

SUPREME COURT OF KENTUCKY

Mills v. Messer

268 S.W.3d 366 (Ky. 2008) · No. 2007-SC-000553-OA · Decided June 19, 2008

SUMMARY

The Supreme Court of Kentucky granted John Mills's petition for a writ of mandamus concerning state funding for expert assistance in his RCr 11.42 post-conviction proceeding. The court remanded for the Knox Circuit Court to determine whether the proposed experts were reasonably necessary for a full presentation of Mills's claims, while leaving the trial court discretion over the funds or services available under KRS 31.185.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Kentucky
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Joseph E. Lambert, Chief Justice
JURISDICTION	Kentucky
DECIDED	June 19, 2008
DOCKET	2007-SC-000553-OA
DISPOSITION	writ_granted
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Petition for a writ of mandamus seeking an order requiring the Knox Circuit Court to conduct an evidentiary hearing on whether Mills was entitled to state-funded expert assistance in his RCr 11.42 post-conviction proceeding.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Mandamus is an extraordinary remedy available when a lower court acts erroneously within its jurisdiction, there is no adequate remedy by appeal or otherwise, and great injustice and irreparable injury would result; under Soto, the court may grant relief without a separate showing of irreparable harm when requiring the funding issue to await direct appeal would be inefficient and delay justice.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published Kentucky Supreme Court decision; binding precedent in Kentucky.
PARTIES	John Mills v. Hon. Roderick Messer, Judge, Knox Circuit Court, Commonwealth of Kentucky

TOPICS

state post-conviction relief

post-conviction relief

ineffective assistance

writ of certiorari

appellate procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

Kentucky post-conviction criminal procedure

mandamus

indigent defense funding

expert assistance

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether a Kentucky post-conviction petitioner may obtain state funds for expert assistance when the proposed expert testimony is reasonably necessary for a full presentation of claims for which an evidentiary hearing has been ordered.
2. Whether mandamus was appropriate to require the Knox Circuit Court to determine Mills's entitlement to state-funded expert assistance before the RCr 11.42 evidentiary hearing.

HOLDINGS

1. A post-conviction petitioner may be entitled to state funds for expert testimony upon a showing that the proposed witness is reasonably necessary for a full presentation of the petitioner's case. The trial court retains discretion to deny funding if the expert testimony is not reasonably necessary.
2. Mills satisfied the prerequisites for a writ of mandamus because postponing the funding issue until direct appeal would require the post-conviction proceeding to be repeated if funding were later found warranted, causing inefficiency and delay in the administration of justice.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Thus, as clarified in Soto, a petitioner may be entitled to state funds for the procurement of expert testimony upon a showing that such witness is reasonably necessary for a full presentation of the petitioner's case.”
(367)

“The trial court still maintains the discretion to deny such funds if it determines that the expert testimony is not reasonably necessary.” (367)

“A writ of “mandamus” may be granted upon a showing that (1) the lower court is proceeding or is about to proceed outside of its jurisdiction and there is no remedy through an application to an intermediate court; or (2) that the lower court is acting or is about to act erroneously, although within its jurisdiction, and there exists no adequate remedy by appeal or otherwise and great injustice and irreparable injury will result if the petition is not granted.” (367)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Mills was awaiting imposition of the death penalty while litigating an RCr 11.42 motion alleging eighty-five claims of ineffective assistance of counsel. The Kentucky Supreme Court had previously remanded for an evidentiary hearing concerning claims involving whether another person killed the victim, prosecutorial misconduct, and the presentation of mitigating evidence during the penalty phase. Mills sought state funds for a

fingerprint expert, crime-scene reconstruction expert, forensic pathologist, attorney expert, psychologist, and social worker, but the Knox Circuit Court denied the request.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

After his conviction, Mills filed an RCr 11.42 motion alleging eighty-five claims of ineffective assistance of counsel. The Knox Circuit Court denied the motion without a hearing, and the Kentucky Supreme Court remanded for an evidentiary hearing on specified ineffective-assistance and prosecutorial-misconduct claims. Before that hearing, Mills sought state funds for several proposed experts, but the circuit court denied funding under *Stopher v. Conliffe*. The Kentucky Supreme Court granted mandamus and remanded for the circuit court to determine whether the proposed experts were reasonably necessary.

DISPOSITION

writ_granted

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

The Knox Circuit Court must determine whether Mills's proposed expert witnesses are necessary for a full presentation of the specified ineffective-assistance and prosecutorial-misconduct claims. The circuit court retains discretion over what funds or state services Mills may receive under KRS 31.185.

CASES CITED

- *Soto v. Conrad*, No. 2006-SC-000924, slip op. at 2-3
- *Hodge v. Coleman*, 244 S.W.3d 102, 108 (Ky. 2008)
- *Stopher v. Conliffe*, 170 S.W.3d 307, 309 (Ky. 2005)
- *Hoskins v. Maricle*, 150 S.W.3d 1, 10 (Ky. 2004)
- *Mills v. Commonwealth*, 996 S.W.2d 473 (Ky. 1999)
- *Mills v. Commonwealth*, 170 S.W.3d 310, 342-43 (Ky. 2005)

OPINION

JOSEPH LAMBERT, J.

