

SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF IDAHO

State v. Knight

Knight · No. 52929 · Decided November 25, 2025

SUMMARY

The Idaho Supreme Court vacated Benjamin Charles Knight’s convictions for three counts of unlawful possession of a firearm and remanded for further proceedings. The court held that Knight was effectively self-represented at trial and that the appointment of “shadow counsel” did not satisfy his Sixth Amendment right to counsel; the record also did not show a knowing, intelligent, and voluntary waiver of that right. The opinion additionally addresses Knight’s challenge to the denial of his motion to suppress evidence obtained during a disturbance response at his residence.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of the State of Idaho
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Brody, Justice; Bevan, Chief Justice; Moeller, Justice; Zahn, Justice; Meyer, Justice
JURISDICTION	Supreme Court of the State of Idaho
DECIDED	November 25, 2025
DOCKET	52929
DISPOSITION	vacated
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Knight appealed his judgment of conviction for three counts of unlawful possession of a firearm by a convicted felon. The Idaho Court of Appeals affirmed, and the Idaho Supreme Court granted review.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The Supreme Court independently reviews the record to determine whether the Sixth Amendment right to counsel was abridged. For suppression rulings, the Court accepts factual findings supported by substantial evidence but freely reviews the application of constitutional principles to those facts.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published; precedential Idaho Supreme Court opinion
PARTIES	Benjamin Charles Knight v. State of Idaho

TOPICS

right to counsel

sixth amendment

criminal procedure

appellate procedure

suppression of evidence

PRACTICE AREAS

criminal procedure

constitutional law

appellate procedure

evidence

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the appointment of shadow counsel satisfied Knight's Sixth Amendment right to counsel when Knight retained control over and conducted his own defense.
2. Whether Knight knowingly, intelligently, and voluntarily waived his Sixth Amendment right to appointed counsel and elected self-representation.
3. Whether the magistrate court improperly proceeded with the preliminary hearing without determining Knight's eligibility for appointed counsel or obtaining a valid waiver.
4. Whether the judgment had to be vacated and whether Knight could refile his suppression motion because he litigated the motion without counsel.

HOLDINGS

1. The appointment of shadow counsel did not satisfy Knight's Sixth Amendment right to counsel because Knight, rather than the public defender, controlled, managed, and presented the defense.
2. Knight did not knowingly, intelligently, and voluntarily waive his Sixth Amendment right to counsel because he never clearly and unequivocally chose self-representation, and the district court did not adequately explain the binary choice between representation by counsel and self-representation.
3. Before accepting a defendant's waiver of counsel, the trial court must conduct a specific on-the-record inquiry ensuring that the defendant understands the binary choice between self-representation and representation by an attorney, the risks of self-representation in light of the charges and possible consequences, and that misconduct or repeated rejection of appointed counsel may result in waiver of the right to counsel.
4. The magistrate court should not have proceeded with Knight's preliminary hearing after he stated that he wanted counsel but could not afford one without first determining indigency, providing adequate Fareta warnings, and conducting a full on-the-record inquiry into any waiver.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"Accordingly, the record is clear that Knight was not represented, and any assistance by the public defender did not meet the requirements of the Sixth Amendment's right to counsel." (12)

"To constitute a valid waiver of a defendant's Sixth Amendment right to counsel, the trial court must conduct a specific inquiry on the record to ensure the defendant understood: (1) the binary choice between self-representation and representation by an attorney; (2) the risks of self-representation as it pertains to the charge and possible consequences of conviction; and (3) that misconduct and repeated rejection of a court-appointed attorney may result in a waiver of the right to counsel." (17)

“In sum, we hold that the record does not show that Knight knowingly, intelligently, or voluntarily waived his Sixth Amendment right to counsel at any point during the criminal proceedings because he was not provided adequate Faretta warnings.” (19)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Officers responding to a reported disturbance at Knight's residence learned that he was a convicted felon and that the home contained at least three firearms. Knight acknowledged knowing about the firearms, led officers to his bedroom, and officers recovered three firearms and ammunition. Knight repeatedly stated that he could not afford counsel and sought what he called effective assistance or assistance of counsel without representation. The district court treated him as self-represented, appointed shadow counsel shortly before trial, and proceeded to trial without obtaining a valid waiver of Knight's Sixth Amendment right to counsel.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

