



Justice opposes death penalty

Pfeifer helped write law, but now says state should halt executions

By Andrew Welsh-Huggins
Associated Press

Published on Wednesday, Jan 19, 2011

COLUMBUS: An Ohio Supreme Court justice who helped write the death penalty law three decades ago and has more recently questioned its interpretation called Tuesday for an end to capital punishment in the state.

Justice Paul Pfeifer also said Gov. John Kasich and any future governor should consider commuting the sentences of Ohio's death row inmates to life without parole.

"These are important matters that need all of our thoughtful attention — need the attention of the legislature to consider seriously whether we're well-served by this statute any longer," he said in remarks following his swearing-in ceremony.

"The time has come for us to make that change," Pfeifer said.

Pfeifer, a moderate Republican, was chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee as Ohio debated the capital punishment bill that became law in 1981.

Ohio has 157 men and one woman on death row. Of those, 43 were sentenced to death before a 1996 law gave juries the option of sentencing defendants to life without the possibility of parole.

Death sentences in Ohio began to drop after that law was passed, and they dropped further following a 2005 law that allowed prosecutors to seek life sentences without first pressing death penalty charges.

Ohio courts sentenced three men to death in 2008 and just one in 2009, before a spike in sentences last year brought the number up to seven. That's still below pre-1996 levels when a dozen or more were sentenced to death each year.

Kasich, a Republican, continues to support capital punishment, spokesman Rob Nicholas said.

Ohioans still support the death penalty and it should still be an option for the worst slayings, said John Murphy, executive director of the Ohio Prosecuting Attorneys Association.

State public defender Tim Young agreed with Pfeifer, saying the law is applied unfairly across Ohio and the state is better served by life without parole.

Pfeifer's remarks were his strongest to date, but for a decade the justice has questioned the law's use in Ohio. He has often said prosecutors were using it for cases, such as domestic violence slayings, that didn't merit a death sentence.

Pfeifer said he didn't want to be misunderstood when it came to the crimes death row inmates were convicted of.

"There are no nice people on death row. They all committed heinous crimes," he said. "But every murder is a heinous crime. Every murder is impossible for any sane person to understand what would motivate someone to do something like that."

COLUMBUS: An Ohio Supreme Court justice who helped write the death penalty law three decades ago and has more recently questioned its interpretation called Tuesday for an end to capital punishment in the state.

Justice Paul Pfeifer also said Gov. John Kasich and any future governor should consider commuting the sentences of Ohio's death row inmates to life without parole.

"These are important matters that need all of our thoughtful attention — need the attention of the legislature to consider seriously whether we're well-served by this statute any longer," he said in remarks following his swearing-in ceremony.

"The time has come for us to make that change," Pfeifer said.

Pfeifer, a moderate Republican, was chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee as Ohio debated the capital punishment bill that became law in 1981.

Ohio has 157 men and one woman on death row. Of those, 43 were sentenced to death before a 1996 law gave juries the option of sentencing defendants to life without the possibility of parole.

Death sentences in Ohio began to drop after that law was passed, and they dropped further following a 2005 law that allowed prosecutors to seek life sentences without first pressing death penalty charges.

Ohio courts sentenced three men to death in 2008 and just one in 2009, before a spike in sentences last year brought the number up to seven. That's still below pre-1996 levels when a dozen or more were sentenced to death each year.

Kasich, a Republican, continues to support capital punishment, spokesman Rob Nicholas said.

Ohioans still support the death penalty and it should still be an option for the worst slayings, said John Murphy, executive director of the Ohio Prosecuting Attorneys Association.

State public defender Tim Young agreed with Pfeifer, saying the law is applied unfairly across Ohio and the state is better served by life without parole.

Pfeifer's remarks were his strongest to date, but for a decade the justice has questioned the law's use in Ohio. He has often said prosecutors were using it for cases, such as domestic violence slayings, that didn't merit a death sentence.

Pfeifer said he didn't want to be misunderstood when it came to the crimes death row inmates were convicted of.

"There are no nice people on death row. They all committed heinous crimes," he said. "But every murder is a heinous crime. Every murder is impossible for any sane person to understand what would motivate someone to do something like that."