

EDITORIAL

Condemned convicts deserve representation

The propriety of the death penalty in a civilized society dedicated to the ideal of justice has been debated for decades. No agreement appears imminent between the two sides.

But surely capital punishment advocates and opponents can agree on one issue regarding its implementation: Defendants whose lives hang in the balance are entitled to competent legal representation.

Apparently, that is not the case in Alabama.

Seven prominent members of the bar in our state — including three former Alabama Supreme Court justices, three former State Bar presidents and a former Criminal Appeals Court judge — filed a friend-of-the-court brief last week urging the U.S. Supreme Court to hear the case of six Alabama death-row inmates who claim they were denied adequate representation.

"Alabama's legal system regarding the provision of counsel to indigent Death Row inmates ... is in a state of crisis," the former judicial system officials said.

Alabama is the only state that doesn't provide condemned inmates with attorneys for post-conviction appeals, The Birmingham News reported in a story on the filing.

Other states have established post-conviction defender programs or have funds to assist indigent convicts with legal costs in the appeals process.

Regardless of how one feels about capital punishment, surely all can agree that justice is the ultimate goal of the criminal justice system. And for justice to prevail, prosecution and defense must be sufficiently competent.

Anything less is the equivalent of vigilantism.