IN RE KIARA LIZ V.*
(AC 44264)

Alvord, Elgo and Alexander, Js.

Syllabus

The respondent father appealed to this court from the judgment of the trial court terminating his parental rights with respect to the minor child, K. The court conducted a trial on the termination of parental rights petition and the father was not present on the last day of trial. Counsel for the father requested a continuance on the basis of the father's absence, which the court denied. *Held*:

1. This court declined to review the respondent father's unpreserved claim that his right to due process was violated when the trial court denied his request for a continuance, as the record of his claim was inadequate for review under *State* v. *Golding* (213 Conn. 233); the father's reasons for his failure to attend the final day of the trial were vague and unclear, and speculation and conjecture have no place in appellate review.

2. The trial court did not err in its determination that the termination of the respondent father's parental rights was in K's best interest, as its conclusion was based on its findings related to the seven statutory (§ 17a-112 (k)) factors, which have not been challenged in this appeal, including the father's difficulty accepting and understanding his mental illness, his inability to comply with mental health treatment, and his failure to make progress in his parenting abilities; moreover, the existence of a bond between the father and K, although relevant, was not dispositive of a best interest determination, and the father's claims that

* In accordance with the spirit and intent of General Statutes § 46b-142 (b) and Practice Book § 79a-12, the names of the parties involved in this appeal are not disclosed. The records and papers of this case shall be open for inspection only to persons having a proper interest therein and upon order of the Appellate Court.

he had been appropriate with K and that she responded to him, did not provide grounds to reverse the trial court's judgment.

Argued February 17—officially released March 30, 2021**

Procedural History

Petition by the Commissioner of Children and Families to terminate the respondents' parental rights with respect to the minor child, brought to the Superior Court in the judicial district of Waterbury, Juvenile Matters, where the matter was transferred to the judicial district of Middlesex, Child Protection Session, and tried to the court, *Crawford, J.*; judgment terminating the respondents' parental rights, from which the respondent father appealed to this court. *Affirmed.*

David B. Rozwaski, assigned counsel, for the appellant (respondent father).

Carolyn A. Signorelli, assistant attorney general, with whom, on the brief, were *William Tong*, attorney general, and *Evan O'Roark*, assistant attorney general, for the appellee (petitioner).

Opinion

ALEXANDER, J. The respondent father, Luis V., appeals from the judgment of the trial court rendered in favor of the petitioner, the Commissioner of Children and Families (commissioner), terminating his parental rights as to his minor child, Kiara Liz V. (Kiara), pursuant to General Statutes § 17a-112. On appeal, the respondent claims that the court (1) improperly denied his request for a continuance and (2) erred in determining that the termination of his parental rights was in the best interests of Kiara. We disagree, and, accordingly, affirm the judgment of the trial court.

** March 30, 2021, the date that this decision was released as a slip opinion, is the operative date for all substantive and procedural purposes.

The following facts and procedural history are relevant to our consideration of the respondent's appeal. Kiara was born in October, 2016, and the commissioner took custody of her shortly thereafter. On December 5, 2017, the court found Kiara to be neglected. On June 22, 2018, the commissioner moved to terminate the parental rights of the respondent and Kiara's mother.[1]

The court, *Crawford, J.*, conducted a four day trial in December, 2019.[2] The court noted that the respondent's parental rights had been terminated with respect to three other children on the basis of his failure to rehabilitate. See General Statutes § 17a-112 (j) (3) (E).[3] It also

[1] Kiara's mother did not appear at trial. The court concluded that the Department of Children and Families had made reasonable efforts at reunification and had proved, by clear and convincing evidence, the statutory grounds of failure to rehabilitate pursuant to § 17a-112 (j) (3) (E) and abandonment pursuant to § 17a-117 (j) (3) (A). The court then determined that it was in Kiara's best interests to terminate her mother's parental rights. Kiara's mother is not a party to the present appeal.

[2] "A hearing on a petition to terminate parental rights consists of two phases, adjudication and disposition. . . . If the trial court determines that a statutory ground for termination exists, it proceeds to the dispositional phase. In the dispositional phase, the trial court determines whether termination is in the best interest of the child. . . . In the adjudicatory phase of the proceeding, the court must make separate determinations as to reasonable efforts and the statutory grounds for termination. In the adjudicatory phase, the judicial authority is limited to evidence of events preceding the filing of the petition or the latest amendment, except where the judicial authority must consider subsequent events as part of its determination as to the existence of a ground for termination of parental rights. . . . In the adjudicatory phase, the court may rely on events occurring after the date of the filing of the petition to terminate parental rights when considering the issue of whether the degree of rehabilitation is sufficient to foresee that the parent may resume a useful role in the child's life within a reasonable time." (Citation omitted; emphasis omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *In re Kyara H.*, 147 Conn. App. 855, 865, 83 A.3d 1264, cert. denied, 311 Conn. 923, 86 A.3d 468 (2014); see also *In re Phoenix A.*, 202 Conn. App. 827, 837–38, A.3d (2021).

[3] General Statutes § 17a-112 (j) (3) (E) provides: "[T]he parent of a child under the age of seven years who is neglected, abused or uncared for, has failed, is unable or is unwilling to achieve such degree of personal rehabilitation as would encourage the belief that within a reasonable period of time, considering the age and needs of the child, such parent could

observed that there had been two prior determinations that the Department of Children and Families (department) had made reasonable efforts at reunification.

The court then addressed the statutory ground of failure to rehabilitate alleged in the petition to terminate the respondent's parental rights. See General Statutes § 17a-112 (j) (3) (E).[4] It noted that the department "has been involved with [the respondent] because of his extensive criminal history, including gang related activities, a history of violence including accusations of being involved in two murder charges which resulted in convictions for assault in the first degree, the physical and sexual abuse of his four older children, the sale and distribution of illegal drugs, and violation of probation. One of the [respondent's] daughters has a permanent disfigurement on her hand, the result of [the respondent] submerging her hand in boiling water after she denied him sexual intercourse."

The court also detailed the respondent's mental health issues. Prior to an evaluation that occurred in October, 2016, "[the respondent] had been treated . . .

assume a responsible position in the life of the child and such parent's parental rights of another child were previously terminated pursuant to a petition filed by the [commissioner] . . . ."

[4] "During the adjudicatory phase [of a proceeding to terminate parental rights], the trial court must determine whether one or more of the . . . grounds for termination of parental rights set forth in § 17a-112 [(j) (3)] exists by clear and convincing evidence. The [petitioner] . . . in petitioning to terminate those rights, must allege and prove one or more of the statutory grounds. . . . Subdivision (3) of § 17a-112 (j) carefully sets out . . . [the] situations that, in the judgment of the legislature, constitute countervailing interests sufficiently powerful to justify the termination of parental rights in the absence of consent. . . . Because a respondent's fundamental right to parent his or her child is at stake, [t]he statutory criteria must be strictly complied with before termination can be accomplished and adoption proceedings begun." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *In re November H.*, 202 Conn. App. 106, 116–17, 243 A.3d 839 (2020); see *In re Cameron W.*, 194 Conn. App. 633, 660, 221 A.3d 885 (2019), cert. denied, 334 Conn. 918, 222 A.3d 103 (2020); see also *In re Gabriel C.*, 196 Conn. App. 333, 359, 229 A.3d 1073 (failure of parent to achieve sufficient personal rehabilitation is one of statutory grounds on which court may terminate parental rights pursuant to § 17a-112), cert. denied, 335 Conn. 938, A.3d (2020).

for schizoaffective disorder, polysubstance abuse, and personality disorder not otherwise specified. . . . The underlying issues included inhaling glue as a child and abuse of [V]alium as an adult, and purchasing [X]anax on the street. He has had at least twelve suicide attempts, and admitted to being suicidal, self-injurious, fire setting, and having homicidal thoughts or behaviors and hear ing voices since age seventeen."

In 2015, the respondent's clinician expressed concern for his untreated mental health issues and his unaddressed sexual and physical abuse of his older daughters. The respondent indicated that he was receiving mental health treatment, but the clinician was unable to verify his compliance with such treatment or medication. He also refused referrals for further treatment. In January, 2016, he did resume treatment following referrals from the department.

