

Attorney general: Insanity standard needs to be reformed

AUSTIN (AP) — Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott told a Senate committee Thursday that the state's insanity standard needs to be reformed, citing the case of a Beaumont man charged with murder for placing a 6-year-old in an oven.

"Our current laws in how we deal with the criminally insane have failed," Abbott said. "A life was needlessly lost because of the way our system works or perhaps didn't work."

Kenneth Pierott was found not guilty by reason of insanity in 1998 for using a dumbbell to fatally beat his 25-year-old sister, who suffered from cerebral palsy. He was released after four months in a state hospital.

"Last month, Mr. Pierott put his girlfriend's 6-year-old son in the oven, turned the heat up to 600 degrees and left the boy to die," Abbott said.

The pilot light wasn't on in the oven so it didn't heat, but the child died of asphyxiation.

Abbott also pointed to the case of East Texas mother Deanna Laney, who was found not guilty by reason of insanity in the stoning deaths of two of her sons. A judge has committed her to a state hospital at least through July.

"The public is justifiably suspect about a system that allows an insane killer to go free," Abbott said.

"Changes must be made to existing laws ... What we need is a system that allows the state to continue to supervise dangerous, mentally ill criminals."

Dr. Mary Alice Conroy, speaking on behalf

of the Texas Psychological Association, said cases such as Pierott's aren't the norm. She said about two-thirds of defendants found innocent by reason of insanity have not committed a violent crime.

James Smith, chief executive officer of the North Texas State Hospital, which cares for those acquitted based on insanity, said the Legislature needs to address what happens to the acquitted once they leave the hospital.

"My experience has been that it is possible to lose track of them fairly quickly," he said.

Sen. Jeff Wentworth, R-San Antonio, said Smith's observation is less than comforting. Wentworth's Jurisprudence Committee is reviewing the state's insanity statute and the issues surrounding it.

Smith would like to see the state move toward allowing a person acquitted based on insanity to be recommitted if they fail to follow certain conditions of their release, such as taking their medication.

"With that type of setup, some of the situations that break all of our hearts would not have occurred," he said.

As of Tuesday, Smith said 67 people being cared for at state hospitals had been acquitted by reason of insanity.

While some at the public hearing called for the verdict to be changed to "guilty but insane" or "guilty except mentally ill," Smith said there is a system in place in the state's prisons to deal with mentally ill inmates.

"A life was needlessly lost because of the way our system works or perhaps didn't work."

— Greg Abbott
Texas attorney general

NEWS IN BRIEF

Tombstone of Jasper man found desecrated

JASPER, Texas (AP) — The gravesite of a black man who was dragged to death in 1998 by three white men was found desecrated Thursday, police said. A racial epithet was carved into the broken tombstone of James Byrd Jr. Jasper Police Chief Stanley Christopher told Beaumont television station KFDM that the

case is being investigated as criminal mischief.

So far no arrests, Christopher said.

Three white men were convicted for Byrd's gruesome death. Two were sent to Texas death row, while the third received a life prison term.

The victim's mother, Stella Byrd, said the family was upset that the gravesite had been disturbed.

"I don't know what to think about it," Mrs. Byrd said. "They've done enough to him already. I don't think it's kids who

did this. It's upsetting. We hoped he could rest in peace."

Two people who were at the Jasper City Cemetery on Thursday afternoon, tending to a relative's gravesite, noticed the damage, police said.

The desecration apparently happened in the past couple of days, according to Christopher.

The granite headstone, putting Byrd's date of birth as May 2, 1949, was broken from its base, according to KFDM.

Jasper is about 110 miles northeast of Houston.

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.72	I	SI ₂	1595 ⁰⁰ EGL Cert.
.54	H	SI ₂	950 ⁰⁰
.32	H	SI ₁	550 ⁰⁰

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