

*This opinion is nonprecedential except as provided by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
A24-1832**

Brian Michael Steidl, petitioner,
Appellant,

vs.

Commissioner of Public Safety,
Respondent.

**Filed August 11, 2025
Affirmed
Ross, Judge**

Douglas County District Court
File No. 21-CV-23-1069

Matthew P. Franzese, Wheaton, Minnesota (for appellant)

Keith Ellison, Attorney General, Cassandra Buehler, Assistant Attorney General, St. Paul,
Minnesota (for respondent)

Considered and decided by Connolly, Presiding Judge; Ross, Judge; and Wheelock,
Judge.

NONPRECEDENTIAL OPINION

ROSS, Judge

A sheriff's deputy stopped a pickup truck driven by Brian Steidl and suspected that Steidl—who suffers physical and mental disabilities—was impaired based on his fidgety behavior, dilated pupils, and poor performance on field sobriety tests. The commissioner of public safety revoked Steidl's driver's license after a blood test indicated positive for

amphetamines. Steidl unsuccessfully challenged the revocation in the district court, arguing that the positive test resulted from his having taken drugs as prescribed. We affirm his revocation because the record supports the district court's conclusion that the drugs impaired Steidl.

FACTS

Douglas County Sheriff's Deputy Corey Sammons was patrolling in Alexandria when he saw a driver toss a lit cigarette from a pickup's window. Deputy Sammons activated his emergency lights to stop the truck, which, rather than stopping, changed lanes several times while the driver moved around "frantically." The deputy thrice ordered the driver to pull the truck over using his squad car's loudspeaker.

Deputy Sammons approached the stopped pickup and encountered the driver, Brian Steidl. He noticed that Steidl had dilated pupils, was fidgeting, exhibited facial tremors, and "blink[ed] with his eyes closed." This led Deputy Sammons, who has extensive training and experience in identifying impairment by controlled substances, to suspect that Steidl was under the influence of a stimulant. Steidl told the deputy that he has ADHD, depression, and sleep apnea, and he disclosed that he was taking medications but was unsure of which he was taking.

Deputy Sammons tried to administer the horizontal gaze nystagmus test but could not because Steidl would not hold his head still. He administered the modified Romberg test, directing Steidl to tilt his head back, close his eyes, and estimate the passage of 30 seconds. Steidl estimated 30 seconds in just 11 seconds. Steidl failed to follow the

instructions of the walk-and-turn test in several ways and only three of six times successfully completed the finger-to-nose test.

Deputy Sammons arrested Steidl and collected a sample of his blood after obtaining a warrant to do so. The test indicated positive for amphetamines. The commissioner of public safety revoked Steidl's driving privileges. Steidl petitioned for judicial review, raising the prescription-drug affirmative defense. The district court conducted a hearing where Steidl, Steidl's father, Steidl's pharmacist, and Deputy Sammons testified.

The hearing testimony included information about Steidl's physical and mental disabilities. Steidl's father said that he was oxygen deprived at birth, leading to a "very severe" learning disability, "very poor" motor skills, and balance that is "way off." Yet Steidl obtained his license at about age 18 on his first attempt, and his father believes him to be a safe driver. Steidl is prescribed multiple medications, including Vyvanse and Provigil, which his pharmacist opined would cause him to test positive for amphetamines. The pharmacist added that Vyvanse can increase Steidl's alertness and dilate his pupils. His father believes that he acts "more normal" when he is on his medications.

The pharmacist acknowledged that Vyvanse taken incorrectly can impair a person. The court also received into evidence a Vyvanse patient-education sheet that directs users to avoid driving until the user knows how the medication affects him. Steidl testified that he takes his medication regularly, carefully timing his doses. He said that a social worker visits him weekly and helps organize his medications. The pharmacist reported that he saw nothing in Steidl's pharmaceutical record that suggested he had filled his prescriptions irregularly.

Deputy Sammons testified that he believed Steidl was impaired by stimulants and was unsafe to drive. He said that Steidl's appearance and body behavior in court were "125% different than it was on the night of the traffic stop," noting Steidl was fidgeting significantly less and that his head and arm movements were slower. Steidl testified that he "failed all [the] sobriety tests" but maintained that he would not ordinarily pass them because of his disability and medications.

