The California Legislature adopted Senate Joint Resolution (SJR) 19 on August 14, 2008 a resolution aimed at  preventing California health professionals from engaging in coercive interrogations of detainees at Guantánamo and other U.S. military prisons.  PSR-LA was a driving force in developing and driving this resolution to success.

SJR 19 instructs the state’s licensing boards to inform California doctors, psychologists and other health professionals of their obligations under national and international law relating to torture. The boards will warn the licensees that they may one day be subject to prosecution if they participate in interrogations that do not conform to international standards of treatment of prisoners.

California’s adoption of the resolution sends a clear message that we are going to live by the principles that this country is founded on.  We will not let fear erode our civil liberties and we will hold health professionals accountable to ethical and legal standards.

PSR-LA Board member Jose Quiroga said, “This has been an effort for almost three years.” Dr. Quiroga is a torture survivor, and the Medical Director of Program for Torture Victims, a sponsor of the resolution. “The California Legislature is sending a message to the Federal Government that they are wrong, and I hope that other state legislatures will begin to do this,” Quiroga added.

“Torture is much more than a political issue,” said State Senator Mark Ridley-Thomas who introduced the resolution. “It is an ethical, moral and spiritual issue that has not only become a shame, but it is an evil in our midst.”

SJR 19 aims to protect the integrity of the health professions and individual practitioners by informing them of their legal and ethical obligations, and giving them a legal reference to remove themselves from abusive situations should they have to contravene the orders of a military superior.

A survey of medical students conducted by the Harvard Medical School, published in the October, 2007 issue of the International Journal of Health Services, found that one-third of the respondents did not know that under the Geneva Conventions, they should refrain from participating in coercive interrogations.

The resolution further requests that the Department of Defense and the CIA remove California-licensed health professionals from participating in coercive interrogations.

The passage of SJR 19 makes California the first state in the nation to officially condemn the use of torture since the beginning of the “War on Terror.” A measure currently under consideration by the New York State Legislature, which would prohibit the state’s health professionals from participating in the torture or improper treatment of detainees, is expected to pass later this year.

PSR-LA, San Francisco Bay Area-PSR, American Friends Service Committee, and Program for Torture Victims coordinated the campaign in favor of SJR 19. The resolution had the additional support, through petitions and testimony, of numerous faith, human rights and medical groups including the California Medical Association.