

GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF NORTH CAROLINA  
SESSION 2009

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HOUSE BILL 137\*  
Committee Substitute Favorable 7/14/09  
Committee Substitute #2 Favorable 7/27/09

Short Title: Capital Procedure/Severe Mental Disability.

(Public)

Sponsors:

Referred to:

February 12, 2009

1 A BILL TO BE ENTITLED  
2 AN ACT TO AMEND THE CAPITAL TRIAL, SENTENCING, AND POST-CONVICTION  
3 PROCEDURES FOR A PERSON WITH A SEVERE MENTAL DISABILITY AND TO  
4 AUTHORIZE THE USE OF CERTAIN FUNDS TO PROVIDE JUDICIAL TRAINING  
5 WITH REGARD TO THE LEGAL REQUIREMENTS OF THESE PROCEDURES.

6 Whereas, leading State and national mental health organizations have called for a  
7 prohibition on imposition of the death penalty for persons with a severe mental disability at the  
8 time of the commission of the crime; and

9 Whereas, specifically, the American Psychological Association, the American  
10 Psychiatric Association, and the National Alliance on Mental Illness have all called for the  
11 exclusion of persons with a severe mental disability from the imposition of the death penalty;  
12 and

13 Whereas, the American Bar Association recently endorsed the call for the end of the  
14 death penalty for persons with a severe mental disability; Now, therefore,  
15 The General Assembly of North Carolina enacts:

16 **SECTION 1.** Article 100 of Chapter 15A of the General Statutes is amended by  
17 adding a new section to read:

18 "**§ 15A-2007. Defendant with severe mental disability; death sentence prohibited.**

19 (a) Definition. – For purposes of this section, the term "severe mental disability" means  
20 any mental disability or defect that significantly impairs a person's capacity to do any of the  
21 following: (i) appreciate the nature, consequences, or wrongfulness of the person's conduct in  
22 the criminal offense; (ii) exercise rational judgment in relation to the criminal offense; or (iii)  
23 conform the person's conduct to the requirements of the law in connection with the criminal  
24 offense. A mental disability manifested primarily by repeated criminal conduct or attributable  
25 solely to the acute effects of alcohol or other drugs does not, standing alone, constitute a severe  
26 mental disability for purposes of this section.

27 (b) Death Penalty Prohibited for Defendant With Severe Mental Disability at Time of  
28 Commission of Criminal Offense. – Notwithstanding any provision of law to the contrary, no  
29 defendant who was under the influence of a severe mental disability at the time of the  
30 commission of the criminal offense shall be sentenced to death.

31 (c) Pretrial Hearing to Determine Severe Mental Disability. – Upon motion of the  
32 defendant, supported by appropriate affidavits, the court shall order a pretrial hearing to  
33 determine if the defendant had a severe mental disability at the time of the commission of the  
34 offense. The defendant has the burden of production and persuasion to demonstrate by clear  
35 and convincing evidence that the defendant had a severe mental disability at the time of the  
36 criminal offense. If the court determines that the defendant had a severe mental disability at the



1 time of the criminal offense, the court shall declare the case noncapital, and the State shall not  
2 seek the death penalty against the defendant.

3 (d) Pretrial Determination Does Not Affect Legal Defenses. – The pretrial  
4 determination of the court shall not preclude the defendant from raising any legal defense  
5 during the trial.

6 (e) Procedure at Sentencing Hearing Regarding Determination of Severe Mental  
7 Disability. – If the court does not find in the pretrial proceeding that the defendant had a severe  
8 mental disability at the time of the commission of the criminal offense, the defendant may  
9 introduce evidence during the sentencing hearing regarding the disability. If, during the  
10 sentencing hearing, the defendant introduces evidence regarding the disability, the court shall  
11 submit a special issue to the jury as to whether the defendant had a severe mental disability at  
12 the time of the commission of the criminal offense. These special issues shall be considered and  
13 answered by the jury prior to the consideration of aggravating or mitigating factors and the  
14 determination of sentence. If the jury determines that the defendant had a severe mental  
15 disability at the time of the commission of the criminal offense, the court shall declare the case  
16 noncapital, and the defendant shall be sentenced to life imprisonment without parole.

17 (f) Burden of Production and Persuasion. – The defendant has the burden of production  
18 and persuasion to demonstrate to the jury by a preponderance of the evidence that the defendant  
19 had a severe mental disability at the time of the commission of the criminal offense.

20 (g) Jury Consideration of Severe Mental Disability. – If the jury determines that the  
21 defendant did not have a severe mental disability as defined by this section at the time of the  
22 commission of the criminal offense, the jury may consider any evidence of the disability  
23 presented during the sentencing hearing when determining mitigating factors and the  
24 defendant's sentence.

25 (h) Penalties that May Be Imposed on Convicted Defendant With a Severe Mental  
26 Disability. – The provisions of this section do not preclude the sentencing of an offender who  
27 has a severe mental disability as defined by this section to any other sentence authorized by  
28 G.S. 14-17 for the crime of murder in the first degree."

