

April 5, 2005 Tuesday

SECTION: METRO - EDITORIAL; Pg. 4

LENGTH: 236 words

HEADLINE: Demanding defenders

BODY:

The Louisiana Supreme Court sent state legislators a clear message last week about the importance of indigent defense.

It's standard legal practice for judges to appoint lawyers for suspects who are too poor to provide their own counsel, but the quality of representation these defendants receive in Louisiana is often dreadful.

Public **defenders** typically have more cases than they can possibly handle, and lack the **time** and experience to give capital cases the attention they deserve.

In a ruling issued Friday, the state Supreme Court said the Legislature is responsible for "providing a working system for securing the representation of indigent defendants." And the high court ruled that judges may block the prosecution of poor defendants until money to hire lawyers is available.

The proper response to this ruling isn't to let the criminal justice system grind to a halt. Rather, state legislators need to set aside sufficient money for indigent defense.

After all, not everyone who is charged with a crime is guilty. Police and prosecutors are human, and they are capable of error. Just ask Clyde Charles or Ryan Matthews; both men languished in prison before being exonerated by DNA.

Some lawmakers seem to think a sufficient indigent defense system would mean Louisiana is "soft on crime." But that's hardly true. When innocent people go to jail, they lose years of their lives. Meanwhile, actual criminals go free.