

*This opinion is nonprecedential except as provided by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
A26-0099**

David Francis Chamberlain, petitioner,
Appellant,

vs.

State of Minnesota,
Respondent.

**Filed October 5, 2026
Affirmed
Wheelock, Judge**

Hennepin County District Court
File No. 27-CR-21-11260

David Francis Chamberlain, Rush City, Minnesota (pro se appellant)

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

Mary F. Moriarty, Hennepin County Attorney, Adam E. Petras, Senior Assistant County Attorney, Minneapolis, Minnesota (for respondent)

Considered and decided by Wheelock, Presiding Judge; Harris, Judge; and Reilly, Judge.*

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

NONPRECEDENTIAL OPINION

WHEELOCK, Judge

In this appeal from the district court’s order denying postconviction relief, appellant argues that the district court erred by concluding, without an evidentiary hearing, that his ineffective-assistance-of-counsel claims were *Knaffla*-barred.¹ We affirm.

FACTS

In 2021, respondent State of Minnesota charged appellant David Francis Chamberlain with first-degree arson of a dwelling in violation of Minn. Stat. § 609.561, subd. 1 (2020), for setting fire to the Minneapolis home of D.S., L.S., and K.J. Three months later, D.S. passed away from the injuries he suffered in the fire. The state then amended the criminal complaint to add a charge of second-degree unintentional murder in violation of Minn. Stat. § 609.19, subd. 2(1) (2020). A six-day jury trial was held in July 2022, at which the following evidence was introduced.²

On June 10, 2021, L.S. left the house to go to the store and called K.J. to tell him that he saw Chamberlain walking towards the house. K.J. then heard Chamberlain’s voice outside the house asking if D.S. or L.S. were home. When K.J. opened the door, he saw that a chair on the back porch was on fire and Chamberlain was gone. K.J. attempted to

¹ The *Knaffla* bar is a procedural rule that “bars all claims that the appellant should have known at the time of direct appeal.” *Buggs v. State*, 734 N.W.2d 272, 274 (Minn. 2007) (quotations omitted); *see also State v. Knaffla*, 243 N.W.2d 737, 741 (Minn. 1976).

² Chamberlain directly appealed his conviction in January 2023. This is his first postconviction appeal.

move the chair off the porch, but it quickly was engulfed in flames. As L.S. returned from the store, he saw the fire and went inside the house to get D.S., who was asleep upstairs.

By the time L.S. woke D.S. up, the room was hot and they could not get back down the stairs. L.S. broke a window, and the two jumped from the second-story window into the backyard. L.S. sustained burns to his face, arms, and left leg, and his shoe melted onto his left foot.

D.S.'s burns were severe and covered 70% of his body, including his airway and corneas. Due to the extent of his injuries, D.S. arrived at the hospital in critical condition and his prognosis for survival was very poor. He was placed in a medically induced coma and died three months later.

Multiple witnesses testified to ongoing conflict between Chamberlain and the residents of the house in the days preceding the fire. Chamberlain also had a dispute with the house's landlord, who did not want Chamberlain at the house. Two witnesses testified that, a few days before the fire, the landlord asked Chamberlain to leave the property, and Chamberlain threatened to "burn this motherf-cker down."

Members from the Minneapolis Police Department's arson unit, the Minneapolis Fire Department, and the State Fire Marshal determined that the fire was intentional. Chamberlain's expert, Dr. Gregory Gorbett, who is a fire and explosion investigator, testified that other causes, like a tripped circuit breaker and "vintage wiring" from a light fixture, were not adequately ruled out as potential causes of the fire. Dr. Gorbett also testified that the state's experts did not follow the proper scientific method to determine the cause of the fire.

The jury found Chamberlain guilty of unintentional murder and arson. The district court convicted Chamberlain of second-degree unintentional murder and sentenced him to 360 months' imprisonment.³

On direct appeal, Chamberlain argued that the prosecutor engaged in misconduct during cross-examination and closing arguments and that the district court erred by denying his objection to the state's peremptory challenge during jury selection. *State v. Chamberlain*, No. A23-0155, 2024 WL 687750, at *2, *4 (Minn. App. Feb. 14, 2024), *rev. denied* (Minn. Apr. 24, 2024). In the opinion, we summarized the expert testimony offered by both Chamberlain and the state. *Id.* at *5-6.

On July 7, 2025, Chamberlain filed a self-represented petition for postconviction relief with the district court. He argued that he had received ineffective assistance of trial counsel because his counsel's conduct fell below an objectively reasonable standard when his counsel failed to move to exclude the state's evidence of arson. In support of that argument, Chamberlain attached Dr. Gorbett's report to his petition, contending that the report put his counsel on notice that the state's experts' testimony was inadmissible based on their failure to follow proper scientific methods.

