.org

www.nami.org

www.nami.org/grades09