Prison practicing for Sawyer execution

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NEW ORLEANS — Guards at the Louisiana State Penitentiary have taken a man from a death-house cell and strapped him to a table as practice for the state’s first execution by injection.

The practice sessions used another guard as stand-in for convicted rapist-killer Robert Sawyer, who will die on the white-and-black table Thursday unless a lawyer can win a ninth stay of execution.

Nick Trenticosta of the Loyola Death Penalty Resource Center is optimistic that he can win a reprieve for Sawyer, who was convicted in 1979 of beating and raping his girlfriend’s babysitter, then setting her on fire.

Sawyer has a clemency hearing Tuesday before the Louisiana Pardon Board. Trenticosta said a juror came forward after Sawyer’s 1991 hearing when the board voted 3-2 to commute his sentence to life imprisonment. Then-Gov. Buddy Roemer turned down the recommendation.

"After the board recommended clemency ... one of the jurors in the case called me up," Trenticosta said. "He said, ‘I’ve really made a mistake. If I’d known he was mentally retarded, I surely would never have voted for death.’"

Trenticosta said the juror wants to testify before the Pardon Board.

"That’s very powerful. Our whole focus is that the jury never knew," Trenticosta said.

The U.S. Supreme Court has rejected Trenticosta’s claim that Sawyer’s retardation made his execution cruel and unusual punishment. Defense witnesses have said that Sawyer has an IQ of 68 — 100 is average — and can manage about third-grade reading and second-grade arithmetic.

Trenticosta said he planned to ask the Supreme Court to consider the case again, but was concentrating on the clemency hearing.

Meanwhile, preparations continue at the Angola prison for an execution.

The execution team has practiced walking someone from the death-house cell to the death chamber and strapping him to the table, Deputy Warden Richard Peabody said. His arms are strapped to special extensions that make it easier to reach them with intravenous lines.

Also checked have been the length of the IV line set up to carry three lethal drugs into Sawyer’s veins, and the sequence that will send each drug through the line.

"The IVs and the other equipment are located in an alcove within the room, behind a one-way window so that the people operating the IV lines can see what’s going on, but the witnesses cannot see the people who are operating the lines or injecting the drugs,” Peabody said.

The gurney is located in the same room that housed the state’s electric chair.

Peabody would not say if prison staffers will inject the drugs.

"They could be, then again, they may not be," he said. "All that’s required is that it’s someone who’s trained in the techniques of starting and maintaining IVs."

Sodium pentathol is first used to render the condemned prisoner unconscious. Pancuronium bromide then stops his breathing and a dose of potassium chloride stops his heart. The line will be flushed with saline between drugs, Peabody said.

The condemned inmate is put into the first cell on death row a week before execution is scheduled and is checked every 15 minutes. He is moved to the death house on the morning before the execution.

Sawyer was moved to the death house in 1991 to await the electric chair, but won a stay of execution from the Supreme Court. The high court lifted that stay on Jan. 15.