

*This opinion is nonprecedential except as provided by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
A25-1407**

State of Minnesota,
Respondent,

vs.

Darla Gail Holmgren,
Appellant.

**Filed June 15, 2026
Affirmed in part, reversed in part, and remanded
Ross, Judge**

Beltrami County District Court
File No. 04-CR-24-766

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

David Hanson, Beltrami County Attorney, Karin R. Hughes, Special Assistant County Attorney, Bemidji, Minnesota (for respondent)

Cathryn Middlebrook, Chief Appellate Public Defender, John Patrick Monnens, Assistant Public Defender, St. Paul, Minnesota (for appellant)

Considered and decided by Bratvold, Presiding Judge; Worke, Judge; and Ross, Judge.

NONPRECEDENTIAL OPINION

ROSS, Judge

Darla Holmgren entered an *Alford* guilty plea to after-the-fact aiding an offender based on her having provided false or misleading information to police who were investigating a murder committed by her son in a house where Holmgren was present. The

district court accepted Holmgren's guilty plea, assigned an offense severity level of eight for sentencing, denied her motion for a downward durational departure, and sentenced her to serve 78 months in prison. In this appeal challenging both her conviction and sentence, we conclude that the record belies Holmgren's contention that her guilty plea lacks a sufficient factual basis and is therefore invalid. But we also conclude that the district court misapplied the offense-severity-level factors it is required to apply under *State v. Kenard*, 606 N.W.2d 440 (Minn. 2000). We therefore affirm in part, reverse in part, and remand for resentencing.

FACTS

Darla Holmgren's son Daniel Eason murdered Jared Eason, Daniel's adult half brother, in the presence of Holmgren's other son, Joseph Eason. Bemidji police officers began investigating Jared's death when they were called to a house in August 2023 on the report of an unresponsive male. There, police found Jared's badly beaten body. They determined from a pool of blood on the kitchen floor, blood smears on walls, and disheveled objects that a violent fight had taken place throughout the house, including in the garage, living room, kitchen, and laundry room, where they had found Jared's body. An autopsy revealed that Jared died of a traumatic brain injury and suffered multiple blunt-force and sharp-force injuries and strangulation.

Daniel and Joseph gave conflicting initial accounts of what happened. Joseph told police that he had blacked out from drugs and alcohol while he, Daniel, and Jared watched a football game and that he awoke in a different home owned by Daniel, where Holmgren was present as well. He claimed not to have recalled anyone else being in the residence the

night of the murder other than Daniel, Holmgren, and Jared. Daniel told police that four intruders had stormed into the house and began beating Joseph and Jared. Daniel said that he joined in to rescue Joseph and then left with Joseph, leaving Jared behind with the attackers. Daniel did not mention his mother's presence or explain how she ended up at his house the next morning. Police could see that both Daniel and Joseph had sustained significant facial injuries, with Joseph's injuries requiring hospital treatment.

Holmgren gave police an account that, like her sons' accounts, disclaimed any knowledge that Daniel had beaten Jared to death in a fight that also involved Joseph. She told officers that she was at the residence watching a football game but that she had no recollection of what happened. She claimed to have no knowledge of any fight, asserting that she had blacked out after drinking six to eight beers. All she knew was that "somebody got jumped," supposedly based on what Daniel had told her. She equivocated somewhat, adding also that she was "questioning" Daniel's somebody-jumped-Jared story. She said that she awoke the next morning at Daniel's house and never asked her sons how they had sustained their serious injuries or why Joseph had gone to the hospital, telling police only that Joseph had told her that some "people came and beat him up." She also claimed not to know that Daniel's face was injured. Daniel eventually admitted to police that he killed Jared, and he pleaded guilty to second-degree murder.

The state charged Holmgren with aiding an offender after the fact under Minnesota Statutes section 609.495, subdivision 3 (2022), alleging that she had provided false or misleading information to police during the investigation. Holmgren petitioned to enter an *Alford* guilty plea, maintaining her innocence.

Holmgren acknowledged during her plea hearing that she had reviewed the evidence the state would offer at trial, including police reports, medical reports of Jared's death, crime-scene videos and photographs, and statements given by witnesses, including her own. She acknowledged that the evidence resulted in a "substantial likelihood" that a jury would find her guilty of aiding an offender after the fact. She admitted that the evidence would show that Daniel had killed Jared, that she was present at the time of the murder, that it was "very obvious" Jared had been "brutally assaulted and killed," and that she provided statements to police supporting Daniel's version of the story that four intruding strangers had perpetrated the murder. She also acknowledged that the evidence would show that she told police that she had blacked out from drinking and did not remember anything, that she told officers that she had six to eight beers, and that the state would argue that she had not consumed enough alcohol to have blacked out and that "maybe 24 beers" total had been consumed in the house the evening of the murder. She also acknowledged that she had said that she was with her two sons when she woke up, that they were both seriously injured, and that she told officers that she had "no idea" why Joseph went to the hospital. She acknowledged too that the couch where she had claimed to have been passed out was directly in the line of sight to the kitchen, where a pool of blood had left a stain on the floor.

