

APPENDIX 2

September 10th, 2026

Tennessee Governor Bill Lee
Office of the Governor
600 Dr. Martin L. King, Jr. Blvd.
Nashville, TN 37243

RE: Request for Commutation of Sentence of Death on Behalf of Christa Gail Pike

Dear Governor Lee:

We are writing to you as youth justice advocates who have worked closely with children and adolescents who have been victims and perpetrators of violence. Our experience in the field of youth advocacy has shown us that too often, children who face adversity early in life without protection from adults or institutions develop into adults who come into conflict with the law. Christa Pike’s life is emblematic of this tragic reality.

We strongly urge you to consider the circumstances of Christa’s childhood before you determine if she should be executed or spend the rest of her natural life in prison. Beginning when she was a toddler, the adults in Christa’s life subjected her to sexual abuse, physical violence, neglect, and abandonment. Adult men sexually assaulted and raped her as during three critical developmental periods: when she was a preschooler, when she was 11 and on the cusp of puberty, and when she was 17 and a still-developing adolescent. This took place against a backdrop of severe neglect and abandonment by her parents.

Christa repeatedly sought help and protection from her parents, schoolteachers, and police officers while she was growing up in North Carolina and West Virginia. None provided the support she needed. This points to a failure not only on the part of her caregivers, but on the part of the states themselves. Instead of ensuring she received structured counseling, treatment, and support, they ignored the unmistakable signs that she was a child in severe distress—including suicide attempts, poor performance in school, and truancy.

Administrators in two different youth facilities where Christa spent time--the Sheaffer House and the Swannanoa Juvenile Evaluation Center--knew that her parents were unable or unwilling to provide her with a safe home, yet she was returned to that environment when not in custody. When Christa ran away, she was punished and treated as a delinquent. Throughout her childhood, her cries for help, including suicide attempts, were continually ignored.

As youth advocates, part of our work is to educate the public on the ways in which children are fundamentally different from adults. These differences are essential to understanding why children deserve special care, protection, and consideration under the law. Much of the legal framework surrounding children’s rights has evolved over the decades since Christa was sentenced to death. And our understanding of adolescent behavior has been profoundly altered by scientific research on adolescent brain function and development that did not exist at the time of Christa’s capital murder trial.

It is now known that the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain associated with decision making and judgement, does not finish developing until approximately age 25. Emerging research has also demonstrated that there is no substantial difference between the brain of a 17-year-old teenager and the brain of an 18-year-old teenager. This means that when Christa committed her crime, there was no meaningful difference between her brain, and by extension, her decision making and culpability, and that of her 17-year-old boyfriend, abuser, and co-defendant, Tadaryl Shipp, who was sentenced to life with the possibility of parole.

Children also deserve special protection because of their lack of power. As wards of their parents or caregivers, children are uniquely vulnerable members of society who are not entrusted with decision making power over their lives, with few exceptions. This is in recognition of their immaturity and vulnerability, realities that do not vanish the moment their 18th birthday arrives.

Christa’s life prior to the crime was shaped by the actions of adults who lacked the love, care, and accountability a child needs to thrive. This reality does not excuse her crime, but it does help contextualize it as a tragic outcome of a child’s life that was defined by violence.

Due to the inexperience and ineptitude of her trial attorneys, the jury who sentenced Christa to die never heard about the realities of her childhood. We believe this fact, alongside the new science on brain development in adolescents, warrants the commutation of Christa’s death sentence. This sentence would provide legal finality to the family of Colleen Slemmer, while also extending mercy to Christa. Mercy that we believe, is far overdue.

Thank you for your serious consideration of the matter.

Sincerely,

Cardell Orrin Executive Director Stand for Children TN	Chester L Williams Chief Executive Officer Always Giving Back Memphis, Inc	Andrew Keats Senior Attorney Juvenile Law Center
Nina Gurak Policy and Education Director Healthy & Free Tennessee	Shirley Bondon Executive Director African American Clergy Collective of Tennessee	Shirley Bondon Executive Director Black Clergy Collaborative of Memphis
Dawn Harrington Executive Director Free Hearts	Xavier McElrath-Bey Executive Director Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth	Alison Flaum Director Northwestern Children & Family Justice Center
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Sara Richardson Treasurer United Women in Faith of First- Centenary UMC	Lori Smith Social Action Committee United Women in Faith	Donna Palmer Scenic South District Holston Conference United Women in Faith
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Beth Cruz	Kathleen Greene Austin	Camille Rambajue
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