

**STATE OF MINNESOTA
IN COURT OF APPEALS
A25-2059**

John Lee Edmondson, petitioner,
Appellant,

vs.

State of Minnesota,
Respondent.

**Filed August 24, 2026
Reversed and remanded
Larson, Judge**

Ramsey County District Court
File No. 62-K4-93-003107

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

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

John J. Choi, Ramsey County Attorney, Michelle A. Monteiro, Assistant County Attorney, St. Paul, Minnesota (for respondent)

Considered and decided by Harris, Presiding Judge; Frisch, Chief Judge; and Larson, Judge.

SYLLABUS

An applicant with a qualifying aiding-and-abetting-felony-murder conviction (qualifying felony-murder conviction) who is in the custody of the commissioner of corrections or under court supervision may submit a preliminary application for relief from that conviction, even if the applicant is not in the custody of the commissioner of

corrections or under court supervision for the qualifying felony-murder conviction from which the applicant seeks relief.

OPINION

LARSON, Judge

In 2023, the legislature enacted a process that allows a person with a qualifying felony-murder conviction to petition the district court to vacate that conviction. 2023 Minn. Laws ch. 52, art. 4, § 24, at 864-68, *amended by* 2024 Minn. Laws ch. 123, art. 4, §§ 19-21, at 2268-71 (the Act).¹ The Act provides that:

Any person convicted of a violation of [Minn. Stat. § 609.185(a)(3)], or [Minn. Stat. § 609.19, subd. 2(1)], under the theory of liability for crimes of another *and who is in the custody of the commissioner of corrections or under court supervision* is entitled to petition to have the person’s conviction vacated pursuant to this section.

2023 Minn. Laws ch. 52, art. 4, § 24, subd. 1, at 864 (emphasis added). To obtain retroactive relief, an eligible person must first file a “preliminary application” in district court. *Id.*, subd. 4, at 865.

Appellant John Lee Edmondson appeals the district court’s decision to summarily deny his preliminary application. Specifically, Edmondson contests the district court’s determination that the phrase “who is in the custody of the commissioner of corrections or under court supervision” requires that the applicant be in custody or under supervision for

¹ The Act is not codified in the Minnesota statutes, likely because the application procedure for seeking relief from a qualifying felony-murder conviction is time-limited. *See Raisch v. State*, 8 N.W.3d 237, 242 n.3 (Minn. App. 2024) (discussing the 2023 session law), *rev. denied* (Minn. Nov. 19, 2024); *see also* 2024 Minn. Laws ch. 123, art. 4, § 21(c), at 2271 (extending the deadline for certain persons seeking relief to October 1, 2026).

the conviction from which relief is sought. Because we agree with Edmondson that the Act's plain language does not provide for such a limitation, we reverse and remand.

FACTS

Following a jury trial in 1994, Edmondson was convicted of aiding and abetting second-degree felony murder under Minn. Stat. § 609.19, subd. 2 (1992), and aggravated robbery under Minn. Stat. § 609.245 (1992). The district court sentenced Edmondson to a 225-month prison term for aiding and abetting second-degree felony murder and to an 87-month prison term for aggravated robbery. Edmondson filed a direct appeal, and we affirmed his convictions and sentences. *State v. Edmondson*, No. C0-94-1708, 1995 WL 254354, at *1 (Minn. App. May 2, 1995), *rev. denied* (Minn. June 29, 1995).

On May 20, 2017, Edmondson completed his sentences for the 1994 convictions. Thereafter, Edmondson was convicted of second-degree intentional murder for an offense that occurred in February 2023. Edmondson was sentenced to a 480-month prison term.² He is currently in the custody of the commissioner of corrections serving this sentence.

