Tennessee botched the execution of Christa Pike. Where does Washington stand on the death penalty?

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As the botched execution of Christa Pike unfolds in real time, Washington state remains just three years removed from officially abolishing the death penalty.

The state's Supreme Court struck down the death penalty in 2018, but then Gov. Jay Inslee signed a bill to officially remove Washington state capital punishment laws that remained on the books. Inslee also issued a moratorium on capital punishment in Washington in 2014. Washington state's last prisoner to die by capital punishment was Cal Coburn Brown, on Sept. 10, 2010, according to the Washington Department of Corrections.

Pike was scheduled to be executed by lethal injection on Sept. 30 at the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in Nashville, Tennessee. After two doses of lethal pentobarbital, witnesses heard breathing and snoring behind the blinds of Riverbend's death chamber.

"Ms. Pike has not lost consciousness and still has a heartbeat and is audibly snoring," Pike's attorneys wrote in an emergency motion to halt and stay the execution, according to The Tennessean..

She was later rushed to a local hospital to be treated, but her condition and location have not been confirmed as of Oct. 1. Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee said he doesn't know Pike's health status on the morning of Oct. 1, according to USA Today.

What happened with Christa Pike?

Christa Pike appeared to have survived two doses of lethal injection drugs after her execution scheduled for Sept. 30. Pike's condition was unclear as of Oct. 1. Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee ordered a pause on the state's executions for the remainder of 2026. The Tennessee Department of Correction said it followed all protocols, according to USA Today.

"Tonight the State of Tennessee once again failed to carry out a lawful execution," Pike's attorneys said in a statement to USA TODAY. "We take no pleasure in being right, but the concerns raised by Ms. Pike proved to be true: difficult vein access, blown veins, degraded pentobarbital, no emergency medical care available when things inevitably go wrong, all under a protocol that remains veiled in secrecy."

In 1995, 18-year-old Pike and her boyfriend Tadaryl Shipp, then 17, lured 19-year-old Colleen Slemmer into the woods outside of Knoxville with another friend. Shipp and Pike tortured and killer Slemmer, and Pike was later convicted of first-degree murder (Slemmer, who was 17 at the time, was not eligiable for the death penalty and sentenced to life in prison).

What is pentobarbital?

Pentobarbital is a sedative commonly used for lethal injections, according to the Death Penalty Information Center. The drug is a "sedative-hypnotic" widely used for euthanasia or assisted suicide due to rapid onset of coma and "perception of peaceful death," according to one study in the Journal of Medical Toxicology. The common brand name of the drug is Nembutal.

Pentobarbital is a Schedule II controlled substance, according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, and affects a person's brain, consciousness motor functioning, respiratory and cardiovascular systems. The drug is often used to treat seizures and a lethal dose of pentobarbital is between 2-10 grams of the substance.

Is the death penalty legal in Washington?

The death penalty is not legal in Washington state. In 2018, the Supreme Court of Washington ruled (in State v. Gregory) that the death penalty is "invalid because it is imposed in an arbitrary and racially biased manner."

Before the 2018 decision, lethal injection and hanging were both legal methods of execution in the state.

In 2023, then Gov. Jay Inslee signed legislation to officially remove capital punish from Washington's state laws. In 2014, Inslee issued a moratorium on the death penalty.

When was the last execution in Washington?

Washington state's last execution took place on Sept. 10, 2010. Cal Coburn Brown, 52, was executed by lethal injection at the Walla Walla Penitentiary.

At the time of Washington's Supreme Court decision in 2018, eight people were currently serving on death row. All of their sentences were converted to life without release, according to the Associated Press.

How many people has Washington executed?

Washington state has executed 78 people between 1904 and 2018. All of them have been men, some of whom have been as young as 17 and 18 years old.
See the full list of people executed in Washington state here.

Where do other states stand on the death penalty?

According to the Death Penalty Information Center, 27 states allow the death penalty while 23 states bar the practice.

States with the death penalty : Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, California (*executive hold in death penalty currently in place), Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, Ohio (*executive hold in death penalty currently in place), Oklahoma, Oregon (*executive hold in death penalty currently in place), Pennsylvania (*executive hold in death penalty currently in place), South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Wyoming

States without the death penalty : Alaska, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin

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