

TENNESSEE COURT OF CRIMINAL APPEALS

State of Tennessee v. Stephen David Sterling

No. M2025-00449-CCA-R3-CD · No. M2025-00449-CCA-R3-CD · Decided March 19, 2026

SUMMARY

The Tennessee Court of Criminal Appeals affirmed the trial court’s revocation of Stephen David Sterling’s probation and reinstatement of his original six-year sentence in confinement. The court held that the trial court adequately considered the probation violation, Sterling’s history of domestic violence, and prior treatment efforts before denying his request to enter the Lazarus Project residential treatment program. The appellate court applied an abuse-of-discretion standard with a presumption of reasonableness.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Tennessee Court of Criminal Appeals
WRITING FOR THE COURT	John W. Campbell, Sr.; Timothy L. Easter; Tom Greenholtz
JURISDICTION	Tennessee Court of Criminal Appeals
DECIDED	March 19, 2026
DOCKET	M2025-00449-CCA-R3-CD
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Defendant appealed as of right from the trial court's revocation of probation and reinstatement of his original six-year sentence in confinement, arguing that the trial court abused its discretion by denying his request to enter an intensive residential treatment program.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Abuse of discretion with a presumption of reasonableness, when the trial court places sufficient findings and reasons for the probation revocation and the consequences on the record.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published
PARTIES	Stephen David Sterling v. State of Tennessee

TOPICS

- probation
- sentencing
- criminal procedure
- standard of review
- appellate procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the trial court abused its discretion by ordering execution of Sterling's original sentence after revoking probation instead of reinstating probation with court-ordered residential treatment.

HOLDINGS

1. The trial court did not abuse its discretion by ordering Sterling to serve the balance of his original sentence in confinement rather than permitting him to enter the Lazarus Project.
2. Upon finding by a preponderance of the evidence that Sterling committed a non-technical probation violation, the trial court was authorized to cause him to commence execution of the judgment as originally entered.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Probation revocation is a “two-step” process by the trial court.” (6)

“We, therefore, affirm the judgment of the trial court revoking the Defendant’s probation and ordering the original sentence into effect.” (7)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Sterling pleaded guilty to especially aggravated stalking in 2021 and received a six-year sentence suspended to supervised probation, including completion of the TN-ROCS program and compliance with no-contact conditions. A probation violation warrant followed his August 2024 arrest and subsequent conviction for violating an order of protection arising from a violent incident involving his wife. After hearings at which the victim testified and photographs corroborated her injuries, the trial court found a probation violation and concluded that Sterling's prior rehabilitation efforts, history, and violent conduct warranted execution of the original sentence rather than placement in the proposed Lazarus Project.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Sterling pleaded guilty to especially aggravated stalking and received a six-year sentence suspended to supervised probation, subject to participation in the TN-ROCS program and related conditions. After he was convicted of violating an order of protection and the State alleged a new domestic-assault-related probation violation, the trial court found a probation violation and later denied his request to enter the Lazarus Project, ordering execution of the original sentence. The Tennessee Court of Criminal Appeals affirmed.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- State v. Shaffer, 45 S.W.3d 553, 554 (Tenn. 2001)

- State v. Lewis, 235 S.W.3d 136, 141 (Tenn. 2007)
- State v. Dagnan, 641 S.W.3d 751, 757, 759 (Tenn. 2022)
- State v. Williams, 673 S.W.3d 255, 260 (Tenn. Crim. App. 2023)

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