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No. 23-126,350-A

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**IN THE
SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE
OF KANSAS**

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**STATE OF KANSAS**
Plaintiff-Appellee

vs.

**BRIAN BECK**
Defendant-Appellant

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# APPELLANT'S PETITION FOR REVIEW

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Petition for Review from the Court of Appeals
of the State of Kansas
Memorandum Opinion No. 126,350
District Court Case No. 21 CR 131
District Court of Geary County, Kansas
Honorable Courtney D. Boehm, Judge

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Kasper Schirer, #26860
Kansas Appellate Defender Office
Jayhawk Tower
700 Jackson, Suite 900
Topeka, Kansas 66604
(785) 296-5484
(785) 296-2689 Fax
adoservice@sbids.org
Attorney for Appellant

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## Prayer for Review

The district court denied Brian Beck's motion to suppress the fruit of an unconstitutional highway seizure by finding that Brian's Illinois license plate was not "clearly legible." *See* (R. XVI, generally) (evidentiary suppression hearing); (R. I, 104-06) (order denying motion). To affirm, the Court of Appeals took things a step further by finding that this plate is not merely illegible, but not even "clearly visible":

*State v. Beck*, No. 126,350, Slip Op. at 16 (Kan.App.2024); (R. XXIV, State's Ex. 3) (image cropped).

Both the district court and the Court of Appeals ignore uncontroverted evidence that Brian's plate was ***both*** clearly visible ***and*** clearly legible. The officer who stopped Brian on I-70 called Brian's license plate into dispatch – identifying it as an Illinois tag – ***while the officer was still in his patrol car***. (R. XVI, 7, 15-16; R. XXV, State's Ex. 1 at 00:10 to 00:30).[1]

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[1] State's Trial Exhibit 1 (Electronic Volume XXV) contains numerous body cam videos from three different officers. It also contains several patrol car videos from different officers. Counsel cites exclusively to the body cam footage of the officer who stopped Brian on I-70 in this brief. Here is the

The importance of Brian's case far exceeds the mere display of Brian's tag. In fact, this highway seizure has never truly been about Brian's license plate. The United States District Court for the District of Kansas has recognized as much in condemning a different set of constitutionally suspect detention practices along I-70:

> "[I]n the name of drug interdiction, [Kansas law enforcement] has waged war on motorists—especially out-of-state residents traveling between Colorado and Missouri on federal highway I-70 in Kansas. As wars go, this one is relatively easy; it's simple and cheap, and for motorists, it's not a fair fight. The war is basically a question of numbers: stop enough cars and you're bound to discover drugs. And what's the harm if a few constitutional rights are trampled along the way?"

*Shaw v. Jones*, 683 F.Supp.3d 1205, 1215-16 (D. Kan. 2023) (appeal pending).

License plate frames like Brian's are common and inoffensive, and do not violate K.S.A. 8-133(c) as long as the plate remains "clearly legible." They do not justify pulling drivers like Brian off of the highway as a pretext for launching a minor skirmish in the "war on drugs." This Court should not sit by while the Court of Appeals allows federal courts to effectively rewrite Kansas statutes. *See Beck*, No. 126,350, Slip Op. at 15-16 (looking to an unpublished case which looks to federal law to morph "clearly legible" into "visible to a law enforcement officer following at a safe distance.")

All of the errors that denied Brian a fair trial, as further developed below, should be corrected. *See* Supreme Court Rule 8.03(b)(6)(E)(vi) (review appropriate to correct an incorrect result). Furthermore, for the benefit of all Kansans, this Court should grant

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folder path to find this video within Volume XXV: BradleyRose 202103021337 WFC1053024 32837509 > Stream 1 > BradleyRose_202103021337_WFC1053024_32837509.mp4. For ease of reference, all citations to State's Ex. 1 from Volume XXV refer to this video.

review to address the timely issues presented by this pretextual highway seizure, and to clarify what "clearly legible" means. *See* Supreme Court Rule 8.03(b)(6)(E)(i), (iii) (review appropriate address important questions and clarify the law).

## Date of Order

April 26, 2024.

## Statement of the Issues

**Issue I:** **The Court of Appeals erred by doubling down on the district court's flawed interpretation of Kansas' license plate display statute. (Issue I in Brief of Appellant).**

**Issue II:** **Instructing Brian's jury on an erroneous "permissive inference" denied Brian a fair trial on the question of whether he intended to distribute contraband. (Issue II in Brief of Appellant).**

**Issue III:** **The Court of Appeals erred by tolerating speculative testimony rooted in faulty math. (Issue III in Brief of Appellant).**

**Issue IV:** **The cumulative effect of multiple errors denied Brian a fair trial. (Issue IV in Brief of Appellant).**

## Statement of Facts

The Court of Appeals provided a statement of facts. *State v. Beck,* No. 126,350, Slip Op. at 2-13 (Kan.App.2024).

## Arguments and Authorities

**Issue I:** **The Court of Appeals erred by doubling down on the district court's flawed interpretation of Kansas' license plate display statute. (Issue I in Brief of Appellant).**

### How the Court of Appeals Erred

The Court of Appeals wrongly found that Brian's license plate "was neither clearly visible nor clearly legible even from 2 feet away." *State v. Beck,* No. 126,350, Slip

Op. at 16 (Kan.App.2024). The photographic evidence says otherwise. (R. XXIV, State's Ex. 3). Furthermore, the uncontroverted testimony plainly established that an officer accurately read Brian's tag from a patrol car 30-40 feet away from Brian's car before making contact with Brian. (R. XVI, 7).

The Court of Appeals erred by endorsing the district court's flawed interpretation of K.S.A. 8-133(c). *See Beck,* No. 126,350, Slip Op. at 15-17 (endorsing the district court). K.S.A. 8-133(c) demands only that a license plate "shall be maintained free from foreign materials and in a condition to be clearly legible." The district court applied a more exacting standard, finding that Brian's tag "must be clearly legible *by an officer at a safe following distance.*" (R. I, 105) (emphasis added). This effectively rewrites the statute in the State's favor. Brief of Appellant at 10-13. The Court of Appeals erred by accepting this judicial add-on to the plain legislative text. This Court should apply its "long-standing express affection for relying on plain legislative language whenever possible." *State v. Fowler,* 311 Kan. 136, 150, 457 P.3d 927, 935 (2020).

Judicial tinkering has expanded the scope of K.S.A. 8-133(c) beyond constitutional limits. *See* Brief of Appellant at 16-18 (addressing vagueness issues presented by the district court's statutory interpretation). But on a more basic level, the judicially reworked statute defies common sense. A driver going 75 miles per hour on I-70 covers 110 feet per second. A following distance of three seconds demands about 330 feet between vehicles – more than a football field. No license plate is ever "clearly legible" at such a distance. Under the district court's "officer at a safe following distance" standard, ***no driver*** doing the speed limit on I-70 has a lawfully displayed tag.

The standard for statutory compliance must not be whether a tag is legible at an arbitrary distance set by judges and law enforcement officers on a case-by-case basis. Here, Brian's tag *was* legible. The district court erred by applying the wrong standard, and the Court of Appeals erred by endorsing that standard. This Court should reverse.

Analysis

**Brian's license plate was "clearly legible." The district court erred by finding that a violation of K.S.A. 8-133(c) justified this seizure.**

The district court's ruling on Brian's suppression motion is legally flawed for at least three reasons. First, the court based its decision on a misapplication of K.S.A. 8-133(c), and a misunderstanding of Kansas caselaw: "The Kansas Court of Appeals has held that a license plate ... must be clearly legible *by an officer at a safe following distance*." (R. I, 105) (emphasis added). The italicized language places a demand on motorists which is not present in the plain text of the statute and is not supported by this Court's cases. Second, the court did not address key factual distinctions between Brian's case and *State v. Hayes*, 8 Kan.App.2d 531, 660 P.2d 1387 (1983). Third, the court failed to consider Brian's argument that, even assuming this seizure was lawful at its outset, the officer unlawfully extended the stop after confirming the legibility of Brian's license plate. Each of these errors contributed to a legally flawed outcome.

*The district court erred by finding that a license plate must be legible "by an officer at a safe following distance."*

Despite its age, the 1983 *Hayes* case remains the most comprehensive case interpreting K.S.A. 8-133(c). However, *Hayes* does not use the "by an officer at a safe following distance" standard. Instead, the *Hayes* panel found:

> "While this statute does not specifically state that the state name must be visible when a license plate is displayed, it does state that the tag must be "legible." We read this to mean that all of the tag must be legible, including the state name, which may be the most important information on the tag."

*Hayes*, 8 Kan.App.2d at 532. And "legible" means nothing more than "capable of being read or deciphered." LEGIBLE, Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. 2023. http://www.merriam-webster.com (6 Oct. 2023). Legibility is the test – not legibility at whatever distance a particular law enforcement officer deems safe.

Federal courts interpreting the Kansas statute added the "by an officer at a safe following distance" language. *See, e.g., United States v. Orduna-Martinez,* 561 F.3d 1134, 1139 (10th Cir. 2009) (finding that "'clearly legible' means visible to an officer following at a safe distance"); *United States v. Edgerton,* 438 F.3d 1043, 1046 (10th Cir. 2006) ("'clearly legible' means the tag on a moving car is capable of being read by an officer in a car immediately following a safe distance behind"). But despite some federal courts interpreting the Kansas statute this way for years, counsel has uncovered only one unpublished Kansas case (until Brian's also unpublished case) using the "law enforcement officer following at a safe distance" standard. *See State v. Moss,* No. 122,775, 2020 WL 7086182, *4 (Kan.App.2020) (unpublished opinion).[2]

The "officer at a safe following distance" language has failed to take meaningful root in Kansas caselaw for good reasons. First: "Federal court decisions on issues of

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[2] Counsel has attached the unpublished opinion to this brief, as required by Supreme Court Rule 7.04(g)(2)(C).

state law are not binding on and have limited precedential effect in state courts." *Kansas Pub. Emps. Ret. Sys. v. Reimer & Koger Assocs., Inc.*, 262 Kan. 635, 669, 941 P.2d 1321 (1997) (citing *Erie R. Co. v. Tompkins*, 304 U.S. 64, 78-79, 58 S.Ct. 817, 82 L.Ed. 1188 (1938)). Second, this Court has routinely condemned efforts to "read into [a] statute language not readily found there." *State v. Spencer Gifts, LLC*, 304 Kan. 755, 762, 374 P.3d 680 (2016) (quoting *State v. Holt*, 289 Kan. 469, 474, 313 P.3d 826 (2013)). And reading language into the statute is precisely what the federal courts interpreting K.S.A. 8-133(c) have done. The yardstick for statutory compliance is "clearly legible," not "clearly legible by an officer at a safe following distance." K.S.A. 8-133(c).

