

SUPREME COURT OF OHIO

In re Disqualification of Swift

2019-Ohio-1626 (Ohio 2019) · No. 19-AP-029 · Decided March 8, 2019

SUMMARY

The Supreme Court of Ohio denied Scott A. Melton’s affidavit seeking to disqualify Judge Thomas A. Swift from further proceedings in an estate matter. The court held that the affidavit did not establish bias, prejudice, or an appearance of impropriety, and that challenges to jurisdiction or the scheduling of a show-cause hearing were outside the limited scope of a disqualification proceeding.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Ohio
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Maureen O'Connor, C.J.
JURISDICTION	Ohio
DECIDED	March 8, 2019
DOCKET	19-AP-029
DISPOSITION	writ_denied
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Scott A. Melton filed an affidavit of disqualification under R.C. 2701.03 and 2101.39 seeking to disqualify Judge Thomas A. Swift from further proceedings in an underlying probate case.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	An affidavit of disqualification addresses only the possible bias or prejudice of the judge; the affiant must establish compelling evidence sufficient to overcome the presumptions that a judge will follow the law and is not biased.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published opinion of the Supreme Court of Ohio
PARTIES	Scott A. Melton

TOPICS

[probate procedure](#) [probate](#) [civil procedure](#) [contempt](#)

PRACTICE AREAS

[probate](#) [judicial disqualification](#) [civil procedure](#)

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether Judge Swift's professional or personal relationship with Judge Rusu created an appearance of impropriety warranting disqualification.
2. Whether Judge Swift's scheduling of a show-cause hearing demonstrated bias or prejudgment.
3. Whether allegations concerning the probate court's jurisdiction, notice of the show-cause hearing, or alleged forum shopping were proper grounds for disqualification.

HOLDINGS

1. Disqualification was not warranted because the chief justice, rather than Judge Rusu, assigned Judge Swift, and the affiant failed to explain sufficiently why Swift's relationship with Rusu would cause an objective observer to harbor serious doubts about Swift's impartiality.
2. The mere scheduling of a show-cause hearing did not establish that Judge Swift was biased or had prejudged issues in the case.
3. An affidavit of disqualification is not a vehicle for contesting substantive or procedural legal issues, including the probate court's jurisdiction or the propriety of scheduling a hearing.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“A judge is presumed to follow the law and not to be biased, and the appearance of bias or prejudice must be compelling to overcome these presumptions.” (¶ 6)

“affidavit of disqualification addresses the narrow issue of the possible bias or prejudice of a judge. It is not a vehicle to contest matters of substantive or procedural law.” (¶ 6)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Judge Thomas A. Swift, a retired judge sitting by assignment, was assigned by the chief justice to preside over proceedings in an estate matter in the Mahoning County Probate Court. The probate court's current judge, Robert Rusu, had recused himself, and the affiant alleged that Swift's professional or personal relationship with Rusu created an appearance of impropriety. The affiant also argued that Swift prejudged the case by scheduling a show-cause hearing and that another attorney had engaged in forum shopping.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The underlying matter was pending in the Mahoning County Court of Common Pleas, Probate Division. Judge Robert Rusu had recused himself, and Chief Justice O'Connor assigned retired Judge Thomas A. Swift to the case. After Judge Swift scheduled a show-cause hearing concerning possible contempt, Melton sought the judge's disqualification. The Supreme Court of Ohio denied the affidavit and permitted the case to proceed before Judge Swift.

DISPOSITION

writ_denied

CASES CITED

- In re Disqualification of Lewis, 117 Ohio St. 3d 1227, 2004-Ohio-7359, 884 N.E.2d 1082, ¶ 8
- In re Disqualification of George, 100 Ohio St. 3d 1241, 2003-Ohio-5489, 798 N.E.2d 23, ¶ 5
- In re Disqualification of Solovan, 100 Ohio St. 3d 1214, 2003-Ohio-5484, 798 N.E.2d 3, ¶ 4

OPINION

O'CONNOR, J.

[Cite as In re Disqualification of Swift, ___ Ohio St.3d ___, 2019-Ohio-1626.] IN RE DISQUALIFICATION OF SWIFT. IN RE ESTATE OF ZWINGLER. [Cite as In re Disqualification of Swift, ___ Ohio St.3d ___, 2019-Ohio-1626.] Judges—Affidavits of disqualification—R.C. 2101.39 and 2701.03—Affiant failed to demonstrate bias or prejudice—Disqualification denied. (No. 19-AP-029—Decided March 8, 2019.)

