

*This opinion is nonprecedential except as provided by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
A25-1503**

State of Minnesota,
Respondent,

vs.

Lewis Lee Goodwin,
Appellant.

**Filed July 13, 2026
Reversed and remanded
Larkin, Judge**

Washington County District Court
File No. 82-CR-23-3906

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

Kevin M. Magnuson, Washington County Attorney, Andrew T. Jackola, Assistant County Attorney, Stillwater, Minnesota (for respondent)

Cathryn Middlebrook, Chief Appellate Public Defender, Stacy L. Bettison, Assistant Public Defender, St. Paul, Minnesota (for appellant)

Considered and decided by Reyes, Presiding Judge; Larkin, Judge; and Bratvold, Judge.

NONPRECEDENTIAL OPINION

LARKIN, Judge

Appellant challenges his conviction for unlawful possession of a firearm, arguing that his guilty plea was unintelligent and therefore invalid. We reverse and remand.

FACTS

Respondent State of Minnesota charged appellant Lewis Lee Goodwin under Minn. Stat. § 624.713, subd. 1(2) (2022), with unlawful possession of a firearm by a person with a prior crime-of-violence conviction. The charging document referenced a mandatory-minimum sentencing provision, which required that “[a]ny defendant convicted of violating section . . . 624.713, subdivision 1, clause (2), *shall* be committed to the commissioner of corrections for not less than five years.” Minn. Stat. § 609.11, subd. 5(b) (2022) (emphasis added). The state alleged that Goodwin could not possess firearms based on a 2014 controlled-substance conviction. The state also charged Goodwin with assault with a dangerous weapon.

On September 26, 2024, Goodwin pleaded guilty to unlawful possession of a firearm and identified his 2014 controlled-substance offense as the underlying crime-of-violence conviction. The state dismissed the remaining charge and a controlled-substance charge in a separate file. Before Goodwin tendered his guilty plea to the district court, the court explained, “Mr. Goodwin, this is basically a straight plea to the Court in the sense that . . . there’s no agreement on resolution on Count 1, but the State is agreeing to dismiss the other case and Count 2, you understand that?” Goodwin responded, “Yes, Ma’am.”

Defense counsel stated that Goodwin had “other matters” that could be “recognized as the predicate offense,” including a prior conviction for unlawful possession of a firearm. Defense counsel hoped to avoid the applicable mandatory-minimum sentence by having Goodwin plead guilty to the charged offense using the 2014 controlled-substance conviction as the underlying offense, instead of his prior firearm conviction. Defense

counsel thought that this approach would avoid application of the mandatory-minimum sentence and permit the district court some sentencing discretion. Defense counsel explained:

the one understanding from the parties is that the disqualifying event that will be the basis of the plea today, is a prior Fifth Degree Possession as a Felony. There are some other matters that are referenced in the PrePlea Worksheet, but those will not be recognized as the predicate offense

Defense counsel further explained that, for the purposes of sentencing, “we’re only referencing the Fifth Degree Possession as part of the plea as far as what the qualifying event is.” Finally, defense counsel explained that Goodwin was relying on defense counsel’s argument that

because of what he’s pleading to today and what the disqualifying event is, . . . the Court has discretion to depart. There’s not an understanding or an agreement that there is a departure, but the Court has discretion based on how the pleas [are] getting entered.

The following exchange occurred:

THE COURT: Is the State agreeing that the only thing that makes Mr. Goodwin prohibited from possessing [a firearm] is this Fifth Degree Drug [conviction], and thus the Court . . . would have discretion to depart dispositionally?

PROSECUTOR: The State is agreeing that he is disqualified by virtue of his drug conviction. We are not agreeing that the Court has discretion to depart, and that will be the basis of our argument at sentencing.

THE COURT: Is that what you said, [defense counsel]?

DEFENSE COUNSEL: The only thing that the Court is going to be receiving is evidence with regard to the Fifth Degree

Possession. At that point, the Court has discretion, that's our legal argument.

THE COURT: All right. And Mr. Goodwin, you understand that it could be that you make this legal argument, I don't agree with the legal argument, and I have to send you to prison for 60 months, right?

GOODWIN: Excuse me, could you say that again?

THE COURT: Absolutely. [Defense counsel's] argument here is that . . . the State and you are agreeing that your qualifying Felony is not a gun case, basically, that instead it is a drug case. . . . So, your lawyer is going to argue that because that particular offense did not involve a gun, . . . I have authority to give you something less than 60 months, including put you on probation or give you less time than 60 months. Do you understand that part so far?