No matter how federal courts may choose to interpret our statutes, this Court has a "long-standing express affection for relying on plain legislative language whenever possible." *Fowler*, 311 Kan. at 150. Here, the State asked the court to read something more into the plain language of K.S.A. 8-133(c), based on federal interpretations of the statute. (R. XVI, 22). The district court should not have obliged this request. And the Court of Appeals should not have endorsed the flawed decision that resulted.

The change from "clearly legible" to "clearly legible by an officer at a safe following distance" had an outsized impact on Brian's motion. The district court credited testimony that Brian's tag could not be read at a safe following distance. (R. I, 104-05). However, the officer conceded that he called in the Illinois tag from his patrol car, before making contact with Brian. (R. XVI, 7, 15-16; R. XXV, State's Ex. 1 at 00:10 to 00:30). The tag was legible — the photos speak for themselves. (R. XXIV, State's Ex. 3).

The district court erred by adding language to K.S.A. 8-133(c). It erred by imposing a non-statutory requirement that Brian's tag be legible from whatever distance law enforcement considered to be a safe following distance. The district court should have granted the motion to suppress, because Brian did not commit any traffic infraction to justify a traffic enforcement seizure. This Court should reverse.

*The district court erred in failing to distinguish this stop from the stop at issue in Hayes.*

*Hayes* informs the interpretation of K.S.A. 8-133(c), but it does not control the outcome of this factually different case. In *Hayes*, the detaining officer ***could not*** read the state name on a license plate — only the Indiana state nickname. *Hayes*, 8 Kan.App.2d at 531-33. Here, the officer correctly identified Brian's tag as an Illinois tag while in his patrol car. (R. XVI, 7, 15-16; R. XXV, State's Ex. 1 at 00:10 to 00:30).

The *Hayes* officer was unable to identify which state had issued the license plate until after making contact with the driver and spotting marijuana in plain view. The seizure was valid, because the tag was ***not*** clearly legible. *Hayes*, 8 Kan.App.2d at 533. Brian's license place ***was*** legible, so the traffic infraction seizure was unlawful. The photos admitted at the suppression hearing are conclusive. (R. XXIV, State's Ex. 1-3). The district court erred in overlooking this important distinction.

*Once an officer establishes that a plate is legible, further extension of a seizure is unjustified and unlawful.*

In district court, Brian argued that: "[O]nce [the deputy] confirmed the plate was indeed from Illinois, he should have released Mr. Beck from further detention." (R. I,

95-96). Dealing with a different traffic statute, Kansas caselaw has endorsed this argument. *State v. Diaz-Ruiz*, 42 Kan.App.2d 325, 337, 211 P.3d 836 (2009).

In *Diaz-Ruiz*, a Kansas State Trooper stopped a driver for what the trooper believed to be an unrestrained ladder hanging off the back a truck. *Diaz-Ruiz*, 42 Kan.App.2d at 326. After stopping the truck, the trooper checked the ladder and found that it was, in fact, secure. *Diaz-Ruiz*, 42 Kan.App.2d at 326. Even so, the trooper asked the driver for a driver's license and ran a license check. *Diaz-Ruiz*, 42 Kan.App.2d at 326-27. As the seizure wore on, the vehicle occupants agreed to a search of the vehicle, which turned up 300 pounds of marijuana. *Diaz-Ruiz*, 42 Kan.App.2d at 326-27. The Court of Appeals found an illegal extension of the seizure:

> "[B]ecause the trooper's reasonable suspicion evaporated once he observed that the ladder was secure, the trooper had no reason to detain the defendants to perform the tasks incident to an ordinary traffic stop. Thus, the trooper unlawfully extended the scope of the stop by questioning the defendants regarding their travel plans and requesting identification."

*Diaz-Ruiz*, 42 Kan.App.2d at 337.

Here, even if the deputy who stopped Brian initially believed Brian's tag might not comply with K.S.A. 8-133(c), that suspicion evaporated before the deputy left his patrol car. In such situations, "the officer can and should approach the driver of the vehicle to briefly explain the reason for the stop and to explain that the reason was dispelled with further investigation." *Diaz-Ruiz*, 42 Kan.App.2d at 337. Brian should have been released long before a second officer got a dog on scene and long before officers searched the car.

This approach is consistent with more general Fourth Amendment jurisprudence. "[T]he investigative methods employed should be the least intrusive means reasonably available to verify or dispel the officer's suspicion in a short period of time." *Florida v. Royer*, 460 U.S. 491, 500, 103 S.Ct. 1319, 75 L.Ed.2d 229 (1983). In fact, multiple panels of the Tenth Circuit have applied similar reasoning to suspected license tag and registration sticker violations, when the tag or sticker turned out to be properly displayed. *See Edgerton*, 438 F.3d at 1051 ("Once Trooper Dean was able to read the Colorado tag and deem it unremarkable, any suspicion that Defendant had violated § 8-133 dissipated because the tag was in 'in a place and position to be clearly visible.'"); *United States v. McSwain*, 29 F.3d 558, 561 (10th Cir. 1994) ("Once Trooper Avery approached the vehicle on foot and observed that the temporary sticker was valid and had not expired, the purpose of the stop was satisfied. Trooper Avery's further detention of the vehicle to question Mr. McSwain about his vehicle and travel itinerary and to request his license and registration exceeded the scope of the stop's underlying justification.").

Even assuming this stop had been valid at its outset, it was unlawfully extended into a full-blown traffic stop after the deputy had established that Brian was displaying a legible Illinois tag. The district court erred by denying the motion to suppress the fruit of this illegally extended seizure, and the Court of Appeals erred by affirming.

Conclusion

License plate frames which do not affect the legibility of a plate are common nationwide, and must not be construed to violate K.S.A. 8-133(c) as long as the tag

remains "clearly legible." More pointedly, such frames cannot justify an invasion of the Fourth Amendment rights of anybody who gets on the interstate between Goodland and Kansas City. This Court should reverse the district court and the Court of Appeals, and remand with instructions to grant Brian's motion to suppress.

**Issue II: Instructing Brian's jury on an erroneous "permissive inference" denied Brian a fair trial on the question of whether he intended to distribute contraband. (Issue II in Brief of Appellant).**

<u>How the Court of Appeals Erred</u>

The Court of Appeals correctly found that the district court "erred in instructing the jury that it could infer Beck intended to distribute methamphetamine based upon the amount in his possession." *State v. Beck,* No. 126,350, Slip Op. at 19 (Kan.App.2024). The panel also correctly placed the burden of proving the error harmless beyond a reasonable doubt on the State. *Beck,* No. 126,350, Slip Op. at 19.

However, the panel erred by finding that the State met this high burden. In its brief analysis, the panel failed to appreciate the damage this erroneous instruction inflicted upon Brian's defense. *Beck,* No. 126,350, Slip Op. at 19-20. For the reasons articulated in Brian's briefing, this Court should reverse the Court of Appeals, and reverse Brian's drug convictions. Brief of Appellant at 21-22.

<u>Analysis</u>

**The erroneous instruction denied Brian a fair trial on the only disputed trial question – the intent to distribute.**

The State did not present any direct evidence of an intent to distribute. Brian's car did not contain any of the paraphernalia typically associated with the distribution of

drugs — scales, plastic baggies, drug ledgers, and the like. (R. XXI, 89). Furthermore, even though officers were able to do a forensic extraction of Brian's phone, they found no communications suggesting an involvement in drug distribution. (R. XXI, 89-90).

Instead of direct evidence, the State leaned heavily in its closing argument on the opinion of law enforcement that Brian intended to distribute. (R. XXI, 137). But as the defense made clear in its cross-examination, this opinion was based almost exclusively on the amounts found in Brian's car:

> 6 Q. So you're basing your opinion solely on your training
> 7 and experience as to the quantity involved here?
> 8 A. Yes, ma'am.

(R. XXI, 90).

As a practical matter, the legally inappropriate permissive inference instruction highlighted and emphasized one piece of evidence, and minimized and deemphasized all other evidence. In theory, all evidence touching on a potential intent to distribute was equally important. But in practice, the only factor the judge explicitly instructed the jury to consider was the amount at issue being more than 3.5 grams. (R. I, 174).

The evidence that the court improperly emphasized with a legally inappropriate jury instruction was the very evidence the State leaned so hard on in closing argument to meet its burden of proof. Under these circumstances, the State cannot meet the burden of proving harmlessness.

Conclusion

This Court should reverse the Court of Appeals' finding of harmlessness. It should also reverse Brian's drug convictions, and remand for a new trial on those charges.

**Issue III: The Court of Appeals erred by tolerating speculative testimony rooted in faulty math. (Issue III in Brief of Appellant).**

How the Court of Appeals Erred

The Court of appeals acknowledged that a law enforcement witness — over Brian's objection — offered testimony that "contained mathematical inconsistencies." *State v. Beck*, No. 126,350, Slip Op. at 23 (Kan.App.2024). In short, the officer struggled with the metric system when offering an opinion about how long a particular quantity of drugs might last an individual user. A mentally misplaced decimal point resulted in a final estimate that was ***ten times too high***. Brief of Appellant at 24-25.

The Court of Appeals erred by finding that the testimony was not speculative, despite its recognized mathematical deficiencies. The panel reasoned that the officer "was offering his opinion, based on his experience and professional training as a law enforcement officer ... as to the average dose of methamphetamine." *Beck*, No. 126,350, Slip Op. at 22-23. This breezes past Brian's argument that excluding speculative testimony and admitting opinion testimony are two sides of the same coin. Appellant's Reply Brief at 3-5. An opinion which cannot be admitted as either a lay or an expert opinion under K.S.A. 60-456 is too speculative to reach the jury.

Analysis

The purpose of K.S.A. 60-456 is to ensure that opinions "have a factual basis ... in order to separate them from mere speculation." *See State v. Papen*, 274 Kan. 149, 159, 50 P.3d 37 (2002) (discussing the admission of an expert opinion). Defense counsel's speculation objection invoked these safeguards.

Defense counsel's trial objection spoke directly to several of the considerations in K.S.A. 60-456. Counsel referenced the "training and experience" of the officer giving the opinion. *Compare* (R. XXI, 92) *with* K.S.A. 60-456(b). Counsel also challenged the officer's opportunity to observe Brian. *Compare* (R. XXI, 92) *with* K.S.A. 60-456(a).

