

OUR OPINIONS

Justice takes a step forward

Injustice has many victims in New Orleans.

Hundreds of poor people accused but not convicted of crimes have sat in jail, many since before Hurricane Katrina, waiting for public defenders and for the recovery of the city's broken criminal justice system. Among them are roughly 30 defendants indicted capital crimes eligible for the death penalty.

So it's promising that administrators of the Orleans Parish Indigent Defender Program are working to contract with private lawyers to handle most of those capital cases.

The already scanty public defender program lost two of the three lawyers

that handled capital cases when administrators last month began requiring all lawyers to work full time. The third capital case attorney was transferred to another section.

Public defenders still will handle a few of the old capital cases. New defendants charged with capital cases who cannot afford lawyers will get legal aid from a state-financed office that already has started working cases.

But until now, most previously charged defendants facing a possible death penalty had no timeline for getting a lawyer. Bringing in additional attorneys should help restart these cases, ending an injustice that has gone on for too long.