On September 25, 2026, Edmondson filed a preliminary application under the Act to vacate his 1994 qualifying felony-murder conviction. The district court summarily denied Edmondson's preliminary application. The district court concluded that Edmondson was not entitled to relief because, at the time he filed his preliminary application, he was not in custody for the 1994 conviction. The district court reasoned that,

² Edmondson appealed this sentence, and that appeal is currently pending in our court. *See State v. Edmonson*, No. A25-1681.

despite such limiting language not appearing in the Act, allowing a person in Edmondson's position to submit a preliminary application would be an absurd result.

Edmondson appeals.

ISSUE

Did the district court abuse its discretion when it summarily denied Edmondson's preliminary application on the ground that he was not in the custody of the commissioner of corrections for the conviction from which he sought relief?

ANALYSIS

Edmondson challenges the district court's decision to summarily deny his preliminary application. We review a district court's decision to summarily deny a preliminary application for an abuse of discretion. *State v. Zielinski*, 32 N.W.3d 847, 856 (Minn. 2026). An abuse of discretion occurs when a decision "is based on an erroneous view of the law or is against logic and the facts in the record." *State v. Griffin*, 24 N.W.3d 247, 255 (Minn. 2025) (quotation omitted). We review findings of fact for clear error and legal conclusions de novo. *Id.*

As discussed above, the Act allows a person with a qualifying felony-murder conviction to petition the district court to vacate that conviction. 2023 Minn. Laws ch. 52, art. 4, § 24, at 864-68, *amended by* 2024 Minn. Laws ch. 123, art. 4, §§ 19-21, at 2268-71. The Act sets forth a series of steps that must occur *before* it can be determined that an applicant is entitled to relief.

"In the first step, the applicant must submit a preliminary application to the district court seeking permission to petition to vacate the felony murder conviction." *Zielinski*, 32

N.W.3d at 854. The “preliminary application must contain certain identifying and procedural information . . . and ‘a brief statement . . . explaining why the applicant is entitled to relief under [the Act].’” *Id.* (citation omitted).

At the outset, the district court may “‘summarily deny’ a preliminary application in certain scenarios.” *Id.* at 856; *see also Griffin*, 24 N.W.2d at 251 n.4 (noting a distinction between “summarily” denying a preliminary application and denying a preliminary application). Specifically, summary denial can occur if: (1) “the application does not contain the [required] information”; (2) “*the applicant is not in the custody of the commissioner of corrections or under court supervision*”; (3) “the applicant was not convicted of a violation of [Minn. Stat. § 609.185(a)(3)] or [Minn. Stat. § 609.19, subd. 2(1)], for crimes committed before August 1, 2023”; (4) “the issues raised in the application are not relevant to the relief available under [the Act] or have previously been decided by the court of appeals or the supreme court in the same case”; or (5) the applicant previously filed a preliminary application for the same conviction. 2023 Minn. Laws ch. 52, art. 4, § 24, subd. 5(e), (f), at 866 (emphasis added). One of these five circumstances *must* exist for a district court to summarily deny a preliminary application. *See Zielinski*, 32 N.W.3d at 856-57.

If the preliminary application is not *summarily* denied, then the district court must assess “whether, in the discretion of [the district court], there is a reasonable probability that the application is entitled to relief.” *Id.* at 854 (citation omitted). To make its determination, the district court considers “‘the preliminary application and any materials submitted with the preliminary application and may consider relevant records in the

possession of the judicial branch.”” *Id.* (citation omitted). If the district court determines “there is not a reasonable probability that the applicant is entitled to relief, the [district court] shall send notice to the applicant” with a “brief statement explaining the reasons” for its decision. *Id.* (citation omitted).