On November 30, 2016, approximately one month after Kiara's birth, Ines Schroeder, a clinical and forensic psychologist, performed a psychological examination of the respondent. Schroeder opined that the respondent demonstrated cognitive deficits and difficulty in processing information. She further noted that his blunted mood and affect was consistent with his prior diagnosis of schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder. The respondent reported regular hallucinations that occurred twice per day, as well as homicidal and suicidal ideation. Schroeder indicated that, in her opinion, the respondent failed to recognize safety concerns and was unable to maintain his mental health, which made it unlikely that he was capable of caring for Kiara. Schroeder stated that the respondent would need to demonstrate engagement in long-term treatment and demonstrate mental health stability for at least one year in order to demonstrate the ability to parent.The department continued to arrange mental health treatment for the respondent, but his inconsistent attendance and

sporadic compliance with his medication regimen resulted in little progress by July 29, 2019. The respondent's failure to be compliant with the offered mental health services prevented the department from providing him with a referral for parenting education. Ultimately, the court concluded: "Many of [the respondent's] service providers worked to assist him with addressing the issues that impede his ability to parent [Kiara]. [Two of the providers] also identified the efforts [the respondent] would have to make to be a parent to [Kiara], and [the respondent] has failed to make those efforts."

The court then proceeded to the dispositional phase and the best interests of the child analysis.[5] In considering the relevant statutory factors, the court first determined that the respondent had "difficulty accepting and understanding his mental illness. He has not complied with treatment and failed to be consistent in order to make progress in his ability to be a parent." The court found that the respondent never prepared a home for Kiara and failed to change his lifestyle so that he could gain custody of her. The court observed that the respondent had not been prevented from having a meaningful relationship with Kiara and that his inability to "get [himself] to a place to parent [Kiara]" was the result of his actions or failures to act. The court found that Kiara, who never had been in the care and custody of the respondent, did not recognize the respondent as her father. The court then concluded, on the basis of clear and convincing evidence, that termination of the respondent's par-

[5] "If the trial court determines that a statutory ground for termination exists, it proceeds to the dispositional phase. . . . In the dispositional phase of a termination of parental rights hearing, the trial court must determine whether it is established by clear and convincing evidence that the continuation of the [parent's] parental rights is not in the best interests of the child. In arriving at that decision, the court is mandated to consider and make written findings regarding seven factors delineated in . . . § [17a-112 (k)]." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *In re Phoenix A.*, supra, 202 Conn. App. 838.

ental rights was in the best interests of Kiara. This appeal followed.[6]

I

The respondent first claims that the court improperly denied his request for a continuance. He claims that the court's denial of a request for a continuance on the last day of trial prevented him from testifying and constituted a denial of his due process rights. The petitioner counters, inter alia, that the respondent failed to preserve this claim and cannot satisfy the first prong of *State* v. *Golding*, 213 Conn. 233, 239–40, 567 A.2d 823 (1989), as modified by *In re Yasiel R.*, 317 Conn. 773, 781, 120 A.3d 1188 (2015). We agree with the petitioner.

The following additional facts are necessary for our discussion. The respondent attended the first three days of the trial.[7] At the outset of the proceedings on December 30, 2019, the respondent's counsel informed the court of the respondent's absence. Specifically, the respondent's counsel stated: "Your Honor, if I may just, briefly—address—my client's [absence] today, that he had—had indicated that he was not able to secure transportation to court this morning. Given . . . that the length of time this case had been pending, I—I indicated to him I didn't think the court would grant a continuance. I—I did tell him I would, at least, raise that issue

[6] On December 11, 2020, the attorney for the child filed a letter with the court, pursuant to Practice Book § 67-13, adopting the brief of the petitioner.

[7] The termination of parental rights trial took place on the following dates: December 9, 11, 13 and 30, 2019. On December 11, 2019, the second day of the trial, the parties discussed with the court the possibility of taking witnesses out of order. The court indicated it would consider permitting the respondent to testify before the petitioner's case had concluded. After consulting with the respondent, the respondent's counsel stated: "So, Your Honor, [the respondent] would like the opportunity to hear the state's testimony, all their witnesses before getting on the stand to testify. At—at one point, I thought we could do that but—if we had other witnesses. But, given that his testimony is critical so . . . ." The court then confirmed with the respondent's counsel that he would not call any witnesses until the petitioner's case had concluded.

for the court to consider, so I'm doing that right now." The court confirmed on the record with the respondent's counsel that the respondent had been present for the previous court date. The following colloquy then occurred between the court and the parties:

"The Court: And, so, he was aware of this date and did he make any contact with you?

"[The Respondent's Counsel]: He did not. He did not. I believe he may have made some phone calls to me this morning, but on my way to court I don't—

"The Court: What do you mean you believe he may have—

"[The Respondent's Counsel]: He indicated on the phone that he tried—

"The Court: —because did he have any contact—

"[The Respondent's Counsel]: —to contact me this morning—

"The Court: —to you?

"[The Respondent's Counsel]: —probably, right before court. I had contact [with] him as well before court. That's when I learned of his transportation issues. But he was aware of this court date. We had spoken about it and I had provided him the date and, over the holiday we had—well, he was aware, so—

"The Court: Okay. All right. Then it appears he did not make the necessary arrangements to be present and may I inquire—because I believe the department will provide transportation when necessary—did either the [assistant attorney general] or social worker receive any contact from [the respondent] concerning the need for transportation to court?

"[Assistant Attorney General]: No, Your Honor.

"[Social Worker]: No, Your Honor.

"The Court: Ok. All right. Sit down and we'll proceed."

Shortly thereafter, the parties rested. At no point during the final day's proceedings did the respondent's counsel make any further comments or arguments regarding the respondent's absence nor did the respondent's counsel file any posttrial motions requesting to open the hearing in order to present further evidence or testimony regarding the respondent's absence.

On appeal, the respondent argues, for the first time, that "[t]he failure to grant trial counsel's continuance request or make alternative arrangements for the [respondent] to be present for the last day of trial, deprived the [respondent] of his fundamental due process rights in trying to have a fair trial to protect his parental rights. Accordingly, the trial court erred in denying [the respondent's] trial counsel's request for a continuance so that the [respondent] could appear and testify and participate in the last day of trial."

Although the respondent noted in his appellate brief that his trial counsel had requested a continuance,[8] he requests review pursuant to *State* v. *Golding*, supra, 213 Conn. 233.[9] "The test set forth in *Golding* applies

[8] To the extent that the respondent contends that this issue was preserved before the trial court, we disagree. As stated previously, his counsel requested a continuance, which the trial court denied. We iterate that the respondent never raised the due process claim he now presents to this court, nor did the trial court consider it as such. Under these circumstances, "it is evident that the . . . [constitutional claim does not fit] within the parameters of this court's holding that it will hear a claim only if it appears on the record that the question was distinctly raised at trial and was ruled upon and decided by the court adversely to the appellant's claim. *In re Candids E.*, 111 Conn. App. 210, 215 n.7, 958 A.2d 229 (2008)." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *In re Lukas K.*, 120 Conn. App. 465, 471, 992 A.2d 1142 (2010), aff'd, 300 Conn. 463, 14 A.3d 990 (2011).

[9] The respondent also asserts that we may "consider" plain error review, "utilize" our supervisory authority or consider the issue of "judicial integrity as well as maintaining the public's confidence in judicial proceedings in termination of parental rights cases." We decline to do so in the absence of any analysis of why these methods of review should be employed in the present case. See *In re Omar I.*, 197 Conn. App. 499, 587 n.28, 231 A.3d 1196 (analysis, rather than abstract assertion, is required to avoid abandoning issue), cert. denied, 335 Conn. 924, 233 A.3d 1091, cert. denied sub nom.

in civil as well as criminal cases." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Gleason* v. *Smolinski*, 319 Conn. 394, 402 n.10, 125 A.3d 920 (2015); *In re Tremaine C.*, 117 Conn. App. 521, 528 n.9, 980 A.2d 317, cert. denied, 294 Conn. 920, 984 A.2d 69 (2009). Pursuant to the *Golding* doctrine, we may review an unpreserved claim "only if *all* of the following conditions are met: (1) the record is adequate to review the alleged claim of error; (2) the claim is of constitutional magnitude alleging the violation of a fundamental right; (3) the alleged constitutional violation . . . exists and . . . deprived the defendant of a fair trial; and (4) if subject to harmless error analysis, the state has failed to demonstrate harmlessness of the alleged constitutional violation beyond a reasonable doubt. . . . The first two *Golding* requirements involve whether the claim is reviewable, and the second two involve whether there was constitutional error requiring a new trial." (Citation omitted; emphasis in original; internal quotation marks omitted.) *State* v. *Castro*, 200 Conn. App. 450, 456–57, 238 A.3d 813, cert. denied, 335 Conn. 983, 242 A.3d 105 (2020); see also *In re Miyuki M.*, 202 Conn. App. 851, 858–59, A.3d (2021).

