

*This opinion is nonprecedential except as provided by
Minn. R. Civ. App. P. 136.01, subd. 1(c).*

**STATE OF MINNESOTA
IN COURT OF APPEALS
A24-0186**

State of Minnesota,
Respondent,

vs.

Steven Jeffrey Mueller,
Appellant.

**Filed July 28, 2025
Affirmed
Worke, Judge**

Ramsey County District Court
File No. 62-CR-22-4647

Keith Ellison, Attorney General, St. Paul, Minnesota; and

John J. Choi, Ramsey County Attorney, Alexandra Meyer, Assistant County Attorney,
St. Paul, Minnesota (for respondent)

Cathryn Middlebrook, Chief Appellate Public Defender, Greg Scanlan, Assistant Public
Defender, St. Paul, Minnesota (for appellant)

Considered and decided by Johnson, Presiding Judge; Worke, Judge; and Smith,
Tracy M., Judge.

NONPRECEDENTIAL OPINION

WORKE, Judge

Appellant challenges the summary denial of his postconviction petition. We affirm.

FACTS

Respondent State of Minnesota charged appellant Steven Jeffrey Mueller with failing to register as a predatory offender. Mueller was initially jailed in Ramsey County, but was transferred to Wright County jail in May 2023 and remained there throughout the proceedings. In June 2023, at the request of defense counsel, the district court ordered a competency evaluation. Mueller was found competent to proceed, and the matter was scheduled for trial.

Mueller ultimately accepted a plea agreement. At his October 2023 plea hearing, Mueller agreed that he had enough time to talk to his attorney about his case and his right to have a trial. Mueller then engaged in the following exchanges with his attorney and the district court:

Q: Is this the [plea petition] document you and I went over in its entirety before we came into the courtroom today?

A: Yes.

Q: Mr. Mueller, we've talked about a plea agreement on several other occasions, and we've also talked about a petition to enter a plea of guilty prior to today's date; is that true?

A: Yes.

....

Q: Do you believe you're thinking clearly today?

A: Yes, I am.

Q: Do you think your judgment is in any way impaired today?

A: No.

....

Q: All right. Mr. Mueller, as I indicated, this is a two-page document. Do you agree with me that we went through every paragraph in this document line by line?

A: Yes.

Q: I answered any questions you had about the information in the plea petition; is that correct?

A: Yes.

Q: You understand the plea agreement?

A: Yes.

....

Q: Did you sign this [plea] document after reading it and reviewing it with [your attorney]?

A: Yes.

Q: And do you agree with everything in the document?

A: Yes, I do.

Mueller provided a factual basis for his plea, and the district court found that it was adequate and that Mueller was “competent to plead guilty . . . and that [he] knowingly, voluntarily, and intelligently waived [his] right to a trial and pretrial proceedings.”

At his sentencing hearing in November 2023, Mueller declined the district court’s offer to make an allocution. The district court sentenced Mueller to 25 months in prison.

Mueller filed a notice of appeal but asked this court to stay that appeal to allow him to pursue postconviction relief. In his postconviction petition, he sought to withdraw his guilty plea, arguing that he “felt coerced to plead.” He requested an evidentiary hearing and asserted that he would testify that (1) he “was not asked at the plea hearing if he felt pressured to enter a guilty plea”; (2) “[t]he Rule 20 proceedings in his case suggest concerns about [his] ability to understand or consult with counsel”; (3) “he was held in custody outside of Ramsey County for five months leading up to the hearing at which he pleaded, which would make it difficult to develop a working relationship with an attorney ahead of a plea”; and (4) “[he] and his attorney did not go through the plea petition until the day of the plea hearing.”

The district court summarily denied Mueller’s petition, determining that his coercion claim was contradicted by the evidence in the record. The district court also determined that Mueller’s claim “does not rise to the level of involuntariness that would justify withdrawal of a guilty plea,” because “he has not alleged facts demonstrating . . . *improper* pressure.”

We then dissolved the stay and reinstated this appeal.

DECISION

Appellate courts “review the denial of a petition for postconviction relief, including the petitioner’s request for an evidentiary hearing, for an abuse of discretion.” *Campbell v. State*, 916 N.W.2d 502, 506 (Minn. 2018). “A [district] court abuses its discretion when it has exercised its discretion in an arbitrary or capricious manner, based its ruling on an erroneous view of the law, or made clearly erroneous factual findings.” *Pearson v. State*, 891 N.W.2d 590, 596 (Minn. 2017) (quotation omitted).

A district court must hold an evidentiary hearing “[u]nless the petition and the files and records of the proceeding conclusively show that the petitioner is entitled to no relief.” Minn. Stat. § 590.04, subd. 1 (2022). In making this determination, “a [district] court considers the facts alleged in the petition as true and construes them in the light most favorable to the petitioner.” *Brown v. State*, 895 N.W.2d 612, 618 (Minn. 2017). But a petitioner “is not entitled to an evidentiary hearing if [his] allegations lack factual support and are directly refuted by [his] own testimony in the record.” *Williams v. State*, 760 N.W.2d 8, 14 (Minn. App. 2009), *rev. denied* (Minn. Apr. 21, 2009). “[D]oubts about whether to conduct an evidentiary hearing are resolved in favor of the petitioner,” but a

district court may summarily deny a petition when “the petitioner alleges facts that, if true, are legally insufficient to grant the requested relief.” *State v. Sardina-Padilla*, 7 N.W.3d 585, 602-03 (Minn. 2024) (quotation omitted).

