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**Mar 09 2026**

S.C. SUPREME COURT

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA  
IN THE SUPREME COURT

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Certiorari to Lexington County

Honorable Jocelyn J. Newman, Circuit Court Judge

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SEAN L. STROMAN,

PETITIONER

V.

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA,

RESPONDENT

APPELLATE CASE NO. 2025-001981

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JOHNSON PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI

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Wanda H. Carter  
Chief Appellate Defender

South Carolina Commission on Indigent Defense  
Division of Appellate Defense  
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ATTORNEY FOR PETITIONER

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**ISSUE PRESENTED**

The PCR judge erred in denying petitioner's allegation that his guilty pleas were given involuntarily because he was coerced into pleading guilty as charged.

## STATEMENT

Petitioner Sean L. Stroman pled guilty to two counts of armed robbery and three counts of kidnapping on April 5, 2016, at the Lexington County General Sessions Court before Judge Knox McMahan and was sentenced to an aggregate fifty-year prison term. App. 1-30. A resentencing hearing was held on April 13, 2016, at the Lexington County General Sessions Court before Judge McMahan whereafter petitioner was re-sentenced to imprisonment for a period of thirty years. App. 31-43. Petitioner appealed, but his appeal was dismissed. See State v. Stroman, Unpublished Op. No. 2020-UP-057 (S.C. Ct. App. filed March 4, 2020).

On December 8, 2020, petitioner filed a PCR application and an amended PCR application with the Lexington County Office of the Clerk of Court. App. 44-51. The Respondent filed a return dated June 14, 2021. App. 52-66. A PCR hearing was convened on June 7, 2022, at the Lexington County Courthouse before Judge Jocelyn Newman. App. 66-123. Petitioner was present at the hearing and represented by Ola Johnson, Esquire, and Assistant Attorney William Corbett appeared on behalf of the state.

On August 25, 2025, Judge Newman filed an Order of Dismissal with Prejudice denying and dismissing petitioner's PCR action. App. 124-170.

Petitioner appealed. This petition follows.

## ARGUMENT

The PCR judge erred in denying petitioner's allegation that his guilty pleas were given involuntarily because he was coerced into pleading guilty as charged.

Petitioner testified at the PCR hearing and stated that he was “coerced into entering the plea because [on] multiple occasions...I was told that if I didn't take the plea, I would be faced with a life sentence...[and] be sentenced to more time.” App. 73, lines 14-17. Petitioner added that he had no choice other than to accept the plea and that he did not understand the definition of coercion at that time. App. 79, lines 2-25; App. 81, lines 1-13.

Petitioner's testimony regarding the matter of coercion in connection with the plea follows:

Q. All these questions and answers you went through at your plea, do you felt (sic) like—I mean, do you feel like at this time that any of that was voluntary on your behalf or no?

A. No, sir. It wasn't voluntary only because I say I was coerced into taking the plea, because they threatened me with the LWOP. If there was no—if they never told me about the LWOP, I'm sorry, it's cold in here so I'm kind of jittery. If they never told me about the LWOP I probably would've just went to trial. App. 84, 1.22-p. 85, 1.5.

Petitioner testified that he felt he had no other choice than to plead guilty as charged. App. 79, 1.2-3; App. 81, lines 5-8; App. 86, lines 14-19.

Trial counsel testified at the PCR hearing and explained that petitioner faced LWOP sentencing and that he made a decision based on this sentencing reality. App. 114; 1.20 -p. 115, 1.1; App. 121, 1.22 - p. 122, 1.2.

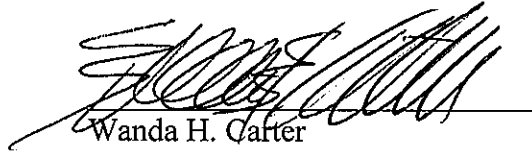
The question to be answered in resolving a complaint of coercion claimed in pleading guilty is whether under all of the facts and circumstances one's guilty plea was voluntarily and understandingly entered. State v. Smith, 255 S.C. 417, 179 S.E.2d 210 (1971), citing to Sweet v.

State, 255 S.C. 293, 178 S.E.2d 657 (1971). Even though a guilty plea may not be held invalid if the defendant was motivated to plead in order to receive a lesser penalty; nonetheless, the long standing test for determining the validity of a guilty plea is whether the plea is a voluntary plea among the alternate courses of action open to the defendant because some circumstances indeed present intrinsically coercive situations. Gustine v. State, 325 S.C. 123, 480 S.E.2d 444 (1997), citing to Hill v. Lockhart, 474 U.S. 52 (1985) and Brady v. United States, 397 U.S. 742 (1970). Therefore, “the better approach is to determine on a case-by-case basis whether a defendant knowingly and voluntarily enter[ed] a plea of guilty.” See Gustine v. State, supra.

In the case at bar, petitioner felt coerced into pleading guilty to the charges due to information he received regarding the possibility of various harsh sentences being handed down to him in the case. Per these circumstances in the instant case, petitioner did not plead guilty voluntarily. Additionally, the coercive measure counsel used (threat of harsh sentencing to obtain petitioner’s pleas) violated petitioner’s right to effective assistance of legal counsel guaranteed under the Sixth Amendment to the United States Constitution in a plea case (See Hill v. Lockhart, 474 U.S. 52 (1985)), as petitioner likely factored counsel’s advice regarding sentencing options given to him by his trial attorney.

**CONCLUSION**

Based on the foregoing argument, counsel for petitioner would request that this Court grant the petition and allow full briefing on the above-raised issue.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Wanda H. Carter', is written over a horizontal line.

Wanda H. Carter  
Chief Appellate Defender

ATTORNEY FOR PETITIONER

This 9th day of March, 2026.

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA  
IN THE SUPREME COURT

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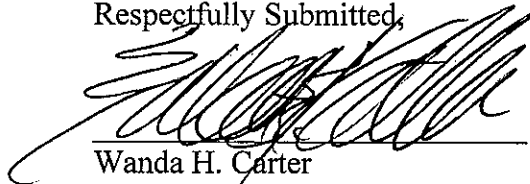
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Counsel for Sean Larmont Stroman states that:

1. She is Chief Appellate Defender for the South Carolina Office of Appellate Defense, and was appointed to represent petitioner.
2. She has reviewed the record of petitioner's post-conviction relief hearing before Judge Jocelyn J. Newman, which was held on June 7, 2022, and, in her opinion, the appeal is without legal merit sufficient to warrant a new trial.
3. She has, pursuant to Johnson v. State, 294 S.C. 310, 364 S.E.2d 201 (1988), briefed an arguable legal issue which arose during the post-conviction relief process.

Therefore, counsel requests that the Court relieve her as counsel for Sean Larmont Stroman.

Respectfully Submitted,



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Wanda H. Carter  
Chief Appellate Defender

ATTORNEY FOR PETITIONER

This 9th day of March, 2026.

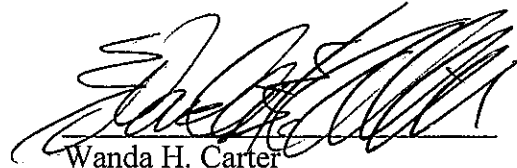
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CERTIFICATE OF COUNSEL

S.C. SUPREME COURT

The undersigned certifies that to the best of her ability this Johnson Petition for Writ of Certiorari complies with Rule 211(b), SCACR, and the April 15, 2014 order from the South Carolina Supreme Court entitled "Revised Order Concerning Personal Identifying Information and Other Sensitive Information in Appellate Court Filings."



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This 9th day of March, 2026.