

Address indigent defender crisis now

The time for justice is now.

For too long, Louisiana has said it is the wrong time to do the right thing. But with the Louisiana Supreme Court's decision on April 1 in the case of *State v. Citizen*, Louisiana can no longer afford to ignore the crisis in the indigent defense system. Because the state has failed for so many years to fulfill its obligations, trial judges are now authorized to halt prosecution of indigent defendants if funds are inadequate to provide for their constitutionally guaranteed right to equal access to justice.

Reform shouldn't require all of this. There is a capable and empowered Indigent Defense Task Force, assistance from committed national experts, a growing collection of parish studies documenting Louisiana's indigent defense crisis, more than a dozen cases of open litigation against the state, seven innocent people exonerated from Louisiana's death row, a growing grassroots coalition and, now, a Supreme Court reprimand.

Just as troubling as the Court's decision to permit halting prosecutions is the enormous waste of tax payers' money that goes into the delivery of unequal justice for the poor. The people of Louisiana would be dumbfounded to learn that hundreds of millions of dollars sit unaccounted for in criminal justice reserve funds while we are fighting for the state to provide constitutional right to counsel.

Gov. Kathleen Blanco should acknowledge the problem and strongly encourage the legislature to immediately create an indigent defense system that

complies with the Ten Principles of a Public Defense Delivery System, national standards recommended by the American Bar Association. To be sure that the system attends to the special needs of juveniles, the state should further implement the American Council of Chief Defenders and the National Juvenile Defender Center Ten Core Principles for Providing Quality Delinquency Representation through Indigent Defense Delivery Systems. These standards are the fundamental criteria that will ensure a fair, constitutional indigent defense system that preserves public safety and is accountable to taxpayers.

The Louisiana Supreme Court directed the state to create a working indigent defense system 12 years ago. With last week's decision, the Court has taken the intrusive measures it was trying to avoid. It's time for Louisiana to do the right thing.

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Law should not be part of pope selection

Is the world crazy? I can't fathom what code of law, fairness, and decency prosecutes Michael Jackson for molesting young boys and simultaneously allows Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston the great honor of participating in selecting a new pope. Law is little better than Jackson. In fact, the Cardinal's actions are farther reaching than the entertainer's — for Law protected abuser after abuser, knowingly moved pedophile priest after pedophile priest to parish after parish without so much as a warning to the never-ending supply of vulnerable, unsuspecting