GOODWIN: Yes, Ma'am.

THE COURT: All right. But you understand that . . . [i]f I don't agree with that argument, and I get evidence that indicates that your priors make this a mandatory sentence under my read of the law, . . . you could end up going to prison at the time of sentencing for 60 months.

GOODWIN: I'm kind of lost on that.

THE COURT: Well, it's quite simple, sir. What you're arguing is that I don't have to send you to prison, okay. And what I'm telling you is I may not agree with those arguments at sentencing. You understand that so far?

GOODWIN: Yes, Ma'am.

THE COURT: All right. So, if I don't agree with those arguments, . . . then I would send you to prison for 60 months. Do you understand now?

GOODWIN: Yes, Ma'am.

THE COURT: All right. Tell me if anything I said doesn't make sense.

GOODWIN: It makes sense.

THE COURT: All right. And is this what you want to do, sir?

GOODWIN: Yes.

Goodwin submitted a petition to plead guilty which stated: "Plead guilty to count 1 felon/person ineligible to possess firearm. Defense and State to agree that Defendant's disqualifying offense for purpose of plea is felony 4th degree possession." Goodwin also orally acknowledged the rights he would give up by pleading guilty.

Before accepting Goodwin's guilty plea, the district court once again addressed him regarding the potential consequences of his plea stating, "I want to make sure that you understand, sir, the minimal consequence that you can have from this case would be that the prison sentence would be hanging over your head, you know that?" Goodwin responded, "Yes." The court continued, "And that the maximum penalty you can get from this case is that I can commit you to the Commissioner of Corrections at sentencing for a period of 60 months, you know that?" Goodwin responded, "Yes." The court continued, "So, that's the spectrum and there's no guarantee as to what I will ultimately do at sentencing, you understand that?" Goodwin responded, "Yes." The court asked, "All right. Understanding that, is it your intention to go forward and plead guilty today?" Goodwin responded, "Yes."

The district court accepted Goodwin's guilty plea and found that it was knowing, voluntary, and intelligent. The parties agreed to submit written arguments regarding the court's authority to depart from the mandatory-minimum sentence.

Not long after Goodwin pleaded guilty, this court released *State v. Crawford*, holding that a "district court is without authority to disregard the mandatory-minimum sentence in Minn. Stat. § 152.021, subd. 3(b) (2020), which applies to certain repeat offenders who are convicted of a first-degree controlled-substance crime." 13 N.W.3d 693, 694 (Minn. App. 2024). Relying on *Crawford*, Goodwin moved the district court to allow him to withdraw his guilty plea as involuntary and unintelligent. The district court denied the motion and later sentenced Goodwin to serve 60 months in prison for the firearm offense. As to whether the district court had authority to depart from the applicable mandatory-minimum sentence, the district court told Goodwin that under "the law, as I see it, sir, I have no such discretion at all."

Goodwin appeals.

DECISION

The Minnesota Rules of Criminal Procedure provide that a court must permit a defendant to withdraw a guilty plea at any time to correct a manifest injustice. Minn. R. Crim. P. 15.05, subd. 1. A manifest injustice exists if a guilty plea is invalid. *State v. Raleigh*, 778 N.W.2d 90, 94 (Minn. 2010). "To be constitutionally valid, a guilty plea must be accurate, voluntary, and intelligent." *Id.* "A defendant bears the burden of showing his plea was invalid." *Id.* Whether a plea is valid is a question of law that we review de novo. *Id.*

“The intelligence requirement ensures that a defendant understands the charges against him, the rights he is waiving, and the consequences of his plea,” specifically, the direct consequences of a guilty plea and conviction. *Id.* at 96. “[A] direct consequence is one that has a definite, immediate and automatic effect on the range of a defendant’s punishment.” *Kaiser v. State*, 641 N.W.2d 900, 904 n.6 (Minn. 2002). Consistent with these principles, before the district court accepts a guilty plea, it must ensure that defense counsel has told the defendant—and the defendant understands—that “[i]f a minimum sentence is required by statute, the judge may impose a sentence of imprisonment” not less than the amount specified in the statute. Minn. R. Crim. P. 15.01, subd. 1(6)(j).

Goodwin contends that the district court erred in denying his motion for plea withdrawal under the manifest-injustice standard because his plea was unintelligent. Specifically, he argues that he was “misled regarding the mandatory minimum penalty.”

