

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
September 10, 2026

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EXPERTS IN TRAUMA, SEXUAL VIOLENCE WARN EXECUTION COULD FORCE CHRISTA PIKE TO RELIVE CHILDHOOD RAPES

Amicus brief asks Tennessee Supreme Court to issue certificate of commutation, citing substantial risk Pike will experience her execution as sexual violence. In a separate letter, more than 100 organizations and experts in sexual violence and its effects call on Governor Lee to commute Pike's death sentence to life imprisonment

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — In an amicus brief filed today in the Tennessee Supreme Court, organizations and experts in the effects of sexual violence and trauma describe how the state's execution procedures are likely to trigger severe traumatic flashbacks for Pike, who has been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder from her history of childhood abuse and rapes. The state has never executed a woman by lethal injection.

"Flashbacks are "powerful and uncontrollable re-enactments" of past trauma," the experts explain. During a flashback, a survivor is not being raped or tortured or beaten in the physical world, but their body relives the trauma as if they were. In all the ways that matter to their experience of the event, the trauma is real," the brief states.

The filing explains that traumatic flashbacks are not simply memories. Survivors can involuntarily re-experience the sights, sounds, physical sensations and even pain associated with the original trauma. For survivors of sexual violence, physical restraint, invasive procedures, vulnerable positioning and loss of bodily control can be powerful triggers.

An amicus brief is a written legal document submitted to a court by a person or group who is not a party to the lawsuit but wants to provide extra information, expertise, or arguments to help make a decision. The parties to the brief include organizations with extensive experience working with survivors of sexual violence and childhood trauma, including the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, Legal Momentum, Rights4Girls, and Shared Hope International, among others from across the country.

In addition, more than 100 organizations and experts from states across the country urged Governor Lee to commute Pike's death sentence based on her history of child sexual abuse and gender-based violence. "The violence inflicted on Christa Pike falls at the most extreme end of the spectrum of gender-based violence," they say, and she was "forced to cope with her sexual abuse and rape virtually alone, without any of the victim support

services that we know are so vital to recovery.” While her history of rape does not excuse her crime, the letter continues, it provides “an explanation for how she came to commit that crime, a context for trying to understand what otherwise might seem incomprehensible.”

The experts also point out the “deeply troubling” disparity in sentences imposed on Pike and her abusive boyfriend, Tadaryl Shipp. Shipp was sentenced to life with the possibility of parole because he had not yet turned 18 at the time of the crime. He had a history of violence and had hit and kicked Christa and assaulted other teens.

Pike was repeatedly raped and sexually abused first as a toddler before she could walk and continuing until age 17. The Tennessee Attorney General has not disputed Ms. Pike’s history of abuse and her PTSD diagnosis, and in a recent hearing stated, “I think we all wish that we were not here today and that she was not on death row.”

Pike and two other people committed a crime that resulted in the murder of Colleen Slemmer, a fellow Job Corps student when Pike was 18.

If Pike is executed on September 30, she will be the first woman put to death by the state of Tennessee in more than 200 years. She would also be the first person Tennessee has executed in the modern death penalty era who was a teenager at the time of the offense.

“What awaits her is not only death,” trauma expert Dr. Bethany Brand concluded. “It is, for Christa, a form of dying that is uniquely and needlessly cruel. And it is avoidable.”

For more information:

<https://www.mercyforchrista.org/>

<https://dpw.lawschool.cornell.edu/advocacy/christa-pike/>