

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF
TENNESSEE

Tony Von Carruthers v. Kenneth Nelsen, Warden

Case No. 2:08-cv-02425-TLP-cgc · No. 2:08-cv-02425-TLP-cgc · Decided May 20, 2026

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Western District of Tennessee denied Tony Von Carruthers’s application for a stay of execution in connection with his federal habeas petition under 28 U.S.C. § 2254. The court reviewed the Tennessee Supreme Court’s determination that Carruthers was competent to be executed and applied the standards from *Ford v. Wainwright*, *Panetti v. Quarterman*, and *Madison v. Alabama*. The court concluded that Carruthers had not shown that the state court’s decision was contrary to or an unreasonable application of clearly established federal law or based on an unreasonable determination of the facts.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Western District of Tennessee
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Thomas L. Parker
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Western District of Tennessee
DECIDED	May 20, 2026
DOCKET	2:08-cv-02425-TLP-cgc
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Federal habeas petitioner under 28 U.S.C. § 2254 applied for a stay of execution after the Tennessee Supreme Court affirmed a state trial court’s determination that he was competent to be executed and denied a stay.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Under 28 U.S.C. § 2254(d), the court deferred to the Tennessee Supreme Court unless its decision was contrary to, or involved an unreasonable application of, clearly established Supreme Court precedent, or was based on an unreasonable determination of the facts. The court applied the four-factor equitable standard for a stay of execution, with likelihood of success on the merits treated as crucial. State factual findings and credibility determinations were given substantial deference and presumed correct absent clear and convincing evidence.

PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	nonprecedential
PARTIES	Tony Von Carruthers v. Kenneth Nelsen, Warden

TOPICS

competency to be executed federal habeas corpus cruel and unusual punishment habeas corpus
post-conviction relief

PRACTICE AREAS

federal habeas corpus capital punishment execution competency criminal procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether Carruthers showed a likelihood of success on his claim that the Tennessee Supreme Court unreasonably applied *Ford v. Wainwright*, *Panetti v. Quarterman*, and *Madison v. Alabama* in finding him competent to be executed.
2. Whether the Tennessee Supreme Court's competency determination was based on an unreasonable determination of the facts under 28 U.S.C. § 2254(d)(2).
3. Whether the equitable factors warranted a stay of execution under 28 U.S.C. § 2251.

HOLDINGS

1. Because the Tennessee Supreme Court adjudicated Carruthers's competency claim on the merits, the district court applied the deferential standards of 28 U.S.C. § 2254(d), rather than reviewing the claim de novo.
2. Carruthers did not establish a likelihood of success on his claim that he was incompetent to be executed because the Tennessee Supreme Court's conclusion that he had a rational understanding of the reason for his execution was not contrary to, or an unreasonable application of, clearly established federal law.
3. The application for a stay of execution was denied because Carruthers failed to show a likelihood of success on the merits, and the remaining equitable considerations did not overcome the State's substantial interest in carrying out a lawful and final death sentence.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“The critical question is whether a “prisoner’s concept of reality” is “so impair[ed]” that he cannot grasp the execution’s “meaning and purpose” or the “link between [his] crime and its punishment.”” (Section II)

“The finding that Petitioner was competent to be executed is not “so lacking in justification that there was an error well understood and comprehended in existing law beyond any possibility for fairminded [sic] disagreement.”” (Section V)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Carruthers was convicted and sentenced to death for the 1994 murders of Marcellos Anderson, Delois Anderson, and Frederick Tucker. After Tennessee scheduled his execution for May 21, 2026, Carruthers asserted that schizoaffective disorder, delusions, and paranoia prevented him from rationally understanding the connection between his convictions, his sentence, and his execution. A state competency hearing included testimony from Carruthers, former counsel, a psychiatrist who had not recently interviewed him, and a state expert; the state courts concluded that he understood that the State intended to execute him because of the murder convictions.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Carruthers was convicted in Tennessee state court of three first-degree murders and sentenced to death. The Tennessee Supreme Court set an execution date, remanded for a competency-to-be-executed hearing, and later affirmed the state trial court's finding that Carruthers was competent to be executed and denied a stay. Carruthers sought federal habeas relief and an execution stay under 28 U.S.C. §§ 2251 and 2254. The district court applied AEDPA deference, concluded that Carruthers had not shown a likelihood of success on his Ford and Panetti competency claim, and denied the stay.

DISPOSITION

other

CASES CITED

- Carruthers v. State, 145 S.W.3d 85, 88 (Tenn. Crim. App. 2003)
- State v. Carruthers, 35 S.W.3d 516, 524-30 (Tenn. 2000)
- Van Tran v. State, 6 S.W.3d 257, 266 (Tenn. 1999)
- State v. Irick, 320 S.W.3d 284, 295 (Tenn. 2010)
- Ford v. Wainwright, 477 U.S. 399 (1986)
- Panetti v. Quarterman, 551 U.S. 930 (2007)
- Madison v. Alabama, 586 U.S. 265, 269, 279, 283 (2019)
- McFarland v. Scott, 512 U.S. 849, 858 (1994)
- Bedford v. Bobby, 645 F.3d 372, 375 (6th Cir. 2011)
- Workman v. Bell, 484 F.3d 837, 839 (6th Cir. 2007)
- Barr v. Lee, 591 U.S. 979, 981 (2020)
- Nelson v. Campbell, 541 U.S. 637, 649-50 (2004)
- Coe v. Bell, 209 F.3d 815, 823-24 (6th Cir. 2000)
- Williams v. Taylor, 529 U.S. 362, 406, 409, 412-13 (2000)
- Renico v. Lett, 559 U.S. 766, 773 (2010)
- Cullen v. Pinholster, 563 U.S. 170, 181 (2011)
- Harrington v. Richter, 562 U.S. 86, 102-03 (2011)
- Woodford v. Visciotti, 537 U.S. 19, 24 (2002)
- Wesson v. Shoop, 17 F.4th 700, 705 (6th Cir. 2021)

- Brown v. Konteh, 567 F.3d 191, 205 (6th Cir. 2009)
- Thompson v. Bell, 580 F.3d 423, 436 (6th Cir. 2009)
- Deja Vu of Nashville, Inc. v. Metro. Gov't of Nashville & Davidson County, Tenn., 274 F.3d 377, 400 (6th Cir. 2001)
- Workman v. Bredesen, 486 F.3d 896, 912-13 (6th Cir. 2007)
- Miller v. Parker, 2018 WL 6003123, at *1 (M.D. Tenn. Nov. 15, 2018), aff'd, 910 F.3d 259 (6th Cir. 2018)
- State v. Carruthers, No. W1997-00097-SC-DDT-DD, 2026 WL 1257769 (Tenn. May 7, 2026)

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