

Fourth Arkansas execution ends gruesome eight-day state killing spree

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Kenneth Dwayne Williams, 38, was put to death Thursday night at the Cummins Unit in the state prison in Grady, Arkansas. A witnesses to the execution, which began at 10:55 p.m. local time, said that Williams' body lurched 15 times and he was "coughing, convulsing, lurching, jerking" after the first drug was injected.

Williams' death brought to a grisly end an 11-day drive by Arkansas state authorities to execute a group of death row inmates before their supply of midazolam, one of the drugs used in the state's three-drug lethal injection protocol, expired at the end of the month.

Williams was sentenced to death in 2000 for fatally shooting farmer and former deputy warden Cecil Boren. He had been serving a life sentence for killing college student Dominique Hurd. He was recaptured after a police chase that ended when he crashed the pick-up truck he had stolen from Boren, fatally injuring delivery driver Michael Greenwood.

Williams' execution was allowed to proceed after the US Supreme Court announced shortly before 10:15 p.m. that it had denied without comment or noted dissent the inmate's final appeals for mercy.

His attorneys had filed a petition Thursday with the high court seeking additional case review, arguing that he was intellectually disabled and "categorically ineligible to be put to death." They cited examinations from three independent mental health professionals.

In separate rulings earlier Thursday the US Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals denied Williams' request. Pulaski County Circuit Judge Mackie M. Pierce also did not halt the execution. The Arkansas Supreme Court had denied Williams' motion for a stay of execution on Wednesday.

While strapped to the gurney before his execution began, the inmate said, "I have been transformed. Some things can't be undone. I seek forgiveness."

Three minutes after his execution began, Williams' body lurched 15 times against the gurney's leather restraints. He then lurched five more times at a slower rate, according to witness Kelly Kissel, state news editor for the Associated Press. Williams, who was breathing through his nose before

the movement, began breathing through his mouth after the 20th lurch, Kissel said. He described the breathing as "a clear attempt to draw oxygen" and said the prisoner attempted to draw breath until 10:59 p.m.

Kissel said the execution-room attendant assessed Williams' consciousness by checking his eyes at 10:57 p.m. and touching his chest at 10:58 p.m. The inmate let out an audible moan at 10:59 p.m., he said. He was pronounced dead at 11:05 p.m., 13 minutes after the midazolam was administered.

Williams was the fourth of eight inmates Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson ordered put to death over an eight-day period. Amnesty International denounced the unprecedented string of execution warrants as Arkansas' "conveyer belt of death."

As with the other executions, Williams' state killing was carried out with a three-drug protocol, beginning with midazolam, a sedative, followed by the paralytic vecuronium bromide and ending with potassium chloride to induce cardiac arrest.

Williams' attorneys released a statement calling the witness accounts "horrifying" and demanding an investigation into the "problematic execution." Through his spokesman J.R. Davis, Governor Hutchinson said he did not believe the execution required a formal review. Davis said the four executions carried out over the eight-day period were "flawless."

The European Union's ambassador to the US, David O'Sullivan, had sent a letter to Hutchinson on behalf of the EU requesting that Williams be spared due to findings that he was "intellectually disabled." The letter also said that justifying the "unprecedented pace" of executions on the basis of drug expiration dates was a "concerning precedent."

Before last night's lethal injection, three men had already met their deaths. Ledell Lee, 51, was executed on Thursday, April 20. On Monday, Arkansas carried out the nation's first double-execution in 17 years, putting to death Jack Jones Jr., 52, and Marcell Williams, 46. (See: "The double-execution horror in Arkansas.")

Attorneys for Williams argued that Jones had been “moving his lips and gulping for air” after being administered midazolam, suggesting that he had not been rendered unconscious by the first drug in the lethal-injection protocol. A US district judge ruled against Williams, allowing his execution to proceed.

A number of executions in recent years using midazolam—in Alabama, Arizona, Ohio and Oklahoma—have resulted in inmates suffering excruciating deaths, gasping for breath and writhing on the execution gurney, appearing not to have been adequately sedated by midazolam. But a 2015 ruling by the US Supreme Court held that the use of the sedative did not constitute “cruel and unusual punishment.”

Four other men had been scheduled to die over the 11-day period in Arkansas, but received reprieves. Hutchinson and Attorney General Leslie Rutledge acknowledged that there was not enough time before the end of the month to seek new death warrants for any of these prisoners, but vowed to pursue them at a later date.

Two men scheduled to die April 17 received last-minute stays. The US Supreme Court halted the execution of Don Davis without comment. Bruce Ward received a temporary stay from the Arkansas Supreme Court to consider his mental competency.

A district judge ruled that Jason McGehee was entitled to a 30-day comment period after the Arkansas parole board told the governor that his clemency request had merit. His execution had originally been set for last night.

The state’s high court also halted the execution of Stacey Johnson, scheduled for execution on April 20, ordering a new hearing in lower court for him to make his claims that DNA testing could prove his innocence.

The eight condemned men include those with mental incompetence, serious mental illness, brain damage and years of abuse, both physical and sexual. The majority of them have never had their life histories of mental health investigated and presented to a judge and jury. They were the victims of prosecutorial misconduct and defense counsel incompetence.

Kenneth Williams’ case was no different. His IQ score of 70 placed him squarely within the intellectual disability range, and he also has a history of severe “learning disabilities” and “neuropsychological problems,” according to the Fair Punishment Project (FPP). There is also evidence that he suffered brain damage from significant head injuries.

According to the 2007 testimony of Williams’ psychologist, Dr. Mark Douglas Cunningham, his patient had “memory problems, problems focusing attention, deficiencies of judgment and reasoning, problems with reading comprehension, problems with comprehending oral instructions and problems with mental flexibility, which is

the ability to shift from one task to another.”

Williams also experienced extreme trauma and poverty, being shuttled between rat- and roach-infested foster homes where economic deprivation meant there was often not enough food to eat and utilities were shut off. Both of his parents were substance abusers.

His father regularly beat his mother and once kidnapped her and held her at gunpoint for days. He also regularly beat Williams and his brothers, “routinely whipping the boys... on their buttocks, legs, arms and hands,” leaving “welts and bruises.” Williams was institutionalized in the juvenile correctional system at the age of nine after beginning to smoke marijuana at six and drink beer at nine.

As opposed to the vengeance and retribution meted out against Williams and the other inmates put to death over the last eight days by Arkansas authorities, the family of one of Williams’ victims called for a halt to his execution.

Williams’ attorneys said the family of Michael Greenwood had called on Hutchinson to spare Williams’ life. The governor denied their plea hours before the execution. Greenwood’s daughter, Kayla, told the *Springfield [Missouri] News-Leader* she recently learned that Williams had a 21-year-old daughter, Jasmine, whom he hadn’t seen in 17 years, as well as a three-year-old granddaughter he had never met.

Kayla Greenwood said her mother, Stacey Yaw, had purchased plane tickets for Williams’ daughter and granddaughter to fly from Washington state so he could see them the day before his executions. “I told him we forgive him and where I stood on it,” Greenwood said through a message to Williams’ attorneys.

Yaw, Greenwood and other family members drove from Missouri to Little Rock so they could meet Jasmine and her daughter and drive them to the prison on Wednesday.



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