The district court determined that Chamberlain's claim was *Knaffla*-barred because, although he did not make the argument on direct appeal, it was known to him, given that he made the same arguments in a motion to dismiss for lack of probable cause prior to trial, he was aware of the content of cross-examination of the experts at trial, and he had brought

³ Chamberlain's sentence reflects an upward departure from the presumptive sentence due to the presence of aggravating factors.

other arguments related to expert testimony on direct appeal. The district court denied Chamberlain’s postconviction petition without an evidentiary hearing because it determined that the petition failed to allege facts that, if true, would entitle Chamberlain to relief.

Chamberlain appeals.

DECISION

Chamberlain argues that, because his ineffective-assistance claim required the district court to consider evidence outside of the trial record, the district court erred by concluding, without a hearing, that his claim was *Knaffla*-barred.⁴ Appellate courts “review the [summary] denial of postconviction relief based on a claim of ineffective assistance of counsel de novo because such claims involve mixed questions of law and facts.” *Ezeka v. State*, 16 N.W.3d 768, 782 (Minn. 2025) (quotation omitted). An evidentiary hearing must be held on a petition for postconviction relief “[u]nless the petition and the files and records of the proceeding conclusively show that the petitioner is entitled to no relief.” Minn. Stat. § 590.04, subd. 1 (2024). “In determining whether an evidentiary hearing is required, a . . . court considers the facts alleged in the petition as true and construes them in the light most favorable to the petitioner.” *Andersen v. State*, 913 N.W.2d 417, 422-23 (Minn. 2018) (quotation omitted).

⁴ When a claim of ineffective assistance of trial counsel can be adjudicated on the basis of the trial record, it must be brought on direct appeal, or it will be *Knaffla*-barred if raised in a postconviction petition. *Torres v. State*, 688 N.W.2d 569, 572 (Minn. 2004); *Robinson v. State*, 567 N.W.2d 491, 494 (Minn. 1997).

To receive an evidentiary hearing on an ineffective-assistance claim, a petitioner must allege facts that, if proved by a preponderance of the evidence, show that counsel's performance "fell below an objective standard of reasonableness" and that, "but for counsel's unprofessional errors, the result of the proceeding would have been different." *Nissalke v. State*, 861 N.W.2d 88, 93-94 (Minn. 2015) (quoting *Strickland v. Washington*, 466 U.S. 668, 694 (1984)). We generally decline to review ineffective-assistance-of-trial-counsel claims that are based on matters of trial strategy. *Sanchez-Diaz v. State*, 758 N.W.2d 843, 848 (Minn. 2008). Whether to request a hearing challenging the admissibility of evidence or object to the admission of evidence are strategic decisions. *Schneider v. State*, 725 N.W.2d 516, 520-21 (Minn. 2007).

Chamberlain asserts that the state's experts did not follow the proper scientific method and argues that additional evidence is needed because his trial counsel has not answered why he did not move to exclude the state's experts' testimony and the state's experts have not had a chance to respond to a challenge to the testimony's admissibility. Chamberlain's ineffective-assistance claim is grounded in decisions his trial counsel made that fall within trial strategy.

We further observe that, prior to trial, Chamberlain's counsel moved to dismiss, arguing that the state's expert evidence was insufficient and criticizing the experts' procedures. In addition, during cross-examination, the state's experts were questioned extensively on their investigation procedures, and during Chamberlain's expert's testimony, Dr. Gorbett opined at length that the state's experts did not follow the proper scientific method and did not properly exclude other potential causes of the fire. After the

state rested, Chamberlain's counsel also moved for a judgment of acquittal, arguing that the state's experts' testimony established only that they failed to find an alternative cause for the fire and that the state's witnesses gave different versions of events. The district court denied the motion, ruling that a jury could find credible the state's evidence that the fire was intentionally set. During closing arguments, both parties focused on whether the state's experts were reliable and credible.

Because it is evident from the trial record that Chamberlain's ineffective-assistance claim fails because it is based on matters of trial strategy, and because the state's witnesses responded extensively to Chamberlain's arguments regarding the reliability of the state's experts, the resolution of Chamberlain's arguments in his postconviction petition does not require additional evidence. We agree with the district court that, at the time of his direct appeal, Chamberlain knew or should have known about the arguments he makes in his postconviction petition and that, because he did not raise them in his direct appeal, they are *Knaffla*-barred.⁵ Finally, we observe that Chamberlain failed to allege facts that, if proved, would show that his counsel's performance fell below an objective standard of reasonableness. We therefore conclude that the district court did not err by dismissing Chamberlain's petition for postconviction relief.

Affirmed.

⁵ Chamberlain does not argue that either of the two exceptions to the *Knaffla* bar—novelty and interests of justice—applies here. *See Davis v. State*, 880 N.W.2d 373, 377 (Minn. 2016) (noting the two common-law exceptions to the *Knaffla* bar).