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OUR VIEW

Let defendants go before trial? Yes, it's the law

Even though school is about to resume, summer is far from over. There's plenty of time to visit area lakes for some fun in the sun – or afternoon thundershowers. Lawnmower racing, comedy night and a big Natchitoches garage sale are just a few of the activities on tap this weekend. Elsewhere, prisoners will be released, and a serial killer has been linked to Louisiana killings. Our views on the news follow.

► District Judge Arthur Hunter said Friday that the state's indigent defense system, which provides the money to hire attorneys for poor criminal defendants, is unconstitutional. He is the second judge to make this ruling.

Hunter said he will begin releasing defendants Aug. 29, the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. Some defendants have been in jail since before the storm on non-violent charges. Some defendants have served more time than they would have had to serve if they had been found guilty and been sentenced.

We think: This could put some problems back on the street, but it needs to be done. The only way our court system can remain fair is to make sure everyone has competent legal representation. Overburdened, underpaid, understaffed public defender offices – in Central Louisiana and elsewhere – cannot provide that fair representation.

"The right to an attorney, right to effective assistance of counsel, right to a fair trial, the rule of law and the Constitution triumphs funding follies, pseudo-legal maneuvers and unparalleled inertia," Hunter said in a ruling from the bench. Bravo! It's time to provide appropriate defense for all who have been accused.