

SUPREME COURT OF DELAWARE

Morla v. State

956 A.2d 31 (Del. 2008) · No. No. 522, 2007 · Decided July 22, 2008

SUMMARY

The Delaware Supreme Court affirmed the denial of Nazario Morla's postconviction motion challenging the voluntariness of his guilty plea and alleging ineffective assistance based on inadequate Spanish-language communication. The Court held that the Superior Court did not abuse its discretion by declining to conduct an evidentiary hearing after considering Morla's response to his attorney's statement and the existing record.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Delaware
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Jack B. Jacobs; Berger; Jacobs; Ridgely
JURISDICTION	Delaware
DECIDED	July 22, 2008
DOCKET	No. 522, 2007
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Morla appealed the Superior Court's denial of his motion for postconviction relief following his guilty plea and sentence for trafficking in cocaine. After the Supreme Court remanded the matter to permit Morla to respond to his attorney's statement, the Superior Court again denied relief without conducting an evidentiary hearing.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Abuse of discretion for the Superior Court's determination whether an evidentiary hearing is necessary on a motion for postconviction relief.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	published
PARTIES	Nazario I. Morla v. State of Delaware

TOPICS

- post-conviction relief
- ineffective assistance
- plea bargaining
- appellate procedure
- criminal procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

- criminal procedure
- post-conviction relief
- appellate procedure
- ineffective assistance
- plea bargaining

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the Superior Court abused its discretion by denying Morla's postconviction motion without conducting an evidentiary hearing concerning the alleged failure to communicate in Spanish and the voluntariness of his guilty plea.
2. Whether Morla was entitled to respond directly to his attorney's statement under Superior Court Criminal Rule 61(g)(3).

HOLDINGS

1. The Superior Court did not abuse its broad discretion in determining that an evidentiary hearing was unnecessary because the submissions and record did not present an issue requiring a hearing.
2. After remand, Morla was permitted to respond to his attorney's statement, and the resulting record provided no basis for further relief or an evidentiary hearing.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"The Superior Court has broad discretion to determine whether an evidentiary hearing is necessary on a motion for postconviction relief."

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Morla pleaded guilty to trafficking in cocaine and later challenged the voluntariness of his plea, asserting that his attorney had not communicated with him adequately in Spanish. The record showed that Morla spoke enough English, counsel spoke enough Spanish, a Spanish interpreter was present when the plea was entered, and the plea form was completed in both English and Spanish. After Morla responded to counsel's statement on remand, the Superior Court concluded that no additional issue required an evidentiary hearing.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Morla pleaded guilty in March 2006 and received a sentence of seven years at Level V, suspended after four years for Level III probation. He did not file a direct appeal but filed a postconviction motion alleging that his guilty plea was involuntary because counsel failed to communicate with him in Spanish, constituting ineffective assistance. The Superior Court denied the motion, and the Supreme Court initially remanded for Morla to respond to counsel's statement under Superior Court Criminal Rule 61(g)(3). After the response was filed, the Superior Court found no new grounds and no need for an evidentiary hearing. The Supreme Court affirmed.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Maxion v. State, 686 A.2d 148, 151 (Del. 1996)