

Defendant Seeks To Keep Her Attorney

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NEW LONDON — Old Saybrook lawyer Beth Ann Carpenter will go to trial in a few weeks in an East Lyme murder-for-hire case that could send her to prison for the rest of her life, but she still doesn't know whom she will have for an attorney.

Veteran New Haven defense lawyer Hugh Keefe has been representing

AREAWIDE Carpenter for the past five years.

But now, with jury selection scheduled to start Nov. 14, prosecutors want him dismissed.

Arguments on whether Keefe can represent Carpenter are scheduled to start at noon today in New London Superior Court. High-profile Hartford lawyer Hubert Santos has agreed to meet with Carpenter in the morning to advise her on the possible benefits and risks associated with retaining Keefe as her legal counsel.

Supervisory Assistant State's Attorney Paul E. Murray wants Keefe removed because the state likely will call him as a witness during the trial. Keefe gave Carpenter legal advice and served as a conduit between her and authorities after she agreed to cooperate in the investigation of the 1994 fatal shooting of her brother-in-law, Anson "Buzz" Clinton III. Carpenter, 36, would later become a suspect in Clinton's death and now stands accused as a co-conspirator in the killing. Carpenter is accused of conspiring with her former lover and law partner, Haiman Clein, to hire a hit man to kill Clinton, who she suspected was abusing her then 3-year-old niece.

Carpenter has pleaded not guilty to charges of capital felony, murder and conspiracy to commit murder.

Police say the plot was carried out

March 10, 1994, when Clein's drug dealer, Mark Despres, lured Clinton, 28, to a road off I-95 and shot him five times in the chest. Clein fled the area after a warrant was issued for his arrest and Keefe contends it was Carpenter, who had moved to Europe — and ultimately settled in Dublin, Ireland — who helped authorities track him down. How much Carpenter allegedly cooperated with investigators and whether she moved to Europe to start a new life or to flee prosecution is likely to come up during the trial. Therefore, Murray says, Keefe is likely to be a key witness.

For his part, Keefe wants to stay on the case, saying that it is by no means certain that he will be compelled to testify and there may be other ways to present the information to the jury. The defense says it would be unfair to deprive Carpenter of effective legal counsel at this late juncture.

"To deprive Beth Carpenter of counsel of her choice on some future contingency would work a serious injustice," co-defense counsel Tara L. Knight wrote in her opposition to Murray's request. "Beth Carpenter and attorney Keefe have developed a close and trusting lawyer-client relationship . . . and attorney Keefe has devoted hundreds of hours to this matter."

Knight, also of New Haven, has said that she, too, will step down if Keefe is removed. In a related matter, Knight filed a motion Tuesday seeking to suppress documents Irish police seized from an apartment. The defense contends that the documents included communications between Keefe and Carpenter about her possible defense strategy and legal options before her arrest.

Keefe contends the documents are protected under the attorney-client privilege rule. Murray declined to comment on the motion Tuesday.