But if the district court determines that “there is a reasonable probability that the applicant is entitled to relief,” the proceeding moves to the second step. *See id.* There, the applicant has 60 days to file a petition to vacate their conviction. *Id.* At this point, the state can file “its support or opposition, and the [district] court issues an order scheduling the matter for sentencing, scheduling a hearing, or denying the petition.” *Id.*

Here, the district court summarily denied Edmondson’s preliminary application on the basis that he “is not in the custody of the commissioner of corrections or under court supervision” because he is not in custody for the conviction from which he seeks relief. Edmondson challenges this decision on the basis that he has a qualifying felony-murder conviction and is *currently* the custody of the commissioner of corrections, which—according to Edmondson—is all the statute requires. The state disagrees, arguing the district court correctly interpreted the statute. The state alternatively argues that, even if its proposed interpretation is contrary to the plain language, we should interpret the statute in this manner to avoid an absurd result. We address the arguments in turn below.

I.

Edmondson argues the district court erred when it summarily denied his preliminary application on the basis that the phrase “in the custody of the commissioner of corrections or under court supervision” requires the applicant to be in custody or under supervision for

the conviction from which relief is sought. Edmondson’s argument presents a statutory interpretation question that we review de novo. *See State v. Holl*, 966 N.W.2d 803, 808 (Minn. 2021).

When interpreting a statute, our goal is to “effectuate the intention of the legislature, reading the statute as a whole.” *Hagen v. Steven Scott Mgmt., Inc.*, 963 N.W.2d 164, 169 (Minn. 2021) (quotation omitted). “When legislative intent is clear from the statute’s plain and unambiguous language, we interpret the statute according to its plain meaning.” *City of Brainerd v. Brainerd Invs. P’ship*, 827 N.W.2d 752, 755 (Minn. 2013). When assessing whether a statute is plain and unambiguous, we look to the statute’s “text, structure, and punctuation” and apply the preambiguity canons of interpretation. *State v. Lee*, 22 N.W.3d 608, 614 (Minn. App. 2025) (quoting *State v. Pakhnyuk*, 926 N.W.2d 914, 921 (Minn. 2019)); *see also State v. Riggs*, 865 N.W.2d 679, 682 n.3 (Minn. 2015) (distinguishing between preambiguity “canons of interpretation” and postambiguity “canons of construction”). The preambiguity canons of interpretation include the ordinary-meaning canon, the whole-statute canon, the canon against surplusage, and the presumption of consistent usage. *Lee*, 22 N.W.3d at 614. “Only when [a statute’s] language is subject to more than one reasonable interpretation may we ‘consider extrinsic sources and canons.’” *Id.* (quoting *State v. Woolridge Carter*, 9 N.W.3d 839, 844 (Minn. 2024)).

Edmondson argues that the statute plainly allows any person with a qualifying felony-murder conviction to submit a preliminary application if they are in the custody of the commissioner of corrections or under court supervision—even if the applicant is not in

custody or under supervision for the conviction from which relief is sought. We agree with Edmondson.

Under subdivision 1, the Act provides that:

Any person convicted of a violation of [Minn. Stat. § 609.185(a)(3)], or [Minn. Stat. § 609.19, subd. 2(1)], under the theory of liability for crimes of another *and who is in the custody of the commissioner of corrections or under court supervision* is entitled to petition to have the person's conviction vacated pursuant to this section.

2023 Minn. Laws ch. 52, art. 4, § 24, subd. 1, at 864 (emphasis added). Subdivision 5 uses substantially identical language, providing that a district court may summarily deny a preliminary application when the applicant “is *not* in the custody of the commissioner of corrections or under court supervision.” *Id.*, subd. 5(e)(2), at 866 (emphasis added). We conclude that these provisions are susceptible to only one reasonable interpretation—that the applicant must be in the commissioner's custody or under court supervision to submit a preliminary application.

The state urges us to reach a different result, asking that we read additional, qualifying language into the Act—specifically, that the applicant be in custody or under supervision *for the conviction from which relief is sought*. But the state presents no textual basis for adding this qualification to the statute as adopted by the legislature. And “we have long held that it is impermissible to add words or phrases to an unambiguous statute.” *State v. Hensel*, 901 N.W.2d 166, 178 (Minn. 2017) (quotation omitted). “We cannot rewrite a statute under the guise of statutory interpretation.” *Laase v. 2007 Chevrolet Tahoe*, 776 N.W.2d 431, 438 (Minn. 2009). Moreover, the state's proposed interpretation

is inconsistent with the general rule that we construe “remedial statutes” to apply more broadly. *See S.M. Hentges & Sons, Inc. v. Mensing*, 777 N.W.2d 228, 232 (Minn. 2010) (“Remedial statutes are generally entitled to liberal construction in favor of the remedy the statutes provide or the class they benefit.”).

