

# Washington state's execution team resigns

Apr 2, 2009

WALLA WALLA, Wash. (AP) — Four people designated to administer lethal injections to death-row inmates at the Washington State Penitentiary have resigned, apparently worried that their identities could become public in court.

The Seattle Times reported Thursday that the four resigned Tuesday for fear that their names would become known as a result of litigation on whether lethal injection constitutes cruel and unusual punishment.

Tuesday was the deadline to give Thurston County Superior Court Judge Chris Wickham records detailing the execution team members' credentials, qualifications and experience in administering lethal drugs.

Darold Stenson, sentenced to die in 1994 for killing his wife and business partner, filed a lawsuit last year contending that lethal injection can result in excruciating pain if not administered correctly. Stenson's execution date had been set for September before being postponed because of the court case.

Two other death-row inmates, Jonathan Gentry and Cal Coburn Brown, have filed similar lawsuits and the cases were consolidated before Wickham.

In December the state prison system's chief physician, Dr. Marc Stern, resigned because he said preparing for an execution would violate medical ethics.

The execution team's resignations leave the state without personnel to perform lethal injections. The agency will begin assembling a new team, and officials said other states have agreed to send a lethal injection team to Washington if needed.

Scott Englehard, a lawyer for Gentry, said he and lawyers for the other inmates had already agreed that the records would be reviewed in private by the judge and that no identifying information concerning the execution team members would be disclosed.

Dan Sytman, a spokesman for state Attorney General Rob McKenna, noted the state's opposition to turning over the background information was rejected and said the reassurances of the inmates' lawyers failed to allay the concerns of the execution team.

"They were concerned their identities would become known as the process went along," Sytman said. "We believe the court can confirm the constitutionality of the lethal injection procedure without knowing the qualifications, training and experience of each of the lethal injection team members."

Joining the team is voluntary. The members, three Corrections Department employees and a retired employee, agreed after being approached and asked to serve, Sytman said.

"Walla Walla is a small town, so it's not hard to figure out (someone's identity) based on their qualifications," Sytman said. "They don't want picketers showing up on their front lawns, and they don't want offenders knowing who they are."

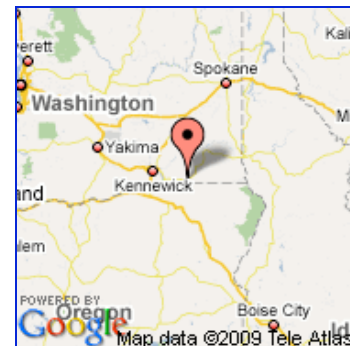
The members' identities have been revealed only to a handful of people, state corrections chief Eldon Vail said. He added that not even he knows who they are.

The last execution in the state was in 1991.

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