

COURT OF APPEALS OF OHIO, ELEVENTH APPELLATE DISTRICT,
TRUMBULL COUNTY

State v. Finlaw

2025-Ohio-5290 · No. 2025-T-0030 · Decided November 24, 2025

SUMMARY

The Ohio Eleventh District Court of Appeals affirmed James Finlaw’s conviction for fifth-degree felony escape. The court held that the trial court did not abuse its discretion in finding Finlaw competent to stand trial, noting that a competency hearing had been held and that the incomplete appellate record required a presumption of regularity. The court also concluded that Finlaw’s refusal to cooperate, substance-abuse history, and allegedly disruptive behavior did not independently establish incompetence.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Court of Appeals of Ohio, Eleventh Appellate District, Trumbull County
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Eugene A. Lucci, J.; John J. Eklund, J.; Scott Lynch, J.
JURISDICTION	Court of Appeals of Ohio, Eleventh Appellate District, Trumbull County
DECIDED	November 24, 2025
DOCKET	2025-T-0030
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	James Finlaw appealed his felony-five escape conviction and challenged the trial court's determination that he was competent to stand trial.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Abuse of discretion
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published opinion
PARTIES	James Finlaw v. State of Ohio

TOPICS

- criminal procedure due process appellate procedure standard of review preservation of error

PRACTICE AREAS

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the trial court abused its discretion in finding Finlaw competent to stand trial.
2. Whether the trial court afforded Finlaw the statutory and constitutional due process required for a competency determination.
3. Whether substance abuse, bizarre or disruptive behavior, refusal to cooperate, and alleged mental-health evidence independently demonstrated incompetence.
4. Whether the trial court's failure to conduct the competency hearing within the statutory timeframe prejudiced Finlaw.
5. Whether the absence of a transcript or App.R. 9 equivalent required reversal.

HOLDINGS

1. The trial court did not abuse its discretion in finding Finlaw competent to stand trial because the record did not establish that he was incapable of understanding the nature and objective of the proceedings or assisting in his defense.
2. Any uncertainty about whether the competency hearing was timely under R.C. 2945.37(C) did not warrant reversal because a hearing was ultimately held, a disposition was reached, and Finlaw suffered no demonstrated prejudice.
3. The absence of a transcript or an App.R. 9(C) statement required the appellate court to presume regularity and prevented it from evaluating claims dependent on the evidence presented at the competency hearing.
4. A history of substance abuse, drug-related hospitalization, emotional distress, strange behavior, or refusal to cooperate does not, standing alone, render a defendant incompetent to stand trial.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“A defendant is presumed to be competent to stand trial. If, after a hearing, the court finds by a preponderance of the evidence that, because of the defendant’s present mental condition, the defendant is incapable of understanding the nature and objective of the proceedings against the defendant or of assisting in the defendant’s defense, the court shall find the defendant incompetent to stand trial” (§ 19)

“Incompetency must not be equated with mere mental or emotional instability or even with outright insanity.” (§ 20)

“An appellate court reviewing a lower court’s judgment indulges in a presumption of regularity of the proceedings below.” (§ 23)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Finlaw was charged with felony-five escape after failing to report to his supervising parole officer and remaining at large for nearly four years. At arraignment, he made religiously themed and bizarre comments, prompting

defense counsel to seek a competency evaluation. A psychologist could not evaluate him because he refused to participate, and a later competency hearing occurred without a transcript or App.R. 9(C) statement. The trial court found no evidence establishing incompetence, and Finlaw was subsequently convicted and sentenced to twelve months.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Finlaw was indicted for felony-five escape, moved for a competency evaluation, and was evaluated unsuccessfully after refusing to participate. After a later competency hearing, the Trumbull County Court of Common Pleas overruled his request for a twenty-day evaluation, found no basis to deem him incompetent, and proceeded to jury trial. The jury convicted him, the trial court imposed a twelve-month prison term, and the Eleventh District affirmed.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- State v. Vrabel, 2003-Ohio-3193, ¶ 33
- Dusky v. United States, 362 U.S. 402 (1960)
- State v. Bock, 28 Ohio St.3d 108, 110 (1986)
- Aurora v. Belinger, 2008-Ohio-6772, ¶¶ 30-31
- Knapp v. Edwards Laboratories, 61 Ohio St.2d 197, 199 (1980)
- Hartt v. Munobe, 67 Ohio St.3d 3, 7 (1993)
- State v. Hough, 2022-Ohio-4436, ¶ 37
- State v. Were, 2002-Ohio-481, ¶¶ 8-10, 14
- State v. Berry, 1995-Ohio-310, ¶ 27
- State v. Powers, 2021-Ohio-4357, ¶ 16