

State to seek death penalty against alleged Thanksgiving Day killer

Paul Merhige accused of shooting 4 family members in Jupiter

By Andrew Marra and Michael LaForgia, The Palm Beach Post

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Prosecutors have decided to seek the death penalty for Paul Michael Merhige, the man accused of fatally shooting four family members in a [Thanksgiving](#) rampage in Jupiter.

The decision, announced Thursday by State Attorney Michael McAuliffe, comes almost a month after Merhige's Jan. 2 capture in a Florida Keys hotel, where he hid out for weeks after allegedly shooting dead his twin sisters, his aunt and his cousin's 6-year-old daughter at Thanksgiving dinner.

The horrific scale of his alleged crime and the prolonged national manhunt made him one of the nation's most wanted criminals for more than a month. After his capture, the father of one of the victims and the celebrity host of the *America's Most Wanted* television program each called on McAuliffe to seek to have Merhige executed.

"If there's anyone who deserves the death penalty, it is someone who would execute my 6-year-old daughter while she is in bed," said Jim Sitton, the father of Makayla Sitton, earlier this month.

The decision by prosecutors to seek death by lethal injection came as a grand jury formally indicted the 35-year-old Miami man on four counts of first-degree murder and three counts of attempted first-degree murder. Police say he shot and wounded two other relatives and tried unsuccessfully to shoot his uncle.

His parents, who supported him financially even as a grown man, have not hired a private defense attorney for Merhige, so he will be represented by Carey Haughwout, the county's public defender. She could not be reached for comment on Thursday.

Relatives of Merhige's alleged victims also declined to comment Thursday, as did McAuliffe.

Merhige was an honors student and varsity athlete at a prominent Miami prep school before studying at the [University of Miami](#). But after graduating, he never held a job and was supported by his parents, his mother said.

He once shot himself in a supposed suicide attempt and allegedly threatened once to cut the throat of one of his sisters.

Merhige's reported history of mental problems — his mother said he suffered from obsessive-compulsive disorder and chronic depression — will likely be a key issue if his case goes to trial. Legal experts have said evidence of Merhige's extensive planning and escape could complicate attempts to argue a convincing insanity defense.

In general, such defenses can backfire on attorneys arguing death penalty cases, said Christopher Slobogin, director of the criminal justice program at Vanderbilt University Law School.

"Some people have described serious [mental illness](#) as a double-edged sword," he said. "It ... tends to show dangerousness in a typical juror's mind," which might make a jury more likely to recommend the death penalty.

Authorities said Merhige meticulously plotted the killings, buying four guns, packing clothes and withdrawing at least \$12,000 in cash.

During the Thanksgiving meal at the Sittons' Jupiter home, he sat quietly and ate nothing. Later, he went outside, removed a gun from his car and re-entered. Moments later, without a word, police say he opened fire.

He fled and hid out in the Keys while a nationwide manhunt swirled around him, swapping the license plate on his blue Toyota Camry and keeping it covered in a motel parking lot.

He was arrested Jan. 2. at the Edgewater Lodge in Long Key, between Islamorada and Marathon, after the motel's owner saw his face broadcast during a college football game. Authorities who raided his motel room said Merhige apparently had been following the manhunt on the Internet.

He was taken to the [Palm Beach County](#) Jail, where he remains held without bail.

Merhige, who reportedly nursed a grudge against his family for more than a decade, is accused of killing 6-year-old Sitton; his aunt Raymonde Joseph, 76; and his 33-year-old twin sisters, Lisa Knight and Carla Merhige.

Veteran Assistant State Attorney Aleathea McRoberts, who co-prosecuted the Dunbar Village rape trials, is slated to prosecute Merhige. His arraignment in court is set for Feb. 2.

In Florida, a majority of jurors must vote to recommend the death penalty and a judge then makes the final decision. The case is set to be handled by Circuit Judge John Hoy.

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