

Florida's assembly line of death: The execution of Chadwick Willacy and the political machinery behind America's killing season

Kate Randall
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On Tuesday, April 21, at 6:15 p.m., the state of Florida pronounced Chadwick Willacy dead at Florida State Prison near Starke. He was 58 years old and had spent more than three decades on death row for the 1990 murder of his neighbor, Marlys Sather. He was the eighth person executed this year in the US and the fifth in Florida, the latest casualty of an accelerating machinery of death overseen by Governor Ron DeSantis.

Willacy maintained his innocence to the end. In his final statement, he said simply, "I would never kill my friend." He urged his "brothers on the row" to stay strong, apologized to his family and asked for forgiveness. Whatever the full truth of the events of 1990, the state's certainty that it was executing the right man—based on evidence now more than three decades old—was not and could never be absolute.

It would be a mistake to understand the current wave of executions in Florida as the product of one governor's personal convictions. Since taking office, DeSantis has signed death warrants at a pace unmatched by any Florida governor in the modern era, presiding over what death penalty opponents have called the deadliest stretch of state-sanctioned killing in the state's recent history.

The men executed in Florida share characteristics that are not coincidental: poverty, childhood trauma, intellectual disability, inadequate legal representation at trial. Court records in Willacy's case note that his father admitted physically abusing him, with beatings beginning in early childhood, and that later mitigation evidence described a background involving abuse and drug problems.

Floridians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty (FADP), which organized opposition to Willacy's execution, aptly called it "state-sanctioned murder" and part of a "steady stream of Florida's attempts to silence the truth."

Willacy was twice condemned to death by a non-unanimous recommendation. He was condemned to death in 1991 by a 9-3 jury vote, but was granted a new sentencing by the Florida Supreme Court in 1994 because the trial judge failed to allow defense attorneys a chance to rehabilitate a potential juror who said she could not recommend the death penalty. He was sentenced to death again in 1995 by a jury recommendation of 11-1.

Willacy had filed public records requests to examine the state's secretive lethal injection protocols—requests denied by the courts, which then dismissed his concerns as a "last-ditch" attempt to delay justice. The system denied him the evidence he needed, then penalized

him for not having it.

The 2026 killing season

Willacy's death is the eighth execution carried out in the US this year, and Florida accounts for five of them. Each of those deaths involved serious unresolved questions of fairness, mental capacity or the reliability of decades-old evidence. Taken together, they reveal a system in which the formal legal machinery of appeal and constitutional protection has been steadily subordinated to the political imperative of maintaining a relentless pace of executions.

Ronald Palmer Heath, executed February 10 at the age of 64, was sentenced to death by a non-unanimous jury—under a Florida law that has lowered the threshold for a death sentence to an 8-4 jury vote. He had committed his first murder at 16. He was executed despite longstanding criticism that the non-unanimity standard undermines the reliability of death sentences.

Melvin Trotter, 65, was executed February 24 for a 1986 killing. His attorneys argued for clemency based on significant intellectual disability and childhood trauma that shaped a lifetime of addiction. His execution drew a pointed dissent from Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, who accused Florida of "shrouding its executions in secrecy" and raised the possibility that the state had used expired or compromised drugs. No court halted the proceedings.

Billy Leon Kears, executed March 3, was 18 years and 84 days old at the time of his crime—barely a legal adult, his brain still physiologically developing. The record of his childhood included Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, severe neglect and documented physical abuse. Neurologists and advocates argued that his actions reflected the impulsivity of a traumatized adolescent brain, not the calculated malice the death penalty is supposed to require. The Catholic Mobilizing Network and FADP organized vigils. Florida proceeded.

Michael Lee King, executed March 17, was condemned for the 2008 abduction and murder of Denise Amber Lee—a case shadowed by the fact that Lee had managed to call 911 from her captor's vehicle, only to be failed by dispatch errors that prevented her rescue. Advocates argued that King's childhood traumatic brain injury and

history of chronic hallucinations should have disqualified him from execution under the Eighth Amendment. Those arguments were rejected.