In *State* v. *Brunetti*, 279 Conn. 39, 54, 901 A.2d 1 (2006), cert. denied, 549 U.S. 1212, 127 S. Ct. 1328, 167 L. Ed. 2d 85 (2007), our Supreme Court observed that, "unless the defendant has satisfied the first *Golding* prong, that is, unless the defendant has demonstrated that the record is adequate for appellate review, the appellate tribunal will not consider the merits of the defendant's claim." It further explained that "[t]he reason for this requirement demands no great elaboration:

Ammar I. v. *Connecticut*, U.S. , 141 S. Ct. 956, L. Ed. 2d (2020); see, e.g., *State* v. *Monahan*, 125 Conn. App. 113, 124–25, 7 A.3d 404 (2010) (Appellate Court will not engage in plain error analysis on basis of inadequate brief), cert. denied, 299 Conn. 926, 11 A.3d 152 (2011). Additionally, we note that these doctrines are reserved for extraordinary circumstances that are not implicated by the present case. See, e.g., *In re Miyuki M.*, 202 Conn. App. 851, 858, A.3d (2021).

in the absence of a sufficient record, there is no way to know whether a violation of constitutional magnitude in fact has occurred." Id., 55. More recently, in *In re Azareon Y.*, 309 Conn. 626, 635, 72 A.3d 1074 (2013), our Supreme Court noted that our appellate courts "will not address an unpreserved constitutional claim [i]f the facts revealed by the record are insufficient, unclear or ambiguous as to whether a constitutional violation has occurred . . . ." (Internal quotation marks omitted.); see also *In re Anthony L.*, 194 Conn. App. 111, 114, 219 A.3d 979 (2019) (respondent bears burden of providing sufficient record for *Golding* review and appellate courts will not attempt to supplement or reconstruct record to make factual determinations in order to decide claim), cert. denied, 334 Conn. 914, 221 A.3d 447 (2020).

The record in the present case contains scant details regarding the respondent's absence from the final day of trial. The respondent's attorney informed the court that the respondent was not able to attend the court proceedings because of a transportation issue and acknowledged that the respondent was aware of the trial date. Both the petitioner's counsel and a social worker indicated that they were not aware of any request made by the respondent for assistance with transportation. Additionally, we note that the trial concluded on December 30, 2019, and the court issued its memorandum of decision on August 7, 2020. In the intervening seven months, the respondent never moved to open the evidence with an offer of proof regarding the reasons for his absence and the evidence he would have presented. See, e.g., *In re Lukas K.*, 300 Conn. 463, 473–74, 14 A.3d 990 (2011) (respondent father gave no indication to trial court by offer of proof or otherwise as to additional evidence he would have presented or attempted to elicit from commissioner's witnesses had he been given copy of transcript and continuance to respond to evidence).

We are mindful that "[t[he right of a parent to raise his or her children has been recognized as a basic constitutional right." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *In re Tremaine C.*, supra, 117 Conn. App. 529; see also *In re Natalie S.*, 325 Conn. 833, 846–47, 160 A.3d 1056 (2017); *In re Adrian K.*, 191 Conn. App. 397, 411, 215 A.3d 1271 (2019). However, just as a defendant in a criminal trial may waive his or her constitutional rights by a voluntary and deliberate absence from the trial, "a respondent in a parental rights termination proceeding may waive [his] right . . . by deliberate absence." *In re Jason M.*, 140 Conn. App. 708, 718, 59 A.3d 902, cert. denied, 308 Conn. 931, 64 A.3d 330, cert. denied sub nom. *Charline P.* v. *Connecticut Dept. of Children & Families*, 571 U.S. 1079, 134 S. Ct. 701, 187 L. Ed. 2d 564 (2013).

Given this record, the respondent's reason or reasons for his failure to attend the final day of the trial are vague and unclear. See, e.g., *In re Anthony L.*, supra, 194 Conn. App. 119–20. We frequently have stated that "speculation and conjecture have no place in appellate review." *In re Samantha S.*, 120 Conn. App. 755, 759, 994 A.2d 259 (2010), appeal dismissed, 300 Conn. 586, 15 A.3d 1062 (2011); see also *Magsig* v. *Magsig*, 183 Conn. App. 182, 196, 191 A.3d 1053 (2018). Given the evidentiary lacuna regarding the respondent's absence from the last day of trial, there is an inadequate record to review this appellate claim. We conclude, therefore, that the respondent failed to satisfy the first prong of *Golding*, and, we must decline to review this claim.

II

The respondent next claims that the court's finding that termination of his parental rights was in Kiara's best interests was clearly erroneous.[10] He argues that

[10] On appeal, the respondent does not challenge the trial court's determination that a statutory ground, namely, the failure to rehabilitate, existed for the termination of his parental rights.

the evidence at trial showed that he "was affectionate toward his daughter, that he expressed concern for her health and well-being by feeding her and changing her diapers, and that he would bring clothing and gifts for her, and although his child was not in his care and custody, he did engage appropriately with her" and, therefore, the court erred in concluding that termination of his parental rights was in Kiara's best interests. We disagree.

"If the trial court determines that a statutory ground for termination exists, then it proceeds to the dispositional phase. . . . In the dispositional phase of a termination of parental rights hearing, the trial court must determine whether it is established by clear and convincing evidence that the continuation of the respondent's parental rights is not in the best interest of the child. In arriving at this decision, the court is mandated to consider and make written findings regarding seven factors delineated in [§ 17a-112 (k)]. . . . The seven factors serve simply as guidelines for the court and are not statutory prerequisites that need to be proven before termination can be ordered. . . . There is no requirement that each factor be proven by clear and convincing evidence. . . . In the dispositional phase . . . the emphasis appropriately shifts from the conduct of the parent to the best interest of the child. . . . The best interests of the child include the child's interests in sustained growth, development, well-being, and continuity and stability of [his or her] environment. . . . Because a respondent's fundamental right to parent his or her child is at stake, [t]he statutory criteria must be strictly complied with before termination can be accomplished and adoption proceedings begun." (Citations omitted; footnote omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *In re Malachi E.*, 188 Conn. App. 426, 434–36, 204 A.3d 810 (2019); see also *In re Anaishaly C.*, 190 Conn. App. 667, 689–90, 213 A.3d 12 (2019).

This court will overturn a determination that termination of parental rights is in the best interests of a child only if the court's findings are clearly erroneous. See *In re Walker C.*, 195 Conn. App. 604, 610–11, 226 A.3d 175 (2020). "It is axiomatic that a trial court's factual findings are accorded great deference. . . . A finding is clearly erroneous when either there is no evidence in the record to support it, or the reviewing court is left with the definite and firm conviction that a mistake has been made. . . . [Additionally] [o]n appeal, our function is to determine whether the trial court's conclusion was factually supported and legally correct. . . . In doing so, however, [g]reat weight is given to the judgment of the trial court because of [the court's] opportunity to observe the parties and the evidence. . . . We do not examine the record to determine whether the trier of fact could have reached a conclusion other than the one reached. . . . [Rather] every reasonable presumption is made in favor of the trial court's ruling." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) Id., 612; see also *In re Malachi E.*, supra, 188 Conn. App. 443.