The district court ordered that a presentence investigation report be completed. The report indicated that Holmgren's last conviction was a 2006 felony impaired-driving offense. It also indicated that Holmgren acknowledged frequent alcohol use to the point of intoxication. Because Holmgren's crime was unranked under the Minnesota Sentencing Guidelines and carried no designated severity level, the district court considered the

parties’ arguments about the appropriate severity-level assignment. It accepted the state’s request to sentence Holmgren based on a severity level of eight rather than Holmgren’s request for level four, deeming her conduct to be most comparable to that of Joseph, who had pleaded guilty to the same offense and was assigned a severity level of eight. The presentence investigation report recommended a sentence of 78 months in prison—the presumptive sentence for a severity-level eight offense with a criminal-history score of three. The district court rejected Holmgren’s motion for a downward durational departure and sentenced her to a 78-month prison term.

Holmgren appeals.

DECISION

Holmgren challenges her conviction, arguing that her *Alford* plea was inaccurate because it lacked a strong factual basis. She challenges her sentence, arguing that the district court improperly determined the severity level of her offense and also that it wrongly denied her departure motion. We address only her first two arguments.

I

We are unpersuaded by Holmgren’s contention that her plea was inaccurate and therefore invalid because it lacked a strong factual basis. A defendant may withdraw her guilty plea if “withdrawal is necessary to correct a manifest injustice.” Minn. R. Crim. P. 15.05, subd. 1. A manifest injustice occurs if a plea is invalid, meaning if it is either not accurate, voluntary, or intelligent. *State v. Theis*, 742 N.W.2d 643, 646 (Minn. 2007). We review *de novo* whether a plea was invalid. *State v. Raleigh*, 778 N.W.2d 90, 94 (Minn. 2010). Our *de novo* review leaves Holmgren’s conviction intact.

Holmgren contends that her *Alford* plea was invalid because it was not accurate. “A proper factual basis must be established for a guilty plea to be accurate.” *Theis*, 742 N.W.2d at 647 (quotation omitted). An *Alford* plea is a guilty plea under which a defendant maintains her innocence but acknowledges that the record establishes her guilt and that she reasonably believes that the state has sufficient evidence to secure a conviction. *North Carolina v. Alford*, 400 U.S. 25, 37–38 (1970); *see also State v. Goulette*, 258 N.W.2d 758, 761 (Minn. 1977) (adopting *Alford* pleas in Minnesota). *Alford* pleas particularly require a “strong factual basis” to satisfy the accuracy requirement because of the “inherent conflict in pleading guilty while maintaining innocence.” *Theis*, 742 N.W.2d at 648–49. The factual basis should rest on evidence discussed with the defendant on the record, including evidence likely to be introduced at trial. *Id.* at 649. The evidentiary record and the defendant’s acknowledgment provide the district court “with a basis to independently conclude that there is a *strong* probability that the defendant would be found guilty of the charge to which [she] pleaded guilty.” *Id.* Holmgren argues specifically that the record evidence fails to show that her statements to police constituted aiding an offender after the fact.

Holmgren’s argument that her statements fall short of the crime charged is unavailing. “Whoever intentionally aids another person whom the actor knows or has reason to know has committed a criminal act, by . . . providing false or misleading information about that crime . . . or otherwise obstructing the investigation or prosecution of that crime is an accomplice after the fact.” Minn. Stat. § 609.495, subd. 3. Holmgren asserts that the evidence does not show that her statements to police were false or

misleading because the evidence does not disprove her assertion that she blacked out and had no recollection of the murder. This evidentiary failure to contradict her assertion of unconsciousness, she maintains, would prevent a finding under the statute that she “kn[ew] or ha[d] reason to know” that Daniel committed the murder. For the following reasons, the argument fails.

Holmgren’s plea was accurate because the evidence shows that her statements to law enforcement, in context, were misleading. It is true that she told police that she “question[ed]” the narrative Daniel had provided her and that she characterized his version of events as the story she had been told. But this qualification would not prevent the evidence from supporting the finding that she misled police. The acknowledged evidence would show that she was in the house when the murder occurred during a violent assault throughout the house and that blood covered many areas, most significantly causing a substantial stain within several feet and eyeshot of the couch on which Holmgren said she remained. Although she claimed that she “had no idea” why Joseph went to the hospital, the photographic evidence would establish that his facial injuries were likely far too obvious to support her claimed ignorance. And by saying that she was told that “somebody got jumped” and was merely “questioning” that account, she was indirectly lending credibility to it, misleadingly, when in fact the evidence would support that she knew that the account was false.

