Florida carries out first double execution in six decades as US death toll mounts

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Florida on Tuesday carried out its first double execution in more than 60 years, putting to death James Aren Duckett, a former police officer who maintained his innocence for nearly four decades, and Dominick Anthony Occhicone, an 80-year-old man who became the oldest prisoner executed in the state's history since modern record-keeping began a century ago.

Duckett, 68, was pronounced dead at 1:19 p.m. following a three-drug lethal injection at Florida State Prison near Starke. Asked if he wished to make a final statement, Duckett responded only, "No sir." About four minutes into the procedure, the prison's warden shook Duckett and shouted his name to check for consciousness; there was no response.

Occhicone was pronounced dead at 6:13 p.m., nearly five hours after Duckett, following a three-drug injection in the same death chamber at Florida State Prison. The curtain to the chamber rose a second time that day at his 6 p.m. scheduled execution time, with Occhicone strapped to a gurney, an IV in his arm, and a spiritual adviser standing near his feet.

Asked if he wished to make a statement, Occhicone thanked the Christian brothers who had visited him over the years and apologized to his own family and to the family of his victims. "I know it don't mean much, but I'm sorry," he said. "I never meant to do what I did." The lethal injection began at 6:02 p.m. After several minutes, as his breathing slowed, the warden shook him and called his name; there was no response.

The pairing of the two executions, ordered six hours apart by Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis, is itself a marker of the pace at which the state has been killing its prisoners. Duckett and Occhicone became the state's 11th and 12th executions this year.

DeSantis, who leaves office in January, oversaw a record 19 executions in 2025, more than any Florida governor since the state reinstated capital punishment in 1976. The previous high was eight, set in 2014. Taken together, Duckett and Occhicone bring the total for DeSantis's final two years in office to 31, compared with just nine executions during his first six years as governor.

The governor's office has offered little explanation for the acceleration. "Some of these crimes were committed in the '80s," DeSantis said at a November 2025 news conference. "Justice delayed is justice denied. I felt I owed it to them [the victims] to make sure this ran very smoothly." The remark treats four decades of legal process, appeals, and judicial review not as due process but as an inconvenience to be corrected through the accumulation of death warrants.

DeSantis' exercise of this power has been unilateral and largely unaccountable. He has not explained why he scheduled Duckett's and Occhicone's executions on the same day, six hours apart, and Florida prison officials have not said whether the compressed timeline posed added risks to the condemned men. Attorneys for both prisoners argued precisely this in a last-ditch appeal, telling courts that pairing the executions "exponentially increased" the risk of a botched procedure by placing additional strain on prison staff not accustomed to carrying out two executions in a single day.

That claim, along with the men's separate emergency petitions, reached the US Supreme Court overnight Monday. The justices denied all the applications, including the certiorari petitions challenging the double execution itself, in a series of short orders issued without explanation and without noted dissents. The orders came roughly an hour after Duckett's execution had been scheduled to begin. In its brief to the court, the state Court dismissed the claim of heightened risk as "pure conjecture that the execution team will fail to perform Florida's lethal-injection procedures correctly"—a response that treats the demand for basic safety as an insult to the state's competence rather than a legitimate concern raised by men facing death.

James Duckett

Duckett, a former Mascotte police officer, was convicted in 1988 of the rape and murder of 11-year-old Teresa McAbee, who disappeared after witnesses saw her get into his patrol car in May 1987. Her body was found the next morning in a lake less than a mile from the store where she was last seen.

Duckett's guilt was never established by direct evidence. The case against him rested on circumstantial findings, including fingerprints on his patrol car and tire tracks near the lake. According to Floridians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty,

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the state's case also depended heavily on a teenage witness who later said her testimony was false, the product of pressure from investigators who threatened to take away her soon-to-be-due newborn if she refused to cooperate. The case additionally relied on microscopic hair comparison evidence that federal authorities later found to be scientifically unsound and overstated in court.

Duckett's execution had originally been scheduled for March 31, but the Florida Supreme Court issued a rare stay five days beforehand to allow DNA testing of a semen sample recovered from McAbee's clothing. The results, delivered in late March, were inconclusive.

Duckett's attorneys argued the state was itself responsible for the ambiguous result, alleging the sample had been sent to a Florida lab equipped only for faster, less sophisticated testing rather than one capable of whole genome sequencing, and that the sample was subsequently exhausted, foreclosing any further analysis. The Florida Supreme Court rejected this argument as procedurally barred and lifted the stay on July 8. DeSantis signed a new death warrant within days, setting Duckett's execution for July 28—the same day already set for Occhicone.

A test that could have settled the question of guilt one way or the other instead settled nothing, and the state treated that as sufficient grounds to proceed. Florida's jury system compounds the concern. Duckett's jury recommended death by a vote of 8-4—the current legal minimum. Florida is one of only two states that permit non-unanimous jury verdicts in capital cases.

Dominick Occhicone

Occhicone was convicted in 1988 of the 1986 murders of Raymond and Martha Artzner, the parents of his former girlfriend, Anita Gerrety, in Pasco County. The killings followed the end of a three-year relationship in which the couple had been engaged and had a child together; Gerrety broke it off over Occhicone's temper and physical abuse.

After failed attempts to win her back, Occhicone went to the Artzners' home, cut the phone line, shot Raymond Artzner in the face, and shot Martha Artzner four times as Gerrety and her child fled. A jury recommended death on both counts by a vote of 7-5, though the trial court ultimately imposed a death sentence only for Martha's murder, with life imprisonment for Raymond's. Under Florida's current law, which requires a minimum of eight votes for a death recommendation, that same 7-5 verdict today would not support a death sentence.

At 80, Occhicone was the second-oldest person executed in the modern history of the US death penalty, after 83-year-old Walter Moody Jr., put to death in Alabama in 2018 for a wave of mail bombs that killed a federal judge and wounded a black civil rights attorney in 1989. Occhicone was the oldest person executed in Florida's history since modern record-keeping began a century ago, surpassing two 74-year-old men executed within the past several weeks. His attorneys had argued that his age-related ailments, including kidney and prostate conditions, could make lethal injection especially painful, amounting to cruel and unusual punishment. A psychologist testified at his original trial that Occhicone was "on a suicide errand, not a homicide errand," pointing to alcohol abuse and his mental state at the time of the killings as evidence of diminished capacity.

A national pattern

Florida's executed do not stand alone. On August 13, barely two weeks from now, three more men are scheduled to be executed on the same day in three different states: Carlos Cuesta-Rodriguez in Oklahoma, whose clemency appeal cited severe brain damage from a childhood accident and inadequate trial representation; Jeremy Williams in Alabama, convicted of the rape and murder of a five-year-old, who has waived his own appeals; and Anthony Darrell Hines in Tennessee, who has spent 40 years on death row and is now paralyzed and partially blind following a stroke that his attorneys say the prison's own medical contractor delayed diagnosing by weeks.

Nationally, 19 executions have been carried out so far in 2026, 12 of them in Florida. This compares with 47 executions nationwide in 2025, itself the highest national total in 16 years, and 25 in 2024. Florida alone accounted for 19 of last year's 47, or 40 percent of all executions carried out in the US.

This flurry of executions does not occur in isolation. It comes amid a marked escalation in police and immigration enforcement violence nationally, from the ICE killings in Houston and Biddeford, Maine to a pattern of aggressive immigration raids and use of lethal force by federal agents across the country. The expansion of the state's willingness to kill on death row and the expansion of its murder in the streets and at the border are not separate developments. They are two faces of the same growth in the repressive power of the capitalist state, exercised with diminishing restraint and accountability against working people, immigrants and the poor.

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