

July court ruling sparks appeals from death row

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TRENTON, N.J. -- A state Supreme Court ruling in July has given convicted murderers renewed hope of getting off New Jersey's death row.

Public Defender's Office spokesman Tom Rosenthal said the office is looking into whether the court's rationale for overturning the death sentence of Anthony DiFrisco can apply to eight of the nine people on death row.

Rosenthal said the office has already asked the high court to consider hearing an appeal in the case of Ambrose Harris, who was sentenced to death in 1996. Harris was condemned for the killing of Kristin Huggins, 22, of Lower Makefield, Pa., whom he kidnapped and raped in 1992.

"We think the criteria from the DiFrisco ruling is applicable to Harris," Rosenthal said.

In July, the Supreme Court overturned the death sentence for DiFrisco, a hit man who said he was paid \$2,500 to shoot a Maplewood pizzeria owner to death 20 years ago.

DiFrisco's successful appeal centered on complex procedural issues involving the type and timing of reviews afforded in capital cases. The ruling determined that DiFrisco's death sentence must be overturned because a majority of justices had voted _ at various times and for various reasons _ to sentence him to life in prison.

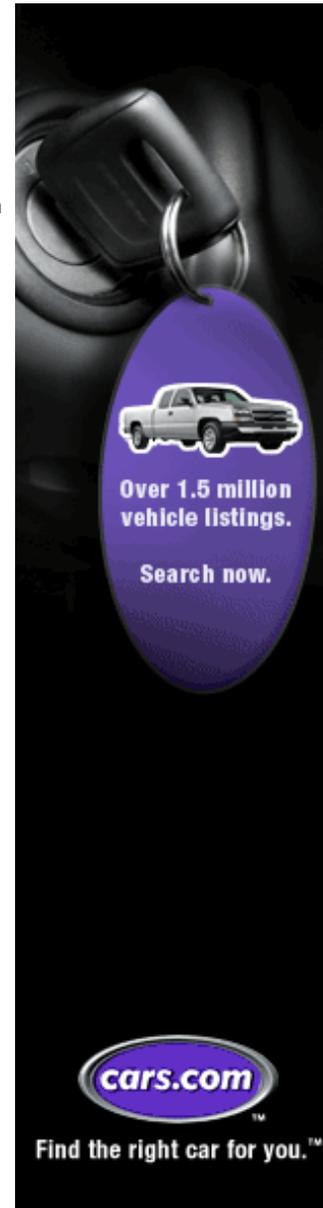
It was DiFrisco's fifth appeal to the state's highest court.

Harris' new request for an appeal is his second to the state's Supreme Court. In it, his attorneys argue that he has received votes against a death sentence from four justices.

"Based on the new precedent carved out by the Supreme Court in the DiFrisco decision," Rosenthal said, "we think that's sufficient to dismiss his capital sentence."

Nine men are on death row in New Jersey. The state though has not put anyone to death since 1963 and currently has a moratorium on executions while officials study capital punishment.

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