

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
TENNESSEE

Jonathan Cooper v. Allen Beard, Jr.

Cooper · No. 3:25-CV-279-TAV-JEM · Decided March 12, 2026

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Eastern District of Tennessee ruled on a respondent’s motion concerning the filing of sealed state-court post-conviction exhibits and the petitioner’s renewed motion for appointment of counsel in a 28 U.S.C. § 2254 proceeding. The court denied waiver of the complete state-court record but permitted the specified sensitive exhibits to be filed ex parte and under seal, and denied appointment of counsel without prejudice to sua sponte appointment if an evidentiary hearing becomes necessary.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Eastern District of Tennessee
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Thomas A. Varlan
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Eastern District of Tennessee
DECIDED	March 12, 2026
DOCKET	3:25-CV-279-TAV-JEM
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Petitioner brought a pro se federal habeas action under 28 U.S.C. § 2254. The court addressed the respondent's motion concerning filing the state-court record and the petitioner's renewed motion for appointment of counsel.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The court evaluated whether the sealed state-court exhibits were potentially relevant to the § 2254 claims and whether good cause supported maintaining them ex parte and under seal. It also applied Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 11(a) to the unsigned motion for appointment of counsel and considered the appointment standard under Rule 8(c) of the Rules Governing Section 2254 Cases.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Unknown
PARTIES	Jonathan Cooper, Petitioner v. Allen Beard, Jr., Respondent

TOPICS

federal habeas corpus

post-conviction relief

pleadings

evidence

due process

PRACTICE AREAS

Federal habeas corpus

Post-conviction relief

Civil procedure

Evidence

Constitutional law

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the respondent should be permitted to waive filing the complete state-court record or instead file specified sensitive exhibits ex parte and under seal.
2. Whether the petitioner was entitled to renewed appointment of counsel in the non-capital § 2254 proceeding.

HOLDINGS

1. The court denied the request to waive filing of the complete state-court record because the sealed exhibits could be relevant to the petitioner's ineffective-assistance-of-counsel and Brady claims and to review under 28 U.S.C. § 2254(d)(2). The court permitted the specified exhibits to be filed ex parte and under seal because their highly personal nature and limited prior disclosure established good cause.
2. The renewed motion for appointment of counsel was denied because it was unsigned in violation of Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 11(a), and the court had already determined that the sealed evidence could be filed and reviewed in the federal proceeding. The court retained authority to appoint counsel sua sponte if an evidentiary hearing became necessary.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Therefore, out of an abundance of caution, the Court finds that it should be presented with the same records that were filed in state court.” (Section I)

“The Court will sua sponte appoint counsel for Petitioner if it determines that an evidentiary hearing is necessary in this case.” (Section II)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Cooper's federal habeas petition raises ineffective-assistance-of-counsel and Brady claims related to sealed state-court post-conviction exhibits, including a second amended post-conviction petition, a forensic interview, juvenile court records, and Department of Children's Services records concerning the minor victim. The exhibits had been sealed in state court, and the state trial court had conducted an in camera review, providing the parties access only to portions containing potentially exculpatory material. Cooper proceeded pro se and sought appointed counsel to review and litigate issues concerning the sealed materials.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Cooper filed a § 2254 petition challenging Knox County convictions for aggravated sexual battery, incest, and rape of a child. Respondent moved to waive filing of several sealed post-conviction exhibits or, alternatively, to file them ex parte and under seal. Cooper renewed his request for appointed counsel. The court denied waiver of

the complete state-court record, granted leave to file the identified exhibits ex parte and under seal, and denied the renewed motion for appointment of counsel.

DISPOSITION

other

CASES CITED

- Brady v. Maryland, 373 U.S. 83, 87 (1963)
- Pennsylvania v. Ritchie, 480 U.S. 39, 58-60 (1987)

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