Florida continues execution surge with lethal injection of Melvin Trotter

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On the evening of February 24, the state of Florida continued its aggressive use of the death penalty, executing 65-year-old Melvin Trotter at Florida State Prison near Starke. Trotter, who had spent nearly four decades on death row, was pronounced dead at 6:15 p.m. following the administration of a three-drug lethal injection cocktail.

Witnesses observed Trotter breathing heavily and twitching for approximately a minute after the drugs began to flow, his movements slowing before a medic confirmed his death. He declined to make a final statement.

Trotter's execution stems from the June 16, 1986, murder of 70-year-old Virgie Langford, a long-time grocery store owner in Palmetto who was on the verge of retirement. During a robbery in which Trotter stole approximately $100 and food stamps to fuel his cocaine addiction, he stabbed Langford seven times with her own butcher knife. Langford survived long enough to identify her attacker, noting he wore a "Melvin" name badge from Tropicana, before she died of cardiac arrest during surgery.

Trotter's legal team long argued for mercy based on his intellectual disabilities and the fact that he was high on crack at the time of the crime and came to the store unarmed, demonstrating he lacked the capacity for premeditation.

His attorneys argued that his significant intellectual disabilities should have barred his execution under the Eighth Amendment, citing early school records, low IQ tests placing him on the border of clinical intellectual disability per Florida law, special education placement, and family testimony about his lifelong struggles with reading, financial management and independent decision-making. They highlighted evaluations from mental health experts during his competency proceedings, who described Trotter as a "slow learner" with impaired common sense, poor planning ability, distorted sense of reality, and reduced inhibition—exacerbated by chronic cocaine use tied to his traumatic childhood.

However, the Florida Supreme Court repeatedly dismissed these findings, favoring later evaluations that suggested higher cognitive functioning. Trotter's journey through the legal system was marked by a 1993 resentencing after the state's high court found errors in how the trial court handled aggravating factors in his original 1987 death sentence.

A barbaric and broken system

Trotter's execution took place against a backdrop of deep judicial and humanitarian concern. The US Supreme Court cleared the way for his execution by denying his application for a stay, but Justice Sonia Sotomayor said she was "deeply troubled" by the state's record on lethal injections.

She said death row inmates have not been able to prove their suspicions that the state is using expired drugs and engaging in other questionable practices because the Florida Supreme Court hasn't allowed the inmates access to documents that could back up their claims.

"By continuing to shroud its executions in secrecy, Florida undermines both the integrity of its own execution process and, potentially, this Court's ability to ensure the State's compliance with its constitutional obligations," she wrote.

In a filing just days before Trotter's death, his attorneys alleged that Florida appeared to have used expired drugs in seven executions during 2025. Sotomayor noted that the state has provided "no assurances" against the future use of expired substances and highlighted a "Catch-22" where inmates are denied the very records needed to prove the state is violating constitutional protections against cruel and unusual punishment.

This secrecy is part of a broader history of executions in Florida gone horribly wrong. The state's executions by the "Old Sparky" electric chair came under scrutiny in March 1997 when foot-long flames erupted from the head of Pedro Medina as he was being put to death. Another condemned inmate, Allen Davis, suffered visible agony during his electrocution in July 1999, when blood gushed from his mouth and chest and it took several minutes for him to die.

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In December 2006, the lethal injection of Angel Diaz was also horrifically botched when the prisoner squinted, grimaced and tried to mouth words after the first injection, a sedative, was administered. An autopsy revealed that the chemical had been injected into soft tissue, rather than a vein, rendering the drug's sedating mechanism ineffective before the second and third deadly chemicals were injected.

DeSantis and the expansion of state killing

Under Governor Ron DeSantis, Florida has seen an unprecedented surge in executions. In 2025, Florida led the nation by putting 19 inmates to death—the highest single-year total for the state since the death penalty was reinstated by the US Supreme Court in 1976. DeSantis maintains complete control over signing death warrants and setting execution dates, a process that allows the governor to champion his reactionary, pro-death penalty agenda and gain favor with the Trump administration.

Florida recently enacted laws that further erode the rights of the condemned. In 2023, the state lowered the jury threshold for death sentences from a unanimous vote to an 8-4 recommendation. This move contradicts the Supreme Court's 2016 *Hurst v. Florid*a ruling, which had temporarily required jury unanimity after the Court struck down Florida's prior sentencing statute. Florida also expanded death-eligible crimes to include non-homicidal offenses, a direct challenge to the 2008 high court ruling in *Kennedy v. Louisiana*.

The relentless pace of executions in Florida is particularly alarming given the state's record of error. Florida leads the nation in death row exonerations, with 30 individuals cleared of wrongful convictions since 1973.

Cases like that of Tommy Zeigler, who has spent 49 years on death row despite recent DNA testing supporting his innocence, serve as a stark reminder of the system's fallibility. Tommy Zeigler's evidentiary hearings concluded in December 2025 before Circuit Court in Orange County, Florida, where his defense presented new DNA evidence, bloodstain analysis, forensic testimony and a recanted witness to argue for a new trial in the 1975 quadruple murder case.

The 2026 execution calendar

Melvin Trotter was the fourth person executed in the US in 2026 and the second in Florida, following the February 10 execution of Ronald Palmer Heath, who was sentenced to death by a nonunanimous jury vote. The machinery of death grinds on, with 12 executions scheduled so far across the country for the remainder of 2026, according to the Death Penalty Information Center:

• Florida (2)
March 3: Billy Leon Kearse
March 17: Michael Lee King
• Texas (4)
March 11: Cedric Ricks
April 30: James Broadnax
May 14: Edward Busby
November 12: John Rubio
• Alabama (1)
March 12: Charles Burton
• Arizona (1)
May 20: Leroy McGill
• Tennessee (4)
May 21: Tony Carruthers
August 13: Anthony Darrell Dugard Hines
September 30: Christa Pike
December 3: Gary Wayne Sutton

In a Texas case closely watched by death penalty opponents, Robert Roberson remains on Texas death row after his October 16 execution date was stayed by the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals.

Roberson was convicted in 2003 of capital murder in the 2002 death of his 2-year-old foster daughter Nikki, based on now-discredited Shaken Baby Syndrome (SBS) testimony by medical experts. New scientific evidence shows Nikki died from pneumonia and sepsis, not abuse at Roberson's hand.

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