

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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CLEVELAND - Today, the American Civil Liberties Union of Ohio sent a letter to Governor John Kasich asking him to grant clemency to Shawn Hawkins, who is scheduled to be executed June 14, 2011. The ACLUs request comes after the Ohio Parole Board voted unanimously to recommend the governor grant Mr. Hawkins clemency. Since his conviction, serious doubts have been raised regarding Mr. Hawkins guilt. Among the questions, a key witness recanted his testimony from the trial, fingerprint evidence was discarded before it was DNA tested, and prosecutors could not prove the murder weapon was ever in Mr. Hawkins possession.

Death is the ultimate sentence and can never be reversed, said ACLU of Ohio Legal Director James L. Hardiman. If the state insists on executing a person, we must be confident that he or she is truly guilty. In Mr. Hawkins case, there are simply too many unanswered questions for the state to move ahead with his execution.

State Senator Bill Seitz (R-Cincinnati) and former Ohio Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell, both supporters of the death penalty, have also called on Governor Kasich to grant clemency to Mr. Hawkins.

Everyone wants a justice system that is fair and accurate, no matter your views on capital punishment, added Hardiman. Supporters and critics of the death penalty agree that Shawn Hawkins should not be put to death next month. Now it is time for Governor Kasich to act.

Mr. Hawkins was convicted of fatally shooting two teenagers in Cincinnati in June 1989. In its recommendation, the Ohio Parole Board questioned why the Hamilton County Prosecutors Office did not investigate four other suspects, including the only other eyewitness to the crime. While the number of executions in Ohio has increased in recent years, the state has granted clemency to three condemned men over the last year.

Executions deserve the highest level of scrutiny by the courts and our governor. If even the tiniest shred of doubt exists, Governor Kasich must spare Mr. Hawkins life, or else risk killing an innocent man, Hardiman concluded.

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