This court has observed that the existence of a bond between a parent and a child, while relevant, is not dispositive of a best interest determination. See *In re Anaishaly C.*, supra, 190 Conn. App. 693. After our careful review of the evidence and the memorandum of decision, we cannot conclude that the trial court's findings in the determination of Kiara's best interests were clearly erroneous. The court's conclusion was based on its findings related to the seven statutory factors, which have not been challenged on appeal, including the respondent's difficulty accepting and understanding his mental illness, his inability to comply with mental health treatment, and his failure to make progress in his parenting abilities. The facts highlighted in the respondent's brief, including that he has "always been

appropriate" with Kiara and that she "has been responsive to him" do not provide grounds to reverse the trial court. "We decline the respondent's invitation to place more emphasis on certain of the court's findings so that we might reach a conclusion on appeal that differs from that of the trial court." *In re Malachi E.*, supra, 188 Conn. App. 446.

The judgment is affirmed.

In this opinion the other judges concurred.

IN RE RILEY B.*
(AC 43959)

Alvord, Moll and DiPentima, Js.

Syllabus

The respondent mother appealed to this court from the judgment of the trial court terminating her parental rights as to her minor child. After the petitioner, the Commissioner of Children and Families, filed the petition to terminate the mother's parental rights, the mother filed a motion to transfer guardianship to a maternal relative in New Jersey. The motion was consolidated for trial with the termination of parental rights petition. The court terminated the mother's parental rights and denied her motion to transfer guardianship. On appeal, the mother claimed that the court deprived her of her right to substantive due process because there was no compelling reason to sever her liberty interest in the integrity of her family while the parties waited to learn whether guardianship of the child could be transferred, which was a less restrictive alternative to the termination of her parental rights. *Held* that this court declined to review the respondent mother's unpreserved constitutional claim because it failed to satisfy the first prong of *State* v. *Golding* (213 Conn. 233), as the record was devoid of any evidence that the maternal relative was amenable to guardianship, the primary factual predicate to the respondent's claim.

Argued November 10, 2020—officially released March 31, 2021**

* In accordance with the spirit and intent of General Statutes § 46b-142 (b) and Practice Book § 79a-12, the names of the parties involved in this appeal are not disclosed. The records and papers of this case shall be open for inspection only to persons having a proper interest therein and upon order of the Appellate Court.

** March 31, 2021, the date that this decision was released as a slip opinion, is the operative date for all substantive and procedural purposes.

Procedural History

Petition by the Commissioner of Children and Families to terminate the respondents' parental rights with respect to their minor child, brought to the Superior Court in the judicial district of New Haven, Juvenile Matters, where the respondent mother filed a motion to transfer guardianship; thereafter, the matter was tried to the court, *Marcus*, *J.*; judgment denying the motion to transfer guardianship and terminating the respondents' parental rights, from which the respondent mother appealed to this court. *Affirmed*.

Albert J. Oneto IV, assigned counsel, for the appellant (respondent mother).

Elizabeth Bannon, assistant attorney general, with whom, on the brief, were *William Tong*, attorney general, and *Stephen G. Vitelli*, assistant attorney general, for the appellee (petitioner).

Opinion

PER CURIAM. The respondent mother, Jacquanita B., appeals from the judgment of the trial court rendered in favor of the petitioner, the Commissioner of Children and Families, terminating her parental rights with respect to her minor daughter, Riley B. On appeal, the respondent[1] argues that the court deprived her of substantive due process as guaranteed by the fourteenth amendment to the United States constitution because there was no compelling reason, as required under the strict scrutiny standard, to sever the respondent's liberty interest in the integrity of her family while the parties waited to learn whether guardianship of the child could be transferred to a maternal relative in New Jersey. We conclude that the record is inadequate to review the respondent's

[1] The trial court also rendered judgment terminating the parental rights of Riley's father, Kevin M. Kevin M. has not appealed from the judgment terminating his parental rights, and, therefore, we refer in this opinion to Jacquanita B. as the respondent.

unpreserved constitutional claim. Accordingly, we affirm the judgment of the trial court.

The following facts, as found by the trial court or as undisputed in the record, and procedural history are relevant to our resolution of this appeal. The respondent is the mother of Riley, who was born in 2016, and two older daughters, Nyasia and Corrynn. The Department of Children and Families (department) has been involved with the respondent and her family since 2009, as a result of issues of physical neglect, physical abuse, and emotional neglect. On March 29, 2018, the department received a referral from Corrynn's school after Corrynn visited the school nurse with a blood blister on her finger, as well as extensive bruising and red welts on both of her inner forearms. Corrynn stated that the respondent had hit her with a belt that morning because she had forgotten to do her homework and that she was afraid to go home for fear of being hit again. The respondent denied the allegations, did not show concern for Corrynn, and was arrested for risk of injury to a child and assault in the second degree.

On April 4, 2018, the department held a considered removal meeting, which resulted in a safety plan that allowed the children to stay with a maternal great-aunt until the Intensive Family Preservation (IFP) program could begin working with the respondent and the children at home. On April 6, 2018, the children were allowed to return to the respondent's care on the condition that she agree to work with the department and IFP and continue counseling for Corrynn. The respondent refused to engage with the department, but she worked with IFP in the home. A department social worker attempted to visit the home to assess the safety of the children on numerous occasions but was unsuccessful in gaining access to the home. The social worker additionally attempted to join the respondent in an IFP session but was unsuccessful. From May to June, 2018, the social

worker was able to speak to the respondent on only one occasion, on the telephone.

Between May and June, 2018, the respondent was informed that neglect petitions would be filed, the department would be requesting protective supervision of the children, and she would have to comply with court-ordered specific steps to facilitate reunification. The steps included, but were not limited to, keeping all appointments set by or with the department, cooperating with the department's home visits, and taking part in individual counseling. The respondent failed to adhere to the required steps and, as a result, the petitioner filed neglect petitions on behalf of Corrynn and Riley on June 7, 2018. While the neglect petitions were pending, the department received a referral on June 19, 2018, wherein it was reported by multiple individuals that the respondent was physically and verbally abusing Corrynn on a regular basis. The department immediately commenced an investigation.

A department investigator and social worker attempted an unannounced visit to the home on June 20, 2018, with a New Haven police officer, but they were unsuccessful in gaining access to the home or seeing the children. However, the investigator and social worker were able to meet with the police officer, who informed them of an incident involving an assault by the respondent on a neighbor, which also had occurred on June 19, 2018, for which a warrant would be sought for the charge of assault in the second degree.

Also on June 20, 2018, a department supervisor was able to make telephone contact with the respondent. The respondent was extremely agitated and defensive and refused to meet with the department supervisor. The department supervisor then made another visit to the home, but nobody was present. The department notified the New Haven police, who agreed to assist in searching for the respondent's car. The department investigator and social worker attempted to visit the home on

June 21, 2018, but were unsuccessful in gaining entry, even though it was apparent, on the basis of the loud music heard inside, that people were present.

That same day, the department investigator received a telephone call from the respondent's criminal defense attorney, during which she impressed upon the attorney the urgency for the respondent to contact her and for her to assess the safety of the children. The respondent contacted the social worker and, after initially refusing to meet, agreed to schedule a meeting for the next day, June 22, 2018, with the children only. In a text message sent later that day, however, the respondent refused to make the children available the following day. Nevertheless, on June 22, 2018, the respondent made the children available at the maternal great-aunt's home. The department social worker conducted a short meeting with the children; the respondent was not present. Almost daily communication between the respondent and the department followed the June 22, 2018 meeting with the children in an attempt to schedule a home visit, but the respondent refused to cooperate.

A home visit was eventually scheduled for July 11, 2018, at 2 p.m. That morning, the respondent sent a text message to the department investigator, asking her to arrive at 3 p.m. instead. When the investigator arrived at the home at 3 p.m., no one answered the door. The investigator waited until 3:30 p.m., but the respondent never appeared.

On July 12, 2018, the department received a telephone call from the New Haven Police Department informing it that the respondent had been taken into custody after being arrested for assault in the second degree and disorderly conduct regarding the June 19, 2018 assault by the respondent on her neighbor and that the children were in need of a caretaker. The respondent identified

some family resources, but they were either not available or deemed not appropriate. The department then invoked a ninety-six hour administrative hold on behalf of both Corrynn and Riley. As a result of the foregoing, the petitioner applied for ex parte orders of temporary custody on behalf of Corrynn and Riley, which were granted on July 16, 2018. The children were placed in a nonrelative foster home, where they remained as of January, 2020.

