

As soon as I step into the main conference room of the hotel in Orlando, I know this is big business. At least 130 people are seated at three dozen rows of tables. To the rear, stacks of high tech equipment are clicking and chirping in preparation for teleconferencing. Front row center, alternating images of distant participants fade in and out on eight-foot screens that tower over each side of the podium.

At the head table, a Supreme Court Justice and State Senator are scribbling notes for their introductory remarks. Peppered throughout the satellite-connected rooms around the state are familiar faces of prominent jurists, elected officials and attorneys.

The opening speaker mounts the stage. "This is the largest intrastate teleconference ever done in Florida. In addition to Orlando, we are teleconferencing with nine other locations for a total of over 400 participants."

With a few quickly penciled sums, I rough cut the total dollar amount in State salaries that will be consumed today in an eight-hour conference attended by over 400 of Florida's best and brightest legal talents.

What matter of such moment could gather so many highly visible, well-paid professionals and politicians from all across Florida? A brainstorming session on treating and processing Florida's burgeoning wastewater? A statewide panel on better care for our elderly or our children? A planning conference on the energy future of our state? A bold initiative to eliminate poverty housing in Florida in our time? A consensus building session on education, on better equipping our teachers and training our young? A public safety consortium on full deployment of community policing throughout every neighborhood in Florida? An economic platform to image community based job-creation that would raise every head-of-household's earnings to a living wage?

No. Nothing so hopeful or productive.

This is the yearly gathering of one of Florida's most pervasive but invisible professional industry. For eight hours, all this talent and time, resources and potential will be squarely focused on the legal minutia of sentencing hearings in the miniscule percentage of criminal cases where the death penalty is constitutionally allowed. I'm amazed. So long as Florida has a death penalty, we want all these people working hard to assure the constitutional systems are solidly in place. Yet, the sheer number of participants brings to mind a survey I read a few years ago.

A 1995 survey of hundreds of randomly selected police chiefs across the nation asked, "What, in your opinion, works in the battle against crime?"

The death penalty was mentioned by fewer than 2% of the chiefs and followed twenty-five other areas of concern. They ranked the death penalty last as a way of reducing violent crime, behind curbing drug abuse, placing more police officers on the streets, longer sentences, and a better economy with more jobs. Strengthening families and neighborhoods, punishing criminals swiftly and surely, controlling illegal drugs, and gun control were all considered much more important than the death penalty in fighting crime. The study acknowledged that politicians love the death penalty which police chiefs consider a distraction from real crime fighting issues.

As the teleconference winds on, I can't help but wonder if the public has any idea of the truth. By mid-afternoon, a judicial guest speaker relates that Florida jurors almost always believe that execution is cheaper than life imprisonment without possibility of parole. Laughter peals through the crowd. Everybody in this conference knows that the truth is just the opposite. Execution can be two to three times more expensive than life imprisonment without possibility of parole. I look around to see if anybody else is not laughing. There are a few who look very concerned.

(608 words) © Dale S. Recinella and *The Florida Catholic*