

SUPERIOR COURT OF PENNSYLVANIA

Commonwealth v. Vansyckel

2025 PA Super 140 (Superior Court of Pennsylvania 2025) · No. 1316 EDA 2023 · Decided July 9, 2025

SUMMARY

The Pennsylvania Superior Court, sitting en banc, reversed an order denying the Commonwealth’s motion to refile charges against Sayjouna Vansyckel arising from a fatal stabbing. The court held that the Commonwealth established prima facie cases for third-degree murder, voluntary manslaughter, possession of an instrument of crime, tampering with physical evidence, and obstructing the administration of law. The matter was remanded for further proceedings.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Superior Court of Pennsylvania
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Beck, J.; Lazarus, P.J.; Bowes, J.; Panella, P.J.E.; Dubow, J.; McLaughlin, J.; King, J.; Sullivan, J.; Lane, J.
JURISDICTION	Pennsylvania Superior Court
DECIDED	July 9, 2025
DOCKET	1316 EDA 2023
DISPOSITION	reversed_and_remanded
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	The Commonwealth appealed from an order of the Philadelphia County Court of Common Pleas denying its motion to refile dismissed criminal charges after the Philadelphia Municipal Court dismissed the charges at a preliminary hearing for lack of evidence.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Whether the Commonwealth established a prima facie case is a question of law reviewed de novo, with a plenary scope of review. The evidence must be viewed in the light most favorable to the Commonwealth, and the court may not make credibility or weight determinations at the preliminary-hearing stage.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published en banc opinion; precedential
PARTIES	Commonwealth of Pennsylvania v. Sayjouna Vansyckel

TOPICS

- criminal procedure
- preliminary hearing
- appellate procedure
- evidence
- self defense

PRACTICE AREAS

Pennsylvania criminal law

criminal procedure

preliminary hearings

appellate procedure

homicide

evidence

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the Commonwealth established a prima facie case of third-degree murder and voluntary manslaughter.
2. Whether the Commonwealth established a prima facie case of possession of an instrument of crime, tampering with physical evidence, and obstructing the administration of law.
3. Whether the trial court improperly weighed the evidence and assessed credibility or treated Vansyckel's self-defense theory as dispositive at the preliminary-hearing stage.

HOLDINGS

1. The Commonwealth established a prima facie case for third-degree murder and voluntary manslaughter because the evidence, viewed in the light most favorable to the Commonwealth, supported inferences that Vansyckel caused Dawson's death with malice and that she intentionally or knowingly killed Dawson while holding an unreasonable belief that deadly force was justified.
2. The Commonwealth established a prima facie case for possession of an instrument of crime, tampering with physical evidence, and obstructing the administration of law.
3. At a preliminary hearing, the Commonwealth must present evidence of each material element of the charged offense and probable cause to believe the accused committed it; reasonable inferences supporting guilt must be drawn in the Commonwealth's favor, without resolving credibility or evidentiary weight.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Furthermore, the evidence need only be such that, if presented at trial and accepted as true, the judge would be warranted in permitting the case to be decided by the jury.” (at 5)

“As the Commonwealth satisfied its burden of proving a prima facie case at this early stage of the proceedings, we reverse the trial court’s order denying the Commonwealth’s motion to refile the charges of third-degree murder, voluntary manslaughter, PIC tampering with evidence, and obstructing justice.” (at 16)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

On March 24, 2021, Taylor Dawson, Vansyckel's ex-paramour, went to Vansyckel's Philadelphia home to retrieve belongings, and a verbal altercation followed. Vansyckel stated that Dawson pushed into the home, took Vansyckel's phone while she attempted to call 911, and that Vansyckel retrieved a kitchen knife and swung it near Dawson. Dawson sustained five stab wounds, including a wound that penetrated her chest and heart, and died from the injury. Vansyckel admitted hiding the knife in the bathroom after police arrived, while giving police differing explanations for why she obtained the knife.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Vansyckel was charged with third-degree murder, voluntary manslaughter, possession of an instrument of crime, tampering with physical evidence, and obstructing the administration of law. The Philadelphia Municipal Court dismissed the charges at the preliminary hearing, and the Commonwealth moved to refile them. The Court of Common Pleas denied that motion. A three-judge Superior Court panel initially affirmed, but the Superior Court granted the Commonwealth's request for en banc reargument and reversed.

DISPOSITION

reversed_and_remanded

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

Remand for trial and further proceedings consistent with the decision on all charged offenses.

CASES CITED

- Commonwealth v. Perez, 249 A.3d 1092 (Pa. 2021)
- Commonwealth v. Wroten, 257 A.3d 734 (Pa. Super. 2021)
- Commonwealth v. Santos, 876 A.2d 360 (Pa. 2005)
- Commonwealth v. Thompson, 106 A.3d 742 (Pa. Super. 2014)
- Commonwealth v. Packer, 168 A.3d 161 (Pa. 2017)
- Commonwealth v. Holley, 945 A.2d 241 (Pa. Super. 2008)
- Commonwealth v. Ventura, 975 A.2d 1128 (Pa. Super. 2009)
- Commonwealth v. Gonzalez, 858 A.2d 1219 (Pa. Super. 2004)
- Commonwealth v. Hitcho, 123 A.3d 731 (Pa. 2015)
- Commonwealth v. Arrington, 86 A.3d 831 (Pa. 2014)
- Commonwealth v. Johnson, 719 A.2d 778 (Pa. Super. 1998)
- Commonwealth v. Bostian, 232 A.3d 898 (Pa. Super. 2020)
- Commonwealth v. Brockington, 230 A.3d 1209 (Pa. Super. 2020)
- Commonwealth v. Holt, 273 A.3d 514 (Pa. 2022)
- Commonwealth v. Austin, 575 A.2d 141 (Pa. Super. 1990)