The respondent appeared at her plea date on the neglect petitions on July 10, 2018, was advised of her rights, was appointed counsel, and entered pro forma denials. She additionally appeared at the preliminary hearing for the orders of temporary custody, choosing to contest them, and a hearing was scheduled for July 27, 2018. The respondent left the hearing early on July 27, 2018, without permission of the court, during the testimony of the department social worker. The hearing did not conclude until August 2, 2018, at which time the court sustained the orders of temporary custody. The respondent failed to appear on August 2, 2018, as well. In addition, the department established a visitation schedule for the respondent, Riley, and Corrynn between August and December, 2018. The respondent's compliance with the visitation schedule was sporadic.

The respondent failed to appear at the case status conference on September 18, 2018. The same day, Riley was adjudicated neglected and was committed to the custody of the petitioner, subject to review in April, 2019. Final specific steps were ordered for the respondent as well. A permanency plan of termination of parental rights and adoption was approved by the court on June 5, 2019, with respect to Riley.

On June 11, 2019, a maternal relative,[2] who is a resident of New Jersey, contacted the department, offering

[2] We note that the record contains inconsistent references to this individual as a maternal cousin or a maternal aunt. The discrepancy has no impact on our analysis.

to be an adoptive resource for Riley. In June, 2019, the petitioner attempted to submit a request for action, pursuant to the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC), to the state of New Jersey; see General Statutes § 17a-175; but, as a result of a delay in obtaining Riley's social security card, the ICPC package was not submitted until one week before December 5, 2019, the date of the trial conducted in the present case. The ICPC results were pending at the time of trial.

On August 1, 2019, the petitioner filed a petition to terminate the respondent's parental rights as to Riley, alleging, as the sole ground for termination, that the respondent had failed to achieve a sufficient degree of personal rehabilitation under General Statutes § 17a-112 (j) (3) (B) (i).[3] Following a judicial pretrial on October 1, 2019, the respondent filed a motion to transfer guardianship to the maternal relative in New Jersey. The motion was consolidated for trial with the termination of parental rights petition.

A trial on the petition was held on December 5, 2019. The respondent appeared at trial by writ of habeas

[3] General Statutes § 17a-112 (j) provides in relevant part: "The Superior Court, upon notice and hearing as provided in sections 45a-716 and 45a-717, may grant a petition filed pursuant to this section if it finds by clear and convincing evidence that (1) the Department of Children and Families has made reasonable efforts to locate the parent and to reunify the child with the parent in accordance with subsection (a) of section 17a-111b, unless the court finds in this proceeding that the parent is unable or unwilling to benefit from reunification efforts, except that such finding is not required if the court has determined at a hearing pursuant to section 17a-111b, or determines at trial on the petition, that such efforts are not required, (2) termination is in the best interest of the child, and (3) . . . (B) the child (i) has been found by the Superior Court or the Probate Court to have been neglected, abused or uncared for in a prior proceeding, or (ii) is found to be neglected, abused or uncared for and has been in the custody of the commissioner for at least fifteen months and the parent of such child has been provided specific steps to take to facilitate the return of the child to the parent pursuant to section 46b-129 and has failed to achieve such degree of personal rehabilitation as would encourage the belief that within a reasonable time, considering the age and needs of the child, such parent could assume a responsible position in the life of the child . . . ."

corpus, as she was serving a two year term of incarceration that had commenced on October 28, 2019. Prior to the evidentiary portion of trial, the petitioner urged the denial of the respondent's motion to transfer guardianship because the ICPC process had not yet been completed. In response, the respondent orally requested that the court stay the proceedings until the ICPC process was completed. The court reserved its decision on the respondent's request for stay until after the conclusion of trial. Thereafter, several witnesses, including the respondent, testified.

On January 14, 2020, the court, *Marcus*, *J.*, issued a memorandum of decision rendering judgment terminating the respondent's parental rights as to Riley and appointing the petitioner as Riley's statutory parent. In support of its judgment, the court determined, inter alia, that (1) the department had made reasonable efforts to locate the respondent and the respondent was unable or unwilling to benefit from reunification services offered by the department, (2) the petitioner had demonstrated, by clear and convincing evidence, that the respondent had failed to sufficiently rehabilitate under § 17a-112 (j) (3) (B) (i), and (3) terminating the respondent's parental rights was in Riley's best interest. Additionally, the court denied the respondent's motion to transfer guardianship and request to stay the proceedings. The court observed that the ICPC process was not yet completed and correctly stated that, as a matter of law, it could not "transfer guardianship of a child to an out-of-state relative without the completion of an ICPC," citing *In re Yarisha F.*, 121 Conn. App. 150, 164–65, 994 A.2d 296 (2010). This appeal followed.[4] Additional facts and procedural history will be set forth as necessary.

Before turning to the respondent's claim, we briefly review a trial court's statutory obligations when consid-

[4] The attorney for Riley has adopted the petitioner's brief.

ering a petition for the termination of parental rights. "Pursuant to § 17a-112 (j), the trial court must make certain required findings after a hearing before it may terminate a party's parental rights. It is well established that, [u]nder § 17a-112, a hearing on a petition to terminate parental rights consists of two phases: the adjudicatory phase and the dispositional phase. During the adjudicatory phase, the trial court must determine whether one or more of the . . . grounds for termination of parental rights set forth in § 17a-112 [(j) (3) exist] by clear and convincing evidence. . . . In contrast to custody proceedings, in which the best interests of the child are always the paramount consideration and in fact usually dictate the outcome, in termination proceedings, the statutory criteria must be met before termination can be accomplished and adoption proceedings begun. . . . Section [17a-112 (j) (3)] carefully sets out . . . [the] situations that, in the judgment of the legislature, constitute countervailing interests sufficiently powerful to justify the termination of parental rights in the absence of consent. . . . If the trial court determines that a statutory ground for termination exists, then it proceeds to the dispositional phase. During the dispositional phase, the trial court must determine whether termination is in the best interests of the child. . . . Also, as part of the adjudicatory phase, the department is required to prove, by clear and convincing evidence, that it has made reasonable efforts . . . to reunify the child with the parent, unless the court finds . . . that the parent is unable or unwilling to benefit from reunification . . . . Because a respondent's fundamental right to parent his or her child is at stake, [t]he statutory criteria must be strictly complied with before termination can be accomplished and adoption proceedings begun." (Citations omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *In re Elijah C.*, 326 Conn. 480, 499–500, 165 A.3d 1149 (2017).

In the present appeal, the respondent does not challenge the court's adjudicatory findings. Instead, the respondent claims that the judgment terminating her parental rights violated her right to substantive due process as guaranteed by the fourteenth amendment to the United States constitution because the petitioner was without a compelling reason to sever her liberty interest in the integrity of her family. Specifically, the respondent argues that a transfer of guardianship to Riley's maternal relative in New Jersey would have served as a less restrictive means to achieve the state's dual goals of protecting Riley from harm and affording her permanency. The respondent acknowledges that her claim of constitutional error was not preserved. Accordingly, she seeks review under *State* v. *Golding*, 213 Conn. 233, 239–40, 567 A.2d 823 (1989), as modified by *In re Yasiel R.*, 317 Conn. 773, 781, 120 A.3d 1188 (2015). The petitioner responds that, among other things, the record is inadequate for review, and, therefore, the respondent's claim fails under the first prong of *Golding*. We agree with the petitioner.

"Under *Golding*, a [party] can prevail on a claim of constitutional error not preserved at trial only if the following conditions are met: (1) the record is adequate to review the alleged claim of error; (2) the claim is of constitutional magnitude alleging the violation of a fundamental right; (3) the alleged constitutional violation . . . exists and . . . deprived the [party] of a fair trial; and (4) if subject to harmless error analysis, the state has failed to demonstrate harmlessness of the alleged constitutional violation beyond a reasonable doubt. In the absence of any one of these conditions, the [party's] claim will fail. The appellate tribunal is free, therefore, to respond to the [party's] claim by focusing on whichever condition is most relevant in the particular circumstances." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *In re Adelina A.*, 169 Conn. App. 111, 119, 148 A.3d 621, cert. denied, 323 Conn. 949, 169 A.3d 792 (2016).

