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In Camera

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TASK FORCE TO REVIEW WRONGFUL CONVICTIONS IN STATE

Former California Attorney General John Van de Kamp will chair a commission charged with recommending improvements to flaws in the state's criminal justice system that may have resulted in wrongful convictions and even executions, the state Senate announced Wednesday.

Van de Kamp, now of counsel to the Los Angeles firm Dewey Ballantine, will lead what will be an 18- or 19-member committee comprised of prosecutors, public defenders, a victims' rights advocate, law enforcement officials and others who work in the criminal justice system.

"It's going to be a very balanced commission," Van de Kamp said last week.

Lawmakers created the Commission on the Fair Administration of Justice in 2004, although the group has not been continuously active in its first full year. It will have until the end of 2007 to report back to the Legislature and governor on its findings.

Van de Kamp said the commission hopes to quicken the pace of its work by announcing a new executive director shortly and starting research on the issue of false identifications in criminal cases.

Other issues the group will consider are the use of inmate informants, access to forensic evidence and inadequate defense, "particularly in death penalty cases, where so much is at stake," Van de Kamp said.

Legislation introduced earlier this month would have placed a moratorium on executions in California until the commission issued its final report. Commissioners stayed out of the debate, and the bill recently stalled in the Assembly.

Van de Kamp, the former U.S. attorney for California's Central District, supported a moratorium on federal death penalty cases earlier this decade, although he said his position is irrelevant.

"There are people on the commission who support the death penalty and there are people who oppose it. That's not the issue here," Van de Kamp said. "The fact is that we have a death penalty statute in California."

The commission's success over the next two years will depend, he said, "on whether we made a positive impact on the criminal justice system and cut down on reversal rates."

— Cheryl Miller

TACKLING TACTICS

Two lawyers in O'Melveny & Myers' Los Angeles office will head back to court next month for further details on an unusual class action that's making national headlines and could affect future unionization strategies.

Partners Robert Welsh and Gordon Krischer are representing uniform supplier Cintas Corp. in a suit against a union