The district court upheld the commissioner's decision to revoke Steidl's driver's license. It considered the prescription-drug defense by determining "whether [Steidl's] medications impaired his ability to operate a motor vehicle." The district court concluded that, despite Steidl's physical and mental issues, his performance on the sobriety tests demonstrated that he was impaired. Steidl appeals.

DECISION

Steidl challenges the district court's license-revocation decision. We review a district court's determination that a driver failed to prove a prescription-drug defense for an abuse of discretion. *See Thordson v. Comm'r of Pub. Safety*, 10 N.W.3d 310, 315 (Minn. App. 2024). A district court abuses its discretion when its findings of fact are unsupported by the record, it improperly applies the law, or it resolves an issue contrarily to the logic and the facts on the record. *Woolsey v. Woolsey*, 975 N.W.2d 502, 506 (Minn. 2022). We consider whether the district court's decision rejecting Steidl's affirmative defense reflects an abuse of its discretion.

The commissioner of public safety must revoke a person's driver's license when a peace officer certifies that an executed search warrant of the person's blood or urine based

on probable cause of his driving while impaired has revealed the presence of certain controlled substances. Minn. Stat. § 171.177, subds. 3(2)(iii), 5(a) (2024). Amphetamine is a qualifying controlled substance. Minn. Stat. § 152.02, subd. 3(d)(1) (2024). A driver may challenge his revocation by asserting the prescription-drug defense:

It is an affirmative defense to the presence of a Schedule I or II controlled substance that the person used the controlled substance according to the terms of a prescription . . . unless the court finds by a preponderance of the evidence that the use of the controlled substance impaired the person's ability to operate a motor vehicle.

Minn. Stat. § 171.177, subd. 12(h) (2024). Steidl contests the district court's determinations as to whether he used amphetamines as prescribed and whether his use impaired his ability to drive. We address both issues.

Use According to Terms of Prescription

Steidl argues that the district court erred by requiring him to produce an expert witness to establish that the blood-test results show that he was medication compliant. The argument overstates the district court's order, which, while unclear, did not impose the alleged medical-expert requirement:

[T]he issue presented . . . is whether [Steidl's] medications impaired his ability to operate a motor vehicle. The Commissioner argues there is no actual evidence [Steidl] took his medications according to the prescriptions. The evidence presented is admittedly circumstantial, but the Court notes it is virtually impossible for an individual to prove they were medication compliant absent a forensic review of the blood sample and testimony from a toxicologist or similar expert. Regardless of whether an individual is medication compliant or not, the statute clearly identifies impairment as an objective basis for evaluation.

As we observed in *Thordson*, the prescription-drug defense “does not require [the driver] to prove that the amount of amphetamine in [his or] her system was within therapeutic levels.” 10 N.W.3d at 316–17. The district court here “note[d]” the difficulty of establishing medication compliance without scientific evidence, but it did not require any party to present that sort of evidence.

Steidl also asserts that the district court erroneously failed to definitively rule on whether he used the medications according to the terms of his prescription. Assuming that the statute requires a district court to examine this aspect of the defense, Steidl fails to show how the alleged failure to do so prejudiced him. We will not reverse for nonprejudicial, harmless errors. *See Kallio v. Ford Motor Co.*, 407 N.W.2d 92, 98 (Minn. 1987). The statute establishes that a driver’s impairment by itself defeats a prescription-drug defense. *See* Minn. Stat. § 171.177, subd. 12(h). The district court decided that Steidl’s use of the medications impaired his ability to drive regardless of whether Steidl was prescription compliant. The district court’s uncertainty as to whether Steidl had been complying with his prescription is therefore irrelevant.

Impaired Ability to Operate a Motor Vehicle

Steidl argues that the district court abused its discretion by determining that his medications impaired him. Even if a petitioner proves he was prescription compliant, a district court may uphold a revocation if it “finds by a preponderance of the evidence that the use of the controlled substance impaired the person’s ability to operate a motor vehicle.” *Id.* Steidl’s argument is not compelling.