The Court of Appeals missed the mark in limiting the scope of Brian evidentiary challenge. The panel insisted that the evidence was not speculative (despite being mathematically faulty), because the evidence was rooted in the officer's training and experience. *Beck*, No. 126,350, Slip Op. at 22. But defense counsel ***actually referenced*** the training and experience of the officer in making her speculation objection. (R. XXI, 92). The tightly bound questions of whether to admit an opinion and whether to exclude speculation cannot be separated so easily as this panel suggests.

Here, the Court of Appeals did not dispute that the opinion evidence admitted over defense objection was based on faulty math, or that it was confusing. *Beck*, No. 126,350, Slip Op. at 21-23. These are precisely the statutory reasons that the opinion was too speculative to be admitted. *See* K.S.A. 60-456(a) (lay opinion must be "helpful to a clearer understanding of the testimony"); K.S.A. 60-456(b) (expert opinion must be "the product of reliable principles" which are "reliably applied ... to the facts").

Conclusion

The State relied on bad math bolster its argument that Brian had more drugs than a single person could use. Both the district court and the Court of Appeals erred by allowing this evidence over Brian's timely objection. Brief of Appellant at 24-26. The error denied Brian a fair trial. Brief of Appellant at 27-29. This Court should reverse.

**Issue IV: The cumulative effect of multiple errors denied Brian a fair trial. (Issue IV in Brief of Appellant).**

The Court of Appeals found only one error in Brian's trial, and did not perform cumulative error analysis. *State v. Beck,* No. 126,350, Slip Op. at 23 (Kan.App.2024). As argued both in this petition and in his original briefing, multiple errors converged to deny Brian a fair trial. Brief of Appellant at 29-31. This Court should reverse the Court of Appeals and reverse Brian's convictions on that basis.

## Conclusion

Brian Beck respectfully asks this Court to grant review of the Court of Appeals decision in this case, and to reverse the Court of Appeals and the district court.

Respectfully submitted,

*/s/ Kasper Schirer*

Kasper Schirer #26860
Kansas Appellate Defender Office
Jayhawk Tower
700 Jackson, Suite 900
Topeka, Kansas 66603
(785) 296-5484
(785) 296-2689 fax
adoservice@sbids.org
Attorney for the Appellant

## Court of Appeals' Opinion

*State v. Beck*, No. 126,350 (Kan.App.2024)

NOT DESIGNATED FOR PUBLICATION

No. 126,350

IN THE COURT OF APPEALS OF THE STATE OF KANSAS

STATE OF KANSAS,
*Appellee*,

v.

BRIAN BECK,
*Appellant*.

MEMORANDUM OPINION

Appeal from Geary District Court; COURTNEY D. BOEHM, judge. Oral argument held on April 9, 2024. Opinion filed April 26, 2024. Affirmed.

*Kasper Schirer*, of Kansas Appellate Defender Office, for appellant.

*Ethan C. Zipf-Sigler*, assistant solicitor general, and *Kris W. Kobach*, attorney general, for appellee.

Before HILL, P.J., SCHROEDER, J., and MARY E. CHRISTOPHER, S.J.

PER CURIAM: After Brian Beck was stopped due to a license plate violation, a search of his car turned up almost a kilogram of methamphetamine. Following a jury trial, Beck was convicted of one count each of possession of methamphetamine with the intent to distribute, no drug tax stamp, and interference with law enforcement. Beck now appeals his convictions, arguing: (1) The district court erred in denying his motion to suppress evidence obtained in the search of his car; (2) the district court erred in instructing the jury that it could infer he intended to distribute the methamphetamine based upon the amount of methamphetamine in his possession; (3) the district court

abused its discretion in overruling his objection to an officer's testimony about the average dose of methamphetamine; and (4) cumulative error denied him a fair trial. While Beck is correct that the district court erred in instructing the jury that it could infer he intended to distribute methamphetamine based upon the amount of methamphetamine in his possession, that error was harmless. Beck's remaining claims lack persuasion and his convictions therefore are affirmed.

FACTUAL AND PROCEDURAL HISTORY

*Traffic Stop and Car Search*

The following facts underlying this appeal are undisputed. On March 2, 2021, Geary County Sheriff's Office Deputy Bradley Rose witnessed Beck driving eastbound on Interstate 70 in Geary County. As Beck drove past him, Deputy Rose observed that the license plate frame on Beck's car was obstructing his view of the license plate to the extent Deputy Rose could not read the name of the issuing state. Deputy Rose testified, "There was a thick portion on the top part of the license plate frame that covered the state name and also the writing on the bottom of the tag." Even when he pulled alongside of Beck's vehicle, Deputy Rose was unable to read the name of the state on the license plate. After stopping Beck, but before exiting his patrol car, Deputy Rose called in Beck's license plate as an Illinois plate "based on the design on the tag."

Deputy Rose determined that this violated K.S.A. 2020 Supp. 8-133(c) and therefore initiated a traffic stop. See K.S.A. 2020 Supp. 8-133(c) ("Every license plate shall at all times be securely fastened to the vehicle . . . in a place and position to be clearly visible, and shall be maintained free from foreign materials and in a condition to be clearly legible."). Deputy Rose did not observe Beck commit any other traffic violations. Deputy Rose then walked to the passenger side of Beck's car, explained the reason for the stop, and asked him for his driver's license and proof of insurance. While

speaking with Deputy Rose, Beck appeared extremely nervous, even after being informed that he was only going to receive a warning. Beck's hands were shaking heavily and he was breathing deeply. Deputy Rose asked Beck about his travels, and Beck responded that he was coming from Springfield, Illinois, on his way to Oak Grove, Illinois. Beck's answer aroused further suspicion because, of course, no reasonable path from Springfield, Illinois, to Oak Grove, Illinois, passes through any part of Kansas. Upon further questioning from Deputy Rose, Beck stated that he was actually on his way to Oak Grove, Missouri. Deputy Rose asked Beck if he knew where he was, and Beck responded that he was in Kansas. Deputy Rose explained to Beck that Kansas was not on the way to Oak Grove, Missouri, and Beck claimed he had gotten lost. Deputy Rose then requested Geary County Sheriff's Office Deputy Justin Stopper come to the scene with his canine partner, Nova, to perform a dog sniff on Beck's car.

Deputy Rose eventually asked Beck to come back to his patrol car where Deputy Rose would write him a warning for the obstructed license plate. Once Deputy Stopper arrived with Nova, Beck informed Deputy Rose that they were free to search his vehicle if they wanted to. Deputy Rose nevertheless wanted Deputy Stopper to run Nova around the car. Nova then alerted to the odor of drugs, so Deputy Rose informed Beck that they were going to search his car. Another deputy with the Geary County Sheriff's Office—Deputy James Garcia—also responded to the scene at this time to assist the other officers.

While the deputies were searching Beck's car, Beck ran to the driver's side door and attempted to start the car and drive away. Deputy Stopper held the gear shift in park and engaged the emergency brake so Beck could not drive away while Deputies Rose and Garcia tried to extract and restrain Beck. Over the next several minutes, Beck resisted the deputies' attempts to restrain him. At one point, Deputy Rose tased Beck, who then reached around and grabbed ahold of Deputy Garcia's firearm. Beck also grabbed ahold of Deputy Garcia's upholstery tool, a screwdriver-like tool that could potentially be used

as a weapon. The three deputies were eventually able to restrain Beck in handcuffs and resume their search of his car.

While searching the back seat of Beck's car, the deputies discovered two heat-sealed bags of methamphetamine wrapped in a white t-shirt inside of a satchel. The total weight of the two bags of methamphetamine was 0.9675 kilograms (or 2.13 pounds). The deputies did not discover any drug paraphernalia consistent with personal drug use in Beck's car. The officers also did not find drug paraphernalia commonly associated with distribution—e.g., scales, extra baggies, ledgers, etc.—in Beck's car. Deputy Rose also searched a phone recovered from Beck's car. Following Beck's arrest, Deputy Rose took three photographs of Beck's car.

Beck was subsequently charged with one count each of possession of methamphetamine with the intent to distribute, no drug tax stamp, and interference with law enforcement. At the preliminary hearing, the district court found probable cause to bind Beck over for arraignment on all three counts. Beck subsequently pleaded not guilty and proceeded to trial.

*Motion to Suppress*

Prior to trial, Beck filed a motion to suppress the evidence obtained during the traffic stop. Beck argued that Deputy Rose lacked the requisite reasonable suspicion to conduct the traffic stop which ultimately led to the discovery of the methamphetamine because, although his license plate was partially obstructed, according to Beck, this did not violate K.S.A. 2020 Supp. 8-133(c):

> "Here, Mr. Beck's license plate was in a place and position to be clearly visible. While the state name was obstructed by what appeared to be a standard car dealership bracket, the name was only partially obstructed, and Deputy Rose was able to recognize

that the license plate was from Illinois. Deputy Rose exercised willful blindness in stopping Mr. Beck, as Deputy Rose was able to clearly read the license plate number and recognized the plate as an Illinois plate. The purpose of K.S.A. 8-133 was met, as Deputy Rose was able to read the plate number and identify the state. Therefore, Deputy Rose lacked reasonable suspicion to stop and detain Mr. Beck. Further, once Deputy Rose confirmed the plate was indeed from Illinois, he should have released Mr. Beck from further detention."

Therefore, Beck argued the stop "was invalid at its inception because Deputy Rose did not have reasonable suspicion to initiate or continue the stop once he realized the plate was from Illinois. Any evidence obtained subsequent to the invalid stop or illegal detention is 'fruit of the poisonous tree' and therefore must be suppressed." Beck also contended that K.S.A. 2020 Supp. 8-133(c) was unconstitutionally vague.

In its response, the State argued that Deputy Rose did, in fact, possess "reasonable and articulable suspicion that the defendant's rear license plate violated K.S.A. 8-133. Even if Lt. Rose was mistaken, it was reasonable under the facts." The State further contended that K.S.A. 2020 Supp. 8-133(c) was not unconstitutionally vague.

The district court subsequently conducted a hearing on Beck's motion to suppress at which Deputy Rose testified. At the hearing, Deputy Rose testified that he stopped Beck because he "could see that [Beck's car] had a license plate bracket on the back of the vehicle that obscured the state name, so I caught up with the vehicle. I could still see that the state name on the tag was obstructed and that's the reason why I stopped him." Deputy Rose further testified that "[t]here was a thick portion on the top part of the license plate frame that covered the state name and also the writing on the bottom of the tag." The State asked Deputy Rose, "And where you were positioned, both when you first saw it when you were stationary and then again when you pulled alongside of it, were you able to read the name of the state?" Deputy Rose answered, "No. I could see that

there were some lettering just underneath of it, but I couldn't read the state name." Deputy Rose later had this exchange with the State:

"Q. Okay. And when you make a traffic stop, sir, do you call in the vehicle tag?

