Ricky Blackmon the first of seven Texas death row prisoners to be executed in the next two weeks

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Ricky Blackmon, 41, was executed by lethal injection on Wednesday for the 1987 murder of an East Texas man. Blackmon was the first of seven men on death row in the state of Texas scheduled to die by lethal injection over the next two weeks.

Blackmon was the 17th person put to death in Texas this year, and the 181st to be executed in the state since the resumption of capital punishment in Texas in December 1982. Texas Governor George W. Bush, the front-running Republican presidential candidate, has yet to issue a stay of execution for any death row inmate.

Since the US reinstituted the death penalty in January 1977, 560 people have been executed nationwide.

To be put to death in Texas in the next to weeks are: Charles Boyd, who was scheduled to die Thursday; Kenneth Dunn, August 10; James Earhart, August 11; Larry Robison, August 16; and Joe Trevino and Rickie Wayne Smith, both scheduled to die on August 18.

One of these men, Larry Robison, has been diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic and had been in an out of psychiatric hospitals for most of his adult life. When he was discharged from John Peter County Hospital because he was "not violent" and they "needed the bed" his mother, Lois Robison, objected, saying, "He has no job, no money, no car, and no place to stay, you can't just put him out on the street." She was told by hospital officials, "We do it every day. You would be surprised how many schizophrenics are on the streets."

When Robison killed five people in a violent, psychotic outburst, his family believed he would finally get the mental treatment he needed. Instead he was arrested, held a year without bail, given no sanity hearing and convicted and sentenced to death. In his 16 years on death row he has only seen a psychiatrist twice, at his family's request, and has never received any medication or mental health treatment.

In a plea for their son's life on the Internet, Robison's parents say, "Since Larry went to Death Row we have met many families who have mentally ill, mentally retarded, or brain-damaged relatives in prison. Approximately one-third of the people on Death Row are mentally impaired. There are more of them in jails and prisons in Texas than there are in mental hospitals. Yet programs to treat mental illness would be less expensive than incarceration in prison and much less expensive than execution, which costs over $2 million each. It is a much more cost-effective and humane way to treat our handicapped citizens. The state of Texas is 49th in resources for the mentally ill and yet it is at the very top in prisons and executions."

The US Supreme Court has refused to hear Larry Robison's case and he is scheduled to die by lethal injection on August 17.

Also scheduled to be executed this month in other US states are: Victor Kennedy, August 6 in Alabama; Marlon Williams, August 17 in Virginia; Steve Roach, August 25 in Virginia; and Leslie Martin, August 25 in Louisiana.

Joseph Timothy Keel, 35, had been scheduled to die by lethal injection in North Carolina today for the 1991 murder of his father. His execution was halted on Thursday by the state Supreme Court. Keel suffers from brain injuries as a result of head traumas and IQ tests place him in the 7th percentile of cognitive functioning. He also has a history of substance abuse, drinking two or three fifths of vodka daily by the age of 18. His first murder sentence was overturned because

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of trial judge error. At his second trial his attorney presented no evidence of his mental disabilities.

If the state of New Jersey executes John Martini, 70, on September 22, he will become the first man put to death by this eastern industrial state in 36 years. Martini, convicted of the murder of a businessman, has repeatedly voiced his desire to be put to death and has not opposed his death sentence. Pro-death penalty advocates hope that his case will set a precedent to resume executions in New Jersey.

Cathy Waldor, a defense lawyer who has handled many New Jersey death penalty cases, commented, "Martini sets that train in motion, and once it's in motion, it's going to get a lot easier for the state to kill people." Martini's lawyer, Public Defender Dale Jones, said, "Volunteers always let society off the hook."

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