This opinion is nonprecedential except as provided by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
A25-2191

State of Minnesota,
Respondent,

vs.

Wayne Dushon Blanks,
Appellant.

Filed November 9, 2026
Affirmed
Schmidt, Judge

Hennepin County District Court
File No. 27-CR-24-21019

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

Kristyn M. Anderson, Minneapolis City Attorney, Adam E. Szymanski, Assistant City Attorney, Minneapolis, Minnesota (for respondent)

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

Considered and decided by Schmidt, Presiding Judge; Bentley, Judge; and Slieter, Judge.*

* Retired judge of the Minnesota Court of Appeals, serving by appointment pursuant to Minn. Const. art. VI, § 10.

NONPRECEDENTIAL OPINION

SCHMIDT, Judge

Appellant Wayne Dushon Blanks challenges his convictions of reckless driving and failure to stop after a collision, arguing the district court clearly erred by finding that he did not prove his mental-illness defense. We affirm.

FACTS

Two police officers in a parked squad car in Minneapolis saw a Ford Explorer speeding and swerving off the street onto the sidewalk. Police observed the SUV drive back onto the street, into the opposite lane, and nearly hit their squad car. The officers turned on the squad car's lights and sirens and followed the vehicle. The vehicle swerved in and out of traffic, went through a red light, collided with one vehicle, swiped another vehicle, and finally came to a stop. The driver, later identified as Blanks, jumped out of the SUV and started running. The officers followed Blanks in the squad car, saw Blanks turn back and look at them, and then turn and keep running. After officers yelled multiple times for him to stop, Blanks finally stopped.

The officers handcuffed Blanks and put him in the squad car. Blanks told the officers that he was driving the Ford Explorer. He looked toward the accident scene and asked, "Is they okay?" Blanks told the officers that he thought someone was in the back seat of his SUV and was trying to grab him. Blanks said he was trying to flip his vehicle to escape the person in the back seat. An officer told Blanks that he "could have killed several people." Blanks responded, "I know I tried to swerve off so I would not hurt anybody." Blanks said that he got out of the SUV and ran because "they" were still after

him. The officers did not see anyone in the vehicle with Blanks or chasing him when he was running. Blanks informed officers that he has diagnosed bipolar disorder and schizophrenia and noted that he had not taken his medication in months. The officers took Blanks to the hospital to be "medically cleared for booking."

Respondent State of Minnesota charged Blanks with reckless driving and failure to stop after a collision. At defense counsel's request under Minn. R. Crim. P. 20.02, the district court ordered an examination of Blanks's mental state at the time of the accident.

A forensic psychologist examined Blanks, evaluated decades of his medical and criminal records, and reviewed evidence from this case. In her written report, the psychologist offered diagnoses of unspecified schizophrenia and other psychological disorders; substance-use disorders; adult antisocial behavior; and noted Blanks report of hearing threatening voices. She opined that Blanks's "mental illness was impacting his perceptions during the alleged event," leading him to believe that "his actions were for self-preservation." The forensic psychologist concluded that Blanks did not understand the moral wrongfulness of his actions.

Defense counsel filed a notice of an intent to present a mental-illness defense. After Blanks waived a jury, the district court found Blanks guilty of both counts based upon the parties' stipulated evidence. During the mental-illness phase of the trial, the district court heard testimony from the forensic psychologist and received her report into evidence.

After trial, the district court denied Blanks's mental-illness defense, determining that it could not "reconcile" the facts from the offenses with the forensic psychologist's opinion that Blanks did not know the moral wrongfulness of his actions. The district court

found that Blanks "knew, as he was driving and immediately afterwards, that his driving conduct was illegal and dangerous," "took precautions to not hurt anyone," and asked about the welfare of other drivers. The court also found that medical personnel at the hospital "did not treat [him] for any mental illness symptoms and cleared him for discharge to be transported to jail." The district court "agree[d]" that Blanks "'appeared to be trying to avoid personal harm,'" but found that Blanks "appreciated the moral wrongfulness" of his actions. The district court found that Blanks failed to prove his mental-illness defense, convicted him of both offenses, and imposed stayed jail sentences and a fine.

Blanks appeals.

DECISION

Blanks argues the district court improperly rejected his mental-illness defense. Blanks had the burden to prove, by a preponderance of the evidence, his defense. *See State v. Roberts*, 876 N.W.2d 863, 867 (Minn. 2016). We will not disturb a district court's finding of fact that the defendant failed to prove a mental-illness defense unless that finding is clearly erroneous. *Id.* at 868. A finding is clearly erroneous if it lacks evidentiary support or "was induced by an erroneous view of the law." *Id.* (quotation omitted).

The statute codifying the mental-illness defense provides:

> No person having a mental illness or cognitive impairment so as to be incapable of understanding the proceedings or making a defense shall be tried, sentenced, or punished for any crime; but the person shall not be excused from criminal liability except upon proof that at the time of committing the alleged criminal act the person was laboring under such a defect of reason, from one of these causes, as not to know the nature of the act, or that it was wrong.