"A. Yes, I did.

"Q. Did you do so in this case?

"A. Yes, I did.

"Q. And when you called it in were you able to identify the state?

"A. When I pulled up right behind it I could see, based on the design on the tag, that it was an Illinois tag, so I did call it in as an Illinois tag.

"Q. Okay. And when you pulled in behind it, approximately how far were you?

"A. From my seat to the tag, maybe 20 feet, I suppose.

"Q. Okay. And when you were following it and to the point where you pulled up along side of it, what was your—what was the estimated distance?

"A. I don't know, maybe 30 or 40 feet maybe when I was beside it and off and back a little bit, I guess.

"Q. Okay. And, sir, at any time prior to you making the traffic stop were you able to clearly read the name of the state?

"A. No, sir.

"Q. Okay. And even after you pulled up—I'm sorry, after you conducted the traffic stop you were only able to identify the state of the tag based on the design of it, not the actual name?

"A. Correct."

The three photographs of Beck's car taken by Deputy Rose—which depict the car's front and back license plates—were admitted into evidence at the hearing and available to this court in the record on appeal. After the photographs were viewed and admitted into evidence, Deputy Rose had another exchange with the State:

"Q. And, sir, would any of the pictures that you observed they all block the (inaudible) of the state?

"A. Yes, sir.

"Q. To the point where you couldn't read the state name clearly?

"A. Not clearly, no.

"Q. Okay. And the only way you were able to identify the state tag was based on the design of the tag, not by the name of it?

"A. Correct, when I pulled up behind it.

"Q. Okay. And when you pulled up behind it I believe your testimony was you were how many feet?

"A. When I came to a stop maybe 20 feet I think maybe, I believe, yes.

"Q. Okay. Needless to say that that 20 feet would not be a safe following distance at highway speeds?

"A. That's correct."

At the conclusion of the hearing, the district court took the matter under advisement. The district court subsequently issued a written order denying the motion, reasoning:

"The Kansas Court of Appeals has held that a license plate, or temporary tag, must be clearly legible by an officer at a safe following distance. Further, the Kansas Court of Appeals has held that the provisions of K.S.A. 8-133 apply to out of state registered vehicles.

"Lt. Rose testified that he could not read the name of the issuing state on the Defendant's license plate because of a plate bracket that was obstructing the state name at the top of the plate and any writing at the bottom of the plate. Therefore, it was not clearly legible. Law enforcement had reasonable and articulable suspicion to conduct the traffic stop.

"The Defense argues that K.S.A. 8-133 is unconstitutionally vague because it fails to give adequate warning as to the prescribed conduct. They submit that K.S.A. 8-133 neither specifies what constitutes 'foreign material' nor defines 'clearly legible.' Statutes are presumed to be valid. The Court finds that the language in K.S.A. 8-133 conveys a sufficiently definite warning as to the conduct prescribed when measured by common understanding and practice. The clear language of K.S.A. 8-133 specifies that all license plates must be clearly legible. The Court finds that K.S.A. 8-133 is not unconstitutionally vague.

"Therefore, based on the above, the Court denies the Defendant's Motion to Suppress."

*Trial*

At trial, Beck renewed the objection asserted in his motion to suppress the evidence obtained in the search of his car. Beck's attorney asked Deputy Rose, "When you pulled in behind Mr. Beck, you could read then that the state on the license plate was Illinois; is that correct?" Deputy Rose answered, "Based on the design on the tag I believed it was Illinois, yes, and that's how I called it in was as an Illinois tag." When asked by the State why he did not find paraphernalia commonly associated with drug distribution in Beck's car, Deputy Rose testified:

> "When people are traveling across country they're not really distributing while they're traveling across country. So once they get back to their home base that's where it would be distributed, where the scales or extra baggies would be, not during the travel of where they picked up the large quantity and taking it back to their home base."

The State further asked Deputy Rose, "So those types of drug paraphernalia—scales, baggies, things of that nature—those would be things found in, say, like the defendant's residence?" Deputy Rose answered, "If that's where it's being distributed from, yes, sir." The State also asked Deputy Rose if the lack of evidence yielded from his search of the phone recovered from Beck's car changed his mind about whether Beck possessed the methamphetamine with an intent to distribute it, and Deputy Rose responded that it did not because "with the large quantity, going across country, it still showed me that it was intended for distribution."

Deputy Rose testified that, based upon his experience and training, the bags of methamphetamine recovered from Beck's car were consistent with an intent to distribute. Beck's attorney asked Deputy Rose, "So you're basing your opinion solely on your

training and experience as to the quantity involved here?" Deputy Rose responded, "Yes, ma'am."

Upon the State's redirect examination of Deputy Rose, the following exchange occurred:

"Q. Okay. And you also had indicated that as part of a detective for Pottawatomie County you also partook in controlled buys and purchasing drugs undercover?

"A. Yes, sir.

"Q. And are you familiar with how much a person would use as far as methamphetamine?

"A. Yes, sir.

"Q. And what is that, sir?

"A. It's often anywhere from like a tenth of a gram to a third of a gram is what a common dose, I guess you would call it, depending on whether you're a low user or maybe a high user. So in milligrams it would be anywhere from 5 to 10 on the low end, 10 to 30 on the medium, and maybe 30 to 60 milligrams on a high end.

"Q. Okay. So how many dosages units would there be in State's Exhibit Number 2?

"[Beck's Attorney]: Objection, Your Honor; speculation. It's based on speculation and inference of what a user in his training and experience would use and then it's speculation as to how much that would actually be used and they're trying to relate that to Mr. Beck where they have nothing tying how much Mr. Beck was using and how much he would use at a time, Your Honor.

"[Prosecutor]: And, Your Honor, I believe the State's laid enough foundation as to that, so. . ..

"THE COURT: Okay. The Court's going to overrule the objection at this time.

. . . .

"Q. [Prosecutor:] So the question was how many dosage units would there be in State's Exhibit Number 2?

"A. [Deputy Rose:] It was just shy of one thousand grams. So if I call it one thousand grams and used 50 milligrams each time, I think that comes out to like 20,000 dosage units.

"Q. And approximately how much time would it take an average user to use 20,000 dosage units?

"A. Well, I guess it would depend on how many times a day he might use it. I think when I did the math if you use it once a day, it would take like 54 years; if you used three times a day, it might be 18 years.

"Q. And, sir, when people who are addicted to drugs buy drugs, do they buy what they're—what they will use immediately or do they buy it in bulk and store it?

"A. What they use immediately. The most common size being sold is one gram increments is what—the most common size being sold on the street is one gram.

"Q. And that is for a user?

"A. Yes, sir.

"Q. Okay.

"A. Oftentimes it would go up to what they call an eight ball, which is three-and-a-half grams. The user might buy three-and-a-half grams, get him by a little bit longer.

"Q. And in your training and experience, especially dealing with people involved with ingesting methamphetamine, have you ever come across a user who stockpiled meth so that they had enough meth for 18 years?

"A. No, sir."

The State likewise asked Deputy Stopper, "[B]ased on your training and experience, sir, would the amount of methamphetamine found in the defendant's vehicle be consistent with methamphetamine possessed for the intent to distribute or for personal use?" Deputy Stopper answered, "Absolutely with intent to distribute." The State further asked Deputy Stopper, "Is it common to find a large amount of drugs as this in conjunction with baggies and scales inside a vehicle that is traveling across country?" Deputy Stopper replied that it was not because "generally it's being transported, it's not being broken down until it gets to another location, its destination. So it really wouldn't—you wouldn't need to have that stuff in the vehicle. You're just simply transporting it from one place to another and then it gets broken down at another location."

During the jury instruction conference, both parties objected to the district court's use of instruction 11:

"THE COURT: Okay. And then Instruction 11 is the inference instruction. So I looked at that case—and so I'm only going to deal with actual law now. I understand there might be a House Bill and there may be some discussion in Topeka, but we've got to deal with what the law is as of today.

"So in *Holder* they did do what the Court is—had planned on doing which is using the PIK. Which *Holder* almost made it seem like the district court should not have deviated from the statute and should not have used the PIK. But my inclination is to use the PIK, not use the language in the statute.

"So that would be Instruction Number 11. Do you have any objection to Instruction Number 11?

"[Prosecutor]: Judge, the State does have an objection because I believe in *Holder* that the main problem there was that the PIK instruction changed it from the statutory presumption to the inference. And so I think the Kansas Supreme Court, what they were saying was the instruction as it was written did not accurately reflect what the law is pursuant to the statute.

"So I believe if the Court were to strike the language beginning with the third sentence. It says, 'You may accept or reject it and determine whether the State has met its burden,' and then leave the rest, I believe that would suffice and that would be accurate to the statute.

"THE COURT: Ms. French?

"[Beck's Attorney]: And, Your Honor, at this point we're going to object to this instruction in its entirety. *Holder* does mention that they did not get to the merits of whether or not the rebuttable presumption in the statute itself would be unconstitutional. And, Your Honor, that rebuttable presumption, if they find that unconstitutional, that would go to Mr. Beck's favor if he is found guilty; however, then there's error in the jury instructions.

"Mr. Cruz has been free to say and to make points and to bring out inferences and opinions all through the trial, Your Honor. And you have already instructed the jury that they can weigh all evidence presented and give credibility and weight to whatever they choose to. This serves to point one piece of that out without—and giving more deference to it than it does to the rest of the evidence. And, Your Honor, that—that would go toward not being fair.

"As I said, Mr. Cruz has been able to bring it up. He's been able to infer what he's wanted to infer. He's been able to get training and experience in. He's been able to get all of that in and so we would ask that this instruction not be given and that the instruction that's given is simply the weight of the evidence in its entirety can be considered. And Mr. Cruz does have closing as well and there is nothing that says he cannot refer to an inference in closing as well. And I just don't think it's appropriate that it be in the PIK.

"THE COURT: Okay.

"[Beck's Attorney]: Or in the jury instructions, I'm sorry, I worded that wrong.

"THE COURT: I was going to say it is in the PIK.

"[Beck's Attorney]: I'm sorry—

"THE COURT: Which the Court is to rely on. So, Mr. Cruz, you're wanting the Court to modify the PIK and take out the third sentence 'you may accept or reject'?

"[Prosecutor]: Yes, Your Honor, because I'm reading here in *Holder* and it's—it's like the third point on that on the back page. It says, 'It's considered whether the statute's rebuttable presumption of intent to distribute is fairly and accurately reflected by PIK Crim. 4th 57.022. Permissive inference that the jury may accept or reject requires some brief background.'

"So that's the language that the Kansas Supreme Court didn't write because that changed it from a rebuttable presumption to—to a permissive inference. And *Holder* even says those are two completely different things.

