

Attorney's minute-by-minute account exposes Christa Pike's torture in Tennessee death chamber

Kate Randall
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A sworn declaration by attorney Randy Spivey exposes the torture inflicted on Christa Gail Pike during Tennessee's failed attempt to execute her on September 30. His minute-by-minute account documents repeated attempts to find a vein, burning pain as pentobarbital entered her arm and prolonged gasping and choking before she was taken to a hospital.

Spivey, an attorney with the Tennessee Office of the Post-Conviction Defender, witnessed the ordeal inside the execution chamber and from the witness room. His October 15 declaration was filed in Davidson County Chancery Court in a challenge to Tennessee's lethal injection protocol. It explodes the myth that lethal injection is a humane and clinical method of state killing.

Excerpts from his 108-paragraph declaration follow, cited by paragraph number. Intervening passages summarize his account.

Spivey arrived at the prison around 6 a.m. After a day of waiting, the US Supreme Court vacated a stay by a 6-3 vote, allowing the execution to proceed. At 6:21 p.m., Tennessee Department of Correction (TDOC) officers lined up to extract Pike from her cell.

11. Christa's hands were restrained through the cell door. She was then told to get on her knees on her bunk and place her forehead against the wall. Christa complied quietly.

Pike was lifted onto the gurney, strapped down, wheeled into the Execution Chamber at 6:27 p.m., where the strapping continued. Throughout, she kept eye contact with her spiritual adviser, Rev. Mikey Noechel, smiling, crying and singing with him.

At 6:34 one IV team member held what appeared to be a vein-finder over Pike's right arm, shook his head and poked her arm with his finger, struggling to locate a vein.

22. At 6:35 PM, Christa began instructing the IV Team members about where they could find a vein. She asked IV Team Member 1 to pull her sleeve up higher to look for a vein in her upper arm.

Spivey describes Pike as "unfailingly polite and kind." A second team member took over, using a wand and tablet device, and at 6:40 appeared to set a line above the crook of her right elbow. "Did you get it?" Pike asked. Told yes, she replied, "I love you."

Team members called for one needle after another as Pike winced and grimaced. At 6:57 a team member said the vein "might be blowing."

42. They then pulled up Christa's left sleeve. IV Team Member 2 said "well, she's got one [vein] right there." Christa said politely "that's what I have been trying to tell you."

At 6:59 the team found the new line was not working. A team member pulled out a needle that appeared to be severely bent. Pike

grimaced through more attempts on her left arm and shoulder. At 7:07 a team member said, "I think it is blown."

The team rechecked her right arm. At 7:13 a team member told Pike they "have it." In all, the IV team appeared to use about 10 needles.

57. At 7:17 PM, the IV Team Members taped Christa's hands down over my objection. The Warden expressed that a particular practice does not need to be in the execution protocol in order for TDOC to do it.

Phone calls into the chamber prompted repeated checks of the left arm. At 7:23 the team pushed saline through the line "with difficulty." A team member said the saline syringe was "the last one." The team left at 7:24, and Spivey was escorted to the witness room. At 7:26 the curtain opened.

68. At 7:27 PM, the Warden asked Christa for a last statement. It was hard to hear, but Christa seemed to say: "I just want to say I'm leaving this world the way I have spent most my life, which is in love. In love with the people who are supporting me, but also with those who hate me. I encourage them to look into the things that brought me out of deep despair and pain. I'm at peace and ready to go."

72. At 7:34 PM, Christa said, "I feel like my arm is about to bust. It burns." She said that the one spot on her arm is "really burning." She said that it hurt.

Pike kept talking and singing with her spiritual adviser, at one point lifting her head, seemingly confused as to why the process was taking so long. Her chest rose and fell quickly, and by 7:44 her breathing was "obviously labored." At 7:46 she began making "an agitated snoring sound" and TDOC closed the curtain, though Spivey could still hear her. When it reopened, the second round of the drug was underway.

87. At 7:54 PM, Christa lifted her head, strained, groaned, snored, and seemed to be struggling. She tried to rise up against the restraints and fell back.

Her snoring began to sound more like choking, "like someone with sleep apnea." At 8:03 Spivey noticed her right arm appeared purple below the elbow. By 8:05 she was making rhythmic gasping sounds, her stomach moving up and down. TDOC closed the curtains again and the witness room went dark.

96. At 8:15 PM, Christa was still making snoring/choking sounds. The curtains remained closed, with the lights in the Official Witness Room off. At this point, I told the Warden's secretary, Lindy Garner, that TDOC is not authorized to do a third push of pentobarbital under the protocol and that they needed to stop the execution. ... I asked for a phone.

Barred from using the witness room's wall phone, Spivey was taken

by “a long, circuitous route” through about five locked doors to another phone, a trip of about seven minutes. At 8:22 he reached his co-counsel and asked them to stop the execution before a third dose.

104. At 8:25 PM, I returned to the Official Witness Room. I could hear Christa still snoring/choking. I told the Deputy Attorney General witness, Leslie Price, that the 2025 Protocol does not call for a third push of pentobarbital and TDOC is not authorized to attempt one. I stated that TDOC needed to provide Christa with immediate medical care.

