La. executions slow; pace up in other states

By The Associated Press

The pace of Louisiana executions, once among the fastest in the nation, has slowed over the past two years as the number of death sentences carried out in other states has sped up.

Defense attorneys say juries are becoming more reluctant to impose capital punishment and those sentenced to death are receiving better legal help on appeal.

Prosecutors criticize what they call unnecessary legal delays for prolonging the lives of condemned killers.

Robert Sawyer, the last murderer put to death in Louisiana, died by lethal injection March 5, 1993, for the 1979 rape-murder of a Jefferson Parish woman.

In the years preceding Sawyer's death, Louisiana carried out executions at a faster pace than almost any other state.

Between 1983 and 1991, 20 people were put to death, a number that ranked behind only Texas and Florida. During the summer of 1987, eight men died in Louisiana's electric chair.

However, only three have been executed since 1990. Sawyer's execution was the first by injection.

Prosecutors and defense attorneys agree there have been more resources available for killers appealing their sentences.

In 1988, Loyola University's law school opened a death penalty resource center that provided attorneys for death row inmates.

Last year, the Louisiana Supreme Court recognized problems with defense in capital cases and created a state board to address them.

About $1.5 million from court fines and traffic tickets has been put into a fund to provide sophisticated defenses for condemned inmates.

Death penalty opponents charge that the speed of past executions could be attributed to shoddy arguments by overworked and inexperienced attorneys, said Steve Bright, a lawyer with the Southern Center for Human Rights in Atlanta.

But critics say the new programs are responsible for endless delays.

"The process has gotten ridiculous, and now it's just a game played by defense attorneys and judges who are against the death penalty," said Calciasien Parish District Attorney Rick Bryant, whose office has sent four killers to death row since 1992.

Nick Trenticosta, director of the Loyola center, believes most people support the slower pace.

"If Louisiana put one person to death a day for the next three weeks, I believe the public would be outraged," he said. "People would wonder if everyone was getting their due process."

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