"So that's why I think that that language, beings that third sentence, once that's removed that still complies with the statute and that last sentence shows that, you know, the burden is still on the State.

"THE COURT: Okay, Anything final, Ms. French?

"[Beck's Attorney]: And, Your Honor, if the PIK—if this PIK instruction is going to be included in the jury instructions, at least with the instruction you may accept or reject it in determining whether the State has met the burden of proving the intent of the defendant, at least tells the jury that they don't have to. It's an inference. They can give it the weight that they choose to give it, not give it extra weight.

"THE COURT: Okay. Okay. Anything else from anybody?

"[Prosecutor]: No, Judge.

"THE COURT: Okay. What I'm going to do, I'm going to use the PIK as written. So overrule both sides' objections. Note both sides are objecting to this instruction. The Court will use Instruction Number 11 as currently written."

The district court overruled both parties' objections and read the instruction as follows:

> "Instruction Number 11. If you find the defendant possessed 3.5 grams or more of methamphetamine, you may infer that the defendant possessed with the intent to distribute. You may consider the inference along with all the other evidence in the case. You may accept or reject it in determining whether the State has met the burden of proving the intent of the defendant. This burden never shifts to the defendant."

The jury ultimately returned a guilty verdict on all three counts. The district court sentenced Beck to a 146-month prison term. Beck timely appealed.

## ANALYSIS

### I. *Did the district court err in denying Beck's motion to suppress?*

Beck argues the district court erred in denying his motion to suppress for two reasons. First, Beck argues he did not violate K.S.A. 2020 Supp. 8-133(c) and, therefore, Deputy Rose did not possess the reasonable and articulable suspicion necessary to initiate the traffic stop. Second, Beck argues the interpretation of K.S.A. 2020 Supp. 8-133(c), under which the district court found the traffic stop valid, is unconstitutionally vague. Beck only challenges the district court's determination that the initial basis for the traffic stop was valid. Beck does not assert other constitutional infirmities against the search of his car.

*Standard of Review and Governing Law*

> "'The standard of review for a district court's decision on a motion to suppress has two parts. The appellate court reviews the district court's factual findings to determine

whether they are supported by substantial competent evidence. But the court's ultimate legal conclusion is reviewed using a de novo standard. The appellate court does not reweigh the evidence or assess the credibility of witnesses. When the facts supporting the district court's decision on a motion to suppress are not disputed, the ultimate question of whether to suppress is a question of law over which the appellate court exercises unlimited review. [Citations omitted.]" *State v. Hanke*, 307 Kan. 823, 827, 415 P.3d 966 (2018).

"The parties do not dispute the material facts, so our suppression question is only one of law. And the burden is upon the State to establish the lawfulness of the warrantless search and seizure." 307 Kan. at 827.

This court exercises unlimited review over questions of statutory interpretation. *State v. Pepper*, 317 Kan. 770, 777, 539 P.3d 203 (2023).

"The most fundamental rule of statutory construction is that the intent of the Legislature governs if that intent can be ascertained. In ascertaining this intent, a court begins with the plain language of the statute, giving common words their ordinary meaning. When a statute is plain and unambiguous, a court should not speculate about the legislative intent behind that clear language, and it should refrain from reading something into the statute that is not readily found in its words. But if a statute's language is ambiguous, a court may consult canons of construction to resolve the ambiguity." *State v. Eckert*, 317 Kan. 21, Syl. ¶ 6, 522 P.3d 796 (2023).

K.S.A. 2020 Supp. 8-133(c) provides, in pertinent part, "Every license plate shall at all times be securely fastened to the vehicle . . . in a place and position to be clearly visible, and shall be maintained free from foreign materials and in a condition to be clearly legible."

"A traffic violation provides an objectively valid reason for conducting a traffic stop." *State v. Coleman*, 292 Kan. 813, Syl. ¶ 6, 257 P.3d 320 (2011). A law enforcement

officer may properly request that a driver get out of his or her vehicle when the vehicle has been stopped for a traffic violation. See *Pennsylvania v. Mimms*, 434 U.S. 106, 111, 98 S. Ct. 330, 54 L. Ed. 2d 331 (1977).

*Discussion*

In determining that Beck violated K.S.A. 2020 Supp. 8-133(c) (and, therefore, that Deputy Rose could initiate a traffic stop for that reason), the district court stated, "The Kansas Court of Appeals has held that a license plate, or temporary tag, must be clearly legible by an officer at a safe following distance." It is true that a previous panel of this court has interpreted "clearly legible," as the term is used in K.S.A. 8-133(c), in this manner. See *State v. Moss*, No. 122,775, 2020 WL 7086182, at *4 (Kan. App. 2020) (unpublished opinion) ("'Clearly legible,' as that term is used in K.S.A. 2019 Supp. 8-133, means visible to a law enforcement officer following at a safe distance.").

Beck challenges this interpretation of the statute as unconstitutional on the basis that it "add[s] language to K.S.A. 8-133(c) which is simply not there." He "is not arguing on appeal that K.S.A. 8-133(c)—as written—is unconstitutional." Rather, Beck is arguing that the *Moss* panel's interpretation of what the statute requires is unconstitutionally vague. In addition, Beck essentially argues that his license plate was legible because Deputy Rose was able to discern that it was an Illinois plate when he called it in. "The tag was legible," Beck argues, "just not from the distance that the officer and the court expected the tag to be legible from."

The State argues a reasonable way to interpret the language of K.S.A. 2020 Supp. 8-133(c) is to focus on its purpose, which is to allow both citizens and law enforcement officers to be able to easily identify vehicles. The State maintains that to adopt Beck's interpretation of "clearly legible" would render the statute meaningless.

A reading of the statute makes plain the purpose of requiring the clear display of a license plate: to make it so citizens and law enforcement officers can easily identify vehicles. "Law enforcement officials frequently must determine from tag numbers whether a vehicle is stolen; whether it is properly registered; or whether its occupant is suspected of a crime, is the subject of a warrant, or is thought to be armed." *State v. Hayes*, 8 Kan. App. 2d 531, 533, 660 P.2d 1387 (1983).

The statutory language of K.S.A. 2020 Supp. 8-133(c) contains several requirements. It requires every license plate must be "securely fastened to the vehicle" and must be "in a place and position to be clearly visible." The license plate also must be "clearly legible." A general definition of "visible" is discernable by sight. See Black's Law Dictionary 1183 (11th ed. 2019). "Legible" is defined to mean "can be read or deciphered easily." Webster's New World College Dictionary 832 (5th ed. 2018).

Beck's desired interpretation of the statute ignores the two requirements in the statute's text: "*clearly visible*" and "*clearly legible*." (Emphases added.) K.S.A. 2020 Supp. 8-133(c). Beck concedes his license plate was partially obstructed by the license plate bracket. The photographs of Beck's car admitted into evidence at the hearing on his motion to suppress reveal this. Beck's license plate frame covered the entire top half of the state name on his license plate. The district court did not even need to rely upon the *Moss* panel's interpretation of the statute to uphold the constitutionality of the initial traffic stop because Beck's license plate was neither clearly visible nor clearly legible even from 2 feet away. If half of a word is covered, it is not clearly visible and clearly legible, no matter how close you get to it. The fact that an observer might eventually be able to discern the half-covered state name by deciphering other clues on the license plate does not mean it is "clearly visible" and "clearly legible."

Deputy Rose's testimony at the hearing on Beck's motion further supports a determination that Beck's license plate was not clearly legible at any distance. Deputy

Rose testified that he was *never* able to identify the issuing state of Beck's license plate by reading the state name, even after he stopped Beck and pulled in behind him. Deputy Rose was only able to discern the issuing state of Beck's license plate by looking at the design of the plate.

The plain and unambiguous language of the statute prohibits covering half of the state name on a license plate, regardless of its legibility from a given distance. Therefore, contrary to Beck's alternative assertion, his license plate violated K.S.A. 2020 Supp. 8-133(c), and Deputy Rose therefore had an objectively valid reason to initiate the traffic stop which ultimately led to the search of Beck's car. That is sufficient to reject Beck's challenge to the district court's denial of his motion to suppress.

Because this court affirms the district court's denial of Beck's motion on grounds of statutory interpretation, the constitutional challenge framed by Beck is not directly implicated and we decline to reach that issue. See *Butler v. Shawnee Mission School District Board of Education*, 314 Kan. 553, 554, 502 P.3d 89 (2022) (explaining that the doctrine of constitutional avoidance "strongly counsels against courts deciding a case on a constitutional question if it can be resolved in some other fashion"); *Gannon v. State*, 302 Kan. 739, 744, 357 P.3d 873 (2015) ("'If a trial court reaches the right result, its decision will be upheld even though the trial court relied upon the wrong ground or assigned erroneous reasons for its decision.'").

II. *Did the district court err in instructing the jury that it could infer Beck intended to distribute methamphetamine based upon the amount he had in his possession?*

Both parties argue the district court erred in instructing the jury that it could infer Beck intended to distribute methamphetamine based upon the amount in his possession because the instruction was legally inappropriate. The parties disagree, however, on whether the district court's instructional error was harmless and, therefore, reversible.

*Standard of Review and Governing Law*

> "The multi-step process for reviewing instructional errors is well-known: First, the court decides whether the issue was properly preserved below. Second, the court considers whether the instruction was legally and factually appropriate. Third, upon a finding of error, the court determines whether that error is reversible. Whether the instructional error was preserved will affect the reversibility inquiry in the third step of this analysis. [Citations omitted.]" *State v. Couch*, 317 Kan. 566, 589, 533 P.3d 630 (2023).

This court exercises unlimited review over "the legal and factual appropriateness of the instruction sought." *State v. Love*, 305 Kan. 716, 736, 387 P.3d 820 (2017).

*Discussion*

Beck properly preserved his claim of instructional error for this court's review. He objected to the instruction prior to trial and again during the jury instruction conference. Because Beck properly preserved the issue for appeal, "any error is reversible only if this court determines that the error was not harmless." *State v. Holley*, 313 Kan. 249, 254, 485 P.3d 614 (2021).

The Kansas Supreme Court has repeatedly rejected the instruction the district court gave as legally inappropriate. See, e.g., *State v. Crudo*, 318 Kan. 32, 42, 541 P.3d 67 (2024) ("We have held that because K.S.A. 2022 Supp. 21-5705[e] actually creates a rebuttable presumption rather than a permissive inference, it is error to give the PIK Crim. 4th 57.022 instruction."); *State v. Bentley*, 317 Kan. 222, Syl. ¶ 5, 526 P.3d 1060 (2023) ("An instruction permitting the jury to infer a defendant intended to distribute drugs based on a certain amount of drugs in the defendant's possession is not legally appropriate because it does not reflect the mandatory rebuttable presumption in K.S.A.

