

NEW YORK COURT OF APPEALS

People v. Waver

3 N.Y.3d 748, 821 N.E.2d 934 (2004) · Decided November 23, 2004

SUMMARY

The New York Court of Appeals held that the trial court erred by allowing undercover officers to testify anonymously without requiring the People to establish a need for anonymity. Applying the sequential inquiry required by *People v. Stanard*, the court concluded that the error was reversible because the anonymous witness’s testimony was central to the prosecution’s case and the effect on cross-examination was speculative. The order of the Appellate Division was reversed and a new trial was ordered.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	New York Court of Appeals
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Per curiam; Chief Judge Kaye; Judge G.B. Smith; Judge Ciparick; Judge Rosenblatt; Judge Graffeo; Judge Read; Judge R.S. Smith
JURISDICTION	New York
DECIDED	November 23, 2004
DISPOSITION	reversed_and_remanded
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Defendant was convicted after a bench trial and appealed the denial of his confrontation-related objection to anonymous testimony by undercover police officers. The Appellate Division affirmed, and the New York Court of Appeals reversed and ordered a new trial.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The court reviewed whether the trial court properly applied the required sequential inquiry governing anonymous witness testimony and whether the resulting confrontation error could be deemed harmless.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published precedential opinion of the New York Court of Appeals
PARTIES	Defendant v. The People of the State of New York

TOPICS

- sixth amendment
- criminal procedure
- evidence

PRACTICE AREAS

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the trial court erred by allowing undercover officers to testify anonymously without first requiring the People to demonstrate a need for anonymity.
2. Whether the failure to conduct the required anonymity inquiry was harmless despite the Appellate Division's conclusion that defendant suffered no confrontation prejudice.

HOLDINGS

1. Before permitting the People to shield a witness's identity, address, or occupation, the trial court must conduct the sequential three-step inquiry established in *People v. Stanard*: the People must first show why the witness should be excused from answering, the defense must then demonstrate the requested information's materiality to guilt or innocence, and the court must finally balance the defendant's cross-examination rights against the witness's interest in anonymity.
2. When the requirements of *People v. Stanard* have not been met, harmless-error treatment is not warranted where the anonymous witness's testimony is central to the People's case and the effect of the witness's anonymity on the defendant's ability to cross-examine is purely speculative.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"The sequential three-step inquiry mandated by Stanard was not undertaken, and this is reversible error." (at 750)

"When the requirements of Stanard have not been met, a finding of harmless error is not warranted where, as here, the testimony of the anonymous witness is central to the People's case and defendant's ability to cross-examine the anonymous witness is purely speculative." (at 750)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Defendant allegedly sold cocaine to an undercover officer during a buy-and-bust operation. The undercover buyer testified at defendant's bench trial anonymously, identified only by shield number and command; two other undercover officers also testified under their undercover numbers. The trial court denied defendant's request to require the People to justify withholding the officers' names and allowed the anonymous testimony.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Defendant was arrested and indicted after an undercover cocaine purchase and was denied suppression. He waived a jury trial and was convicted after a bench trial in which the undercover buyer and other officers testified by shield number rather than name. The Appellate Division affirmed, although it agreed that the trial court should have required the People to show a need for anonymity. The Court of Appeals reversed and ordered a new trial.

DISPOSITION

reversed_and_remanded

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

A new trial was ordered.

CASES CITED

- People v. Stanard, 42 N.Y.2d 74 (1977)

OPINION

PER CURIAM.

OPINION OF THE COURT Memorandum. The order of the Appellate Division should be reversed, and a new trial ordered. Defendant allegedly sold cocaine to an undercover officer during a buy-and-bust operation. The operation involved one undercover officer who purchased the drugs from defendant, as well as two other undercover officers who functioned as ghosts (i.e., they watched the transaction secretly to ensure the buying officer's safety).

Following arrest, indictment and denial of suppression, defendant waived a jury trial, choosing to be tried by the court. The People called the undercover buyer at trial. When the officer took the stand, the court clerk asked him to state only his shield number and command, and the officer testified anonymously throughout direct examination.

Before beginning cross-examination, defense counsel told the court that he had noticed during direct examination that the prosecutor had identified the undercover officer by his shield number, not his name. Counsel asserted that "[m]y client has a constitutional right to confront his accuser. There has been no motion made by the People to withhold this information.

I don't see any reason why it should be withheld." The court denied counsel's application, stating that "it's incumbent upon you under the case law to show that some prejudice will ensue. Having made your application, having failed to demonstrate any prejudice, I'll permit this officer and the others to testify under their undercover number." On appeal, defendant claimed that his Sixth Amendment right to confrontation had been violated by the anonymous testimony of the two officers, and that the trial court had erred by not *750requiring the People to show a need for anonymous testimony.

The Appellate Division affirmed defendant's conviction. While agreeing with defendant that the trial court should have required the People to make a showing of need, the Appellate Division concluded that defendant's right of confrontation had not been prejudiced, "particularly since the direct testimony provided the necessary predicate to allow each officer to testify under his shield number" (3 AD3d 360, 361 [1st Dept 2004]).

In *People v Stanard* (42 NY2d 74 [1977]), we set out the sequential steps that must be followed whenever the People seek to shield a witness's identity, address and/or occupation. First, the People must "come forward with some showing of why the witness should be excused from answering the question. Excuse may arise from a showing that the question will harass, annoy, humiliate or endanger the witness" (id. at 84).

Then the burden shifts to the defense "to demonstrate the materiality of the requested information to the issue of guilt, or innocence" (id.). Finally, the trial court must balance the defendant's right to cross-examination with the witness's interest in some degree of anonymity.

Here, the People did not satisfy their burden of showing the need for anonymity. The sequential three-step inquiry mandated by *Stanard* was not undertaken, and this is reversible error. When the requirements of *Stanard* have not been met, a finding of harmless error is not warranted where, as here, the testimony of the anonymous witness is central to the People's case and defendant's ability to cross-examine the anonymous witness is purely speculative.

Chief Judge Kaye and Judges G.B. Smith, Ciparick, Rosenblatt, Graffeo, Read and R.S. Smith concur in memorandum. Order reversed, etc.