

Florida executes William Silvia as the US death machine accelerates

Kate Randall
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Florida put William Frances Silvia to death Tuesday evening at Florida State Prison near Starke, the 13th person killed by the state this year and the 23rd executed in the United States in 2026. He was pronounced dead at 6:11 p.m. after receiving a three-drug lethal injection.

Silvia, 61, was already strapped to the gurney with an IV in his arm when the curtain rose at 6 p.m. He lay largely motionless, eyes and mouth open, while a priest sat at his feet and prayed. Asked for a final statement, he said, “It was an accident. I never meant to hurt her.” Several minutes after the drugs began flowing, a warden shook him and shouted his name, getting no response. A medic pronounced him dead a short time later.

Silvia was convicted and executed for a crime that took place on September 22, 2006, at his mother-in-law’s home in Seminole County. He had lost his job the day before. He had been living in his truck for weeks after separating from his wife, Patricia. That day he bought a 12-gauge shotgun and ammunition, drove to the house during a family cookout, tried and failed to reconcile, and fired seven rounds, killing Patricia, 39, and destroying his mother-in-law Betty Woodard’s face. She lost her left eye and part of her nose.

Silvia’s serious mental illness was never in dispute. Both state and defense experts agreed at trial that his chronic psychiatric disorder was genuinely mitigating. In the months before the killing he had lost his job, lost his housing and deteriorated psychologically. The jury voted 11-1 for death.

Convinced after his direct appeal failed that nothing more could be done to save him, Silvia waived his postconviction appeals. When the US Supreme Court ruled in *Hurst v. Florida* in 2016 that Florida’s judge-centered capital sentencing system was unconstitutional, subsequent state court decisions resulted in new penalty hearings for 145 of the 386 prisoners then on death row. A circuit judge ruled that Silvia was entitled to one. The state appealed, arguing that he remained bound by his waiver of a right that had not existed when he relinquished it. The Florida Supreme Court agreed with the state in 2018 and reinstated the sentence.

His lawyers also argued that Florida’s Capital Collateral Regional Counsel could not represent him adequately because the same small team was simultaneously fighting two other death warrants. Silvia’s attorneys learned of his warrant while driving to the prison to meet another client, Dominick Occhicone, who was executed July 28. Within two days of that execution, DeSantis signed a warrant for a third client.

Florida, said Maria DeLiberato of Floridians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, “cannot manufacture an emergency and then pretend that equates to meaningful legal review.” The Florida Supreme Court rejected the claim. The US Supreme Court denied a stay Tuesday afternoon.

Three killings in one day

Silvia’s execution came five days after the first triple execution day in the United States since 2010. On August 13, Tennessee killed Anthony Darrell Hines, 66, who had spent 40 years insisting on his innocence, could not walk, was partially paralyzed by strokes and lived in the prison infirmary. Witnesses reported hearing groaning followed by choking.

Oklahoma killed Carlos Cuesta-Rodríguez, 70, a Cuban immigrant with dementia and a metal plate in his skull, who had asked the parole board not to spare him. Alabama killed Jeremy Williams, 42, who waived his sentencing jury, refused to present any mitigation and petitioned to be moved to the front of the line, dying roughly two years after the crime.

Harold Gene Lucas, 74, is set to die September 1 after nearly 50 years on death row, one of the longest-serving condemned prisoners in the country. He was 24 when he shot 16-year-old Jill Piper at her Bonita Springs home in August 1976 and wounded two of her teenage friends; he testified that he was intoxicated, blacked out and woke up in the woods.

His death sentence was vacated on appeal three separate times. Lucas has now waived all warrant litigation and all federal habeas review. No appeal has been filed. He is, in effect, a volunteer.

Daniel Owen Conahan Jr., 72, an unemployed nurse convicted of the 1996 killing of 21-year-old Richard Montgomery in Charlotte County, is scheduled to die September 10. Conahan has always maintained his innocence.

