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Victim's mom speaks to death panel

District attorney also testifies in L.A.

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LOS ANGELES - The legal system that has kept convicted killer Kevin Cooper alive on death row for more than two decades is broken and causes needless suffering for the families of murder victims, a grieving Chino Hills woman told a panel of commissioners Wednesday.

Mary Ann Hughes, whose 11-year-old son, Christopher, Cooper was convicted of murdering, told the California Commission on the Fair Administration of Justice that death row inmates such as Cooper are given too many opportunities to challenge their sentences, while grieving survivors of their victims are forced to wait far too long for justice.

"We've lived with this nightmare for over 25 years while Kevin Cooper and his defense attorneys have manipulated a legal system that I always thought was one of the best in the world," she said. "The only way for this to come to an end is when the state finally starts carrying out the death penalty and people like Kevin Cooper are off the face of the earth."

Hughes' remarks came at the end of a daylong hearing of the commission, a panel of

experts appointed by the California Senate to examine legal issues in the state. Part of the commission's charge is to deliver recommendations on how to fix flaws in the death-penalty system. Wednesday's hearing in downtown Los Angeles was the second of three that focused specifically on the topic.

San Bernardino County District Attorney Michael A. Ramos also spoke at the hearing.

Cooper has been on death row for more than two decades after being convicted for a killing spree that left Christopher Hughes and three of his neighbors dead.

Prosecutors say Cooper hacked and stabbed Douglas and Peggy Ryen, their 10-year-old daughter, Jessica, and Christopher inside the Ryens' Chino Hills home in 1983.

The killings, perhaps the most notorious in San Bernardino County, occurred just days after Cooper escaped from the nearby California Institution for Men state prison. Cooper, who claims authorities framed him for the crimes, has long appealed his conviction in hopes of winning freedom or a new trial. His case has often been at the center of California's death-penalty debate.

Hughes was one of about a dozen members of the general public permitted to speak during a public comment portion of the afternoon session of the hearing.

She told the commissioners that as long as

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Cooper is alive, he poses a danger to society.

about that," he said.

Hughes, however, was greatly outnumbered by death-penalty opponents, who told the commission the state's capital system is not only hopelessly broken, but also immoral.

Those speakers included former "M*A*S*H" actor Mike Farrell, now president of Death Penalty Focus, an anti-death penalty group. Several other relatives of murder victims also spoke, telling commissioners they believed executing convicted killers only added to the grief and tragedy of murder.

Ramos, meanwhile, testified during the morning session and addressed a completely different set of topics.

He primarily defended the practice of most prosecutors in the state to keep secret the processes they use in choosing which defendants will face the death penalty.

Some researchers have suggested that such secrecy leads to a disproportionate number of death sentences for minorities and the poor.

Ramos, however, said exposing the thinking of district attorneys would allow defense lawyers to unfairly glimpse prosecution strategies about cases. He assured the commission that district attorneys throughout the state use their discretion in a responsible manner.

"The ultimate decision we can make is taking somebody's life, and we are very careful

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