Having concluded the Act plainly does not require that an applicant be in custody or under supervision for the conviction from which relief is sought, we must next consider the state’s absurdity argument. *See State v. Wukawitz*, 662 N.W.2d 517, 525 (Minn. 2003) (“Because the language of the statute is plain and unambiguous, we will not engage in any further construction unless we conclude that the plain meaning leads to absurd or unreasonable results that depart from the purpose of the statute.”).

II.

The state contends that, even if the statute plainly does not require the applicant to be in custody or under supervision for the conviction from which relief is sought, we nonetheless should interpret the statute in this manner to avoid an absurd result. When interpreting a statute, we presume “the legislature does not intend a result that is absurd.” Minn. Stat. § 645.17(1) (2024). The absurdity canon usually applies if a statute is ambiguous. *Schatz v. Interfaith Care Ctr.*, 811 N.W.2d 643, 651 (Minn. 2012). The absurdity canon can be used to override the plain language of an *unambiguous* statute only “in an exceedingly rare case in which the plain meaning of the statute ‘utterly confounds’ the clear legislative purpose of the statute.” *Id.* (quoting *Weston v. McWilliams & Assocs., Inc.*, 716 N.W.2d 634, 639 (Minn. 2006)).

We observe that the supreme court has applied the absurdity canon to depart from a statute's plain language in only one case. *State v. McReynolds*, 973 N.W.2d 314, 319 (Minn. 2022) (citing *Wegener v. Comm'r of Revenue*, 505 N.W.2d 612, 617 (Minn. 1993)). And the supreme court has never applied the absurdity canon to an unambiguous criminal statute. *See, e.g., id.* at 319-20 (observing the supreme court has never applied the absurdity canon "to override the plain language of a criminal statute"); *State v. Ortega-Rodriguez*, 920 N.W.2d 642, 646 (Minn. 2018) (noting the supreme court has never applied the absurdity canon "in a criminal case"). And we cannot apply the absurdity canon to fill in gaps that exist in a statute. *See State v. Khalil*, 956 N.W.2d 627, 638 (Minn. 2021) ("If a gap in the statute exists . . . filling in that gap is a job for the Legislature."); *see also State v. Carson*, 902 N.W.2d 441, 446 (Minn. 2017) (determining that a gap in the relevant statute was a "public policy concern [that] should be directed to the Legislature because [the supreme court] must read this state's laws as they are, not as some argue they should be" (quotation omitted)); *McReynolds*, 973 N.W.2d at 320 ("A bad policy outcome is not enough to justify departure from the plain language of a statute.").

The state raises two arguments regarding absurdity. First, the state contends that the plain language is absurd because it "incentivizes individuals to commit crimes" so that they "become eligible to vacate their convictions." But, as explained above, submitting a preliminary application does not guarantee relief. If a preliminary application is *not* summarily denied, the district court then evaluates whether "there is a reasonable probability that the application is entitled to relief." 2023 Minn. Laws ch. 52, art. 4, § 24, subd. 5(c), at 865. As relevant to Edmondson, to meet the "reasonable probability"

standard from an aiding-and-abetting-second-degree-felony-murder conviction, the applicant must show by a preponderance of the evidence that they: “(1) did not cause the death of a human being; and (2) were not a major participant in the underlying felony and did not act with extreme indifference to human life.”³ *Zielinski*, 32 N.W.3d at 855 n.6. Given these requirements, it is a remote and speculative hypothetical that a person would be legitimately incentivized to reoffend and face new punishment⁴ for the mere opportunity to submit a preliminary application.