29 **SECTION 2.** G.S. 15A-2000(b) reads as rewritten:

30 "(b) Sentence Recommendation by the Jury. – Instructions determined by the trial judge  
31 to be warranted by the evidence shall be given by the court in its charge to the jury prior to its  
32 deliberation in determining sentence. The court shall give appropriate instructions in those  
33 cases in which evidence of the defendant's mental retardation requires the consideration by the  
34 jury of the provisions of G.S. 15A-2005. The court shall also give appropriate instructions in  
35 those cases in which evidence of the defendant's severe mental disability requires the  
36 consideration by the jury of the provisions of G.S. 15A-2007. In all cases in which the death  
37 penalty may be authorized, the judge shall include in his instructions to the jury that it must  
38 consider any aggravating circumstance or circumstances or mitigating circumstance or  
39 circumstances from the lists provided in subsections (e) and (f) which may be supported by the  
40 evidence, and shall furnish to the jury a written list of issues relating to such aggravating or  
41 mitigating circumstance or circumstances.

42 After hearing the evidence, argument of counsel, and instructions of the court, the jury shall  
43 deliberate and render a sentence recommendation to the court, based upon the following  
44 matters:

- 45 (1) Whether any sufficient aggravating circumstance or circumstances as  
46 enumerated in subsection (e) exist;
- 47 (2) Whether any sufficient mitigating circumstance or circumstances as  
48 enumerated in subsection (f), which outweigh the aggravating circumstance  
49 or circumstances found, exist; and
- 50 (3) Based on these considerations, whether the defendant should be sentenced to  
51 death or to imprisonment in the State's prison for life.

1 The sentence recommendation must be agreed upon by a unanimous vote of the 12 jurors.  
2 Upon delivery of the sentence recommendation by the foreman of the jury, the jury shall be  
3 individually polled to establish whether each juror concurs and agrees to the sentence  
4 recommendation returned.

5 If the jury cannot, within a reasonable time, unanimously agree to its sentence  
6 recommendation, the judge shall impose a sentence of life imprisonment; provided, however,  
7 that the judge shall in no instance impose the death penalty when the jury cannot agree  
8 unanimously to its sentence recommendation."

9 **SECTION 3.** Article 100 of Chapter 15A of the General Statutes is amended by  
10 adding a new section to read:

11 **"§ 15A-2008. Request for post-conviction determination of severe mental disability.**

12 In cases in which the defendant has been convicted of first degree murder, sentenced to  
13 death, and is in custody awaiting imposition of the death penalty, the following procedures  
14 apply:

- 15 (1) Notwithstanding any other provision or time limitation contained in Article  
16 89 of Chapter 15A of the General Statutes, a defendant may seek appropriate  
17 relief from the defendant's death sentence upon the ground that the defendant  
18 had a severe mental disability, as defined in G.S. 15A-2007(a), at the time of  
19 the commission of the capital crime.
- 20 (2) A motion seeking appropriate relief from a death sentence on the ground that  
21 the defendant had a severe mental disability at the time of the commission of  
22 the capital crime, shall be filed:
- 23 a. On or before April 1, 2010, if the defendant's conviction and  
24 sentence of death were entered prior to December 1, 2009.
- 25 b. Within 150 days of the imposition of a sentence of death, if the  
26 defendant's trial was in progress on December 1, 2009. For purposes  
27 of this section, a trial is considered to be in progress if the process of  
28 jury selection has begun.
- 29 (3) The motion, seeking relief from a death sentence upon the ground that the  
30 defendant had a severe mental disability, shall comply with the provisions of  
31 G.S. 15A-1420. The procedures and hearing on the motion shall follow and  
32 comply with G.S. 15A-1420. Upon motion of the defendant, supported by  
33 appropriate affidavits, the court shall order a hearing to determine if the  
34 defendant had a severe mental disability at the time of the commission of the  
35 offense.
- 36 (4) If the court determines that the defendant had a severe mental disability at  
37 the time of the commission of the criminal offense, the death sentence shall  
38 be vacated, and the defendant shall be sentenced to life imprisonment  
39 without parole."

40 **SECTION 4.** Of the funds appropriated to the Board of Governors of The  
41 University of North Carolina for the North Carolina Judicial College for the 2009-2010 fiscal  
42 year, the School of Government at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill may use up  
43 to the sum of ten thousand dollars (\$10,000) for the 2009-2010 fiscal year for the purpose of  
44 providing superior court judges with information and training on the requirements of this act.

45 **SECTION 5.** Sections 1 and 2 of this act become effective December 1, 2009, and  
46 apply to trials docketed to begin on or after that date. Section 3 of this act becomes effective  
47 December 1, 2009, and expires December 1, 2010. Section 4 of this act becomes effective July  
48 1, 2009. Section 5 of this act is effective when it becomes law.