

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF
OKLAHOMA

Sonia R. Weidenfelder v. Justin Farris, Director

No. 23-cv-369-JDR-CDL · No. 23-cv-369-JDR-CDL · Decided April 27, 2026

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Northern District of Oklahoma denied Sonia R. Weidenfelder’s petition for a writ of habeas corpus under 28 U.S.C. § 2254. The court held that the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals reasonably rejected her claims that appellate counsel was ineffective for failing to challenge the exclusion of a co-defendant’s statement and the admission of an audio recording.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Northern District of Oklahoma
WRITING FOR THE COURT	John D. Russell
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Northern District of Oklahoma
DECIDED	April 27, 2026
DOCKET	23-cv-369-JDR-CDL
DISPOSITION	dismissed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Petition for federal habeas corpus under 28 U.S.C. § 2254 challenging an Oklahoma murder conviction and alleging ineffective assistance of appellate counsel.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Review was governed by AEDPA. Relief was unavailable unless the state-court adjudication was contrary to, or an unreasonable application of, clearly established Supreme Court precedent, or was based on an unreasonable determination of the facts under 28 U.S.C. § 2254(d). State factual findings were presumed correct under § 2254(e) (1), and review under § 2254(d)(1) was limited to the state-court record. Ineffective-assistance claims were evaluated under Strickland v. Washington, including the requirement that an appellate-counsel omission involve a meritorious issue and a reasonable probability that the petitioner would have prevailed on appeal.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unpublished_nonprecedential

PARTIES

Sonia R. Weidenfelder v. Justin Farris, Director

TOPICS

federal habeas corpus

ineffective assistance

sixth amendment

appellate procedure

evidence

PRACTICE AREAS

federal habeas corpus

post-conviction relief

criminal procedure

constitutional law

appellate procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals unreasonably applied Strickland in rejecting Weidenfelder's claim that appellate counsel was ineffective for failing to challenge exclusion of Spaulding's statement identifying the location of the murder weapon.
2. Whether the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals unreasonably applied Strickland in rejecting Weidenfelder's claim that appellate counsel was ineffective for failing to raise a Confrontation Clause challenge to the audio recording of Spaulding's statements.
3. Whether Weidenfelder was entitled to a federal evidentiary hearing or a certificate of appealability.

HOLDINGS

1. Weidenfelder was not entitled to habeas relief because she did not establish a reasonable probability that including a challenge to the excluded statement would have changed the result of her appeal. The statement would not reasonably have established that Spaulding acted alone or negated Weidenfelder's culpability.
2. Weidenfelder was not entitled to habeas relief because the omitted Confrontation Clause claim was meritless and the recorded statements were nontestimonial and were admitted only to provide context for Weidenfelder's responses.
3. The court denied Weidenfelder's request for an evidentiary hearing because § 2254(d) review was limited to the state-court record and she did not show that she satisfied the requirements for a hearing under § 2254(e)(2).

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Mr. Spaulding could have known the location of the murder weapon if he acted alone or if he and Ms. Weidenfelder acted together to perpetrate the crime.” (at 14-15)

“The Court finds and concludes that Ms. Weidenfelder has not made the necessary showings to obtain federal habeas relief under 28 U.S.C. § 2254.” (at 18)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Weidenfelder was convicted of first-degree murder after Debra Morgan was killed by a shotgun blast during a contentious child-custody and child-support dispute involving Morgan and Weidenfelder's partner, Richard

Spaulding. The trial evidence included incriminating communications between Weidenfelder and Spaulding, evidence concerning Spaulding's acquisition and modification of the shotgun, Weidenfelder's internet searches, and a recorded conversation containing statements about stopping Morgan. Weidenfelder argued that appellate counsel should have challenged the exclusion of Spaulding's statement identifying the weapon's location and the admission of an audio recording of a conversation between Spaulding and Weidenfelder.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

An Oklahoma jury convicted Weidenfelder of first-degree murder and the state trial court sentenced her to life imprisonment. The Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals affirmed her conviction and later affirmed the denial of her application for post-conviction relief. Weidenfelder then filed this § 2254 petition, asserting that appellate counsel was ineffective for failing to raise claims concerning exclusion of a co-defendant's statement and admission of an audio recording.

DISPOSITION

dismissed

CASES CITED

- Cullen v. Pinholster, 563 U.S. 170 (2011)
- McQuiggin v. Perkins, 569 U.S. 383 (2013)
- Wilson v. Corcoran, 562 U.S. 1 (2010)
- Bland v. Sirmons, 459 F.3d 999 (10th Cir. 2006)
- Douglas v. Workman, 560 F.3d 1156 (10th Cir. 2009)
- Lockyer v. Andrade, 538 U.S. 63 (2003)
- Williams v. Taylor, 529 U.S. 362 (2000)
- Harrington v. Richter, 562 U.S. 86 (2011)
- Brown v. Davenport, 596 U.S. 118 (2022)
- Wood v. Allen, 558 U.S. 290 (2010)
- Dunn v. Madison, 583 U.S. 10 (2017)
- Mays v. Hines, 592 U.S. 385 (2021)
- Milton v. Miller, 744 F.3d 660 (10th Cir. 2014)
- Sumpter v. Kansas, 61 F.4th 729 (10th Cir. 2023)
- Brecht v. Abrahamson, 507 U.S. 619 (1993)
- Strickland v. Washington, 466 U.S. 668 (1984)
- Logan v. State, 2013 OK CR 2, 293 P.3d 969
- Jones v. State, 2009 OK CR 1, 201 P.3d 869
- Smith v. Robbins, 528 U.S. 259 (2000)
- Cargle v. Mullin, 317 F.3d 1196 (10th Cir. 2003)
- Neill v. Gibson, 278 F.3d 1044 (10th Cir. 2001)

- Malicoat v. Mullin, 426 F.3d 1241 (10th Cir. 2005)
- Upchurch v. Bruce, 333 F.3d 1158 (10th Cir. 2003)
- Crawford v. Washington, 541 U.S. 36 (2004)
- Davis v. Washington, 547 U.S. 813 (2006)
- Ohio v. Clark, 576 U.S. 237 (2015)
- Myatt v. Hannigan, 910 F.2d 680 (10th Cir. 1990)
- Pointer v. Texas, 380 U.S. 400 (1965)
- Weedman v. Hartley, 396 F. App'x 556 (10th Cir. 2010)
- Desai v. Booker, 732 F.3d 628 (6th Cir. 2013)
- Barnes v. Davis, No. 11-cv-02760-REB, 2012 WL 3869019 (D. Colo. Sept. 6, 2012)
- Slack v. McDaniel, 529 U.S. 473 (2000)
- Spruill, 2018 OK CR 25, 425 P.3d 756
- Tryon v. State, 2018 OK CR 20, 423 P.3d 617
- Spaulding v. State, No. F-2018-668 (Okla. Crim. App. Oct. 31, 2019) (not for publication)

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