2022 Supp. 21-5705[e]."); *State v. Strong*, 317 Kan. 197, 202, 527 P.3d 548 (2023); *State v. Slusser*, 317 Kan. 174, 182, 527 P.3d 565 (2023); *State v. Martinez*, 317 Kan. 151, 162-63, 527 P.3d 531 (2023); *State v. Valdez*, 316 Kan. 1, 8-9, 512 P.3d 1125 (2022); *State v. Holder*, 314 Kan. 799, Syl. ¶ 4, 502 P.3d 1039 (2022) ("PIK Crim. 4th 57.022 [2013 Supp.] provides a jury instruction with a permissive inference the jury may accept or reject about a defendant's possession with intent to distribute when that defendant is found to possess specific quantities of a controlled substance. This permissive instruction does not fairly and accurately reflect the statutory rebuttable presumption specified in K.S.A. 2020 Supp. 21-5705[e]."). The district court therefore erred in instructing the jury that it could infer Beck intended to distribute methamphetamine based upon the amount in his possession because the instruction was legally inappropriate.

However, that error is only reversible if this court determines that the error was not harmless. Because Beck "properly preserved his objection to the use of PIK Crim. 4th 57.022, we apply the constitutional harmless error standard." *Crudo*, 318 Kan. at 42. Under the constitutional harmless error standard, as defined in *Chapman v. California*, 386 U.S. 18, 24, 87 S. Ct. 824, 17 L. Ed. 2d 705 (1967), this court must be convinced beyond a reasonable doubt that the error complained of did not affect the outcome of the trial in light of the entire record—that is, that there is no reasonable possibility the error affected the jury's verdict of guilt. *Crudo*, 318 Kan. at 42.

The instructional error in this case was harmless. Beck was in possession of nearly a *kilogram* of methamphetamine. Deputy Rose testified that, in his experience, it would take an individual user anywhere from 18 to 54 years to personally use that much methamphetamine. Deputy Rose further testified that he had never encountered a drug user that stockpiled that much methamphetamine for personal use. And Deputy Stopper testified that the average street price for methamphetamine is $50 to $75 per gram. Even at the lower price of $50 per gram, the amount of methamphetamine of which Beck was in possession would be worth $48,375. In *Valdez*, the Kansas Supreme Court found that

possession of methamphetamine in excess of the minimum 3.5 grams necessary to trigger the rebuttable presumption in K.S.A. 21-5705(e)(2) is evidence of intent to distribute. 316 Kan. at 10; see *Holder*, 314 Kan. at 806 ("In this context, a defendant's possession of a large quantity of narcotics certainly may support an inference that the defendant intended to distribute the narcotic.").

Based upon the evidence presented at trial, this court is convinced beyond a reasonable doubt that the jury would have found Beck had an intent to distribute even absent the erroneous instruction. The error was therefore harmless and does not warrant reversal.

III. *Did the district court abuse its discretion in overruling Beck's objection to Deputy Rose's testimony about the average dose of methamphetamine?*

Beck argues that "[t]he district court committed reversible error by admitting speculative and internally inconsistent law enforcement opinion evidence about how long the methamphetamine discovered in the car could support an individual's personal use."

*Standard of Review and Governing Law*

> "The admission of evidence lies within the sound discretion of the trial court. An appellate court's standard of review regarding a trial court's admission of evidence, subject to exclusionary rules, is abuse of discretion. Judicial discretion is abused when judicial action is arbitrary, fanciful, or unreasonable. If reasonable persons could differ as to the propriety of the action taken by the trial court, then it cannot be said that the trial court abused its discretion. One who asserts that the court abused its discretion bears the burden of showing such abuse of discretion." *State v. Holmes*, 278 Kan. 603, Syl. ¶ 10, 102 P.3d 406 (2004).

"A verdict or finding shall not be set aside, nor shall the judgment or decision based thereon be reversed, by reason of the erroneous admission of evidence unless there

appears of record objection to the evidence timely interposed and so stated as to make clear the specific ground of objection." K.S.A. 60-404; see *State v. Scheetz*, 318 Kan. 48, Syl. ¶ 1, 541 P.3d 79 (2024) ("The contemporaneous objection rule under K.S.A. 60-404 requires a party to make a timely and specific objection at trial to preserve an evidentiary challenge for appellate review."); *State v. Jordan*, 317 Kan. 628, 647, 537 P.3d 443 (2023) ("K.S.A. 60-404 requires a party to make a timely and specific objection to the evidence at trial to preserve the issue for appellate review."). "The contemporaneous objection rule is not satisfied by objecting on one ground at trial and arguing another ground on appeal because it would undercut the statute's purpose." *State v. Garcia-Garcia*, 309 Kan. 801, 810, 441 P.3d 52 (2019); see *State v. Richmond*, 289 Kan. 419, 429, 212 P.3d 165 (2009) ("[T]he trial court must be provided the *specific objection* so it may consider as fully as possible whether the evidence should be admitted and therefore reduce the chances of reversible error." [Emphasis added.]). "The statute has the practical effect of confining a party's appellate arguments to the grounds presented to the district court." *Scheetz*, 318 Kan. 48, Syl. ¶ 1.

"Speculative evidence is inadmissible, and a trial court has the responsibility of ensuring that speculative evidence does not reach the jury." *State v. Seacat*, 303 Kan. 622, Syl. ¶ 3, 366 P.3d 208 (2016); *State v. Hunt*, No. 117,413, 2018 WL 4655959, at *4 (Kan. App. 2018) (unpublished opinion) ("Speculative evidence, which lacks foundation, is inadmissible.").

*Discussion*

The objection at issue occurred in the following exchange at trial:

"Q. [Prosecutor:] Okay. And you also had indicated that as part of a detective for Pottawatomie County you also partook in controlled buys and purchasing drugs undercover?

"A. [Deputy Rose:] Yes, sir.

"Q. And are you familiar with how much a person would use as far as methamphetamine?

"A. Yes, sir.

"Q. And what is that, sir?

"A. It's often anywhere from like a tenth of a gram to a third of a gram is what a common dose, I guess you would call it, depending on whether you're a low user or maybe a high user. So in milligrams it would be anywhere from 5 to 10 on the low end, 10 to 30 on the medium, and maybe 30 to 60 milligrams on a high end.

"Q. Okay. So how many dosages units would there be in State's Exhibit Number 2?

"[Beck's Attorney]: *Objection, Your Honor; speculation. It's based on speculation and inference of what a user in his training and experience would use and then it's speculation as to how much that would actually be used and they're trying to relate that to Mr. Beck where they have nothing tying how much Mr. Beck was using and how much he would use at a time, Your Honor.*

"[Prosecutor]: And, Your Honor, I believe the State's laid enough foundation as to that, so . . .

"THE COURT: Okay. The Court's going to overrule the objection at this time." (Emphasis added.)

In his contemporaneous objection, Beck *only* challenged Deputy Rose's testimony as speculative. The district court never had a chance to rule on the other arguments Beck makes against the admission of Deputy Rose's testimony in his appellate brief. This court therefore only addresses the grounds of the specific objection Beck lodged below, i.e., whether Deputy Rose's challenged testimony was speculative. See *Garcia-Garcia*, 309 Kan. at 810-11.

Deputy Rose's testimony was not speculative. He was offering his opinion, based upon his experience and professional training as a law enforcement officer with experience in drug crimes (the foundation of which was established in his testimony), as to the average dose of methamphetamine. Deputy Rose was not asked to speculate about how much methamphetamine Beck consumes or what Beck's average methamphetamine

dose might be. The fact that Deputy Rose's testimony contained mathematical inconsistencies (which Beck did not raise in his contemporaneous objection) may well have rendered his testimony less credible, but that is a determination for the fact-finder to make.

We conclude Beck has failed to carry his burden of showing the district court abused its discretion in overruling his objection. Thus, we find the district court did not err in overruling the objection.

## IV. *Was Beck deprived of his constitutional right to a fair trial because of cumulative errors?*

Finally, Beck argues cumulative error denied him a fair trial. The cumulative error rule does not apply if there is only a single error. *State v. Gallegos*, 313 Kan. 262, 277, 485 P.3d 622 (2021). As Beck has established only one error (which was harmless), this rule is inapplicable.

For the reasons stated, we conclude Beck's convictions should be affirmed.

Affirmed.

**Unpublished Opinion**

*State v. Moss*, No. 122,775, 2020 WL 7086182 (Kan.App.2020)

477 P.3d 273 (Table)
Unpublished Disposition
This decision without published opinion is referenced in the Pacific Reporter. See Kan. Sup. Ct. Rules, Rule 7.04.
NOT DESIGNATED FOR PUBLICATION
Court of Appeals of Kansas.

STATE of Kansas, Appellant,
v.
Anthony Ray MOSS, Appellee.

No. 122,775
|
Opinion filed December 4, 2020.

Appeal from Riley District Court; Kendra Lewison, judge.

**Attorneys and Law Firms**

David Lowden, deputy county attorney, Kelly G. Cunningham, assistant county attorney, Barry R. Wilkerson, county attorney, and Derek Schmidt, attorney general, for appellant.

Jeffery S. Adam, of Robinson Firm, LLC, of Manhattan, for appellee.
Before Powell, P.J., Green and Standridge, JJ.

MEMORANDUM OPINION

Per Curiam:

*1 This is the State's interlocutory appeal of the district court's order granting Anthony Ray Moss' motion to suppress evidence. Following a traffic stop, law enforcement discovered drugs and drug paraphernalia in Moss' vehicle. The district court granted Moss' motion to suppress, finding that although the officer had reasonable suspicion to stop Moss for an illegible license tag under K.S.A. 2019 Supp. 8-133, any reasonable suspicion dissipated once the officer approached the vehicle and could read the license tag. On appeal, the State argues that the officer's reasonable suspicion did not dissipate and that several other factors provided law enforcement with reasonable suspicion that Moss was engaged in criminal activity, justifying his continued detention and warranting further investigation. For the reasons stated below, we reverse the district court's order of suppression and remand the matter for further proceedings.

