

URGENT ACTION

WOMAN FACING EXECUTION FOR CRIME AT AGE 18

Christa Pike, aged 50, is scheduled to be executed in Tennessee, USA, on 30 September 2026. She was convicted in 1996 of a 1995 murder committed when she was 18, barely out of a childhood in which she endured rape, sexual and physical violence, abuse and neglect. The state failed to protect her as a child despite having knowledge of what she was facing. Her court-appointed lawyers then failed her at her trial, presenting little of the mitigating evidence of this abuse or its psychological consequences. We urge the governor to stop this execution and grant clemency.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Governor Bill Lee
1st Floor, State Capitol
600 Dr Martin L. King, Jr. Blvd.
Nashville, TN 37243, USA

Webmail: <https://www.tn.gov/governor/contact-us/share-opinion.html>

Dear Governor,

Please stop the 30 September 2026 execution of Christa Pike. I do not seek to downplay the seriousness of the crime of which she was convicted. But I urge you to consider the appalling treatment that marked her childhood – a childhood she was barely out of when the murder occurred – and to consider whether the jurors were presented with a full and cohesive narrative of her short life to that point with which to inform their life-or-death decision-making. I submit to you that they were not.

On the eve of the 1996 trial's sentencing phase, the inexperienced court-appointed lawyers abandoned their plan to present as their sole mitigation witness the psychologist who had produced a three-volume history of their young client. They had no back-up plan and did not seek more time to make one. They had not pursued any other witnesses and decided to put the defendant's parents and an aunt on the stand. At a post-conviction hearing, the lead lawyer conceded that he should have called many of the individuals interviewed by the psychologist.

In 2001, a psychiatrist/neurologist retained by the appeal lawyers for post-conviction proceedings concluded that Christa Pike met the criteria for bipolar disorder, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and had frontal lobe brain damage from birth. Another expert described Christa Pike as being "the product of an almost unbearably abusive background". In 2023, a psychologist with 30 years of experience in trauma-related disorders concluded that the abuse and neglect endured by Christa Pike as a child was "truly extreme" and its severity was "almost impossible to grasp".

The state failed to provide Christa Pike the protection she needed as a child despite multiple state actors having knowledge about what she was facing. Please do not perpetuate this failure and the failure of the trial lawyers by allowing this execution to proceed.

I appeal to you to grant clemency and to commute this death sentence.

Sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

On 12 January 1995, a 19-year-old female student in the Job Corps, a program for troubled youth in Knoxville, Tennessee, was murdered. Three teenagers in the program were charged with her murder, 18-year-old Christa Pike, her 17-year-old boyfriend and an 18-year-old female. The boyfriend was exempt from the death penalty because of his age, and was sentenced to life imprisonment with parole, and the female teenager received six years' probation and credit for time served.

At her 1996 trial, Christa Pike was convicted of first-degree murder. Her two court-appointed lawyers had no prior capital case experience – the lead lawyer having never previously represented anyone charged with a capital crime, and his associate having no experience with a murder case of any sort. The night before the sentencing phase, the lawyers abandoned their mitigation plan, deciding not to put their sole witness on the stand – a mitigation specialist (a psychologist) who had produced a three-volume social history of Christa Pike's childhood. The lawyers had not pursued any of the mitigation witnesses suggested by the psychologist, so opted to present three people available at short notice – Christa Pike's parents and an aunt. The limited presentation left jurors in the dark about the extent of the violence and abuse in the defendant's childhood and without expert analysis to help them understand its impact on her. The lead lawyer urged them to reject the death penalty because Christa Pike “derives and gains her self-esteem, her self-worth from those around her” and a death sentence would thrust her into “a national spotlight”. In contrast, if the jury voted for life imprisonment, he suggested, “what you take from her is her notoriety. You take her fame. She will be just another inmate serving a life sentence”. The jurors chose execution.

In 2001, a psychiatrist retained by the appeal lawyers concluded that Christa Pike met the criteria for bipolar disorder, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and had frontal lobe brain damage from birth. Another expert described her as being “the product of an almost unbearably abusive background”. When with her father she faced “frequent beatings with a belt”, leaving “welts, bruises and cuts”. Her mother had a “series of boyfriends” – some subjected the young girl to physical abuse, and some to sexual abuse. Her “babysitters” included an older sister who was “very abusive” towards her, including instances of burning her and deliberately slamming her fingers in a door. An aunt subjected her to sadistic cruelty and humiliation.

In 2023, a psychologist with expertise in trauma-related disorders and 30 years of experience in the field, concluded that Christa Pike's childhood was characterized by “poverty, extreme and chronic sexual, physical, and emotional abuse as well as neglect”. This abuse and neglect qualified as “truly extreme”, she wrote, and the level of trauma she experienced was “almost impossible to grasp” because of its severity. The psychiatrist assessed Christa Pike for Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and found that she had experienced 9 out of 10 ACEs, a “highly unusual” quantity. Moreover, a single perpetrator was not the cause of any or each ACE. “Rather, many adults mistreated and abused her in a multitude of ways”, compounding the trauma. Throughout her childhood, she was “a victim of violent predators”. Christa Pike's paternal grandmother's boyfriend was “the first person to sexually abuse Christa” when she was a pre-school child. At age 11, she was raped by a neighbour, resulting in an infection for the child and a short sentence for the perpetrator. At the age of 17, she was raped again by a man who grabbed her and dragged her into some woods as she was going to a store. The murder occurred a year later, almost to the day, while Christa Pike was experiencing the stress of an anniversary reaction, in addition to symptoms of her bipolar disorder and PTSD.

A 1984 US Supreme Court ruling requires that a high level of deference be given to the performance of capital trial lawyers in appeal claims of ineffective assistance of counsel. Combined with this “highly deferential standard”, the US District Judge noted in Christa Pike's case in 2016, the bar is made “even more formidable” under the 1996 Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA), which limits federal habeas corpus review. These high bars under US law have facilitated violations of international law requiring that anyone facing the death penalty is provided “adequate legal assistance at all stages” and “above and beyond the protections afforded in non-capital cases.” A US Sixth Circuit Judge would have vacated Christa Pike's death sentence but for the “strictures of AEDPA”. She pointed to advances in neurological science demonstrating the similarities in brain development in 17-year-olds who are exempt from the death penalty and 18-year-olds who are not. “In sentencing Pike to death”, she wrote, “we rule out the possibility that her crime was a product of the immature mind of youth” and “presume that she is incapable of reform”. The youngest age at the time of the crime for the men Tennessee has executed in the modern era is 23 years old. This significant age gap mirrors current adolescent brain development science.

For more than a quarter of a century, because she was the only woman on death row in Tennessee, Christa Pike was held in de facto solitary confinement until litigation ended this in 2024. According to a therapist, this treatment was “ruinous” to Christa Pike's mental health, including exacerbating the symptoms of her bipolar disorder and PTSD. The use of the death penalty against individuals with serious mental disabilities is prohibited under international law and standards.

There have been 23 executions in the USA in 2026. Tennessee has executed 11 people since 2018. The last time a woman was executed in this state was in 1819. Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases unconditionally.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: English. You may also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 30 September 2026

NAME AND PRONOUNS: Christa Pike, she/her

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: n/a