

Florida executes James Robertson as executions press ahead after Christa Pike horror

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Florida executed James Robertson, 63, by lethal injection Tuesday at Florida State Prison near Starke. He was pronounced dead at 12:32 p.m., about 10 minutes after the drugs began to flow. Robertson, who told authorities he killed his cellmate in order to be sent to death row, declined to make a final statement. His execution was Florida's 17th this year, more than any other state.

Robertson was to be the first of two men put to death in Starke on Tuesday. William Lee Thompson, 74, was scheduled to die that evening for the 1976 murder of Sally Ivester in Miami. But on October 8, Republican Governor Ron DeSantis withdrew Thompson's death warrant without explanation—the first time he has done so. DeSantis had stayed the execution in September and appointed three psychiatrists to evaluate Thompson's competency after his lawyers said recent assessments found him “confused” and “disoriented” and under the impression that Bush was still president. The findings of that evaluation have not been released.

“Mr. Thompson suffers from dementia and his health is failing,” said his attorney Bri Lacy. “Now that Mr. Thompson is no longer under a death warrant, we hope FDOC will relocate him to an adequate medical facility and provide the care he needs.” Thompson remains on death row, and a new warrant could be signed at any time.

Robertson's was Florida's first execution since Tennessee's failed attempt to kill Christa Pike on September 30. Asked how Florida would avoid a repetition of that horrific event, Department of Corrections spokesman Jordan Kirkland said the state had “a sound lethal injection process and protocol.”

Pike, 50, was condemned for the 1995 murder of

Colleen Slemmer, committed when Pike was 18. After about an hour spent setting IV lines, she was given two full rounds of pentobarbital. “My arm feels like it's about to burst open,” she said, but she did not die. Newly released 911 recordings show dispatchers initially dismissed the call for help from the execution chamber as false, delaying medical aid by half an hour.

Pike was hospitalized with burned and blistered arms, placed on a ventilator and kept shackled to her bed. Nearly a week after her failed execution, her attorneys announced, “Against all odds, Christa Pike is conscious, speaking, and continues to receive critical medical care.” On October 10 she was returned to prison. Governor Bill Lee has postponed her execution but refused to commute her sentence, and the state will not say whether it will try to kill her again.

Texas carried out the first execution after the Pike debacle, putting Jamaal Howard, 46, to death on October 7 with pentobarbital—the drug that failed to kill Pike. Howard's lawyers had presented evidence that he was intellectually disabled, and he had been diagnosed with chronic schizophrenia for 25 years. Texas and Tennessee use a single-drug pentobarbital protocol. Florida uses three drugs: the sedative etomidate, the paralytic rocuronium bromide, and potassium acetate, which stops the heart.

The day after Howard was killed, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth announced that the Pentagon would livestream the firing squad execution of former Army Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan, who killed 13 people at Fort Hood, Texas in 2009. Trump had approved the execution on October 5. “People need to understand that there's serious consequences for these types of things,” Hegseth said, adding, “I kind of like the

mentality we had in World War II.” Trump promised at a rally to “deliver final justice to an evil killer.” The execution, the first by the US military since 1961, is set for December 3.

Robertson, who was executed Tuesday in Florida, entered prison in 1980 at 17 and spent his entire adult life incarcerated. He accumulated convictions for burglary and assault in four Florida counties; for escape, battery and weapons offenses committed in prison; and for the attempted murder of a cellmate in 1997. He told the Netflix series *I Am a Killer* that he killed to escape solitary-like conditions for the better conditions of death row.

In the early hours of December 10, 2008, at Charlotte Correctional Institution in Punta Gorda, Robertson waited until his cellmate, Frank Hart, 52, was asleep and guards had made their rounds, then strangled him with socks tied together. He told investigators he killed Hart so he would be charged with first-degree murder and sentenced to death. Hart was eight days from release.

Prosecutors initially charged second-degree murder and offered a life sentence. Robertson demanded a first-degree charge, stabbed a guard in 2011 and vowed to keep killing until he was sent to death row. He pleaded guilty, waived the jury penalty phase and mitigating evidence, and was sentenced to death in 2012. After the Florida Supreme Court affirmed the sentence on mandatory appeal in 2016, he waived further proceedings and fired his lawyer. “I chose the death penalty over the life sentence, and I just, you know, want the sentence to be carried out,” he told a judge on October 1.

Floridians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty (FADP) said the case “raises deeply troubling questions about isolation, despair, and the use of execution as a means of escaping incarceration.” Such “homicide as suicide” has been documented repeatedly since 1976. A 1999 *Journal of Criminal Justice* article, “The Psychology of Suicide-Murder and the Death Penalty,” identified at least 22 suspected cases and warned, “there is a danger in even just having the death penalty on the statute book in a state.” FADP’s Maria DeLiberato said the existence of the death penalty “may have caused the very violence it purportedly prevents.”

The killings of Howard and Robertson passed without

protest from Congress, the Democratic Party or the corporate media. Even official criticism of Pike’s failed execution concerned its outcome, not the killing itself. Tennessee Governor Lee insisted executions must be “effective.” Trump said lethal injection “shouldn’t be very difficult.” Senator Marsha Blackburn, the Republican nominee for Tennessee governor, declared, “We have to find a way to do this—and do it successfully.”

The bipartisan objections to the Hasan execution are directed not at the killing but at the livestream, which the UN human rights office says would violate the prohibition on torture. Their concern is that a televised firing squad would tarnish the military and damage the interests of American imperialism abroad. Nearly all of these critics support the death penalty.

Thirty-one people have been executed in the US in 2026. Florida accounts for 17, more than all other states combined, followed by Texas with seven, Oklahoma with three, Alabama with two, and Arizona and Tennessee with one each. DeSantis, who leaves office in January, has signed 20 death warrants this year, after a record 19 executions in 2025.

Eight more executions are scheduled this year: William Reaves Jr. in Florida on October 20; Jeffrey Weisheit in Indiana, Michael Taylor in Alabama and Jesse Guardado in Florida on November 5; John Rubio in Texas and James Pavatt in Oklahoma on November 12; Reinaldo Dennes in Texas on November 19; and Hasan on December 3.



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