

Death-row inmate refuses to leave cell for hearing

By Anthony Colarossi, Orlando Sentinel

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Death row inmate John Huggins refused to appear via video conference call at a hearing this morning that was originally intended to deal with his request to fire his legal team.

Orange-Osceola Chief Judge Belvin Perry questioned a corrections officer up at the state prison complex near Starke about Huggins. The officer said he refused to leave his cell and remained on his bunk this morning, when asked to go to another room to take part in the hearing, scheduled for 10:30.

Huggins' defense attorney, meanwhile, argued that an upcoming hearing on post-conviction appellate claims made in this case should be delayed until the question of whether Huggins is competent is settled.

But Perry insisted that a hearing long scheduled for next month will go on regarding certain claims, while the question of Huggins' competence is still being decided. Perry plans to spell out which claims will be heard in an order soon to be released. Some of those claims involve ineffective counsel and prosecutorial misconduct.

Perry said "this case is mired in quicksand" and said he can't know for sure if Huggins is refusing to cooperate with his lawyers because he is delusional or because he is trying to delay the process.

Also, Perry said he may compel Huggins to be transported to Orlando for that hearing whether he wants to attend or not.

The parties had some discussion about whether to hold the hearing, which may last a few days, at the prison in northern Florida. But ultimately Perry decided to hold it at the [Orange County Courthouse](#) because many of the witnesses are in and around Orlando and the trip to Starke would be an inconvenience for many involved.

"We will have it here," Perry said. "If he refuses to come...well, let me think about it. I think I will have him transported."

The inmate wants a new team of attorneys to handle the appeal of his conviction of strangling 30-year-old construction engineer Carla Larson in June 1997.

Her body was found partially buried near [Walt Disney](#) World.

There are lingering questions about Huggins' competence. He must be found competent to assist the legal team handling his case and challenging his death sentence.

But during a hearing earlier this month one of his attorneys told Perry that Huggins also wants to get rid of his legal team and refuses to meet with them.

"He wants other counsel," attorney David Gemmer said. "He's expressed that to us repeatedly."

Huggins himself has filed papers requesting that his legal team with the Capital Collateral Regional Counsel be removed.

In October, Perry found Huggins competent to proceed. However, his legal team had another evaluation done by Tampa-based psychologist Richard Carpenter in November and that testing indicated he was not faking delusions to stave off his execution.

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