When DeSantis signed his warrant on August 11, Conahan had two motions still pending before the circuit court: a request for additional DNA testing, and a claim of newly discovered evidence that the court later admitted it did not know was on its docket until it pulled the file to rule on the DNA request. The Florida Supreme Court denied his request to extend the compressed briefing schedule in a one-line order and denied a stay in another. Justice

Jorge Labarga alone would have granted it.

The pattern of 2026 is clearly identifiable. Poverty, untreated mental illness, brain damage and childhood abuse define the condemned. Courts foreclose claims based not on their merits but on procedure: waiver, default or untimeliness. Where a claim survives, courts dismiss it as a “repackaging” of arguments already made and rejected. Prisoners who abandon their appeals are killed fastest. Since 2025 the US Supreme Court has denied virtually every stay request nationwide.

Florida’s execution method is itself under a cloud. In November 2025, attorneys for Frank Walls cited Florida corrections logs from 13 executions to allege expired drugs, wrong drugs and insufficient doses of them being used. Walls was executed a month later. Every defense team since, including Silvia’s, has raised the same claim, and the Florida Supreme Court has denied all subsequent requests for the records. The executioner in Florida procedures remains an anonymous private citizen paid \$200.

The governor’s machine

Under Florida Statute 922.052, the governor alone signs death warrants. Once the Florida Supreme Court clerk certifies that the required appeals have concluded or expired and the clemency process has ended, the governor “shall” issue a warrant within 30 days.

The governor personally sets the execution date within a 180-day window. Clemency is also up to the governor, who may deny it at any time for any reason, while commuting a sentence requires two of the three elected cabinet officers to agree. A warrant instantly converts years of deliberate litigation into a fire drill—in Conahan’s case, all circuit proceedings closed 10 days after signing, with briefs due over a weekend.

DeSantis has used this power more than any Florida governor in the modern era. Nineteen executions in 2025 shattered the previous state record of eight. Fifteen warrants have been signed in 2026, with 13 carried out. Since January 2025 Florida has killed 32 people. The state accounts for more than half the nation’s executions this year.

Appearing at the Florida Sheriffs Association conference at Trump National Doral on July 28, hours before a double execution, DeSantis complained that cases “shouldn’t be going for 20 years.”

This is unfolding in the state with the highest number of death-row exonerations in the country. Florida has recorded 30 since 1973. Twenty-eight of those prisoners were sentenced to death through a non-unanimous jury recommendation or judicial override.

The politics of state killing

The acceleration is not a Florida peculiarity. It follows Trump’s Inauguration Day executive order demanding a dramatic expansion of capital punishment, and it is of a piece with everything else: ICE arrest quotas of 2,000 a day, warrantless home entries, renditions to CECOT prison in El Salvador, and a \$38.3 billion detention network, and \$20 million budgeted for electric-shock gloves. The ICE and Customs and Border Protection shooting deaths of Renée Nicole Good and Alex Pretti in Minneapolis, Lorenzo Salgado Araujo in Houston, Texas and Johan Sebastián Durán Guerrero in Biddeford, Maine have provoked widespread popular outrage.

Abroad, the same class carries out assassination, blockade and mass killing in Iran and Gaza.

Silvia was the 1,677th person executed in the United States since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976. Eighteen of those killed have been women. Christa Gail Pike, scheduled for execution September 30, would be the 19th and the first woman executed in Tennessee in more than 200 years. She would also become the only person executed in Tennessee’s modern death penalty era for a crime committed at age 18, 19 or 20. Her attorneys cite congenital brain damage, post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder and childhood sexual abuse that were never presented at trial.

The United States has executed 34 foreign nationals in the modern death penalty era. In all but one reported case, authorities failed to inform the prisoner upon arrest of the treaty right to consular notification. Twenty-two juvenile offenders were executed between 1976 and 2005, all but one in the South, before the US Supreme Court barred the practice.

Ten more executions are scheduled before the end of the year: two in Florida, five in Texas, two in Tennessee and one in Alabama. That would bring the national total to 33 in 2026, short of last year’s 47 but higher than any year since 2014. More warrants are likely. DeSantis has signed nearly two each month this year.



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