

Florida executes Michael Lee King, dismissing his childhood traumatic brain injury claims

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In a continuation of what has become the deadliest era of state-sanctioned killing in modern Florida history, the state moved forward Tuesday with the execution of 54-year-old Michael Lee King. King was pronounced dead at 6:13 p.m. following a lethal injection at Florida State Prison near Starke. His execution marks the fourth in Florida this year alone, following a record-breaking 2025 in which the state led the nation with 19 executions.

King was convicted of the 2008 abduction, rape and murder of 21-year-old Denise Amber Lee, a mother of two young sons. The case has long been a flashpoint not only for the horror of the crime itself, but for the systemic failures of the very state that has now executed King in Lee's name.

On the day of her abduction, Lee managed to use King's cell phone to call 911, begging for her rescue. Despite her call and at least three other 911 reports from witnesses—including a woman who reported screams coming from King's car at a traffic light—communication errors and a critical lack of dispatcher training prevented a timely rescue and Lee was killed. The state subsequently passed the Denise Amber Lee Act to reform operator training standards. It was, in effect, an admission that the system had failed her and most likely others.

The state has now chosen to respond to this state failure with another act of violence: King's execution. His case exposes a legal system that disposes of individuals, mostly men, whose minds were fractured long before they ended anyone else's life. King suffered a significant traumatic brain injury during childhood—the kind of neurological damage that research has consistently shown can permanently and profoundly alter impulse control, emotional regulation and the capacity for moral reasoning.

The injury left King with serious cognitive impairments and chronic hallucinations. He fell behind in school, struggled to maintain a stable grip on reality and moved

through life carrying the invisible weight of a brain that did not work the way it was supposed to. These are not mitigating factors invented by defense attorneys, but documented neurological realities—the kind that should provoke reservations about culpability.

In *Atkins v. Virginia* (2002), the US Supreme Court barred the execution of those with intellectual disabilities, recognizing that diminished culpability renders the death penalty's retributive and deterrent justifications constitutionally insufficient. In *Roper v. Simmons* (2005), the Court extended similar protection to juvenile offenders, acknowledging that brain development—and therefore an individual's capacity to make moral judgments about right and wrong—is not complete in adolescence. Traumatic brain injury, hallucinatory mental illness and the accumulated psychological wreckage of childhood trauma are real and documentable, yet these factors are rarely considered against the constitutional protections that should apply.

The impairment of men like King may be profound and their histories of suffering well documented, but unless they meet the precise clinical threshold of “intellectual disability”—the Supreme Court left this determination up to the states—the 2002 ruling has limited impact.

Advocates for clemency, including the Catholic Mobilizing Network, argued that King had become, in the structured environment of prison, a measure of the person his fractured childhood had denied him the chance to be. Prison officials and fellow inmates described him as a “model prisoner,” a “trusted contributor to the prison community” and a man of faith.

Study after study has found that death row inmates are disproportionately likely to carry histories of severe childhood trauma, traumatic brain injury and untreated mental illness. But in a legal system that values retribution and vengeance over rehabilitation and mercy, the impact a society wracked by violence and social

inequality has had on these condemned prisoners is rarely considered.

King's execution was carried out under a shroud of secrecy that marks Florida's justice system as one of the nation's most disreputable. His attorneys, echoing claims raised in several 2025 executions, argued that the Florida Department of Corrections has systematically mismanaged its death penalty protocols—potentially using expired drugs or unauthorized chemical compounds that could cause severe and unconstitutional suffering.

Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor has described this dynamic as a “Catch-22”: Florida officials routinely refuse to answer basic questions about the contents of the state's lethal injection cocktail, while the Florida Supreme Court simultaneously denies inmates access to the very records needed to prove the state is violating the Eighth Amendment's prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment.

This is not bureaucratic oversight but deliberate unaccountability, which insulates the state from legal challenge and allows executions to proceed on a schedule driven by reactionary politics rather than by any transparent process of review.

The accelerating pace of Florida executions is driven and sustained by Governor Ron DeSantis, who maintains absolute and largely secretive control over the signing of death warrants and the selection of execution dates. Observers have noted that this unchecked power allows the governor to deploy state killing as a political instrument—a demonstration of subservience to President Donald Trump's pro-death penalty agenda.

Under DeSantis, Florida has not only accelerated its pace of executions but has actively eroded the procedural protections historically associated with capital punishment. The state lowered the jury threshold for a death sentence to an 8-4 recommendation—the lowest bar in the United States—making it easier to condemn a defendant to death, even when one third of jurors harbor doubt. Such nonunanimous jury recommendations are clearly unconstitutional and will face legal challenge.

Florida leads the nation in death row exonerations, with 30 individuals cleared of wrongful convictions since 1973. These are people who were sentenced to die for crimes they did not commit, and who survived the system long enough to be proven innocent.

Others have not been so lucky. Frank Lee Smith spent 15 years on death row before he died of cancer in 2000. Just months after his death, DNA testing cleared him of the crime for which he had been convicted in 1985. The

sole witness in the case had recanted her testimony in 1989—10 years before his death—but he remained on death row.

Florida's history of so-called botched executions—from the flames produced by the electric chair known as “Old Sparky,” to the documented chemical burns suffered by Angel Diaz in a 2006 lethal injection that took 34 minutes—underlines the drive to continue the assembly line of death despite the high degree of likelihood that an execution can go horribly wrong.

The execution of Michael Lee King is not an act of justice for a grieving family. It is a demonstration of the cold, calculated power of a state that has decided, systematically and deliberately, that the most appropriate response to violence is more violence—administered behind closed doors, with the drugs undisclosed.

With two more executions already scheduled for March and April, the gears of Florida's death machinery show no signs of slowing. The questions they bury with each body—about culpability, about trauma, about the fallibility of the system—show no signs of going away.

Seven people have been executed in the US so far in 2026, including four in Florida, two in Texas and one in Oklahoma. Eleven executions are scheduled by the end of the year: four in Tennessee, three in Texas, two in Florida and one each in Oklahoma and Arizona. This calendar of death is not final, as there are currently 15 pending requests to set additional execution dates across five states and the US military.



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