ON AFFIDAVIT OF DISQUALIFICATION in Mahoning County Court of Common Pleas, Probate Division, Case No. 13 ES 364. _____ O'CONNOR, C.J. {¶ 1} Scott A. Melton has filed an affidavit with the clerk of this court pursuant to R.C. 2701.03 and 2101.39 seeking to disqualify Judge Thomas A. Swift, a retired judge sitting by assignment, from presiding over any further proceedings in the above-referenced case.

Judge Swift recently scheduled a hearing for Mr. Melton to show cause why he should not be held in contempt. {¶ 2} Mr. Melton claims that Judge Swift should be disqualified to avoid any appearance of impropriety created by the judge's relationship with Judge Robert Rusu, the current judge of the Mahoning County Probate Court, who recused himself due to a potential conflict of interest.

According to Mr. Melton, the judges have a close relationship and “[e]very single probate case in which Judge Rusu has recused himself during 2018 has been assigned to Judge Swift at Judge Rusu’s direction.” Mr. Melton also asserts that by scheduling the show-cause hearing, Judge Swift has prejudged the issues, and Mr. Melton believes that another attorney involved in the underlying case has engaged in forum shopping. {¶ 3} Judge Swift has responded in writing to the affidavit and requests that it be denied.

The judge states that prior to being assigned to this case, he did not SUPREME COURT OF OHIO know any of the parties or attorneys, and he does not believe that his scheduling of a hearing demonstrates bias or prejudice. {¶ 4} For the reasons explained below, no basis has been established to order the disqualification of Judge Swift. {¶ 5} First, Judge Swift’s assignment to this case does not create an appearance of impropriety.

Mr. Melton is correct that a disqualified or recused judge ordinarily should not select his or her successor. See Guidelines for Assignment of Judges, Section 2.5, <https://www.sc.ohio.gov/JCS/>

judicialAssignment/judgeAssignGuide.pdf (accessed Mar. 27, 2019) (“if the administrative judge has recused from a case, the administrative judge may not request a specific judge to be assigned to that case”); Flamm, Judicial Disqualification, Section 22.4, at 653 (2d Ed.2007) (“proper procedure ordinarily requires that a judge should not attempt to intervene in the selection of his successor—much less assign the case to another judge” [footnotes omitted]).

But here, the chief justice assigned Judge Swift to the underlying case—not Judge Rusu. And although it is true that Judge Swift regularly hears cases in the Mahoning County Probate Court as a visiting judge, Mr. Melton has failed to sufficiently explain why Judge Swift’s professional or personal relationship with Judge Rusu would cause an objective observer to harbor serious doubts about Judge Swift’s impartiality in this matter.

See *In re Disqualification of Lewis*, 117 Ohio St. 3d 1227, 2004-Ohio-7359, 884 N.E.2d 1082, ¶ 8 (setting forth the proper test for disqualifying a judge based on an appearance of impropriety). {¶ 6} Second, the mere fact that Judge Swift scheduled the show-cause hearing does not establish that he is biased or that he has prejudged any issues in the case. Nor does Mr. Melton’s belief that an attorney engaged in forum shopping support the judge’s removal. “A judge is presumed to follow the law and not to be biased, and the appearance of bias or prejudice must be compelling to overcome these presumptions.” *In re Disqualification of George*, 100 Ohio St. 3d 1241, 2003- 2 January Term, 2019 Ohio-5489, 798 N.E.2d 23, ¶ 5.

Mr. Melton’s allegations have not overcome those presumptions. He may have other remedies if he believes that the probate court lacks jurisdiction over certain claims or if the court failed to properly notify him of the scope of the show-cause hearing. But it is well settled that an “affidavit of disqualification addresses the narrow issue of the possible bias or prejudice of a judge.

It is not a vehicle to contest matters of substantive or procedural law.” *In re Disqualification of Solovan*, 100 Ohio St. 3d 1214, 2003-Ohio-5484, 798 N.E.2d 3, ¶ 4. Without more, it is outside the scope of this proceeding to review a probate court’s jurisdiction or the propriety of a judge’s decision to schedule a hearing. {¶ 7} The affidavit of disqualification is denied.

The case may proceed before Judge Swift. _____ 3