For about the next 20 minutes, Spivey heard Pike’s snoring and choking but no sounds that medical care was being given. At 8:50 p.m. he was told an ambulance was on its way, and at 9:10 that medical staff were performing life-saving measures and giving Pike oxygen.

108. After the curtain closed for the second time at 8:05 PM, it never reopened. From 8:06 PM to when Christa was eventually taken out of the facility by ambulance, she did not have any member of her defense team or her spiritual advisor with her.

The first 911 call from Riverbend came at 8:40 p.m., more than 50 minutes after witnesses watched Pike begin to struggle. According to a written account released by Metro Nashville’s Department of Emergency Communications, which withheld the audio, the caller told the dispatcher, “We’ve been carrying out an execution tonight. We’ve administered 10 grams of pentobarbital. The person is not yet deceased. That started approximately 1 hour ago. And we’re calling for an ambulance.”

The ambulance did not leave the prison until 9:28 p.m., nearly 50 minutes after that first call. Pike was taken to Vanderbilt University Medical Center, where she was placed on a ventilator, her arms swollen, burned and blistered. On October 5 her medical team told her attorneys she was believed to be brain dead, and her family prepared for her to be taken off life support. The next morning, she regained consciousness. She was discharged October 10 and returned to the Deborah K. Johnson Rehabilitation Center in Nashville, where she remains under medical care. She can now walk without assistance and speak in full sentences, but her long-term prognosis is unknown.

“Christa is dealing with the profound psychological trauma of having survived a failed execution, including the terror, pain and uncertainty of believing she was about to die,” her attorneys wrote in an October 8 statement. At that time, she was still struggling with concentration and memory, and her lawyers said it could take months to determine whether she has lasting cognitive injuries.

Pike, now 50, was sentenced to death in 1996 for the torture and murder of Colleen Slemmer, 19, when Pike was 18. She has acknowledged the horror of her crime. Her attorneys documented childhood sexual abuse and adolescent rape, evidence her trial lawyer never presented to the jury. She spent more than a quarter century in virtual solitary confinement. Republican Governor Bill Lee rejected her clemency petition.

Lethal injection was introduced in Texas in 1982 and promoted as a medical, painless alternative to the electric chair and the gas chamber. The scientific evidence shows otherwise.

Before the execution, anesthesiologist Dr. Joel Zivot warned in a court declaration that Pike’s blood disorder would very likely produce “bloody froth” in her lungs. He also warned that her veins were likely to fail during injection, sending the drug into tissue and muscle. Her attorneys now say this appears to be what happened.

A 2020 NPR investigation found signs of pulmonary edema, a buildup of fluid in the lungs, in 84 percent of 216 execution autopsy

reports that described the lungs. The finding held across states and drug protocols, including pentobarbital. Froth and foam in the airways indicated prisoners were still trying to breathe as their lungs filled with fluid.

Pathologist Dr. Mark Edgar testified that prisoners executed with midazolam would experience “severe respiratory distress with associated sensations of drowning, asphyxiation, panic and terror.” Doctors have also warned that many prisoners are not fully anesthetized. In protocols that use a paralytic drug, the prisoner’s distress can be invisible to witnesses.

In 2019, federal Magistrate Judge Michael Merz ruled that Ohio’s midazolam protocol “certainly or very likely causes severe pain and needless suffering.” Medical witnesses agreed that pulmonary edema induced a sense of drowning and panic, “much as would occur with the torture tactic known as waterboarding.” An appeals court overturned the ruling.

John Yoo, who helped write the Bush administration’s legal justifications for torture, told Fox News after Pike’s failed execution that lethal injection is “the most humane method” and Tennessee would have to “go back and try again.”

Tennessee has its own precedent. Byron Black was executed with pentobarbital, the same single-drug protocol used on Pike, on August 5, 2025. Five minutes in he said, “It’s hurting so bad,” and he groaned repeatedly. His autopsy, released September 10, 2025, found pulmonary congestion and edema. Before the execution, the state’s expert had testified that he would lose consciousness within 20 seconds.

Lee has halted executions through the end of the year pending an independent review led by former US Attorney Ed Stanton. Gary Wayne Sutton, the only other Tennessee prisoner scheduled for execution this year, received a reprieve until October 2027. Tony Carruthers received a one-year reprieve after a failed execution attempt in May, when the IV team spent about an hour and a half failing to set a backup line. TDOC Commissioner Frank Strada, who oversaw both failed attempts, would resign, Lee announced October 3.

Pike’s attorneys have requested four months to assess her injuries before amending her complaint against Tennessee Attorney General Jonathan Skrmetti. The state has agreed only to 30 days. Chancellor I’Ashea Myles will decide the issue on written filings after both sides waived oral argument.

In the separate protocol challenge brought by Carruthers and other prisoners, Chancellor Russell Perkins will hear arguments November 6 on the state’s motion to dismiss and the prisoners’ request to add the new evidence.

The state has made no promise not to try to kill her again. Lee leaves office in January. Republican Senator Marsha Blackburn, running to succeed him, has called for bringing back the electric chair to carry out death sentences.



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