



Mental Health Groups Write Joint Amicus re: Panetti v. Quarterman

<http://www.firstlight.cn> 2007-04-23

April 17, 2007, WASHINGTON—The American Psychological Association has teamed with the National Alliance on Mental Illness and the American Psychiatric Association to present a brief as Amici Curiae to the U.S. Supreme Court, providing expertise on appropriate standards for determining the level of mental illness that should preclude execution. Arguments on the case, Panetti v. Quarterman, will be heard by the court today.

Scott Panetti, the defendant in the case, was sentenced to death for the 1992 murder of the parents of his estranged wife. In 2003, Panetti petitioned the Texas state court to determine his competency for execution. The Texas state court ruled him competent. Panetti next petitioned the federal district court. The district court found fault with the earlier ruling and held an evidentiary hearing at which four mental health professionals (three psychologists and a psychiatrist) all agreed that Panetti suffered from some degree of mental illness, characterized by impaired cognitive process and delusions, and consistent with schizoaffective disorder. The district court nevertheless held that Panetti was competent to be executed because he understood the state intended to execute him.

On appeal to the Fifth Circuit, Panetti argued that the district court employed the wrong legal standard to evaluate his competence to be executed. Panetti argued that an earlier Supreme Court standard established in the seminal case of Ford v. Wainwright required that Panetti not only be aware of the fact of his impending execution but also have a rational understanding of why he was to be executed. Panetti believes he is to be executed because he preached the gospel, not because he murdered his in-laws.

The central question before the Court is whether a defendant must have a rational understanding of the reasons for his execution, beyond the mere fact that he will be executed, in order to be competent to be executed?

The APA brief provides guidance to the Court in developing a meaningful standard of competence for execution, including bringing scientific knowledge to the Court on such issues as the ability of a prisoner with serious mental illness to understand the reason for the execution.

"The law-psychology field has been attentive to the law's distinction between 'factual' and 'rational' understanding for many years, and across a variety of legal questions," according to Kirk Heilbrun, PhD, a forensic psychologist who served as one of three APA representatives to the American Bar Association's Task Force on Mental Disability and the Death Penalty. "Factual understanding is about information. Rational understanding allows us to place that information in a meaningful context, without gross interference caused by certain symptoms of severe mental illness, or very serious impairment of intellectual functioning."

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