Our Supreme Court repeatedly has emphasized that "*Golding* is a *narrow exception* to the general rule that an appellate court will not entertain a claim that has not been raised in the trial court. The reason for the rule is obvious: to permit a party to raise a claim on appeal that has not been raised at trial—after it is too late for the trial court or the opposing party to address the claim—would encourage trial by ambuscade, which is unfair to both the trial court and the opposing party. . . . Nevertheless, because constitutional claims implicate fundamental rights, it also would be unfair automatically and categorically to bar a defendant from raising a meritorious constitutional claim that warrants a new trial solely because the defendant failed to identify the violation at trial. *Golding* strikes an appropriate balance between these competing interests: the [respondent] may raise such a constitutional claim on appeal, and the appellate tribunal will review it, but only if the trial court record is adequate for appellate review. The reason for this requirement demands no great elaboration: in the absence of a sufficient record, there is no way to know whether a violation of constitutional magnitude in fact has occurred. Thus, as we stated in *Golding*, we will not address an unpreserved constitutional claim [i]f the facts revealed by the record are insufficient, unclear or ambiguous as to whether a constitutional violation has occurred . . . ." (Emphasis added; internal quotation marks omitted.) *State* v. *Canales*, 281 Conn. 572, 580–81, 916 A.2d 767 (2007).

"In assessing whether the first prong of *Golding* has been satisfied, it is well recognized that [t]he [respondent] bears the responsibility for providing a record that is adequate for review of [her] claim of constitutional error. If the facts revealed by the record are insufficient, unclear or ambiguous as to whether a constitutional violation has occurred, we will not attempt to supplement or reconstruct the record, or to make fac-

tual determinations, in order to decide the [respondent's] claim. . . . The reason for this requirement demands no great elaboration: in the absence of a sufficient record, there is no way to know whether a violation of constitutional magnitude in fact has occurred." (Citations omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *In re Anthony L.*, 194 Conn. App. 111, 114–15, 219 A.3d 979 (2019), cert. denied, 334 Conn. 914, 221 A.3d 447 (2020).

"To determine whether the record is adequate to ascertain whether a constitutional violation occurred, we must consider the respondent's alleged claim of impropriety and whether it requires any factual predicates." *In re Azareon Y.*, 309 Conn. 626, 636, 72 A.3d 1074 (2013).

As stated previously in this opinion, the crux of the respondent's claim is that her substantive due process rights were violated because there was a less restrictive alternative to the termination of her parental rights in the form of a transfer of Riley's guardianship to the respondent's relative in New Jersey. The primary factual predicate to that claim required an evidentiary showing that Riley's maternal relative was in fact amenable to guardianship of Riley. It is undisputed, however, that the record is devoid of any evidence that the maternal relative was amenable to guardianship.[5] In the absence of this basic factual predicate, there is an insufficient record to permit us to review the respondent's substantive due process claim. See *In re Brayden E.-H.*, 309 Conn. 642, 656–57, 72 A.3d 1083 (2013) (reserving for another day questions of whether substantive due process requires determination that termination is least restrictive means to protect child's best interest and, if so, whether § 17a-112 violates that

[5] Indeed, during oral argument before this court, when asked on what evidence he relied for the proposition that a maternal relative was interested in guardianship of the child, the respondent's counsel answered: "There was no evidence."

requirement). "Our role is not to guess at possibilities, but to review claims based on a complete factual record developed by the trial court. . . . Without the necessary factual and legal conclusions furnished by the trial court . . . any decision made by us respecting [the respondent's claim] would be entirely speculative." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *In re Anthony L.*, supra, 194 Conn. App. 119–20.

Accordingly, we decline to review the respondent's unpreserved constitutional claim because it fails to satisfy the first prong of *Golding*. See, e.g., *In re Azareon Y.*, supra, 309 Conn. 636–41 (affirming this court's determination that respondent's unpreserved substantive due process claim was not reviewable in light of inadequate record on issue of valid alternative permanency plan); *In re Madison C.*, 201 Conn. App. 184, 189–96, 241 A.3d 756 (concluding that respondent's substantive due process claim was unreviewable because record contained no factual predicates to permit review of claim that lesser restrictive means, other than termination of her parental rights, were available to protect best interests of children), cert. denied, 335 Conn. 985, 242 A.3d 480 (2020); *In re Adelina A.*, supra, 169 Conn. App. 114, 125–27 (concluding that respondent's claim was unreviewable because there was no evidence presented concerning alternative permanency plan).

The judgment is affirmed.

WENDY GEORGES *v.* COMMISSIONER OF CORRECTION (AC 43145)

Elgo, Alexander and DiPentima, Js.

Syllabus

The petitioner, a Haitian national who had been convicted of reckless manslaughter in the first degree in violation of statute (§ 53a-55 (a) (3)), sought a writ of habeas corpus, claiming that the habeas court improperly concluded that he had not established that his trial counsel rendered

ineffective assistance in advising him of the immigration consequences of his plea of nolo contendere. The petitioner asserted that his counsel failed to advise him that his plea would result in certain deportation because a conviction pursuant to § 53a-55 (a) (3) constituted a crime of moral turpitude under federal law. The court rendered judgment denying the habeas petition, from which the petitioner, on the granting of certification, appealed to this court. *Held* that the habeas court properly denied the petition for a writ of habeas corpus, the petitioner having failed to satisfy his burden of demonstrating deficient performance on the part of his trial counsel: contrary to the petitioner's claim that the crime of which he was convicted was one of moral turpitude that would result in definite deportation, there was no federal or Connecticut authority holding that reckless manslaughter in the first degree constituted a crime of moral turpitude, and, although the petitioner's deportation was extremely likely as a result his plea, it was not a certainty, as a practice guide that was available to his counsel at the time of the plea advised that crimes of moral turpitude did not render noncitizens removable in every case and that federal law permitted the waiver of that ground for removal; moreover, the petitioner's testimony that he would not have entered his plea had he known that there was a very real risk of deportation was found to be not credible by the court, which credited trial counsel's testimony that he had advised the petitioner that his plea could very likely result in his deportation and that he should expect the worst.

Argued December 7, 2020—officially released April 6, 2021

Procedural History

Amended petition for a writ of habeas corpus, brought to the Superior Court in the judicial district of Tolland and tried to the court, *Bhatt*, *J.*; thereafter, the petition was withdrawn in part; judgment denying the petition, from which the petitioner, on the granting of certification, appealed to this court. *Affirmed.*

Robert L. O'Brien, assigned counsel, with whom, on the brief, was *William A. Adsit*, assigned counsel, for the appellant (petitioner).

Nancy L. Walker, assistant state's attorney, with whom, on the brief, were *Michael L. Regan*, state's attorney, and *Stephen M. Carney*, senior assistant state's attorney, for the appellee (respondent).

Opinion

ELGO, J. The petitioner, Wendy Georges, appeals from the judgment of the habeas court denying his amended petition for a writ of habeas corpus. In rejecting his ineffective assistance of counsel claim, the court concluded that the petitioner had not established deficient performance on the part of his trial counsel in advising him of the immigration consequences of his nolo contendere plea to a charge of reckless manslaughter in the first degree in violation of General Statutes § 53a-55 (a) (3). The petitioner now challenges the propriety of that determination. We affirm the judgment of the habeas court.

The petitioner is a Haitian national who moved to Connecticut in 2008. At all relevant times, the petitioner was a green card[1] holder and, hence, a lawful permanent resident who could be removed from the United States for committing a serious crime. See *Barton* v. *Barr*, U.S. , 140 S. Ct. 1442, 1445, 206 L. Ed. 2d 682 (2020). In 2010, the petitioner was involved in a homicide in Norwich.[2] He thereafter was arrested and charged with reckless manslaughter in the first degree in violation of § 53a-55 (a) (3).[3]

[1] "A 'green card' is a document which evidences an alien's permanent residence status in the United States." *Singh* v. *Singh*, 213 Conn. 637, 640 n.3, 569 A.2d 1112 (1990).