After officers discovered three firearms in Knight's home, the State charged him with three counts of unlawful possession of a firearm by a convicted felon. Knight proceeded without appointed or retained counsel through the preliminary hearing, pretrial proceedings, suppression hearing, and trial; the district court later appointed so-called shadow counsel, but Knight continued to control and conduct his defense. A jury convicted Knight, the district court imposed suspended concurrent sentences and probation, and the Court of Appeals affirmed. The Idaho Supreme Court vacated the convictions and remanded.

DISPOSITION

vacated

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

Vacate the judgment of conviction and conduct further proceedings consistent with the opinion. Because Knight appeared without counsel throughout the pretrial proceedings, including the suppression litigation, he may refile his motion to suppress if he wishes.

CASES CITED

- *Rodriquez v. State*, 171 Idaho 634, 524 P.3d 913 (2023)
- *Marr v. State*, 163 Idaho 33, 408 P.3d 31 (2017)
- *State v. Pratt*, 125 Idaho 546, 873 P.2d 800 (1993)
- *State v. Maahs*, 171 Idaho 738, 525 P.3d 1131 (2023)
- *State v. Phipps*, 166 Idaho 1, 454 P.3d 1084 (2019)
- *Pharris v. State*, 91 Idaho 456, 424 P.2d 390 (1967)
- *Gideon v. Wainwright*, *Gideon v. Wainwright*, 372 U.S. 335 (1963)
- *Powell v. Alabama*, 287 U.S. 45 (1932)
- *Caplin & Drysdale, Chartered v. United States*, 491 U.S. 617 (1989)
- *Faretta v. California*, 422 U.S. 806 (1975)

- McCoy v. Louisiana, 584 U.S. 414 (2018)
- Gonzalez v. United States, 553 U.S. 242 (2008)
- Jones v. Barnes, 463 U.S. 745 (1983)
- McKaskle v. Wiggins, 465 U.S. 168 (1984)
- State v. Meyers, 164 Idaho 620, 434 P.3d 224 (2019)
- State v. Hoppe, 139 Idaho 871, 88 P.3d 690 (2004)
- State v. Clayton, 100 Idaho 896, 606 P.2d 1000 (1980)
- State v. Dalrymple, 144 Idaho 628, 167 P.3d 765 (2007)
- State v. Lovelace, 140 Idaho 53, 90 P.3d 278 (2003)
- Carnley v. Cochran, 369 U.S. 506 (1962)
- Johnson v. Zerbst, 304 U.S. 458 (1938)
- Von Moltke v. Gillies, 332 U.S. 708 (1948)
- People v. Arguello, 772 P.2d 87 (Colo. 1989) (en banc)
- Garza v. Idaho, 586 U.S. 232 (2019)
- State v. Averett, 142 Idaho 879, 136 P.3d 350 (Ct. App. 2006)
- Kirby v. Illinois, 406 U.S. 682 (1972)
- State v. Daly, 161 Idaho 925, 393 P.3d 585 (2017)
- State v. Hackett, 164 Ohio St. 3d 74 (Ohio 2020)
- Phillips v. State, 604 S.W.2d 904 (Tex. Crim. App. 1979)
- Commonwealth v. Ellis, 626 A.2d 1137 (Pa. 1993)
- United States v. Mikolajczyk, 137 F.3d 237 (5th Cir. 1998)
- United States v. Morrison, 153 F.3d 34 (2d Cir. 1998)
- State v. Clay, 11 S.W.3d 706 (Mo. Ct. App. 1999)
- State v. Hampton, 92 P.3d 871 (Ariz. 2004)
- United States v. McLeod, 53 F.3d 322 (11th Cir. 1995)
- United States v. Allen, 895 F.2d 1577 (10th Cir. 1990)
- Illinois v. Allen, 397 U.S. 337 (1970)