We are not persuaded otherwise by her highlighting the fact that she claimed to have blacked out and lacked any recollection of what occurred. Although she told police that she had blacked out all night and remembered nothing, she also said she had consumed

only six to eight beers. She argues that other evidence showed that she and her son also purchased whiskey and that she had taken other substances, including marijuana and Gabapentin, which she says she took regularly but exceeded her prescribed dose. But the state's trial evidence would include her answer to what she had to drink, which was beer, not whiskey. And the record also indicates that Holmgren was accustomed to drinking alcohol, often to intoxication, leaving dubious her representation that she blacked out for hours from six to eight beers. The factual basis to support a plea "may be supplemented by other evidence," and a defendant may not withdraw a plea "if the record contains sufficient evidence to support the conviction." *Lussier v. State*, 821 N.W.2d 581, 589 (Minn. 2012) (quotation omitted). We cannot say that the evidence falls short of providing a "strong probability" that a jury would find Holmgren guilty of providing misleading statements to police.

II

Holmgren convincingly maintains that the district court assigned an improper severity level of eight to determine her sentence. We review this determination for an abuse of discretion. *State v. Bertsch*, 707 N.W.2d 660, 666 (Minn. 2006). The supreme court established the following factors the district court must weigh when assigning a severity level for an unranked offense, like Holmgren's crime of conviction:

the gravity of the specific conduct underlying the unranked offense; the severity level assigned to any ranked offense whose elements are similar to those of the unranked offense; the conduct of and severity level assigned to other offenders for the same unranked offense; and the severity level assigned to other offenders who engaged in similar conduct. No single factor is controlling nor is the list of factors meant to be

exhaustive.

Kenard, 606 N.W.2d at 443. Our close consideration of *Kenard* reveals the district court's error here.

The severity-level analysis in *Kenard* provides us particular guidance in this case. Like Holmgren, *Kenard* had been convicted of aiding an offender after the fact under Minnesota Statutes section 609.495, subdivision 3 (1998). *Id.* at 441. But *Kenard*'s criminal conduct was substantially more serious than Holmgren's. *Kenard* was charged after she physically helped a first-degree murderer conceal the evidence of his crime, including cleaning the victim's blood at the murder site and helping to hide the victim's body, in addition to her providing false information to law enforcement. *Id.* at 442–43. The *Kenard* court nevertheless concluded that the district court abused its discretion by assigning a severity level of seven to that offense (which would be equivalent to a severity level of eight under the version of the sentencing guidelines applicable here, *compare* Minn. Sent'g Guidelines IV (1997), *with* Minn. Sent'g Guidelines 4.A (2023)). *Id.* at 441, 442–43. The district court here clearly considered the *Kenard* factors. But given the significant points of comparison to this case and the purpose of the sentencing guidelines to provide a system of statewide uniform sentencing, *see State v. Soto*, 855 N.W.2d 303, 309 (Minn. 2014), the district court should have also recognized that assigning Holmgren a severity level of eight is inconsistent with the *Kenard* court's abuse-of-discretion conclusion in that case.

More specifically, the *Kenard* court demonstrated the need to compare the defendant's conduct to other similar instances of conduct. *See id.* at 444–45. It elaborated that the degree of a defendant's active participation is material, observing that even passive

assistance to a perpetrator of first-degree murder was less severe than more active assistance to a perpetrator of second-degree murder and could not justify a severity level of seven in that case. *See id.* Under that reasoning, Holmgren's significantly less active conduct in merely providing evasive statements to the police, but otherwise offering no assistance to the perpetrator of the second-degree murder here, cannot justify a severity level of eight. We are mindful that the district court compared Holmgren's conduct to the conduct of Joseph. But although Joseph was likewise convicted of aiding after the fact and his offense was assigned a severity level of eight, the record shows that his participation was clearly more active than Holmgren's, given his substantial injuries. We conclude that the district court abused its discretion in assigning a severity level of eight to Holmgren's offense. We therefore reverse and remand for the district court to apply its discretion under *Kenard* and resentence Holmgren accordingly. Because we reverse Holmgren's sentence on this basis, we do not consider Holmgren's argument that the district court wrongly denied her motion for a downward durational departure.

Affirmed in part, reversed in part, and remanded.