

Clock is ticking on first execution at San Quentin's revamped death chamber

Albert Greenwood Brown is scheduled to be put to death via lethal injection Sept. 29. The facility has undergone an \$853,000 remodel and is now four times larger than the old chamber.



Death row inmates would be strapped to this gurney in the lethal injection chamber, and three drugs would be administered intravenously. Albert Greenwood Brown is scheduled to be executed Sept. 29. (Wally Skalij / Los Angeles Times / September 21, 2010)

By Carol J. Williams, Los Angeles Times

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Reporting from San Quentin, Calif. —

Pistachio vinyl covers the gurney in the state's new lethal injection chamber, the only splash of color in a sterile white room where corrections officials intend to put to death rapist-murderer Albert Greenwood Brown next week.

An Elgin clock, the only other furnishing, ticks above the death bed, tracking the time to the first execution to be carried out in California in nearly five years — unless a judge moves to stop it.

The hexagonal room surrounded by viewing compartments and a holding cell where Brown is expected to spend his last six hours were built to comply with a federal court order that state officials correct deficiencies in the execution regimen. U.S. District Judge Jeremy Fogel halted the February 2006 execution of murderer Michael Morales after hearing testimony about inadequate anesthesia and cramped conditions in the former gas chamber.

Fogel's order set in motion a legal duel between those who want capital punishment practiced in a state where two out of three citizens support the ultimate penalty and those who oppose executions on moral, religious and economic grounds and have used the hiatus to challenge its validity in state and federal court.

"We are fully prepared to carry out an execution on Sept. 29," San Quentin State Prison Warden Vincent Cullen said as he accompanied journalists on a tour of the facility housed in a cinderblock annex to the prison's teeming East Wing.

At 200 square feet, the lethal injection chamber built with inmate labor and \$853,000 in taxpayer money is more than four times the size of the old metal-walled gas chamber used for two executions by lethal gas and 11 by lethal injection since capital punishment was restored in 1977.

Vials of the three drugs used to execute the condemned are stored in a caged and locked refrigerator in the death chamber's adjacent Infusion Control Room. Sodium thiopental would be pumped through first, to anesthetize the inmate, then pancurium bromide to paralyze him and, finally, potassium chloride to stop his heart. Two grommeted holes in the wall on either side of the gurney would be threaded with tubes to carry the lethal infusions from the masked execution team in the control room to the veins of the inmate. The inmate would be restrained by five black straps across the body and cuffs to steady his arms and ankles. Four tan wall phones with red warning lights stand ready to receive calls from the governor, the warden, the state attorney general and the [U.S. Supreme Court](#), should a last-minute clemency be granted.

Fogel has yet to inspect the new death chamber or review the revised execution procedures drafted by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation over the last three years and approved by a state agency in July. But department spokeswoman Terry Thornton pointed out Tuesday that the Morales case wasn't a class action on behalf of all death row inmates and posed no barrier to Brown's scheduled death by lethal injection.

The warren of rooms being readied for their first use are silent, in stark contrast with the grunts and shouts and thunderous footfalls emanating from the concertina-wire-enclosed rooftop recreation yard where maximum-security inmates exercise high above the sparkling waters of San Francisco Bay. A fog-shrouded skyline is visible on the horizon.

Lethal injection is the "default" method of execution in California, with the gas chamber still available and fully functional if a condemned prisoner should choose that over lethal injection,

said Lt. Sam Robinson, public information officer for San Quentin.

Brown's attorney, Jan B. Norman of Los Angeles, has petitioned [Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) to grant her client a reprieve so that the next governor can consider the prisoner's request for clemency. Schwarzenegger, who leaves office in January, has said he wants to resume executions as soon as possible. Norman criticized the rapid-fire moves to resume executions since the new protocols were adopted six weeks ago and accused the governor and his lawyers of "a headlong rush to execute as many people as quickly as possible and to sabotage the ability of inmates' counsel to respond."

Brown, who raped and murdered a 15-year-old girl in 1980, is one of 708 California prisoners on death row, including 18 women. Only a handful have exhausted all appeals and are eligible to be issued death warrants.

A state appeals court on Monday lifted an injunction against executions that had been imposed by a Marin County judge, clearing away the last legal hurdle to fulfilling the death warrant issued by a Riverside County judge for 56-year-old Brown.

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