Facts

On the evening of August 6, 2019, Riley County Sergeant Nathan Boeckman was conducting surveillance on a known drug residence in southeast Manhattan. Law enforcement had been watching this residence for some time and had observed "stop and go traffic" from the rear of the residence, which was consistent with drug transactions. Boeckman observed a dark vehicle park directly behind the house in an alley and leave its headlights on. Suspicious of the vehicle, Boeckman exited his patrol car to get a better view of the alley. The vehicle was in the alley for three to four minutes. During this time, Boeckman saw no one from the vehicle enter or exit the house. As Boeckman stood on the side of the curb in full police uniform, he watched the vehicle drive up the alley and turn north, heading towards him. As the vehicle drove by, Boeckman observed the driver—later identified as Moss—raise his hand to cover the left profile of his face, an action Boeckman found suspicious. Boeckman also noted that the vehicle's 60-day temporary registration tag was illegible from about 15 feet away.

Boeckman contacted Riley County Police Officer Andrew Toolin, who also was conducting surveillance in the area, to request that Toolin intercept the vehicle. After the vehicle passed Toolin, he began following it. Toolin could not see any information on the license tag from a car-length distance. As a result, Toolin initiated a traffic stop. After Moss pulled the vehicle into a parking stall, Toolin saw Moss' body turn towards the center console back seat area while moving his right arm. Toolin was concerned that Moss was either concealing items inside the vehicle or retrieving a weapon. As Toolin approached the vehicle, he could not read the tag numbers on the license tag, or even tell that it was a Kansas temporary tag, until he was about 5 feet away "at an angle off to the side of the vehicle."

Officer Toolin made contact with Moss, explained the reason for the stop, and requested Moss' driver's license and proof of

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insurance. Moss provided his driver's license and located a photograph of the vehicle's registration in a text message on his cell phone, but he was unable to provide any proof of insurance for the vehicle. Toolin ran Moss' information and learned that there was a warrant for Moss' arrest. Toolin also learned that Moss was required to have an ignition interlock device, but there was no ignition interlock device in the vehicle. As a result of the warrant, Toolin placed Moss under arrest. Toolin deployed his K9 partner on the vehicle, who alerted to the odor of illegal drugs near the front driver's side door. Toolin searched the vehicle and discovered a zipper pouch containing a large bag with 28.8 grams of a crystal substance inside, along with four smaller prepackaged bags, a digital scale, and four unused ziplock bags. Another pouch contained additional unused ziplock bags and two unused syringes. These items were located on the rear driver's floorboard directly behind the center console, the area Moss moved towards after he pulled over.

*2 The State charged Moss with one count each of possession with intent to distribute methamphetamine, possession of methamphetamine, no drug tax stamp, and circumvention of ignition interlock, and two counts of possession of drug paraphernalia.

Moss moved to suppress the drug evidence discovered in his car, claiming the search violated his rights against unreasonable searches and seizures under the Fourth Amendment to the United States Constitution. Relying on *United States v. Edgerton*, 438 F.3d 1043 (10th Cir. 2006), and *United States v. McSwain*, 29 F.3d 558 (10th Cir. 1994), Moss argued that Officer Toolin unlawfully had detained him without reasonable suspicion of his involvement in any criminal activity. Moss asserted that because the reason for the stop dissipated after Toolin determined that the vehicle had a valid temporary tag, Toolin improperly had extended the stop by questioning Moss and requesting documentation. As a result, Moss claimed that the drug evidence obtained as a result of the unlawful detention should be suppressed.

At a suppression hearing, the State presented testimony from Sergeant Boeckman and Officer Toolin. During his testimony, Boeckman admitted that law enforcement had been conducting pretextual stops of the vehicles leaving the drug house based on a hunch that they would find drugs. But Boeckman noted that the vehicles could not be stopped based on this hunch alone and that a valid traffic infraction was necessary to make a stop. Boeckman testified that when Moss' vehicle drove by him, he was unable to read the temporary license tag from 15 feet away. Boeckman explained:

> "The tag light was not fixed in the position where it would usually be fixed, you know, to the side or above. It was actually just dangling by a wire, so there was a bulb and a wire. The bulb is about the size of half of my pinky. It was just kind of sitting there, dangling. That wasn't necessarily the true obstruction.
>
> "The true obstruction was the fact that the tag was probably, I assume got wet at one point because it was really wrinkled. The best I can describe it is like just shriveled up bacon."

Officer Toolin testified about his observations of the license tag once he began following Moss' vehicle:

> "So I could tell that the tag had a clear plastic cover on it, something that's consistent with a 30-day or a 60-day tag, but I noticed that the license plate itself was wrinkled or folded up, creating distance between the plate and the actual cover. The tag light was swaying back and forth as it was a couple inches dropped down on to the tag making it illegible even at a car length behind it."

Toolin said that the condition of the tag violated Kansas statutes in two ways: (1) the tag numbers, the state, and the expiration date were not visible and (2) the tag light was not properly affixed and instead was hanging down and obstructing the tag. Toolin described how the tag light obstructed the plate: "It caused a glare. Not only that, but it also—if you look directly on it, directly if you're maybe six inches from the plate it still obstructs portions of not only possibly the state or the numbers of the actual tag itself." Toolin said that he could not read the tag even when he was about a car length away or "much closer than what is considered to be a safe following distance."

*3 After hearing testimony from Sergeant Boeckman and Officer Toolin and considering written and oral argument from counsel, the district court granted Moss' motion to suppress. The court held that Toolin had reasonable suspicion to stop Moss given the tag was illegible from a fairly short distance. But the court determined that any reasonable

suspicion dissipated once Toolin was able to read the license tag within 5 feet of the vehicle as he approached it. The court rejected the State's argument that additional factors, including the vehicle stopping at the drug house and Moss hiding his face from Boeckman, constituted reasonable suspicion to believe that Moss was engaged in criminal activity. The court highlighted Boeckman's testimony, in which he said he did not believe these factors were sufficient to stop the vehicle in the absence of a traffic violation. And the court found that Moss' furtive movements after he pulled over did not warrant extension of the stop. Finally, the court declined to find reasonable suspicion based on an equipment violation due to the dangling tag light. The court reasoned that any evidence of an equipment violation was not well-developed in the State's motion or witness testimony. The district court judge concluded:

> "So with the Court's finding that the reasonable suspicion ended with Officer Toolin observing the tag, and seeing and being able to read the tag, that his only purpose at that point in time should have been to approach the defendant, advise him of why he had been stopped, and at that point in time if he developed no further reasonable suspicion, then Mr. Moss should have been allowed to go on his way.
>
> "I think the case law is clear that it is not permissible to ask for identification, for insurance, for registration at that point in time unless you've already—unless you have reasonable suspicion. The only thing Officer Toolin was permitted to do would be to approach the vehicle and inform the driver of the reason for the stop, and that he was free to leave the scene.
>
> "So I am granting Mr. Moss'[ ] Motion to Suppress."

The State filed this timely interlocutory appeal.

## Analysis

The State argues that the district court erred in granting Moss' motion to suppress. In support of its argument, the State claims Officer Toolin had reasonable suspicion to believe that Moss improperly displayed his license tag in violation of K.S.A. 2019 Supp. 8-133 and that Moss had a defective license tag light in violation of K.S.A. 8-1706(c). The State claims that Toolin's reasonable suspicion did not dissipate when he approached the vehicle and observed the tag. The State also alleges that, besides the license tag violations, several other factors provided Toolin with reasonable suspicion that Moss was engaged in criminal activity, justifying his continued detention and warranting further investigation.

The standard of review for a district court's decision on a motion to suppress has two components. An appellate court reviews the district court's factual findings to determine whether they are supported by substantial competent evidence. The ultimate legal conclusion, however, is reviewed using a de novo standard. In reviewing the factual findings, appellate courts do not reweigh the evidence or assess the credibility of witnesses. *State v. Talkington*, 301 Kan. 453, 461, 345 P.3d 258 (2015) (applying standard of review to State's appeal after district court granted defendant's motion to suppress). Where, as here, the material facts supporting a district court's decision on a motion to suppress are not in dispute, the ultimate question of whether to suppress is a question of law over which an appellate court has unlimited review. *State v. Hanke*, 307 Kan. 823, 827, 415 P.3d 966 (2018).

The Fourth Amendment to the United States Constitution protects the "right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures." Section 15 of the Kansas Constitution Bill of Rights contains similar language and provides "the same protection from unlawful government searches and seizures as the Fourth Amendment." *State v. Neighbors*, 299 Kan. 234, 239, 328 P.3d 1081 (2014). The detention of a driver, however brief, during the course of a routine traffic stop constitutes a seizure within the meaning of the Fourth Amendment. *Edgerton*, 438 F.3d at 1047; *State v. Mitchell*, 265 Kan. 238, 241, 960 P.2d 200 (1998).

*4 Because a routine traffic stop is more akin to an investigative detention than a custodial arrest, we analyze such stops under the principles developed for investigative detentions under *Terry v. Ohio*, 392 U.S. 1, 88 S. Ct. 1868, 20 L. Ed. 2d 889 (1968). To that end, a law enforcement officer must have reasonable suspicion—supported by specific, articulable facts—that a crime has been, is being, or is about to be committed. K.S.A. 22-2402(1) (codifying *Terry*); *State v. Jones*, 300 Kan. 630, 637, 333 P.3d 886 (2014). To

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determine the reasonableness of a traffic stop, we make a dual inquiry, asking first whether the law enforcement officer's action was justified at its inception, then second whether the officer's action was reasonably related in scope to the circumstances which justified the interference in the first place. In other words, a traffic stop must last no longer than is necessary to effectuate the purpose of the stop. See *State v. Jimenez*, 308 Kan. 315, 323, 420 P.3d 464 (2018) (citing *Terry*, 392 U.S. at 20). "[W]hen a law enforcement officer has reasonable suspicion that a traffic violation has occurred, and that suspicion has not dissipated before the officer speaks with the driver, the officer is permitted to detain the driver, request a driver's license, run a computer check, and issue a citation, if appropriate." *State v. Diaz-Ruiz*, 42 Kan. App. 2d 325, 336, 211 P.3d 836 (2009) (citing *United States v. Lyons*, 510 F.3d 1225, 1236 [10th Cir. 2007]). But once an officer discovers that a traffic violation has not occurred, the officer must allow the driver to proceed without further delay. *McSwain*, 29 F.3d at 561-62.

Here, there is no dispute that the initial stop of Moss' car was lawful. K.S.A. 2019 Supp. 8-133, titled "Display of license plate," provides, in relevant part:

> "The license plate assigned to the vehicle shall be attached to the rear thereof and shall be so displayed during the current registration year or years. ... Every license plate shall at all times be securely fastened to the vehicle to which it is assigned so as to prevent the plate from swinging, and at a height not less than 12 inches from the ground, measuring from the bottom of such plate, *in a place and position to be clearly visible, and shall be maintained free from foreign materials and in a condition to be clearly legible*." (Emphasis added.)