Justice Sotomayor pointed to one of the central mechanisms sustaining Florida's capital punishment system when she described what amounts to a "Catch-22": the state denies condemned prisoners access to the records that would allow them to challenge the execution protocol, and then the courts dismiss those challenges for lack of evidence. It is a closed loop, designed to be impossible to break from the inside.

The secrecy surrounding lethal injection in Florida is not accidental. It is maintained because transparency would be politically inconvenient. What states are protecting is not a medical procedure but a political ritual, and its architects have no interest in a clear public accounting of what actually happens when the drugs are administered—whether they work as claimed, or what the condemned person experiences in the minutes before death.

Florida: A leader in both executions and exonerations

There is a bitter irony at the center of Florida's position as the nation's leading executing state: it is also the state with the highest number of death row exonerations. Since 1973, more than 30 people have been freed from Florida's death row after being wrongfully convicted. The men exonerated were not freed because the system worked but usually due to the work of determined advocates, DNA evidence unavailable at trial or witnesses who recanted. The question that flows from this is: how many people has Florida already executed who did not commit the crimes for which they were condemned?

DeSantis and the state's political establishment have chosen to answer that question with more executions, not fewer.

The men on Florida's death row are, with vanishingly rare exceptions, poor. The overwhelming majority were represented at trial by underfunded public defenders carrying impossible caseloads. Many had the misfortune of being tried in jurisdictions where the quality of appointed counsel was determined more by courthouse politics than legal competence. Many, like Melvin Trotter and Billy Kears, suffered from intellectual disabilities or severe mental illness that should have made them categorically ineligible for execution—but whose conditions were never adequately documented or litigated at trial.

Study after study has demonstrated that the single most reliable predictor of a death sentence in the United States is not the severity of the crime but the race of the victim. Killing a white victim dramatically increases the likelihood of a death sentence. While this is among the most extensively documented empirical findings in the social science literature on criminal justice, it has had essentially no effect on the administration of the death penalty.

The political function of DeSantis's execution agenda

DeSantis has made the expansion of capital punishment a centerpiece of his governorship. He signed legislation lowering the

jury unanimity requirement for death sentences—a move widely understood as intended to make it easier to execute more people. He has signed death warrants at a pace that has drawn comparison to the most aggressive executing governors in recent American history. Each execution, each round of legal challenges, each dissenting Supreme Court opinion is an opportunity to demonstrate that DeSantis is not deterred by opposition from courts or advocates—a signal directed at his political base rather than at any coherent theory of crime and punishment.

What this agenda reflects is a contempt for the proposition that poverty is an explanation that calls for intervention, that childhood trauma shapes adult behavior in ways the law must account for, and that the possibility of error demands caution, not a rush to justice.

The exonerations, the botched executions, the racial disparities, the executions of the intellectually disabled and the severely mentally ill are not aberrations from a sound system. They are what the system produces when operating as designed. The communities that bear the weight of violent crime are the same communities that bear the weight of mass incarceration and the social conditions that generate violence in the first place. The death penalty does not make them safer, nor does it address any of those underlying conditions. It is a costly performance of state authority, carried out in the name of those communities and against their interests.

The state of Florida killed Chadwick Willacy based on a conviction more than three decades old, for a crime he denied committing, using a drug protocol he was never allowed to examine, after courts dismissed his legal challenges as dilatory, or too late. He died saying, "I would never kill my friend."

Whatever the truth of 1990, the process that ended his life was not justice. It was the operation of a machine—one that processes poor and vulnerable people through a system designed to produce convictions and executions, that shields itself from scrutiny through secrecy, and that has been deliberately accelerated by a politician who has made state killing a signature of his tenure.

James Ernest Hitchcock is the next prisoner set to die in Florida, on April 30. There are 12 executions scheduled so far for the remainder of 2026, including one each in Florida, Oklahoma, Arizona and Alabama, and four in both Texas and Tennessee. DeSantis holds the sole authority to set additional execution dates in Florida.



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