

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
In The Supreme Court

APPEAL FROM GREENVILLE COUNTY
Court of Common Pleas

The Honorable Robin B. Stilwell, Circuit Court Judge

Appellate Case No. 2013-002409

RECEIVED

AUG 13 2014

S.C. Supreme Court

Christopher Bernard Anderson, Petitioner,

v.

State of South Carolina, Respondent.

**RETURN TO PETITION FOR
WRIT OF CERTIORARI**

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Attorney General

KAREN C. RATIGAN
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ATTORNEYS FOR RESPONDENT

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QUESTION PRESENTED

1. Did trial counsel err in failing to object to the solicitor's "substantial sentence" recommendation made during the plea proceeding because no sentencing recommendations were connected to the plea agreement and Petitioner was prejudiced as a result since he received a substantial sentence indeed in the case?

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

The Greenville County Grand Jury indicted Petitioner at the February 2010 term of General Sessions for manufacturing cocaine base (2010-GS-23-0713), possession with intent to distribute (PWID) cocaine base (2010-GS-23-0714), and trafficking cocaine (2010-GS-23-0715). (App.pp.715-73). Joshua Schultz, Esquire represented Petitioner.

On June 16, 2011, Petitioner pled guilty. The Honorable Letitia H. Verdin sentenced Petitioner to concurrent terms of eighteen years for manufacturing cocaine base, second offense, eighteen years for PWID cocaine base, second offense, and eighteen years for trafficking cocaine (10-28 grams), second offense. (App.p.16). Petitioner did not appeal.

Petitioner filed an application for post-conviction relief (PCR) on June 14, 2012 (2012-CP-23-3899). (App.pp.18-24). A hearing was convened at the Greenville County Courthouse on August 27, 2013. (App.pp.30-58). Petitioner was present and represented by Caroline Horlbeck, Esquire. Karen C. Ratigan, Esquire of the South Carolina Attorney General's Office represented Respondent. The Honorable Robin B. Stilwell denied relief in an order filed October 10, 2013. (App.pp.60-67).

STANDARD OF REVIEW

The proper standard for review of a PCR evidentiary hearing is whether “any evidence of probative value” exists to sustain the post-conviction relief judge’s findings. Cherry v. State, 300 S.C. 115, 119, 386 S.E.2d 624, 626 (1989). In a post-conviction relief proceeding, the applicant bears the burden of proving the allegations in their application. Butler v. State, 286 S.C. 441, 442, 334 S.E.2d 813, 814 (1985).

ARGUMENT

The PCR judge did not err in finding Petitioner failed to meet his burden of proving plea counsel was ineffective.

Petitioner argues plea counsel should have objected when the assistant solicitor asked for a “substantial sentence” at the guilty plea hearing. This allegation is without merit.

A.

At the guilty plea hearing, the clerk of court announced Petitioner was pleading guilty to second offenses. (App.p.3). The plea judge advised Petitioner of the sentence ranges for his charges. (App.p.4). Petitioner stated he had discussed his charges with plea counsel, was satisfied with his representation, and had not been made any promises in exchange for his guilty pleas. (App.pp.5-6). Petitioner waived his right to a jury trial. (App.pp.7-8). Petitioner did not dispute the assistant solicitor’s recitation of either the facts of his case or his prior criminal record. (App.pp.9-11).

The only mention of sentencing at the guilty plea hearing – prior to plea counsel’s mitigation argument – occurred after the assistant solicitor recited Petitioner’s prior

criminal history:

[Assistant solicitor]: And law enforcement does have input at the appropriate time.

The Court: All right.

[Assistant solicitor]: Your Honor, they are asking for substantial jail time. they understand I'm reducing it off the 25. But they did still want me to ask for substantial jail time.

The Court: All right.

(App.p.11).

After plea counsel spoke in mitigation (and asked for a sentence on the low end of the 5-30 year sentence range), the plea judge stated:

I take into consideration the fact that he's been involved in this before, been sentenced to a significant amount of time and went right back to it. Not right back to it, but went back to it. It is a tragic situation. It's a tragic situation for his family now. It's a tragic situation for his mother that died to have seen her son live that kind of life. It's a tragic situation all the way around.

I'll run each of them concurrent but the sentence of the court is 18 years. Good luck to you, sir.

