



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty to hold annual statewide conference in Austin

State Representative John Bucy to deliver keynote address; organization to honor individuals who played key roles in stopping the execution of Robert Roberson

(Austin, Texas) — Advocates from across Texas will gather for the annual conference of the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (TCADP) on Saturday, February 22, 2025, at the Thompson Conference Center on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin. The conference, titled *Becoming Catalysts for Change*, will feature a variety of workshops, a panel discussion, and a keynote address from State Representative John Bucy.

State Representative John H. Bucy III is a native Texan and small business owner serving District 136 in the Texas House of Representatives. First elected in 2018, he represents part of Williamson County, including Northwest Austin, Cedar Park, Round Rock, and the Brushy Creek area. As a member of the House Criminal Justice Reform Caucus, Representative Bucy was integrally involved in efforts to stop the execution of Robert Roberson in October 2024. In the 89th Legislative Session, he is the author of House Bill 454, which calls for the abolition of the death penalty.

During the conference, TCADP will honor two other individuals who played key roles in stopping the execution of Robert Roberson, which was scheduled for October 17, 2024, but stopped at the last minute by the Supreme Court of Texas after members of the House Committee on Criminal Jurisprudence issued a subpoena for Roberson's testimony. Roberson is an innocent father with Autism who has spent over 20 years on death row in Texas for a crime that never occurred; his conviction is based on the outdated and now debunked Shaken Baby Syndrome hypothesis.

The TCADP Courage Award will be presented to **Rev. Brian Wharton**, an ordained Elder in the United Methodist Church (UMC) who pastors First UMC in Onalaska, Texas. Previously, he served as a police officer in Palestine, Texas, retiring as the Assistant Chief after 14 years. In that capacity, he was the lead detective who investigated the death of Robert Roberson's daughter as a homicide in 2002 and then testified for the State during Roberson's 2003 trial in Anderson County. Brian now believes Roberson is completely innocent of causing Nikki's death and has become one of his most steadfast advocates. It is extremely rare for anyone in the criminal justice system to admit to a mistake and even rarer for them to go to the lengths Brian has gone to repair the harm and hold himself accountable. With this award, TCADP honors his commitment to personal integrity and truth.

The 2025 TCADP Founder's Award will be presented to defense attorney **Gretchen Sween** in recognition of her zealous advocacy for Robert Roberson, Charles Flores, and other individuals on death row. Since late 2015, Gretchen has dedicated her solo law practice to defending indigent individuals in death penalty cases. That dedication was on full display last year as Gretchen sought to stop the execution of Robert Roberson, who she has represented since 2016. She continues to advocate for a new trial and for review of the new scientific and medical evidence establishing Roberson's innocence. Gretchen also strives to find creative ways to engage the community in exposing the significant flaws in the cases of other clients on death row. The TCADP Board of Directors is profoundly grateful for Gretchen's commitment to justice.

In addition, TCADP will present Appreciation Awards to the Friends Meeting of Austin and to TCADP member Shirl A.P. Solomon.

- Since the 1990s, the **Friends Meeting of Austin** has advocated against capital punishment through protest and legislative engagement. The Meeting also began writing and visiting prisoners in the 1990s and around 10 members currently maintain close ties with people on Texas' death row. Members regularly stand vigil outside the Texas State Capitol during executions.
- **Shirl A.P. Solomon** is on a mission to make a difference. The New Orleans native arrived in Texas in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. After seeing how North Texans opened their doors, hearts, and resources to her and other evacuees, she dedicated the second half of her life to establishing and engaging organizations with a mission to be transformative in the lives of others. Shirl has played a significant role in TCADP's activities in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex over the past two years and we are grateful for the way she conveys our mission with such passion and connectivity.

The TCADP 2025 Annual Conference will take place at the Thompson Conference Center (2405 Robert Dedman Dr., Austin, TX 78712) from 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM on Saturday, February 22, 2025. The keynote address and awards ceremony will take place from 12:30 to 2:30 PM. The program also will feature a panel discussion and workshop sessions with expert speakers and advocates. Members of the media are invited to attend the conference. Free parking is available in Lot 40.

For detailed information about the panelists, keynote speaker, and award recipients, visit <http://tcadp.org/what-we-do/annual-conference/>.

The **Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty** is the only statewide grassroots advocacy organization dedicated solely to ending the death penalty in Texas. Led by staff in Austin and Dallas and a statewide Board of Directors, TCADP has more than 20,000 supporters and 36 organizational affiliates. TCADP collaborates with local, state, and national partners to reduce use of the death penalty and advocate for change at the county and state level.

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