

Terrance Williams A Case for Clemency

Pennsylvania is preparing to execute Terrance Williams. Mr. Williams, known to his friends and family as “Terry,” is on death row for a crime he committed three and one-half months after his 18th birthday. On that tragic day, Terry and another teenager killed a man. As the sentencing jury heard, Terry also committed another killing five months earlier at the age of 17. What the jury did not hear was that both of the men had sexually abused Terry, and both crimes directly related to Terry’s history of sexual abuse by older males, which began when he was six years old.

Terry’s abuse continued throughout his adolescence. One of his abusers was his former public schoolteacher. That abuse caused Terry such intense pain and confusion that he began cutting himself and engaging in other acts of self-mutilation.

The jury that sentenced Terry to death never heard that both of the men who Terry killed, like other sexual predators, were significantly older men who used their positions of power and authority to prey on vulnerable underage boys. Terry was one of those boys. In fact, the night before he committed the crime for which he was sentenced to death, Terry was violently sexually assaulted by the man he killed – a man who had been sexually abusing Terry for years, and who used his position in the local church to prey on other boys.

The jury never heard that, like so many other children, the physical and emotional abuse Terry suffered at the hands of his mother and the abandonment he felt from the father he never knew made Terry an easy target for sexually-predatory older men. The jury also never heard how the sexual and psychological traumas that Terry suffered directly impacted his thinking and actions at the time of the killings, throughout the trial, and to this very day. As Dr. David Lisak, a nationally recognized expert on child sexual abuse, explained, “Terry Williams suffered a succession of sustained traumas over the course of his childhood that utterly undermined his development and were directly related to the crimes for which he is now incarcerated. His mother brutally abused him, both physically and emotionally, and so damaged [him] that he desperately sought the attention and approval of an older male, someone who could replace the father he never knew. His desperate need was a vulnerability that drew sexual predators to him. From the age of six Terry was systematically abused and sexually assaulted by a succession of

sexual predators, including one of his teachers. He felt intense shame and disgust, and loathed himself. And over time, some of that hate began to turn towards the men who [were] preying on him.”

In recent years, Pennsylvanians were horrified to learn that so many young people were sexually assaulted by clergymen. The horrors of child sexual abuse in this state continued when former Penn State football coach Jerry Sandusky was charged and convicted of sex crimes against young boys. Without intervention, the effects of childhood sexual abuse can have lasting, profound, and tragic consequences to the victims and those around them. Prosecutors, judges, legislators, and our Governor Tom Corbett have all rightfully acknowledged that much more could and should have been done to prevent the physical and psychological trauma wrought upon the victims abused by the clergy and Sandusky. Terry Williams never received any counseling or mental health treatment to deal with the effects of the abuse he suffered. No one – not a parent, not a teacher, not a doctor or clergy person – came to his aid. Instead, many of the people who should have helped Terry continued to prey on him.

Like so many adolescent victims of sexual abuse, Terry felt intense shame that kept him from talking about what had happened to him. Terry's history of sexual abuse was not presented at his capital trial because Terry's lawyer failed to conduct any meaningful investigation into Terry's background and ignored obvious evidence of abuse. While courts agreed that Terry's lawyer failed him, those courts also said that evidence of sexual abuse would not have made a difference to the jury. However, in sworn affidavits, jurors who sentenced Terry have acknowledged that they would not have voted for a death sentence had they known about the sexual abuse he suffered as a child, the abuse he suffered at the hands of the men he killed, and the psychological impact of that abuse. In addition, several jurors have stated that they voted for Terry to be put to death only because they mistakenly believed that if they did not sentence Terry to death he would later become eligible for release on parole. In truth, both now and at the time of his sentencing, a life sentence in Pennsylvania meant that Terry Williams would never have been eligible for parole. Unfortunately, Pennsylvania is the only state in the country that does not require the judge to instruct the jury that a life sentence means life without the possibility of parole, and no such instruction was given in Terry's case.

In addition to the jurors, the victim's widow does not want Terry executed for her husband's killing. She has stated that she supports commuting his death sentence to life without the possibility of parole.

Terry is deeply remorseful for his actions. There are no excuses or justifications for the crimes he committed. Nonetheless, the abuse he suffered provides significant insight into the betrayed, traumatized, and impaired thinking that led him to commit those terrible crimes. Pennsylvania should not execute Terry Williams because:

- **Terry suffered horrific sexual and physical abuse during his childhood and no one intervened to get him help when he was boy;**
- **The jury did not know about his history of childhood sexual abuse and trauma;**
- **The jury did not know that the men he killed were his abusers;**
- **Terry was only 18 years old at the time of the crime for which he was sentenced to death and the jury did not know about the psychological impact of sexual abuse on someone as young as Terry;**
- **Jurors did not know that he would never be eligible for parole;**
- **Jurors have stated that they would not have voted for death if they had known about his sexual abuse and ineligibility for parole; and**
- **The victim's widow does not want Terry executed for her husband's killing.**

For all these reasons, we urge the members of the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons, Philadelphia District Attorney Seth Williams, and Governor Tom Corbett to commute Terry's sentence to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

For more information, contact:
Arianna Freeman,
Attorney for Terrance Williams
215-928-0520
Arianna.Freeman@fd.org