Our decision in *Crawford* is dispositive here. On appeal to this court, Crawford challenged the validity of his guilty plea to first-degree controlled-substance possession, arguing that his plea was invalid. *Crawford*, 13 N.W.3d at 695. He argued that his plea was unintelligent because he was not aware that imposition of a mandatory-minimum term of imprisonment was a direct consequence of his guilty plea or that the district court was not authorized to disregard that mandatory-minimum sentence. *Id.* “Instead, he was led to believe that the district court had authority to grant his request for a downward-dispositional sentencing departure” based upon “the state’s assertion that, because it had not invoked the mandatory-minimum sentencing provision in the charging document, that provision did not restrict the district court’s sentencing discretion.” *Id.* We concluded that

the district court was not authorized to disregard the relevant mandatory-minimum sentence and that, therefore, appellant's guilty plea was unintelligent and invalid. *Id.* Thus, we remanded to allow Crawford to withdraw his guilty plea. *Id.*

Similar to the circumstances here, Crawford pleaded guilty intending to seek a downward-dispositional sentencing departure, that is, to avoid the applicable mandatory-minimum prison sentence. *Id.* We summarized the circumstances as follows:

[I]f Crawford were convicted of the underlying charge of first-degree controlled-substance possession, a mandatory-minimum sentence of 48 months would be required if the offense had been charged with reference to a prior first-degree controlled-substance conviction. However, the state asserted that even though Crawford had a prior controlled-substance conviction, which triggered application of the mandatory-minimum sentence, the district court was not required to impose the mandatory-minimum sentence if the state did not charge Crawford's first-degree controlled-substance offense as a subsequent controlled-substance offense, that is, with reference to Crawford's prior controlled-substance conviction. The district court and defense counsel accepted that assertion.

Id.

The district court ultimately rejected Crawford's request for a downward sentencing departure, and Crawford appealed to this court, arguing that: (1) he was "misinformed regarding the direct consequences of his guilty plea and that his plea was therefore unintelligent and invalid," (2) "a mandatory-minimum prison sentence of at least 48 months was a direct consequence of his guilty plea," (3) "the district court had no authority to disregard that mandatory-minimum sentence," and (4) "the district court therefore had no authority to grant a downward-dispositional departure and place him on probation instead of imposing an executed prison sentence." *Id.* at 696-97. We agreed that the district

court did not have authority to disregard the mandatory-minimum sentence, and we concluded that the state was not authorized to sidestep the mandatory sentence via charging decisions.¹ *Id.* at 698-703.

Like the circumstances in *Crawford*, the record here establishes that Goodwin was not informed that a direct consequence of his guilty plea was an unavoidable mandatory-minimum prison sentence. Instead, he was incorrectly led to believe that the district court might have authority to disregard the applicable mandatory-minimum sentence, to grant his request for a downward-dispositional departure, and to place him on probation. But as set forth in *Crawford*, precedent established that the district court was not authorized to do so. *See* 13 N.W.3d at 698-701 (summarizing caselaw indicating that the district court did not have authority to disregard the applicable mandatory-minimum sentence).

We recognize that, when Goodwin tendered his guilty plea, the prosecutor’s position was clear: the state did not agree that the district court was authorized to sentence Goodwin without regard to the applicable mandatory-minimum sentence. The prosecutor informed the district court: “We are not agreeing that the Court has discretion to depart, and that will be the basis of our argument at sentencing.” We also recognize that the district court

¹ Subsequently, in *Butler v. State*, we applied *Crawford* and concluded that the postconviction court erred by denying a motion to withdraw a guilty plea to unlawful possession of ammunition under Minn. Stat. § 624.713, subd. 1(2) (2020), as unintelligent, reasoning that the defendant “had not been informed that he faced a mandatory-minimum 60-month prison sentence when he pleaded guilty, which foreclosed any possibility of a downward dispositional departure.” No. A24-1288, 2025 WL 380918, at *1 (Minn. App. Feb. 3, 2025). We cite *Butler* as persuasive authority. *See* Minn. R. Civ. App. P. 136.01, subd. 1(c) (“Nonprecedential opinions . . . are not binding authority . . . but . . . may be cited as persuasive authority.”).

clearly informed Goodwin that there was no guarantee that it would accept his attorney's argument and conclude that it had discretion to disregard the mandatory-minimum sentence.