[2] As the prosecutor recounted at the petitioner's plea hearing: "This [altercation] occurred . . . on the 14th of December, 2010. Shortly after midnight, police officers responded to a 911 call . . . . When they [arrived], they located a person identified as the victim . . . who was ultimately pronounced dead at the [hospital]. It was determined that he had been stabbed, which was the cause . . . of his death. Police officers spoke to witnesses who were at the scene. They said that [the petitioner] and the victim had been playing cards, that there had been an accusation of cheating, and, at one point, the [petitioner] grabbed the victim by the throat, the victim pulled out a knife, people restrained both parties, and then . . . [the petitioner] broke free and stabbed the victim in the back, ultimately killing him . . . ."

[3] General Statutes § 53a-55 (a) provides in relevant part: "A person is guilty of manslaughter in the first degree when . . . (3) under circumstances evincing an extreme indifference to human life, he recklessly engages in conduct which creates a grave risk of death to another person, and thereby causes the death of another person."

As the habeas court noted in its memorandum of decision, the petitioner's case "was discussed over the course of numerous [pretrial conferences]. . . . The matter was continued several times so that the petitioner could think about the plea offer." The petitioner ultimately entered into a plea agreement with the state, and a hearing was held on February 8, 2012. During the plea canvass conducted by the trial court, the petitioner affirmatively indicated that he had discussed his plea with his trial counsel, Attorney Bruce Sturman; that he was entering the plea voluntarily and of his own volition; and that he understood that, by pleading nolo contendere, he was forfeiting his right to require the state to prove his guilt beyond a reasonable doubt at a trial. The court explained to the petitioner that he faced a maximum sentence of twenty years of incarceration, and the petitioner acknowledged that, in exchange for his plea, a sentence of twelve years and six months of incarceration with seven years of special parole would be imposed.

The court also informed the petitioner that his plea "can have the consequences of deportation, exclusion from admission to the United States, or denial of naturalization" if he was not a citizen of the United States. The petitioner indicated that he understood that admonition and that he had discussed the issue with Sturman.

At that time, Sturman addressed the court and confirmed that he had apprised the petitioner of the possible immigration consequences of his plea. He stated in relevant part: "[W]e have discussed at length the immigration ramifications of this plea. I have been in touch with a . . . pro bono group out of Hartford that assists folks who have immigration issues, and I have alerted them to [the petitioner's] plight. I will be giving that information both to my client and to his wife, and I am confident that when he gets close to the end of his sentence . . . they will get involved and represent him with regard to future immigration proceedings." The

following colloquy between the court and Sturman then ensued:

"The Court: . . . I am far from an expert on immigration . . . but I would imagine that, with a conviction of manslaughter in the first degree, [the petitioner] runs a very serious risk . . . of being deported.

"[Sturman]: That's my concern. [The petitioner and I have] discussed that. I mean, immigration is deporting folks with [driving under the influence] convictions.

"The Court: I know. . . . I'm not allowed to ask him whether he has [citizenship] issues, but obviously . . . I would assume that if somebody has citizenship issues . . . this would be the type of conviction that you'd be deported on.

"[Sturman]: That's our concern."

The court then accepted the petitioner's plea of nolo contendere to one count of reckless manslaughter in the first degree, finding that it was predicated on an adequate factual basis and that it was "voluntarily and understandably made with the assistance of competent counsel."

The petitioner's sentencing hearing was held on April 12, 2012. After reciting the factual basis for the plea and the terms of the sentence, the prosecutor stated: "[M]y best understanding is that, at the end of this total sentence, [the petitioner] would be deported." In its remarks, the court likewise noted that the petitioner "is going to be going to prison for years and, most likely, with immigration issues, will then be deported . . . ." The court then sentenced the petitioner in accordance with the terms of his plea.

On August 15, 2013, the petitioner filed a pro se petition for a writ of habeas corpus; an amended petition was filed by the petitioner's habeas counsel, James E. Mortimer, on November 7, 2018. The amended petition

alleged that Sturman's representation was ineffective in that, inter alia, he "failed to advise the petitioner of the likelihood of deportation following a plea of guilty . . . ."[4] Following a trial, the habeas court concluded that the petitioner had failed to demonstrate that Sturman rendered deficient performance in that regard. Accordingly, the court denied the petition for a writ of habeas corpus. The court thereafter granted certification to appeal from the judgment denying the habeas corpus petition, and this appeal followed.

On appeal, the petitioner claims that the court improperly concluded that he had not established ineffective assistance on the part of Sturman in advising him of the immigration consequences of his nolo contendere plea. We do not agree.

At the outset, we note that the "standard of review in a habeas corpus proceeding challenging the effective assistance of trial counsel is well settled. Although a habeas court's findings of fact are reviewed under the clearly erroneous standard of review . . . [w]hether the representation a [petitioner] received at trial was constitutionally inadequate is a mixed question of law and fact. . . . As such, that question requires plenary review by this court unfettered by the clearly erroneous standard. . . . In order to prevail on an ineffective assistance of counsel claim, the [petitioner] must show: (1) that counsel's representation fell below an objective standard of reasonableness . . . and (2) that defense counsel's deficient performance prejudiced the [petitioner]." (Citation omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Gray* v. *Commissioner of Correction*, 99 Conn.

[4] In his amended petition, the petitioner raised six additional grounds for his ineffective assistance of counsel claim, two of which he withdrew at his habeas trial. With respect to the four other grounds, the habeas court concluded that the petitioner had not established deficient performance on the part of Sturman. In this appeal, the plaintiff does not challenge that determination.

App. 444, 447–48, 914 A.2d 1046, cert. denied, 282 Conn. 925, 926 A.2d 666 (2007). As our Supreme Court has observed, "[a] reviewing court can find against a petitioner on either [prong], whichever is easier." (Emphasis omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Sanchez* v. *Commissioner of Correction*, 314 Conn. 585, 606, 103 A.3d 954 (2014).

In the present case, the court's decision was predicated on the deficient performance prong. "In order for a petitioner to prevail on a claim of ineffective assistance on the basis of deficient attorney performance, a defendant must show that, considering all of the circumstances, counsel's representation fell below an objective standard of reasonableness as measured by prevailing professional norms. . . .

"Furthermore, our review of counsel's performance is highly deferential. . . . [A] fair assessment of attorney performance requires that every effort be made to eliminate the distorting effects of hindsight, to reconstruct the circumstances of counsel's challenged conduct, and to evaluate the conduct from counsel's perspective at the time. Because of the difficulties inherent in making the evaluation, a court must indulge a strong presumption that counsel's conduct falls within the wide range of reasonable professional assistance . . . ." (Citations omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Meletrich* v. *Commissioner of Correction*, 332 Conn. 615, 627, 212 A.3d 678 (2019); see also *Budziszewski* v. *Commissioner of Correction*, 322 Conn. 504, 517 n.2, 142 A.3d 243 (2016) (burden is on petitioner to prove that counsel failed to properly advise on immigration consequences of plea).

At the habeas trial, Sturman testified that, as a public defender, he received training on the collateral consequences of criminal convictions and routinely advised clients "about the deportation ramifications . . . ." Because the petitioner "was not an American citizen," Sturman testified, he had advised the petitioner that "a

guilty plea could very well likely result in his deportation . . . .'' Sturman also testified that, prior to the plea hearing, he consulted with a pro bono organization with immigration expertise regarding the petitioner's case, which cautioned Sturman that the petitioner should ''expect the worst.'' As a result, Sturman testified, he informed the petitioner that ''he would probably get deported; that he should, you know, hope for the best but expect the worst'' and that ''the chances were very good that [he would be] deported . . . .''

The petitioner, by contrast, testified at the habeas trial that Sturman had not advised him of the immigration consequences of his plea. As a result, the petitioner testified that he did not understand what effect his plea would have on his immigration status. The petitioner claimed that, had he known that there was a ''very real risk of deportation,'' he would not have accepted the nolo contendere plea.

