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Death penalty opponents release report

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GANNETT STATE BUREAU

TRENTON - With a study commission set to begin deliberating whether the state's death penalty procedures ought to be changed or abolished, opponents of the penalty focused today on several New Jerseyans who served time for heinous crimes of which they were later found innocent.

New Jerseyans for Alternatives to the Death Penalty released a report chronicling 25 cases in New Jersey in which convictions were later overturned.

One of the featured cases involved Larry Peterson, who served 18 years for rape and murder in Burlington County. He tried for a decade to get DNA testing, which finally cleared him last year. The prosecutor dropped the case in May.

"It was a mistake by the state that stole 18 years of my life and could have easily taken my life," Peterson said at a State House news conference.

Peterson was one example advocates cite in arguing false testimony, eyewitness error or prosecutorial misconduct could cause an innocent person to be executed in New Jersey, which hasn't used the death penalty since 1963.

"Those who think that innocent people do not get convicted and never be sentenced to die are dead wrong," said Celeste Fitzgerald, director of New Jerseyans for Alternatives to the Death Penalty.

This year, lawmakers enacted an official moratorium on executions until January 2007 while a study commission examines the economics, ethics, effects and possible alternatives to the death penalty in a report due in November.

That panel is scheduled to hear testimony this afternoon about whether the death penalty is a deterrent, still meets standards of decency and whether the benefits of the punishment outweighs the risks of executing an innocent person.

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