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Tennessee reinstates electric chair as death penalty option

BY TIM GHIANNI

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(Reuters) - Tennessee's electric chair, last used in 2007, is now an option for executions in the state if lethal injection drugs are unavailable, following a bill that was signed by the governor on Thursday.

The law was drawn up as various states were encountering difficulty in obtaining drugs for lethal injections because many pharmaceutical firms, mainly in Europe, object to their use in executions. The bill sailed through the state's legislature.

"It gives us another option out there. We've had so many problems with lethal injection," said the bill's House sponsor Representative Dennis Powers, who confirmed the bill was signed by Governor Bill Haslam.

Cade Cothren, spokesman for the state's House Republican Caucus, also confirmed the bill had been signed. The governor's office did not respond to repeated calls and emails from Reuters seeking confirmation and additional information.

Richard Dieter, executive director for the Death Penalty Information Center, which tracks executions, said that court battles would likely erupt if an inmate were sentenced to the chair.

"There certainly have been some gruesome electrocutions in the past and that would weigh on courts' minds," Dieter said when the bill passed the senate in April.

Lethal injection is the primary execution method in all states that have capital punishment, but some states allow inmates the option of electrocution, hanging, firing squad or the gas chamber.

Tennessee Attorney General Robert Cooper Jr. issued an advisory opinion stating that electrocution is constitutionally defensible as an execution method earlier this year.

Tennessee last executed an inmate in 2009 and the next execution is scheduled for October. The state corrections department has said it is confident of being able to secure drugs when needed. It has also said its electric chair is operational.

(Editing by Curtis Skinner and Stephen Coates)

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Aaron Dickson, President of the Board of Directors of the Texas Prison Museum stands on November 19, 2002 with "Old Sparky," the Texas electric chair in which 361 killers were executed. - RTXLMWL

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