Mueller does not dispute that his plea-hearing admissions contradict his claim that his plea was coerced, but he argues that in summarily denying his petition the district court “rel[ie]d exclusively” on his plea-hearing admissions and therefore did not consider his allegations as true or construe them in the light most favorable to him. He contends that his allegations, viewed in the light most favorable to his claim, sufficiently establish that he was coerced, and that the contradictions between his allegations and his admissions can be resolved only in an evidentiary hearing.

Mueller’s argument is flawed because the district court did not deny his petition based exclusively on his plea-hearing admissions. The district court determined that Mueller’s claim was contradicted by the record, and that “even if . . . Mueller testified exactly as he alleges he would,” his allegations “[a]t best . . . would show that he felt pressure, but he has not alleged facts demonstrating that it was *improper* pressure.” We agree.

A district court “must allow withdrawal of a guilty plea if withdrawal is necessary to correct a manifest injustice.” *State v. Raleigh*, 778 N.W.2d 90, 93 (Minn. 2010) (quotation omitted); Minn. R. Crim. P. 15.05, subd. 1. “A [m]anifest injustice occurs if a guilty plea is not accurate, voluntary, and intelligent.” *Perkins v. State*, 559 N.W.2d 678, 688 (Minn. 1997). “The voluntariness requirement ensures a defendant is not pleading guilty due to improper pressure or coercion.” *Raleigh*, 778 N.W.2d at 96. A guilty plea is

not voluntary if it results from “mental coercion overbearing the will of the defendant.” *State v. Ecker*, 524 N.W.2d 712, 719 (Minn. 1994) (quotation omitted).

The allegations in Mueller’s petition, even if true, do not establish that his plea was coerced.

First, Mueller cited the fact that, at the plea hearing, he was not asked if he felt pressured to enter a guilty plea. Though the record supports this assertion, it is not evidence of coercion and Mueller neglects to explain how it could be.

Second, Mueller’s petition stated that “[t]he [competency] proceedings . . . suggest concerns about [his] ability to understand or consult with counsel.” But Mueller’s petition fails to explain what he did not “understand” or was unable to “consult with counsel” about. Construed in the light most favorable to Mueller, the competency evaluation provides no indication that Mueller was coerced. The evaluator found Mueller competent to proceed. The evaluator found that Mueller understood the charges against him, the nature of court proceedings, and that he did not appear to be experiencing mental-health symptoms that “impact[ed] his ability to understand his charges or speak about his case in a coherent manner.” Mueller told the evaluator that it was “getting more difficult[] mentally being in [jail],” but this alone does not support his claim because “the normal trauma associated with being incarcerated . . . is not, by itself, a basis to claim coercion.” *Sykes v. State*, 578 N.W.2d 807, 813 (Minn. App. 1998), *rev. denied* (Minn. July 16, 1998). Finally, though Mueller indicated that he did not trust his attorney, he did not state that his attorney pressured him and he “acknowledged he would be able to work with his [attorney] if he ha[d] to do so.”

Third, Mueller asserted that “he was held in custody outside of Ramsey County for five months . . . , which would make it difficult to develop a working relationship with an attorney ahead of a plea,” and that “[he] and his attorney did not go through the plea petition until the day of the plea hearing.” Here again, Mueller fails to explain how these assertions, even if true, support the claim that his plea was coerced or that he was improperly pressured.

In sum, Mueller’s allegations do not include clear instances of coercion, and he does not explain how the allegations could be construed as conduct or circumstances capable of overbearing his will. *See Raleigh*, 778 N.W.2d at 96 (concluding defendant’s plea not involuntary when defendant claimed “extreme stress and not thinking rationally” but failed to explain how it influenced his plea).

Mueller likens his case to *State v. Kaiser*, 469 N.W.2d 316 (Minn. 1991). In *Kaiser*, the defendant moved to withdraw his plea, arguing that he was coerced by his attorney. 469 N.W.2d at 319. As is the case here, “[t]he record made at the time [the] defendant entered the guilty plea clearly was adequate to support the plea.” *Id.* But unlike in Mueller’s case, the defendant in *Kaiser* supported his claim with affidavits stating that his attorney pressured him to plead guilty. *Id.* The supreme court concluded that an evidentiary hearing was necessary because resolving the contradiction between the defendant’s allegations and his plea-hearing admissions required the district court “to make findings of fact and the [district] court could not fairly do that without allowing [the] defendant to testify.” *Id.* Here, however, the district court was not required to make

findings of fact because Mueller’s allegations, even if true, were insufficient to conclude that he was coerced. *See Sardina-Padilla*, 7 N.W.3d at 602-03.

Mueller also argues that the district court’s reasoning was contrary to logic. He contends it “makes no sense to rely exclusively on a defendant’s words from the plea hearing” to reject his coercion claim because, had he indicated he was coerced at the hearing, the district court would have rejected his plea.

Mueller’s argument is unpersuasive because the district court did not “rely exclusively” on his plea-hearing admissions when it denied his petition. Besides concluding that Mueller’s claims simply did not constitute coercion, the district court noted that (1) Mueller “did not allege any specific statements or actions by his attorney to support the claim that he was pressured or coerced”; (2) the nature of Mueller’s attorney’s questions at the plea hearing “made clear that he and . . . Mueller talked about a plea agreement on several other occasions, and [they] also talked about a petition to enter a plea of guilty prior to [the hearing]”; and (3) at his sentencing hearing, a month after pleading guilty, Mueller still declined to raise concerns when given the opportunity to do so.

Because the allegations in Mueller’s petition, viewed in the light most favorable to him, do not establish that he was coerced, we affirm.

Affirmed.