Minn. Stat. § 611.026 (2024). To prove a mental-illness defense, the supreme court has held that a defendant must prove that he did not know his act "was wrong in a moral sense and not merely . . . that he has violated a statute." *Roberts*, 876 N.W.2d at 868 (quotations omitted). In assessing a defendant's knowledge of moral wrongfulness, a district court considers various factors, including: "planning," "flight from authorities," and "expressing awareness of consequences." *Id.* at 869. The concepts of legal wrongfulness and moral wrongfulness are "not mutually exclusive" and "overlap to a great extent." *Id.* at 870 n.7.

On appeal, Blanks challenges three of the district court's factual findings, that Blanks (1) knew his driving was illegal and dangerous, (2) took precautions and showed concern for the other drivers, and (3) was not treated by hospital staff for mental illness. Blanks contends that these findings relied on a mistaken view of the law or lack record support and, therefore, cannot support the finding that Blanks did not understand the wrongfulness of his actions. We address each challenged finding in turn.

Blanks knew his driving was illegal and dangerous

Blanks argues the district court's finding that he knew his driving was "illegal and dangerous" is clearly erroneous because the finding was induced by an erroneous view of the law. Blanks contends that the finding demonstrated the wrongfulness of his driving in a legal sense, not a moral sense. We agree with Blanks that the word "illegal" connotes "legal wrongfulness," which does not apply to his mental-illness defense. But the district court's "dangerous" finding does apply to the mental-illness defense; or, at a minimum, overlaps with both "legal wrongfulness" and "moral wrongfulness." *Id.*

The "dangerous" finding showed legal wrongfulness because it proved that Blanks "consciously disregard[ed]" the risk to others with his driving, which is an element of the offense of reckless driving. *See* Minn. Stat. § 169.13, subd. 1(a) (2024). That legal significance of the dangerousness finding does not, however, negate the district court's finding as to the "moral wrongfulness" of the conduct. *See Roberts*, 876 N.W.2d at 870 n.7. Thus, the district court's finding that Blanks knew his driving conduct was dangerous—and, therefore, was morally wrong—was not clearly erroneous.

Blanks took precautions and showed concern for others

Blanks argues that the district court clearly erred by finding that his conduct of taking precautions and showing concern for others was inconsistent with his mental-illness defense. He again does not dispute the evidentiary basis for the finding but contends the district court relied on an erroneous view of the law. We are not persuaded.

The district court found that Blanks's concern for others—together with other factors—showed that he "appreciated the moral wrongfulness" of his driving. This finding reflects the district court's understanding that the proper question was not whether Blanks believed he was morally justified in trying to escape the perceived personal threat. Instead, the finding shows that the district court appropriately understood that the proper question was whether Blanks believed that he was morally justified by driving in a manner that Blanks knew endangered a lot of people. The district court did not clearly err in finding that Blanks's driving conduct in taking precautions and his demonstrated concern for others was inconsistent with Blanks believing that his driving was morally justified.

Hospital staff did not treat Blanks for mental illness

Blanks argues that the district court clearly erred in using the finding about hospital staff not treating him for mental illness as a fact weighing against his mental-illness defense. Blanks contends that the only evidence on the issue—the forensic psychologist's report—reflects that his mental health was "assessed" before he was released to the jail.

Blanks' argument conflates two distinct concepts: assessment and treatment. The evidence of the forensic psychologist's report showed that hospital staff considered Blanks's self-reported mental-health history, medication noncompliance, and symptoms. In short, the report demonstrated that hospital staff "assessed" his mental health to determine whether he could safely be held in jail. The report does not indicate that hospital staff diagnosed Blanks, gave him medication, admitted him, or engaged in any other conduct that might constitute treating him. Because the report was consistent with the district court's finding that medical personnel did not "treat" Blanks for "any mental illness symptoms," the finding is not clearly erroneous.

We conclude, therefore, that the district court did not clearly err in any of the challenged findings of fact. We also note that, on appeal, Blanks has not challenged the district court's finding that his flight from police demonstrated that he knew his driving conduct "was wrong in a moral sense." *Id.* at 868 (quotation omitted). That unchallenged finding further demonstrates that, on this record, the district court did not clearly err in its finding that Blanks had not met his burden to prove, by a preponderance of the evidence, his mental-illness defense. *Id.*

Finally, we recognize that Blanks's arguments heavily rely on the forensic psychologist's opinion offered by way of her testimony and the exhibit of her report. With the forensic psychologist offering the only evidence during the mental-illness phase of his trial, Blanks expresses frustration with the district court's decision that runs contrary to the expert's opinion. But our clear error review requires that we afford the district court "[b]road deference" in its determination of what weight to assign to an expert's psychiatric opinion. *State v. Odell*, 676 N.W.2d 646, 648–49 (Minn. 2004). Indeed, a district court's broad discretion includes the authority to "entirely" reject an expert's testimony, "even when the only experts who testify support the defendant's assertion of a mental-illness defense." *Roberts*, 876 N.W.2d at 868. It appears that the district court did so here. And without some legal error or clearly erroneous findings of fact, it is not our place to second-guess that purely discretionary decision. *See Odell*, 676 N.W.2d at 648–49.

Affirmed.