Steidl first maintains that the statute requires evidence of actual impaired *driving*, not just impairment, to defeat the defense. Steidl did not make this argument in the district court, and we will not entertain it in this appeal. *Thiele v. Stich*, 425 N.W.2d 580, 582 (Minn. 1988). Steidl’s statutory-interpretation argument is forfeited, and we see no reason to address the forfeited argument.

Steidl next maintains that the district court erroneously determined that his use of medication impaired his ability to operate a motor vehicle. We review findings of fact underlying this determination for clear error by viewing the evidence in the light most favorable to the findings, not finding our own facts, not reweighing evidence, and not reconciling conflicting evidence. *In re Civ. Commitment of Kenney*, 963 N.W.2d 214, 221–22 (Minn. 2021). The district court reasoned that “while some of [Steidl]’s behavior or responses may be explained due to his physical or mental issues, the field sobriety tests demonstrated objective indicators of impairment.” It observed that Deputy Sammons suspected Steidl to be under the influence based on his dilated eyes, eyelid tremors, and rapid movement of his feet; on the modified Romberg test where Steidl estimated 30 seconds passing in 11 seconds; on Steidl’s failing the walk-and-turn test; and on the fact that, during the finger-to-nose test, Steidl’s eyes tremored and he missed his nose. The district court also remarked about other conduct while driving, including Steidl’s failure to stop promptly, his moving around in the cab, and his changing lanes after Deputy Sammons activated his emergency lights. It also referenced his inability to follow instructions to complete the horizontal gaze nystagmus test and his elevated pulse. All these findings are

supported by testimony in the record, and, cumulatively, they support the district court's finding of impairment under the preponderance-of-the-evidence standard.

We are not persuaded otherwise by Steidl's contention that the field sobriety tests cannot support the impairment finding because his learning disabilities prevented him from following instructions and his coordination skills prevented him from adequately performing the walk-and-turn and finger-to-nose tests. Nor are we persuaded by his related assertion that his non-impairing use of his prescription drugs accounts for his pupil dilation, eyelid tremors, rapid movement, and elevated pulse. It is true that Deputy Sammons acknowledged that he did not know whether Steidl could ordinarily perform some of the coordination tests. And it is likewise true that the pharmacist said that Vyvanse can increase alertness, dilate pupils, and "do those types of things that amphetamines do." But we construe the evidence in the light most favorable to the findings, *id.* at 221, and other circumstances support the determination that Steidl's impairment, rather than his condition or non-impairing medication use, explains his behavior. For example, Deputy Sammons observed that Steidl used his left hand to attempt the finger-to-nose test rather than his right, as instructed, and he admonished himself without the deputy's input, indicating that he had understood but failed to follow the instruction. And the Romberg test is not based on coordination. The deputy testified that Steidl's mannerisms in court were noticeably reduced from the fidgety behavior he observed the night of the traffic stop. And the district court was aware of and accounted for Steidl's disabilities, finding that they may explain "some of" his behavior or responses. The record supports the district court's finding that

Steidl’s conduct during the field sobriety tests resulted from his impairment rather than his medical issues.

This is no easy case. We are not unsympathetic to Steidl’s circumstances. But we cannot reweigh the evidence on appeal, and we extend significant discretion to the district court’s fact findings on circumstances that might reasonably support a different result. *See id.* at 221–22.

Public Policy

Steidl argues that the policy behind the prescription-drug defense seeks to protect people in his situation and, despite its impairment caveat, should result in our reversing the district court’s decision. But the judicial role in our separated-powers system does not include legislating from the bench and reading words into or out of a statute. *See Martinco v. Hastings*, 122 N.W.2d 631, 638 (Minn. 1963); Minn. Const. art. III, § 1. The legislature asks that, for unambiguous statutes, “the letter of the law shall not be disregarded under the pretext of pursuing the spirit.” Minn. Stat. § 645.16 (2024); *State v. Bradley*, 4 N.W.3d 105, 113 (Minn. 2024). Steidl’s policy argument essentially asks us to apply the spirit of section 171.177, subdivision 12(h), over its plain language. This we will not do.

Affirmed.