The "clearly visible" and "clearly legible" requirements of K.S.A. 2019 Supp. 8-133 apply to temporary registration tags. See *United States v. Poke*, 81 Fed. Appx. 712, 715 (10th Cir. 2003) (unpublished opinion). "Clearly legible," as that term is used in K.S.A. 2019 Supp. 8-133, means visible to a law enforcement officer following at a safe distance. *United States v. Orduna-Martinez*, 561 F.3d 1134, 1139 (10th Cir. 2009).

A review of the record supports the district court's finding that law enforcement had reasonable suspicion under K.S.A. 2019 Supp. 8-133 to stop Moss' vehicle. Both Sergeant Boeckman and Officer Toolin testified that Moss' temporary license tag was not clearly legible. Boeckman testified that he was unable to read the tag from 15 feet away because it was wrinkled and because the tag light was hanging down over the tag. And Toolin testified that the license tag was "wrinkled or folded up, creating distance between the plate and the actual cover." Toolin also noted that "[t]he tag light was swaying back and forth as it was a couple inches dropped down on to the tag making it illegible even at a car length behind it." These observations provided Toolin with reasonable suspicion to believe that Moss had committed a traffic infraction.

As for whether the resulting detention was justified, however, the district court found that the initial reasonable suspicion of criminal activity dissipated once Toolin got close enough to read the license tag on Moss' vehicle. As a result, the court held that Toolin was only permitted to approach Moss, explain to him the reason for the stop, and advise him that he was free to leave the scene.

The Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals has issued several opinions involving traffic stops for license tag violations that are instructive to our analysis. In arguing for suppression of the drug evidence in this case, Moss relied on that court's decisions in *McSwain* and *Edgerton*. In *McSwain*, a Utah trooper stopped a Colorado vehicle on grounds that the temporary registration sticker was difficult to read because the expiration date appeared to be covered with reflective tape. But as the trooper approached the vehicle on foot, he verified the validity of the temporary sticker, and observed no violation of state law. Nevertheless, the trooper continued with some of the routine inquiries associated with a traffic stop and also conducted a criminal history check. Ultimately, the trooper requested and received consent to search the vehicle. The Tenth Circuit found that the detention of the vehicle's occupants became illegal after the stated purpose of the stop—checking the validity of the temporary registration sticker—was satisfied and the sticker was found to be valid. As a result, the court held that the trooper's actions in questioning the defendant and requesting his license and registration violated the Fourth Amendment. 29 F.3d at 561-62.

*5 In *Edgerton*, a Kansas highway patrol trooper stopped a vehicle from Colorado at 2:30 a.m. because it was too dark to read the vehicle's temporary registration tag, which was posted in the rear window as required by Colorado law. After approaching the vehicle on foot, the trooper had no difficulty

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reading the tag and noted that it appeared valid. The trooper proceeded to inspect the undercarriage of the vehicle, issued a warning for a violation of K.S.A. 8-133, questioned the driver, and received consent to search the trunk. The Tenth Circuit held that the trooper's initial stop of the vehicle to ascertain the validity of the temporary tag in the back window constituted a permissible investigative detention of limited scope consistent with the Fourth Amendment. 438 F.3d at 1047-48. But the court concluded that the trooper's actions exceeded the permissible scope of the detention in light of the stated justification for the stop. 438 F.3d at 1050-51. In reversing the district court, the Tenth Circuit determined that K.S.A. 8-133 did not criminalize a "wholly unremarkable" temporary registration tag simply because the defendant's vehicle was traveling at night, a condition that was outside the defendant's ability to control. 438 F.3d at 1050-51. The court held that once the trooper "was able to read the Colorado tag and deem it unremarkable, any suspicion that Defendant had violated [K.S.A.] 8-133 dissipated because the tag was 'in a place and position to be clearly visible.' " 438 F.3d at 1051. At that point, the court found that, consistent with *McSwain*, the trooper should have explained the reason for the initial stop and then allowed the defendant to leave without requiring her to produce her driver's license and registration. 438 F.3d at 1051.

The State argues that this case is factually distinguishable from *McSwain* and *Edgerton* and suggests that the facts here are more closely analogous to those before the Tenth Circuit in *Lyons*. There, a Kansas highway patrol trooper noticed that the defendant's vehicle was dirty and salty but had a clean spare tire attached to its undercarriage. The trooper suspected, based on his experience, that the spare tire might contain drugs. Additionally, the trooper could not read the expiration sticker on the vehicle's license plate. The trooper stopped the vehicle based on his suspicion about the tire and his belief that the dirty license tag constituted a violation of K.S.A. 8-133. As the trooper approached the stopped vehicle, he wiped the dirt off the tag before approaching the driver's side window and advising the defendant he had been stopped for an illegible tag. While obtaining the defendant's driver's license and registration documents, the trooper became more suspicious about the spare tire. After obtaining consent to search the vehicle, the trooper discovered 51 pounds of cocaine in the tire.

The Tenth Circuit affirmed the validity of the initial stop based on the trooper's reasonable suspicion of a violation of K.S.A. 8-133. Given the trooper's suspicion of a continuing violation of the statute, the court also concluded the trooper could temporarily detain the defendant, request his driver's license and registration, run a criminal history check, and issue a warning ticket. 510 F.3d at 1234-35. The court distinguished *McSwain* and *Edgerton* because in each of those cases, the officers' stated reason in support of reasonable suspicion "evaporated once they observed no violation had occurred" and therefore the officers had no reason to detain the defendants to perform the tasks incident to an ordinary traffic stop. 510 F.3d at 1236. In contrast to the facts before it, the *Lyons* court noted that the trooper's suspicion that the defendant had an illegible tag "did not evaporate, but rather was confirmed, once he stopped Lyons' vehicle"; for that reason, the subsequent detention was lawful. 510 F.3d at 1236. The court also concluded the trooper had reasonable suspicion of illicit drug activity, based on the totality of the circumstances, to detain the defendant after returning his documents and to request consent to search. 510 F.3d at 1237-38.

Turning to the present case, we find the State's argument persuasive. The facts here are distinguishable from those in *McSwain* and *Edgerton* due to the differing nature of the violations involved. In *McSwain*, the driver was stopped and detained "for the sole purpose of ensuring the validity of the vehicle's temporary registration sticker." 29 F.3d at 561. In *Edgerton*, the driver was stopped because nighttime conditions made it difficult to read the vehicle's temporary registration tag. 438 F.3d at 1050. Neither case involved a situation in which the officer, at time of questioning the driver, still had some objectively reasonable articulable suspicion that a traffic violation had occurred or was occurring.

*6 Here, Moss initially was stopped and detained because his temporary tag was not "maintained free from foreign materials and in a condition to be clearly legible," as required by K.S.A. 2019 Supp. 8-133. As stated above, a tag is "clearly legible" when it is capable of being read by an officer at a safe following distance. *Orduna-Martinez*, 561 F.3d at 1139. Sergeant Boeckman testified that the temporary tag on Moss' vehicle was wrinkled, and he was unable to read the tag from 15 feet away. Officer Toolin testified that the tag was wrinkled or folded, and the tag light was hanging down over the tag.

Toolin said that the tag was impossible to read from a car length behind the vehicle, closer than a safe following distance. That Toolin could read Moss' temporary tag when he came within 5 feet of the vehicle does not negate the traffic violation because the tag remained illegible and in violation of K.S.A. 2019 Supp. 8-133. Indeed, this court has recognized that law enforcement officers may have any number of legitimate reasons for running a license plate check on a moving vehicle, and this important public function is frustrated if the officer cannot read the license plate from his or her moving patrol car. See *State v. Hayes*, 8 Kan. App. 2d 531, 533, 660 P.2d 1387 (1983); see also *United States v. Granados-Orozco*, No. 03-40035-01/02-SAC, 2003 WL 22213129, at *2 (D. Kan. 2003) (unpublished opinion) ("[I]f the tag was not clearly legible to a law enforcement officer following a safe distance behind the vehicle, [K.S.A. 8-133] is violated. ... Officers should not be required to stop vehicles in order to read their tags.").

Unlike in *McSwain* or *Edgerton*, Officer Toolin's view of the registration tag when he approached the vehicle did not satisfy him that no violation had occurred. Rather, Toolin continued to have an objectively reasonable suspicion that a violation of K.S.A. 2019 Supp. 8-133 was occurring. Under these circumstances, further detention and questioning of Moss was permissible. See *Lyons*, 510 F.3d at 1236 (detention of driver permissible where officer's reasonable suspicion of K.S.A. 8-133 violation "did not evaporate, but rather was confirmed" after stop); *United States v. Ledesma*, 447 F.3d 1307, 1314 (10th Cir. 2006) (officer may detain driver and continue with traffic stop for displaying a registration plate in violation of K.S.A. 8-133 " 'even after [the officer] approache[s] the [vehicle] and [is] able, at that point, to read it' "); *United States v. DeGasso*, 369 F.3d 1139, 1149 (10th Cir. 2004) (In contrast to *McSwain*, the violation here was "that the lettering on the license plate was not 'clearly visible,' which remained true even after the trooper approached the truck and was able, at that point, to read it."); *Poke*, 81 Fed. Appx. at 714-15 (where officer could not see vehicle's temporary tag as it traveled along interstate, officer "continued to have an objectively reasonable suspicion that a traffic violation was occurring" even after confirming presence of license plate affixed to back window).

Based on the analysis set forth above, Officer Toolin had a right to continue his investigation by asking for Moss' driver's license and registration, running a warrants check, and confirming whether the license tag was assigned to the vehicle. In otherwise properly performing those tasks, Toolin learned that there was a warrant for Moss' arrest. During a search incident to Moss' arrest, Toolin discovered drugs and drug paraphernalia in the vehicle. Because the process leading to that discovery did not violate Moss' Fourth Amendment rights, the district court erred in granting Moss' motion to suppress. Accordingly, we need not address the State's alternative arguments for relief.

Reversed and remanded with directions.

**All Citations**

477 P.3d 273 (Table), 2020 WL 7086182

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**Certificate of Service**

Counsel served this petition for review on the Geary County Attorney (801 N. Washington, Ste. A, Junction City, KS 66441, phone number (785) 762-4343, fax number (785) 762-6778), by email at krista.blaisdell@gearycounty.org; and on Kris Kobach, Attorney General, Kris Ailslieger, Deputy Solicitor General, and Ethan Zipf-Sigler, Assistant Solicitor General (120 SW 10th Ave., 2nd Floor, Topeka, KS 66612, phone number (785) 296-2215, fax number (785) 296-6269), by email at ksagappealsoffice@ag.ks.gov; on the 17th day of May, 2024.

*/s/ Kasper Schirer*
Kasper Schirer #26860
Attorney for Appellant