

Tommy Zeigler case: New blood expert granted

By [Anthony Colarossi](#), Orlando Sentinel

5:32 p.m. EDT, April 11, 2011

An Orange Circuit judge has decided that long-time death row inmate [William Thomas](#) Zeigler should receive state-funding for a blood spatter expert to testify at a future hearing on whether a new round of [DNA](#) testing should be conducted in his case.

Zeigler's attorneys argue the new DNA testing would provide evidence pointing to his innocence.

Orange Circuit Judge Reginald Whitehead granted the defense motion for the expert's expenses during a hearing early Monday. An evidentiary hearing on the DNA has yet to be scheduled.

Zeigler was convicted of killing three family members and a customer inside his [Winter Garden](#) furniture store on Christmas Eve 1975. He and his attorneys want new DNA testing conducted on bloodstained evidence recovered from the crime scene.

But in late January, Zeigler's attorneys John Houston Pope and Dennis Tracey III said a defense witness used to review the blood evidence several years back is no longer willing to work on the case. That's when they requested funding for a new expert.

The state's Capital Collateral Regional Counsel will fund the expert.

The DNA evidence, the attorneys say, will point to Zeigler's wrongful conviction, something Zeigler has argued all along.

His wife, in-laws and store customer Charlie Mays were killed in the family furniture store in Winter Garden more than 35 years ago. Zeigler was found alive, shot in the abdomen; investigators said it was self-inflicted. Zeigler claims a group of men attacked him and his family in the store.

A previous round of DNA testing failed to clear Zeigler. A little more than six years ago, Zeigler's legal team and prosecutor Jeff Ashton argued about DNA findings that showed some blood evidence on Zeigler's shirt was originally linked to the wrong victim.

During the 1976 trial, the prosecution suggested Zeigler held his father-in-law, Perry Edwards, in a headlock while striking him with a metal crank. This was an explanation for the bloodstain found on the underarm of Zeigler's shirt.

But the DNA tests discussed during Zeigler's 2004 hearing showed that the blood actually belonged to Charlie Mays, the other man killed in the store.

Prosecutors argued that both Edwards and Mays suffered bloody beatings that night. Following that hearing, Whitehead ruled that DNA test results would not have changed jurors' minds. He denied Zeigler a new trial.

But now Zeigler's attorneys say new testing on blood-stained evidence "can show Mr. Zeigler's innocence."

Zeigler, 65, filed his petition for the new DNA testing in August 2009.

Following Monday's hearing, a group of Zeigler supporters led by Lynn-Marie Carty, a St. Petersburg investigator, held a press conference outside the Orange County Courthouse

Carty repeated many of the unusual circumstances surrounding the case, which she believes prove his innocence. She also questioned the credibility of a key witness who testified against Zeigler, former Oakland Police Chief Robert Thompson. Thompson was the first to arrive at the crime scene and rushed Zeigler to the hospital that night.

acolarossi@tribune.com or 407-420-5447