But these circumstances do not change our conclusion that Goodwin's plea was unintelligent because, after the state made its position clear, the district court effectively led Goodwin to believe that the court had discretion to accept his argument and to place him on probation. The district court did so when it addressed Goodwin immediately before accepting his guilty plea and stated, "And I want to make sure that you understand, sir, the *minimal consequence that you can have from this case would be that the prison sentence would be hanging over your head, you know that?*" (Emphasis added.) Goodwin responded, "Yes." The court continued, "And that the maximum penalty you can get from this case is that I can commit you to the Commissioner of Corrections at sentencing for a period of 60 months, you know that?" Goodwin responded, "Yes." The court continued, "So, that's the spectrum and there's no guarantee as to what I will ultimately do at sentencing, you understand that?" Goodwin responded, "Yes." The court asked, "All right. Understanding that, is it your intention to go forward and plead guilty today?" Goodwin responded, "Yes."

Any reasonable person would understand the district court's explanation to mean that, although there was no guarantee that the district court *would* agree with the defense's argument, the district court *could* agree with the defense's argument and *could* grant Goodwin's request for probation. But the district court had no discretion to do so. As we explained in *Crawford*:

Mandatory-minimum sentencing statutes “prohibit a stay of execution of sentence and probation.” *See State v. Adams*, 791 N.W.2d 757, 759 (Minn. App. 2010) (discussing Minn. Stat. §§ 152.022, subd. 3(b), .026 (2006)), *rev. denied* (Minn. Mar. 15, 2011). Thus, mandatory-minimum sentencing provisions restrict judicial discretion in sentencing. *See State v. Olson*, 325 N.W.2d 13, 18 (Minn. 1982) (“[T]he legislature may restrict the exercise of judicial discretion in sentencing, such as by providing for mandatory sentences”). The supreme court has rejected “the argument that the legislature must append language prohibiting waiver to every mandatory statute to ensure that the statute is given effect,” reasoning that “[t]he canons of statutory construction provide that ‘shall’ is mandatory.” *State v. Humes*, 581 N.W.2d 317, 319 (Minn. 1998); *see State v. Sheppard*, 587 N.W.2d 53, 56 (Minn. App. 1998) (applying *Humes* to consideration of a mandatory-minimum sentencing provision in Minn. Stat. § 609.11, subd. 8(b) (1996), and stating that “[t]he legislature should not be expected to enumerate a prohibition against stayed executions in every mandatory sentencing statute, particularly when the mandatory language and removal of discretion is clear”), *rev. denied* (Minn. Jan. 27, 1999).

Id. at 698. We further explained that, if the legislature provides that the district court “shall” impose a mandatory-minimum sentence and provides no express authorization to disregard the mandatory minimum, a district court is without authority to do so. *Id.* at 698-701; *State v. Rausch*, 799 N.W.2d 19, 20 (Minn. App. 2011) (“In the absence of express authorization by the legislature, a district court is without authority to disregard a statutory mandatory-minimum sentence.”).

In sum, given the precedent existing at the time of Goodwin’s plea, there was no basis to conclude that imposition of the applicable mandatory-minimum sentence could be avoided by ignoring Goodwin’s mandatory-minimum-triggering prior conviction. And although there are some factual differences between this case and *Crawford*, those

differences do not change the fact that Goodwin’s guilty plea was based on the mistaken belief that the district court *could* accept defense counsel’s sentencing argument, disregard the applicable mandatory-minimum prison sentence, and place Goodwin on probation. The district court could not do so. Thus, the district court’s statement that the sentencing “spectrum” ranged from the “minimal consequence” of a prison sentence “hanging over your head” to a maximum prison sentence of 60 months was a misstatement of law. That misstatement may have been unintentional and made in good faith, but it nonetheless misled Goodwin regarding an unavoidable direct consequence of his guilty plea—mandatory imprisonment for 60 months—rendering his plea unintelligent and invalid.

We recognize the need to resolve criminal cases through plea bargaining and creative arguments. But in the end, our rules of criminal procedure provide that “[b]efore the judge accepts a guilty plea,” the judge must “ensure defense counsel has told the defendant and the defendant understands” that “[i]f a minimum sentence is required by statute, the judge may impose a sentence of imprisonment of not less than” the statutory minimum “for the crime charged.” Minn. R. Crim. P. 15.01, subd. 1(6)(j). Thus, if a defendant tenders a guilty plea to an offense that might require a mandatory-minimum term of incarceration, the best practice is for the district court to determine—before accepting the guilty plea—whether or not “a minimum sentence is required by statute.” *Id.* Doing so ensures compliance with rule 15.01, subdivision 1(6)(j), and may avoid a subsequent request for plea withdrawal.

Because Goodwin's guilty plea was unintelligent and therefore invalid, we reverse and remand to allow Goodwin to withdraw his plea, without addressing his assertion that his guilty plea was also involuntary.

Reversed and remanded.