(App.pp.12-16).

B.

At the PCR hearing, Petitioner argued he hired plea counsel to attempt to get a sentence of house arrest and probation. (App.p.33). Petitioner stated plea counsel said he was eligible for probation on these charges. (App.p.39). Petitioner stated he based his decision to plead guilty upon the lack of a recommendation and plea counsel "being able to talk to get me the low end of the sentence." (App.p.45). Petitioner stated he would

have gone to trial if he had known the assistant solicitor would ask for a “high sentence.” (App.p.40; p.42).

Petitioner’s fiancée, Beverly Adams, stated plea counsel advised the Applicant was facing a 60-year sentence. (App.p.48). Adams stated plea counsel did not promise a particular sentence but said he was pushing for either five years of probation or a five-year active sentence. (App.p.49).

Plea counsel testified he discussed with the Applicant the risks and advantages of a plea versus a trial. (App.p.53). Plea counsel testified he negotiated the third offenses down to second offenses but there was no specific offer for a sentence. (App.pp.53-54). Plea counsel testified he probably explained to the Applicant the consequences of a plea without a recommendation. (App.p.54; p.56). Plea counsel testified he did not think he would have said he would ask for probation because the charges carried a mandatory prison sentence and that he was hoping for a 5-10 year sentence. (App.p.54). Plea counsel testified he told Adams he would push for the minimum sentence but did not recall saying anything about probation. (App.p.55). Plea counsel testified he was “just surprised” at the solicitor’s comment. (App.p.55).

In denying Petitioner’s application for post-conviction relief, the PCR judge found Petitioner “failed to meet his burden of proving plea counsel should have objected when the State said law enforcement wanted ‘to ask for substantial jail time.’” The PCR judge noted there was no sentence recommendation and that plea counsel did not believe the comment violated the spirit of any agreement. The PCR judge concluded “there was no error or prejudice from the lack of an objection to the solicitor’s statement.” (App.p.65).

C.

For an applicant to be granted PCR as a result of ineffective assistance of counsel, he must show both: (1) that his counsel failed to render reasonably effective assistance under prevailing professional norms, and (2) that he was prejudiced by his counsel's ineffective performance. See Strickland v. Washington, 466 U.S. 668, 104 S. Ct. 2052 (1984); Porter v. State, 368 S.C. 378, 383, 629 S.E.2d 353, 356 (2006). When there has been a guilty plea, the applicant must prove that counsel's representation was below the standard of reasonableness and that, but for counsel's unprofessional errors, there is a reasonable probability that he would not have pled guilty and would have insisted on going to trial. Hill v. Lockhart, 474 U.S. 52, 58-59, 106 S. Ct. 366, 370 (1985).

D.

The PCR judge did not err in finding Petitioner failed to meet his burden of proving plea counsel was ineffective for not objecting to the assistant solicitor's comment during the guilty plea hearing.

Trial counsel was not deficient for not objecting because the assistant solicitor's comment was not a sentence recommendation. Rather, the assistant solicitor merely relayed a request from law enforcement that they "are asking for substantial jail time." (App.p.11). The assistant solicitor did not phrase this as a recommendation from the State. As such, this case is clearly distinguishable from cases such as Smith v. State, 407 S.C. 270, 754 S.E.2d 900 (Ct. App. 2014) and Thompson v. State, 340 S.C. 112, 531 S.E.2d 294 (2000), where counsel were found to be ineffective for not objecting when the solicitor actually recommended imposition of the maximum sentence. While plea

counsel may have been surprised by the assistant solicitor's comment, there was no need for an objection, as the comment did not amount to a sentence recommendation. Rather, this was merely information passed along to the plea judge for her consideration in sentencing. See In re M.B.H., 387 S.C. 323, 326, 692 S.E.2d 541, 542 (2010) ("A judge must be permitted to consider any and all information that reasonably might bear on the proper sentence for a particular defendant.").

