

# Death penalty sought in killings of Tampa police officers but not two other victims

By [Alexandra Zayas](#) and [Colleen Jenkins](#), Times Staff Writers  
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TAMPA — Four grieving families filled a courtroom Thursday, together for the first time to face the same murder suspect, Dontae Morris.

The wives of two slain Tampa police officers heard prosecutors announce the intent to seek the harshest punishment: death.

And the frustrated families of two civilians learned that for their loved ones, the state would stop at life in prison.

Lawyers understood why. By statute, death penalty cases must meet certain criteria. The law singles out cop killers. The courts typically reserve capital punishment for the most egregious offenses. And convincing a jury isn't enough. On appeal, death sentences must pass the scrutiny of the state Supreme Court.

But there was hunger for justice Thursday, with four young fathers equally gone, and their families bracing for a long legal journey.

They included Matisse Gallman, mother of victim Harold Wright's daughters. She looked at Morris and felt something stir inside of her.

"I've never felt hate before," she said.

"And I felt it when I saw him."

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Hillsborough County Sheriff's deputies mapped out a security plan in advance. Eleven guarded the courtroom Thursday morning, searching people as they entered. Six transferred Morris from jail. He waited quietly in a back room.

The family of Officer David Curtis arrived in a police van. Officer Jeffrey Kocab's family followed his wife, Sara, who entered in a wheelchair just one day after she delivered their stillborn daughter.

On a chain around her neck, she wore what looked like a wedding band.

The wives sat side by side in the front row as deputies emerged clutching Morris, who was in chains.

Kelly Curtis tapped her foot as she looked at him, gripping tissues and working hard to hold in tears. Sara Kocab stared ahead, reaching for Curtis.

Morris shot their husbands in the head the early morning of June 29, police say, as they attempted to arrest him on a bad check warrant. The woman with him drove away. Cortnee Brantley, 22, was indicted Wednesday by a federal grand jury. Authorities say she concealed the fact that Morris was a felon with a firearm.

Hillsborough Circuit Judge Daniel Sleet presided over Morris' arraignment.

Through his state appointed attorney, Stephen Fisher, Morris pleaded not guilty to all four murders.

When prosecutors announced their intent to seek the death penalty in the two police officers' deaths, Morris showed no reaction.

"You understand that, Mr. Morris?" the judge asked.

He responded, "Yes, sir."

But some family members of civilian victims, Derek Anderson and Harold Wright, didn't understand. Assistant State Attorney Scott Harmon, the lead prosecutor on the case, spoke to them after the hearing.

Anderson, 21, was gunned down at the Kenneth Court apartments on May 18, police said. Wright, 25, was killed on June 8 in what police said was a drug-related robbery.

Gallman, the mother of two children with Walker, said she sympathized with the pain of the two officers' families, but was frustrated that prosecutors were pursuing different sentences.

"What about us?" she asked. "Do the other two not matter?"

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The difference between the life and death of a capital felon can come down to 15 points in a Florida statute called "aggravators." Prosecutors apply them to cases to support the death penalty, and juries weigh them against "mitigators" presented by the defense.

The statute specifically mentions the murders of police officers as a justification for seeking the death penalty. The state does seek the penalty in the deaths of civilians, but Hillsborough State Attorney's Office spokesman Mark Cox said experienced prosecutors made their decision after examining the facts of each case.

Cox did not comment on the specifics. But the *Times* spoke to two former homicide prosecutors about factors that could have contributed to the decision.

"In almost every murder case, you're going to find an aggravator," said attorney Lyann Goudie.

Killing during a robbery is one. So is killing for financial gain. Many Hillsborough murder cases fall under those guidelines.

The death penalty, she said, is reserved for cases a level above average. She said Hillsborough prosecutors are appropriately conservative in their use of the death penalty, because it is such a severe consequence.

Judging from what he has read about the police murders, attorney Mike Benito sees at least five aggravators, including killing to avoid an arrest and doing so in a cold, calculated and premeditated way.

"The killing of two officers is a very, very strong aggravator in and of itself," Benito said. "There are no mitigating circumstances that would outweigh."

Morris returns to court Oct. 14.

*Times staff writers Colleen Jenkins and Jessica Vander Velde contributed to this report. Alexandra Zayas can be reached at azayas@sptimes.com or (813) 310-2081.*

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