



June 26, 2017

The Honorable Terence R. McAuliffe
Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia
1111 East Broad Street
Richmond, Virginia 23219

Re: Application for Executive Clemency for William Charles Morva

Dear Governor McAuliffe:

We are writing on behalf of the national office of NAMI (the National Alliance on Mental Illness) and NAMI-Virginia to respectfully request that you commute William Morva's death sentence to life in prison due to his long term severe mental illness. NAMI is the nation's largest grassroots organization advocating on behalf of individuals and families affected by mental illness. NAMI Virginia is NAMI's state organization in Virginia and the largest grassroots organization focused on mental health conditions in the state, with 17 local affiliates throughout the state.

As Chief Executive Officer of NAMI and the Interim Executive Director of NAMI-Virginia respectively, we are all too aware of the harmful impact that false, negative stereotypes associating mental illness with violence can have on societal perceptions and the willingness of people with mental illness to seek help. However, we are also aware that a small number of people may engage in acts of violence due to the symptoms of their severe illnesses. In some cases, like in William Morva's case, powerful delusions or hallucinations may lead a person to act in ways they never would have otherwise.

Societal lack of understanding about mental illness is one of the reasons NAMI supports an exemption to the death penalty for people with severe mental illness. People with these conditions are more likely to be sentenced to death than those without mental illness due to false perceptions that these individuals are inherently violent and beyond redemption. We also know that jurors are frequently presented with inaccurate information about defendants with severe mental illness, reinforcing perceptions that the crimes were products of willful choices rather than the severe, untreated symptoms of their mental illness. Jurors often do not receive information about the effectiveness of treatment.

We are concerned that these false stereotypes may have played a critical role in Mr. Morva's death sentence. Jurors were told that Mr. Morva's behavior was the result of "schizotypal personality disorder." It was explained that this is a psychiatric term confirming that Mr. Morva had problematic "attitudes towards the world." Jurors also were told that these attitudes were static—that Mr. Morva would never change, and that he would remain "aggressive" forever because personality disorders are not amenable to treatment. There was no evidence offered to explain why Mr. Morva would kill, or to suggest that Mr. Morva could be redeemed and rehabilitated.

Now we know, however, that the information jurors heard was not true. After development and review of his complete psychiatric history—including symptomology in the years immediately preceding the crimes—Mr. Morva was diagnosed with delusional disorder, an acute psychotic disorder similar to schizophrenia. Delusional disorders are characterized by the presence of delusions, or “false belief[s] based on [an] incorrect inference about external reality that is firmly held despite what almost everyone else believes and despite what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof or evidence to the contrary.” Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, at 819 (5th ed). As noted by the diagnosing psychiatrist, a combination of Mr. Morva’s longstanding delusions led to his crimes. Mr. Morva felt he had to escape from jail because of persecutory and somatic delusions that conspirators were using the poor conditions at the jail to kill him. He was terrified, and came to believe that he was at imminent risk of death—this was Mr. Morva’s reality, albeit demonstrably false.

But Mr. Morva’s false reality need not be the end of his story. Notably, even though the jury did not hear about it, delusional disorder is amenable to treatment with medications and counseling. There is a strong reason to believe Mr. Morva could be successfully treated because his older brother was diagnosed and successfully treated by the Virginia Department of Corrections for a psychotic disorder. The VDOC also would be responsible for treating Mr. Morva if his death sentence is commuted to life imprisonment.

Governor McAuliffe, you have advocated for more funding for mental health services during your tenure as Governor. Now, we are calling on you to step in and stop the execution of William Morva, a man who clearly has a serious mental illness of longstanding duration. While NAMI and NAMI Virginia in no way wish to excuse the severity or impact of the crimes, we believe that executing Mr. Morva on July 6th will only compound the original tragedy, represent a profound injustice, and serve as neither retribution nor deterrence. We therefore implore you to commute his death sentence to a sentence of life imprisonment without the possibility of parole. We also urge that he finally receives proper treatment for his severe mental illness.

Thank you for your careful attention to this letter.

Sincerely,



Mary T. Giliberti, J.D.
Chief Executive Officer
NAMI



Stephany Melton Hardison, MSW
Interim Executive Director
NAMI-Virginia