

Missouri death row inmate Marcellus Williams faces execution September 24 for a crime he did not commit

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Marcellus “Khaliifah” Williams, an innocent man on Missouri’s death row, is set to be put to death September 24. Williams’ defense team, the Midwest Innocence Project, has submitted a clemency petition to Missouri Governor Mike Parson seeking a last-minute reprieve.

Williams, now 55, was convicted and sentenced to death for the brutal August 11, 1998 stabbing death of St. Louis reporter Felicia Gayle. He has consistently maintained his innocence. A petition on Change.org calling for his execution to be stopped has garnered more than 525,850 signatures.

The clemency petition asking Parson to spare Williams’ life focuses on how Gayle’s relatives want his sentence commuted to life in prison in parole. “The family defines closure as Marcellus being allowed to live,” the petition states. “Marcellus execution is not necessary.”

The St. Louis County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office is also appealing to the Missouri Supreme Court a judge’s ruling last week upholding Williams’ conviction and death sentence. A notice of appeal filed Monday night did not include any details about the basis for the appeal.

Barring clemency from Parson or a favorable ruling from the state Supreme Court, which has ruled against Williams numerous times, he will be killed by lethal injection next week at the Potosi Correctional Center in Mineral Point, Missouri, about 70 miles southwest of St. Louis.

Parson, a Republican and a former county sheriff, has presided over 11 executions and has never granted clemency to an inmate facing execution. The Associated Press (AP) reports that a spokesman for

Parson said in an email Tuesday that attorneys for the governor’s office have met with Williams’ legal team, and Parson will likely announce a decision at least a day before the scheduled execution.

There is no physical evidence tying Williams to the crime. DNA evidence on the murder weapon, a large butcher knife, which would definitively rule out Williams as the perpetrator, has been rendered inconclusive through mishandling by the prosecution.

Williams’ original lawyer now admits that he did not give his client’s case the attention he needed at trial. His jury included only one black juror. Two witnesses implicating Williams in the murder, his former cellmate and his ex-girlfriend, both sought \$10,000 in reward money for information leading to a conviction. These witnesses, both convicted felons, are now dead.

There is no forensic evidence tying Williams to the crime. Physical evidence left at the scene—bloody fingerprints, footprints and hairs—does not match Williams. The jury never heard evidence that Williams’ former girlfriend may have planted Gayle’s laptop in his car. The laptop was cited by the prosecution as evidence of his guilt.

Williams has faced three execution dates. In 2015, the Missouri Supreme Court stayed his execution after testing showed his DNA was not on the murder weapon. But after reviewing the evidence, the same court rescheduled his execution.

On August 22, 2017, just hours before Williams’ second date with death, then-Governor Eric Greitens, a Republican, stayed his execution and convened a board of inquiry to investigate the case and issue a formal report. Then on June 29, 2023, the current governor, Republican Marc Parson, dissolved the board of inquiry

before it had issued a report and set a third execution date, September 24, 2024.

In January 2024, St. Louis County Prosecuting Attorney General Wesley Bell, a Democrat, filed a motion to overturn Williams' conviction based on a 2021 state law that allows a prosecutor to challenge convictions in cases where the prosecutor "has information that the convicted person may be innocent or may have been erroneously convicted." Critical to this challenge was new analysis of DNA found on the murder weapon, a knife, which excluded Williams as the perpetrator.

At an August 21 hearing before circuit court, however, Williams and his legal defense were hit with a bombshell when it was revealed that the DNA evidence on the knife had been contaminated by the prosecution team through mishandling and improper storage. These "mistakes" by the prosecutors meant that this crucial evidence could not be used to support the prosecuting attorney's claims of Williams' innocence.

Bell then proposed that Williams enter an Alford plea, in which he would maintain his innocence but agree that the state had enough evidence to convict him. He was prepared to accept a life sentence and avoid his impending execution while, importantly, preserving his right to appeal if his defense discovered new exculpatory evidence.

The presiding circuit court judge, Bruce F. Hilton, agreed to the plea deal, but Missouri Attorney General Andrew Bailey, a rabid pro-death-penalty Republican, claimed that he had "exclusive authority" to review such cases. Bailey sent the case back to the state Supreme Court, which agreed with Bailey, junked the plea deal and sent the case back to Judge Hilton to hold an evidentiary hearing.

At the evidentiary hearing held September 12, Hilton denied the prosecutor's motion to vacate Williams' conviction and death sentence. "Every claim of error Williams has asserted on direct appeal, post-conviction review, and habeas review has been rejected by Missouri's courts," Hilton wrote. "There is no basis for a court to find that Williams is innocent, and no court has made such a finding."

Williams is one of five death row inmates scheduled for execution from September 20 to 26: Freddie Eugene Owens, September 20 in South Carolina; Travis James Mullis, September 24 in Texas; Alan Eugene Miller,

September 26 in Alabama; and Emmanuel Antonio Littlejohn, September 26 in Oklahoma.

This staggering assembly line of deaths over the course of a week exemplifies the barbaric nature of capital punishment in America, which is still allowed in 27 states, and by the federal government and the US military.

Like those of the more than 2,200 men and women languishing on death rows across America, Williams' case epitomizes the horror of the death penalty and what passes for the criminal "justice" system in America.

Williams is clearly innocent. The prosecuting attorney's office and the victim's family have both called for his life to be spared. His case demonstrates how the death penalty in America is meted out in the most arbitrary manner—to those denied adequate legal counsel, those facing racial discrimination at trial, those railroaded to death on "technicalities," as well as to the factually innocent.

Those put to death comprise the most vulnerable in society and are overwhelmingly working class and poor. Since the US Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976, 1,595 individuals have been executed, including 22 sentenced for crimes committed as juveniles, 34 foreign nationals, 18 women and 16 federal prisoners. Human Rights Watch says at least 35 individuals with intellectual disabilities have been put to death.

Since 1973, at least 200 people who had been wrongly convicted and sentenced to death in the US have been exonerated of their crimes, according to the Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC). There is no way to determine how many of those executed since 1976 may have been innocent and wrongly convicted, but DPIC estimates that at least 20 people with strong evidence of innocence may have been put to death.



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