Regardless, Petitioner cannot prove the assistant solicitor's comment prejudiced him in any way. Plea counsel's lack of objection cannot be viewed as prejudicial in a case involving such overwhelming evidence of guilt. During a protective sweep of a residence, Petitioner "was at a kitchen table with a pile of white [sic] powder, scales, baking soda, Pyrex dishes. And one of the Pyrex dishes did have finished product on it." Police recovered \$1209 from Petitioner's person, as well as 9.69 grams of crack cocaine and 27.32 grams of powder cocaine from the aforementioned kitchen. (App.pp.10-11). See Geter v. State, 305 S.C. 365, 367, 409 S.E.2d 344, 346 (1991) (concluding reasonable probability of a different result does not exist when there is overwhelming evidence of guilt); State v. McFadden, 318 S.C. 404, 416, 458 S.E.2d 61, 68 (Ct. App. 1995) (holding the solicitor's comments did not infect the trial with unfairness to the extent that his conviction was a denial of due process where there was ample evidence of guilt in the record). While Petitioner stated he would have gone to trial on these facts if he had known the assistant solicitor would make this comment, based on the facts of this case and Petitioner's prior criminal record, this testimony is simply not credible. The PCR judge, in fact, found Petitioner's testimony was not credible. (App.p.64). See Drayton v.

Evatt, 312 S.C. 4, 13, 430 S.E.2d 517, 522 (1993) (finding great deference is given to the PCR judge's findings on the credibility of witnesses).

Further, Petitioner failed to demonstrate the assistant solicitor's comment impacted the plea judge's decision making in determining his sentence. While the assistant solicitor may have relayed law enforcement's request that Petitioner receive a "substantial" sentence, it is the plea judge who determines sentencing. See In re M.B.H., 387 S.C. at 326, 692 S.E.2d at 542 ("A trial judge has broad discretion in sentencing within statutory limits."). In levying Petitioner's sentence, the plea judge did not reference the law enforcement request. Rather, the plea judge seemed to be most concerned with Petitioner's recidivism after having received a substantial arrest for his last conviction. (App.p.16). Petitioner's sole argument that he was prejudiced rests merely with the length of his sentence. There is no evidence in the record the assistant solicitor's comment had any impact upon the sentence Petitioner ultimately received.

Accordingly, Petitioner failed to prove the first prong of the Strickland test – that plea counsel failed to render reasonably effective assistance under prevailing professional norms. Similarly, Petitioner also failed to prove the second prong of Strickland – that he was prejudiced by plea counsel's performance.

As Petitioner failed to meet his burden of proving ineffective assistance of plea counsel on this issue, the PCR judge did not err in denying the PCR application. See Frasier v. State, 351 S.C. 385, 389, 570 S.E.2d 172, 174 (2002) ("The burden of proof is on the applicant to prove his allegations by a preponderance of the evidence.").

CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, Respondent submits this Court should deny the Petition for Writ of Certiorari. However, if this Court grants certiorari, Respondent requests the opportunity to fully brief the issue discussed above.

Respectfully submitted,

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By: 
ATTORNEYS FOR RESPONDENT

August 13, 2014

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The Honorable Robin B. Stilwell, Circuit Court Judge

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Christopher Bernard Anderson, Petitioner,

v.


State of South Carolina, Respondent.

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I, Karen C. Ratigan, certify that I have today served the within Return to Petition for Writ of Certiorari upon Petitioner by depositing a copy of the same in the United States mail, postage prepaid, addressed to:

Wanda H. Carter, Esquire
South Carolina Commission on Indigent Defense
Division of Appellate Defense
Post Office Box 11589
Columbia, South Carolina 29211-1589

I further certify that all parties required by Rule to be served have been served.
This 13th day of August, 2014.


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ATTORNEY FOR RESPONDENT



ALAN WILSON
ATTORNEY GENERAL

August 13, 2014

The Honorable Daniel E. Shearouse
Clerk, South Carolina Supreme Court
Post Office Box 11330
Columbia, South Carolina 29211

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S.C. Supreme Court

Re: Christopher Bernard Anderson v. State of South Carolina
Appellate Case No: 2013-002409
Lower Court Case No: 2012-CP-23-3899

Dear Mr. Shearouse:

Enclosed for filing please find an original and six (6) copies of the **Return to Petition for Writ of Certiorari** in the above-captioned case. If there are any questions or comments, please do not hesitate to contact me at any time.

Sincerely,

Karen C. Ratigan
Senior Assistant Deputy Attorney General
SC Bar #68331

KCR/jacc
Enclosures

cc: Wanda H. Carter, Esquire
Trisha Allen, Victim Services Counselor