Moreover, we perceive that there are non-absurd reasons the Act may not be limited in the manner the state suggests. The custody or supervision requirement only relates to a district court “summarily” denying a preliminary application. A preliminary application can otherwise be denied on the basis that the applicant is not entitled to relief. And it is not clear based upon the arguments made in this appeal that there are not individuals who might be entitled to relief under the Act if they are currently in custody or under supervision, despite completing their sentence for a qualifying felony-murder conviction.⁵

³ An applicant seeking relief from aiding-and-abetting-*first-degree-intentional*-felony murder conviction must show by a preponderance of the evidence that they: “(1) did not cause the death of a human being; and (2) did not intentionally aid . . . Or otherwise procure another with the intent to cause the death of a human being.” *Zielinski*, 32 N.W.3d at 855 n.6.

⁴ An applicant must be in the commissioner’s custody or under court supervision, thus only convictions that result in that level of punishment would result in eligibility.

⁵ Because the Edmondson’s preliminary application was summarily denied, the district court never analyzed whether there was a reasonable probability that Edmondson was entitled to relief. Accordingly, we express no opinion on the merits of Edmondson’s preliminary application.

We are similarly unpersuaded by the state’s second argument that the plain language is absurd because it conflicts with the deadline to petition for relief.⁶ The state argues that our interpretation of the Act’s plain language in conjunction with the Act’s deadline to petition for relief creates classes of individuals “who would be ineligible for relief with no rational basis.” For example, a person with a prior qualifying felony-murder conviction and a subsequent conviction that occurred *before* the statutory deadline may apply for relief while a person who has a prior qualifying felony-murder conviction and a subsequent conviction that occurs *after* the deadline may not. But the supreme court has held that the absurdity canon cannot be used to fill in statutory gaps left by the legislature. *See Khalil*, 956 N.W.2d at 638. Instead, “we must read this state’s laws as they are, not as some argue they should be.” *Carson*, 902 N.W.2d at 446 (quotation omitted).

Accordingly, we conclude that this is not the exceedingly rare case in which the statute’s plain language utterly confounds the statute’s legislative purpose. The purpose of the preliminary-application process is to give an applicant with a qualifying felony-murder conviction an *opportunity* for the district court to determine whether there is a reasonable probability that they are entitled to relief. To the extent those permitted to submit a preliminary application encompasses individuals the state asserts should not qualify, that issue is a “public policy concern [that] should be directed to the Legislature.” *See Carson*, 902 N.W.2d at 446.

⁶ Subdivision 4(d) previously required that “[a]ny person seeking relief under this section must submit a preliminary application no later than October 1, 2025.” The Act has since been amended to extend the time to submit a preliminary application to October 1, 2026. *See* 2024 Minn. Laws ch. 123, art. 4, § 21(c), at 2271.

For these reasons, we conclude an applicant who is in the custody of the commissioner of corrections or under court supervision may submit a preliminary application for relief from a qualifying felony-murder conviction, even if the applicant is not in custody or under supervision for the conviction from which relief is sought. Because the district court abused its discretion when it summarily denied Edmondson's preliminary application on the sole basis that he is not currently in the commissioner's custody for his 1994 qualifying felony-murder conviction, we reverse and remand for further proceedings.

DECISION

We conclude an applicant who is in the custody of the commissioner of corrections or under court supervision may submit a preliminary application for relief from a qualifying felony-murder conviction, even if the applicant is not in custody or under supervision for the qualifying felony-murder conviction from which relief is sought. Accordingly, the district court abused its discretion when it summarily denied Edmondson's preliminary application on the ground that he was not in the commissioner's custody for his prior qualifying felony-murder conviction. We reverse and remand for the district court to further evaluate Edmondson's preliminary application, consistent with this opinion.

Reversed and remanded.