

First US execution of 2026: Charles Thompson dies by lethal injection in Texas

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Texas carried out the first US execution of 2026 on January 28. Charles Victor Thompson, 55, died by lethal injection at the state penitentiary in Huntsville, marking another round in the state government's endless pursuit of capital punishment.

Texas has executed 81 prisoners under Governor Greg Abbott (2015-2026). His two predecessors approved even more state killings: 152 under George W. Bush (1994-2000), and 279 under Rick Perry (2000-2015). Only two death sentences were commuted during this period.

Thompson was condemned to die for the April 1998 double murder of his ex-girlfriend, Glenda Dennise Hayslip, 39, and her new partner, Darren Keith Cain, 30. Following an argument at Hayslip's Houston-area apartment, Thompson returned hours later and shot both victims. Cain died at the scene, while Hayslip succumbed to her injuries in a hospital one week later.

Before the lethal dose of pentobarbital was administered, Thompson issued a final statement seeking forgiveness: "I hope the victim's family ... can find forgiveness in their heart and that you can begin to heal and move past this." He added a critique of the judicial process, stating, "There are no winners in this situation, it creates more victims and traumatizes more people 28 years later." Witnesses noted that as the injection took effect, Thompson gasped loudly and snored before all movement ceased. He was pronounced dead at 6:50 p.m., 22 minutes after the procedure began.

Thompson's case was not without legal controversy. He was originally sentenced to death in 1999. In 2001, the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals (TCCA) vacated that sentence due to a Sixth Amendment violation, as Thompson's guarantee of legal representation had already taken effect. Prosecutors unconstitutionally sent

an undercover investigator, posing as an inmate, to elicit incriminating details of the crime from Thompson.

A new punishment-phase jury trial in November 2005 excluded the undercover testimony but heard other incriminating evidence, including testimony from another inmate's account of Thompson admitting to the murders. The jury resentenced him to death on October 28, 2005.

Seven days after being resentenced, Thompson gained notoriety for an escape from the Harris County Jail. He shed his handcuffs and jumpsuit, used a fake ID to pose as a Texas Attorney General's Office investigator, and walked out the front door. He was captured three days later outside a liquor store in Louisiana, where he was trying to raise funds to escape to Canada.

On January 26 of this year, the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles denied Thompson's request to commute his death sentence to a lesser penalty.

Thompson's attorneys made a final appeal for a stay of execution before the US Supreme Court, arguing that his Sixth Amendment rights were violated when they were denied the ability to cross-examine the medical examiner at trial. They contended that Hayslip did not die directly from the gunshot wound, but from improper medical care at the hospital, specifically oxygen deprivation following a failed intubation. The high court rejected his petition on January 27, clearing the way for his execution.

Several high-profile appeals loom over Texas' death row:

- Robert Roberson was convicted of killing his daughter Nikki in 2002. Just days before his scheduled execution on October 16, 2025, he was granted a stay by the TCCA, sending his case back to the district court

for further review. Prosecutors argued his guilt based on the now-discredited theory of “shaken baby syndrome.” New evidence suggests Nikki died of natural causes, including pneumonia. Advocates also point to Roberson’s autism, noting that his “flat affect” at the hospital was misinterpreted by detectives as a sign of callousness rather than a symptom of his neurodivergence.

- Brittany Holberg was sentenced to death in 1998 for the 1996 killing of A.B. Towery, 80, in Amarillo. Her capital conviction was overturned by a federal appeals court in March 2025. The court cited the prosecution’s failure to disclose that a key witness, Holberg’s cellmate, was a paid informant for the police. The full US Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals held oral arguments on January 21, 2026, but has yet to issue a ruling.

- David Wood was convicted in 1992 for killing six young women in El Paso, between May and August 1987, and sentenced to death in 1993. Prosecutors relied on circumstantial evidence, including testimony from jailhouse informants. Wood has maintained his innocence, citing exculpatory DNA (excluding him from male traces on one of the victims). Wood’s execution was stayed in 2025 by the TCCA, and his case was returned to the trial court.

2025 saw 47 executions nationwide, the highest number since 2009. While Texas has historically led the country in executions since 1976, Florida carried out the most in 2025 with 19, followed by Alabama, South Carolina, and Texas with five each.

Texas’ five executions in 2025 were matched by the deaths of five inmates on death row, who either died from natural causes or committed suicide. This included Scott Panetti, a man with schizophrenia who spent 34 years fighting for his life before dying of medical conditions in June 2025. During his self-represented 1995 trial—where he appeared in a cowboy outfit and subpoenaed figures like Jesus Christ and John F. Kennedy—Panetti argued delusions and external forces (like auditory hallucinations) controlled his actions. Through decades of appeals, he consistently maintained his innocence, blaming his schizophrenia.

There are 18 executions scheduled across the US so far in 2026. Ohio holds the highest number of upcoming dates (27 through 2029), largely due to a backlog and repeated reprieves granted as the state debates execution protocols and seeks supplies for

lethal injections. In Texas, the number of scheduled executions has dropped to a historical low, with only four currently on the calendar for 2026, reflecting a broader decline in new death sentences.

The machinery of death continues to evolve as states seek alternatives to problematic lethal injection protocols. Of the 47 executions in 2025, 39 were by lethal injection, five by nitrogen hypoxia, and three by firing squad. Nitrogen hypoxia, used in Alabama, involves suffocating the prisoner with nitrogen gas and has been denounced by international experts as “cruel and inhumane.” Inmates executed by firing squad in South Carolina have suffered prolonged deaths as the shooters missed their precise target.



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