268 S.W.3d 366 (2008) John MILLS, Petitioner v. Hon. Roderick MESSER, Judge, Knox Circuit Court; and Commonwealth of Kentucky (Real Party In Interest), Respondent. No. 2007-SC-000553-OA. Supreme Court of Kentucky. June 19, 2008. ORDER GRANTING PETITION FOR WRIT OF MANDAMUS Petitioner, John Mills, seeks a writ of mandamus ordering the Knox Circuit Court to conduct an evidentiary hearing to determine whether he is entitled to state funds for expert assistance on his RCr 11.42 motion.

In light of our recent decision *367 in *Soto v. Conrad*, the petition is granted. Petitioner is currently awaiting imposition of the death penalty while litigating his RCr 11.42 motion. The factual circumstances underlying his convictions can be found at *Mills v. Commonwealth*, 996

S.W.2d 473 (Ky.1999). Following his conviction, Petitioner filed a motion pursuant to RCr 11.42, alleging eighty-five claims of ineffective assistance of counsel.

The Knox Circuit Court overruled the motion without a hearing, and Petitioner appealed. This Court remanded the matter to the trial court for an evidentiary hearing solely on the issues of Petitioner's claims of ineffective assistance of counsel and prosecutorial misconduct with respect to the possibility that another person killed the victim, and as to Petitioner's claims of ineffective assistance of counsel in the presentation of mitigating evidence during the penalty phase.

Mills v. Commonwealth, 170 S.W.3d 310 (Ky.2005). Prior to the evidentiary hearing, Petitioner moved the Knox Circuit Court to conduct an additional hearing to determine whether state funds for expert assistance should be granted. Specifically, Petitioner sought state funds to retain a forensic expert specializing in fingerprint evidence; a forensic expert specializing in crime scene reconstruction; a forensic pathologist; an expert attorney witness; a psychologist; and a social worker.

The Knox Circuit Court denied the motion, relying on this Court's decision in *Stopher v. Conliffe*, 170 S.W.3d 307 (Ky.2005). In *Stopher*, we held that "the hiring of an expert for use in a collateral attack on a conviction exceeds the bounds and purpose of RCr 11.42[.]" *Id.* at 309.

However, in our recent decision in *Soto v. Conrad*, we held that a post-conviction petitioner may be allowed funding for necessary evidentiary expenses upon the finding by "a court of competent jurisdiction" that "the post-conviction petition sets forth allegations sufficient to necessitate an evidentiary hearing" regarding a particular issue. No.2006-SC-000924, slip op. at 2. quoting *Hodge v. Coleman*, 244 S.W.3d 102, 108 (Ky.2008).

Thus, as clarified in *Soto*, a petitioner may be entitled to state funds for the procurement of expert testimony upon a showing that such witness is reasonably necessary for a full presentation of the petitioner's case.

The trial court still maintains the discretion to deny such funds if it determines that the expert testimony is not reasonably necessary. Petitioner seeks relief in the form of a writ of mandamus. A writ of mandamus is an extraordinary remedy that is granted in limited circumstances: A writ of "mandamus" may be granted upon a showing that (1) the lower court is proceeding or is about to proceed outside of its jurisdiction and there is no remedy through an application to an intermediate court; or (2) that the lower court is acting or is about to act erroneously, although within its jurisdiction, and there exists no adequate remedy by appeal or otherwise and great injustice and irreparable injury will result if the petition is not granted.

Hoskins v. Maricle, 150 S.W.3d 1, 10 (Ky. 2004). Here, Petitioner seeks a writ of the second nature. In *Soto*, we granted a writ without a showing of irreparable harm, in the interest of judicial economy, as it would be inefficient to "raise the funding issue for the first time on direct appeal

after the post-conviction proceeding because if the petitioner was found to be entitled to funding, the entire proceeding would be held again and the administration of justice would be delayed."

Id. at 3. Based on the same rationale espoused in *368 Soto, we conclude that Petitioner has satisfied the prerequisites necessary to the granting of a writ. Accordingly, the petition for a writ of mandamus is granted.

As stated above, this Court has previously determined that an evidentiary hearing is necessary to develop Petitioner's claims of ineffective assistance of counsel and prosecutorial misconduct. See Mills, 170 S.W.3d at 342-43.

Accordingly, this matter is remanded to the Knox Circuit Court for determination as to whether Petitioner's proposed expert witnesses are necessary for a full-presentation of these claims. The Knox Circuit Court retains discretion as to what funds or state services Petitioner may receive, pursuant to KRS 31.185. All sitting. All concur. ENTERED: June 19, 2008. /s/ Joseph E. Lambert
Chief Justice