

Florida executes Daniel Conahan as DeSantis killing spree reaches 15 in 2026

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Florida put Daniel Owen Conahan Jr. to death Thursday evening at Florida State Prison near Starke, the 15th person executed by the state this year and the 42nd under Republican Governor Ron DeSantis. Conahan, 72, a Navy veteran and former nurse who maintained his innocence for three decades, was killed after the state secretly pursued its own DNA testing, fought his request for more and then ran out the clock with a death warrant.

Conahan was already strapped to a gurney with an IV in his arm when the curtain to the death chamber rose at 6 p.m., a spiritual adviser praying at his feet. Asked for a final statement, he replied, “No sir.” The three-drug cocktail began flowing at 6:01 p.m. He panted, twitched briefly and went still. A warden shook him and shouted his name; there was no response. He was pronounced dead at 6:12 p.m.

Conahan was convicted of the 1996 kidnapping and murder of 21-year-old Richard Allen Montgomery. Prosecutors said Conahan, then 41 and working as a nurse, lured Montgomery into the woods of northern Charlotte County with an offer of several hundred dollars to pose for nude photographs. His body was found the next day, wrapped in carpet padding. Ligature marks indicated he had been tied to a tree and strangled, and his body had been mutilated. Conahan waived a jury trial and was convicted by a judge in August 1999.

Montgomery’s death was folded into a larger investigation the media dubbed the “Hog Trail Murders.” Beginning in February 1994, the remains of at least six people were discovered over three years in the swampy woods north of Fort Myers. Investigators concluded the killer was targeting homeless men. In 2007, a survey crew uncovered eight more sets of remains in Fort Myers, the “Fort Myers Eight.” Four of

the victims whose remains were identified had also been homeless.

Authorities named Conahan a person of interest in both series of killings, including the “Fort Myers Eight,” but he was never charged in connection with any of those deaths. Yet for three decades he has been branded a serial killer. As Floridians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty (FADP) noted Thursday, executing him “does not magically transform unsolved murders into solved cases.” The deaths of homeless men, whose lives commanded little official concern, remain unsolved.

Conahan’s execution was one more in a killing spree without precedent in Florida’s modern history, to which we will return.

Even the case for which Conahan was executed was, in FADP’s words, “shockingly thin.” No DNA matching him was found on Montgomery’s body or at the scene. Paint chips and carpet fibers could not be conclusively tied to him. Police focused on Conahan only after revisiting an allegation by Stanley Burden, which they had deemed unreliable two years earlier. Burden later admitted he had been promised support for parole in exchange for his testimony.

The conviction was sealed by jailhouse informant John Neuman, who claimed Conahan had confessed to the killing. That testimony was later challenged by another former cellmate, Alfred Rhiner, who said Neuman was an experienced jailhouse snitch who bragged about “setting up” Conahan. Rhiner said Conahan “never wavered in his denial.”

Investigators never examined Montgomery’s uncle, James Bauman, who had been involved in a strikingly similar murder within 10 miles of the site and received immunity to testify for the state.

On January 17, 2025, Conahan requested

postconviction DNA testing. The state opposed it while secretly conducting its own testing to tie him to the other killings. It came up empty. DeSantis signed the warrant on August 11, 2026, and within 24 hours the DNA request, pending for 18 months, was denied. His lawyers were given less than four days to file postconviction claims. The Florida Supreme Court ruled that another person's DNA on Montgomery's body would not exonerate him. The US Supreme Court denied a stay of execution for Conahan Thursday.

Florida accounts for 15 of the 25 executions in the US this year, after a record 19 killings in 2025. It also leads the nation in death row exonerations, 30 since 1973, nearly all of them people condemned by non-unanimous juries or judicial override.

The state has made killing easier at every turn. In 2023, DeSantis signed a law allowing death sentences on an 8-4 jury vote, the lowest threshold in the nation. The Florida Supreme Court, five of whose seven justices he appointed, upheld it in December 2025. Alabama, the only other state permitting non-unanimous death verdicts, requires a 10-2 jury vote. Florida has also made child rape a capital offense in defiance of the US Supreme Court's 2008 ruling barring the death penalty for crimes that do not result in death.

In Florida, the governor alone signs death warrants and sets execution dates. The governor also chairs the clemency board, the only executive body that can commute a death sentence. No Florida governor has granted clemency to a death row prisoner since 1983. A 2022 law shields the identities of drug suppliers and personnel involved in putting inmates to death.

DeSantis's campaign is the state-level expression of the Trump administration's policy. Trump's Inauguration Day executive order, "Restoring the Death Penalty and Protecting Public Safety," called for a dramatic expansion of capital punishment. The same contempt for due process drives Immigration and Customs Enforcement's roundups under a quota of 2,000 arrests a day and renditions to El Salvador's CECOT prison. Federal agents have shot and killed Renée Nicole Good and Alex Pretti in Minneapolis, Lorenzo Salgado Araujo in Houston and Johan Sebastián Durán Guerrero in Biddeford, Maine, while police killings continue unabated.

Abroad, the administration wages an unauthorized

war against Iran and has killed more than 220 people in boat strikes in the Caribbean and Pacific. A ruling class presiding over staggering inequality answers the social crisis it has created with ever more open violence.

Florida began its 2026 killings with Ronald Heath on February 10, followed by Melvin Trotter, Billy Kears, Michael King, Chadwick Willacy, James Hitchcock, Richard Knight and Andrew Lukehart. Dusty Ray Spencer and Dennis Sochor, both 74, died June 25 and July 14. On July 28, the state carried out its first double execution in six decades, killing James Duckett, who maintained his innocence, and Dominick Occhicone, 80, the oldest person executed in Florida's history. William Silvia, whose serious mental illness was undisputed, died August 18. Harold Gene Lucas, 74, was killed September 1 after 50 years on death row.

The condemned are old and sick: Spencer suffered from cirrhosis and cognitive decline, and Occhicone needed help showering. Many were shaped by poverty, abuse and addiction. Lucas grew up in an Arkansas sharecropping family with a violent, alcoholic father and left school after the seventh grade. Sochor had a documented history of childhood abuse and mental illness. Conahan was the 12th military veteran executed under DeSantis, following Marine veteran Spencer and Army veteran Sochor. Spencer and Occhicone were condemned by 7-5 jury votes that could not produce a death sentence anywhere today. Sochor was sentenced by a 10-2 jury vote, Duckett by an 8-4 vote.

Curtis Beasley, 77, convicted of a 1995 Polk County murder, is scheduled to die September 29. Thirteen more executions are scheduled nationwide through December, including Christa Pike, who would be the first woman executed in Tennessee in more than 200 years. DeSantis leaves office in January. After signing nearly two warrants a month this year, he will likely sign more before year's end.



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