

Texas executes Suzanne Basso, despite claims of mental incompetency

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On Wednesday a 59-year-old woman was executed by the state of Texas. Suzanne Basso was the 14th woman to be sentenced and put to death since the US Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976. Five of these women have been executed in Texas.

Basso's lawyers appealed to the US Supreme Court in her final days, arguing that she was mentally incompetent, but the high court did not intervene. At approximately 6:25 p.m. local time, Basso was injected with the drug pentobarbital. She was pronounced dead 11 minutes after the chemical entered her bloodstream.

According to the Death Penalty Information Center, there are just over 60 women awaiting execution across the US, making up 2.1 percent of the roughly 3,100 individuals on death row. The United States is the only country in North America and Europe, save for Belarus, which has not abolished the death penalty. Basso was the seventh person to be put to death in the US in 2014.

In 1998 a court convicted Basso for torturing and killing a 59-year-old man, Louis "Buddy" Musso, who was mentally impaired. Prosecutors argued that she was the ringleader in the group of six people, including her son. Basso was one of six people convicted for the brutal killing and the only one sentenced to death.

At trial, prosecutors argued that Basso lured Musso to Houston on the pretense of marriage. She then proceeded to make herself the beneficiary of an insurance policy, totaling \$65,000, the sum purportedly being the motivation behind the murder.

According to the defense, there were several issues with the court case. One was that the medical examiner, Dr. Paul Shrode, "fabricated credentials and hypothesized expansively." Dr. Shrode was fired in 2010 from his position as chief medical examiner for El Paso, Texas for similar reasons. According to the *Guardian* newspaper, his testimony on another death

row case was discredited, leading to clemency for that individual.

The defendant's lawyer, Winston Cochran, told the *Guardian* that the prosecution "could not to this day tell you who did it ... they had bad forensics in this case and they didn't do a thing about it..." Cochran also argued that there was no mitigating evidence presented and no evidence of Basso's personal involvement. Cochran later told the court that Basso was delusional and that Texas should review its protocol for declaring persons mentally competent "enough" to be executed.

Various attempts to appeal the case have been unsuccessful over the past month. Lower federal and state courts have upheld a state judge's ruling that Basso tried to manipulate psychological tests and fabricate stories about herself.

The Associated Press reports that Basso's "court appearances were marked by claims of blindness and paralysis, and speech mimicking a little girl." Basso purportedly had a degenerative disease and used a wheelchair, but "blamed her paralysis on a jail beating years ago... and talked about a snake smuggled into a prison hospital in an attempt to kill her."

The drug used to kill Basso was pentobarbital. Since a variety of ethical bans on execution drugs were put in place limiting their availability, state death chambers have been experimenting killing people with single drugs and drug cocktails, often produced by loosely regulated compound pharmacies.

Michael Lee Wilson, put to death in Oklahoma in January, cried out, "I feel my whole body burning" as he was administered a three-drug cocktail including pentobarbital. Kenneth Hogan, executed similarly in January this year, said, "There's a chemical taste in my mouth ... I'm going, I'm going, I'm going." Another man, Dennis McGuire of Ohio, administered another

cocktail, died over the course of 25 minutes in what his attorney called a “failed, agonizing experiment.”

In Texas, pentobarbital, usually used with two other drugs, is being administered on its own. A *Guardian* survey finds that killing inmates in Texas now takes roughly “twice as long as under previous protocols.”



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