It is well established that an appellate court cannot ''evaluate the credibility of the witnesses. . . . Rather, we must defer to the [trier of fact's] assessment of the credibility of the witnesses based on its firsthand observation of their conduct, demeanor and attitude. . . . The habeas judge, as the trier of facts, is the sole arbiter of the credibility of witnesses and the weight to be given to their testimony.'' (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Sanchez* v. *Commissioner of Correction*, supra, 314 Conn. 604; see also *Breton* v. *Commissioner of Correction*, 325 Conn. 640, 694, 159 A.3d 1112 (2017) (''a pure credibility determination . . . is unassailable''). In the present case, the court expressly credited Sturman's testimony that he had advised the petitioner that he very likely would be deported as a result of his plea. The court also found that the petitioner's testimony to the contrary was not credible. This court cannot disturb those credibility determinations. See *Bowens* v. *Commissioner of Correction*, 333 Conn. 502, 523, 217 A.3d 609 (2019).

The petitioner nevertheless contends that Sturman rendered deficient performance by failing to advise him that his plea would result in *certain* deportation. He claims that, at the time of his plea hearing in 2012, a conviction of reckless manslaughter in the first degree under § 53a-55 (a) (3) constituted a crime of moral turpitude that would result in "definite deportation."

In *Padilla* v. *Kentucky*, 559 U.S. 356, 130 S. Ct. 1473, 176 L. Ed. 2d 284 (2010), the United States Supreme Court held that the right to effective assistance of counsel mandated by the sixth amendment to the United States constitution requires a criminal defense attorney to advise a defendant "whether [a guilty] plea carries a risk of deportation." Id., 374. "[T]he precise advice counsel must give depends on the clarity of the consequences specified by federal immigration law." *Budziszewski* v. *Commissioner of Correction*, supra, 322 Conn. 511. In *Padilla*, the high court recognized that "[i]mmigration law can be complex, and it is a legal specialty of its own." *Padilla* v. *Kentucky*, supra, 369. For that reason, the court explained that, "[t]here will, therefore, undoubtedly be numerous situations in which the deportation consequences of a particular plea are unclear or uncertain. The duty of the private practitioner in such cases is more limited. When the law is not succinct and straightforward . . . a criminal defense attorney need do no more than advise a noncitizen client that pending criminal charges may carry a risk of adverse immigration consequences. But when the deportation consequence is truly clear, as it was in this case, the duty to give correct advice is equally clear." (Footnote omitted.) Id.

In the present case, the law on the immigration consequences of the petitioner's plea is not succinct and straightforward. Although federal law mandates deportation for persons convicted of certain categories of offenses, such as aggravated felonies and controlled

substance offenses; see 8 U.S.C. § 1227 (a) (2) (A) (iii) and (2) (B) (2018); the petitioner concedes that his plea involved neither an aggravated felony nor a controlled substance offense. Rather, he argues that his plea to one count of reckless manslaughter in the first degree under § 53a-55 (a) (3) constituted a crime of moral turpitude, as defined in 8 U.S.C. § 1101 (a) (13) (C) (v) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, 8 U.S.C. § 1101 et seq.[5]

As the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit has noted, "the phrase 'crime involving moral turpitude' is notoriously baffling . . . ." *Garcia-Meza* v. *Mukasey*, 516 F.3d 535, 536 (7th Cir. 2008); see also *People* v. *Valdez*, 37 N.E.3d 837, 843 (Ill. App. 2015) ("[m]oral turpitude is a notoriously difficult phrase to define"), rev'd on other grounds, 67 N.E.3d 233 (Ill. 2016), cert. denied, U.S. , 137 S. Ct. 1386, 197 L. Ed. 2d 563 (2017). The United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit similarly has observed that " 'moral turpitude' is perhaps the quintessential example of an ambiguous phrase." *Marmolejo-Campos* v. *Holder*, 558

[5] Section 1101 (a) (13) (C) of title 8 of the United States Code provides in relevant part: "An alien lawfully admitted for permanent residence in the United States shall not be regarded as seeking an admission into the United States for purposes of the immigration laws unless the alien . . .

"(v) has committed an offense identified in section 1182 (a) (2) of this title, unless since such offense the alien has been granted relief under section 1182 (h) or 1229b (a) of this title . . . ."

Section 1182 (a) of title 8 of the United States Code provides in relevant part: "Classes of aliens ineligible for visas or admission

"Except as otherwise provided in this chapter, aliens who are inadmissible under the following paragraphs are ineligible to receive visas and ineligible to be admitted to the United States . . .

"(2) Criminal and related grounds

"(A) Conviction of certain crimes

"(i) In general

"Except as provided in clause (ii), any alien convicted of, or who admits having committed, or who admits committing acts which constitute the essential elements of—

"(I) *a crime involving moral turpitude* (other than a purely political offense) or an attempt or conspiracy to commit such a crime . . . ." (Emphasis added.)

F.3d 903, 909 (9th Cir.), cert. denied, 558 U.S. 1092, 130 S. Ct. 1011, 175 L. Ed. 2d 620 (2009). That phrase is not defined by statute or federal regulation. See *Alonzo* v. *Lynch*, 821 F.3d 951, 958 (8th Cir. 2016) ("[a]lthough the immigration laws have directed the exclusion of persons convicted of crimes involving moral turpitude since 1891, Congress has never defined the term" (internal quotation marks omitted)); *State* v. *Ortiz-Mondragon*, 364 Wis. 2d 1, 24, 26, 866 N.W.2d 717 (2015) (noting that "the amorphous term 'crime involving moral turpitude' is not defined" by either federal Immigration and Nationality Act or Code of Federal Regulations). As Justice Alito noted in his concurring opinion in *Padilla*, "determining whether a particular crime is . . . a 'crime involving moral turpitude' . . . is not an easy task." *Padilla* v. *Kentucky*, supra, 559 U.S. 378 (Alito, J., concurring in the judgment); accord *Rohit* v. *Holder*, 336 Fed. Appx. 672, 673 (9th Cir. 2009) (question of whether particular offense constitutes crime involving moral turpitude "is a complex one").

There is no Connecticut or federal authority holding that a conviction of reckless manslaughter in the first degree under § 53a-55 (a) (3) constitutes a crime of moral turpitude. Nor did any such authority exist at the time that Sturman represented the petitioner in 2012. In his appellate brief, the petitioner concedes that "not all reckless crimes" are ones involving moral turpitude. Relying on the United States Board of Immigration Appeals decision in *Matter of Medina*, 15 I. & N. Dec. 611 (B.I.A. 1976), the petitioner nonetheless submits that crimes "involving recklessness and a deadly weapon do implicate moral turpitude." *Matter of Medina* involved a conviction of aggravated assault under an Illinois statute that included the use of a deadly weapon as an element of the offense. The petitioner thus reasons that, because he used a knife to stab the victim in the present case, his conviction under § 53a-55 (a) (3) necessarily is

one involving moral turpitude. The petitioner overlooks the fact that our Supreme Court has instructed that, in determining whether a crime is one involving moral turpitude, "we look only to the minimum criminal conduct necessary to satisfy the essential elements of the crime, not the particular circumstances of the defendant's conduct." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *St. Juste* v. *Commissioner of Correction*, 328 Conn. 198, 210, 177 A.3d 1144 (2018). The use of a deadly weapon is not an element of § 53a-55 (a) (3). See footnote 3 of this opinion.

As the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit has observed, the Board of Immigration Appeals "has explained that the term moral turpitude generally encompasses . . . conduct that shocks the public conscience as being inherently base, vile, or depraved, and contrary to the accepted rules of morality and the duties owed between persons or to society in general." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Rodriguez* v. *Gonzales*, 451 F.3d 60, 63 (2d Cir. 2006). It may well be that the offense of reckless manslaughter in the first degree under § 53a-55 (a) (3) involves conduct that satisfies that standard. See *Matter of Wojtkow*, 18 I. & N. Dec. 111, 113 (B.I.A. 1981) (concluding that conviction under New York reckless manslaughter statute "[did] involve moral turpitude"); cf. *St. Juste* v. *Commissioner of Correction*, supra, 328 Conn. 214 (concluding that conviction of reckless threatening in violation of General Statutes § 53a-62 (a) (3) "is not . . . a crime of moral turpitude because it lacks the requisite aggravating factor"). In this case, we are not called on to resolve that question. Rather, the issue in this case is simply whether, at the time of the petitioner's plea hearing in 2012, the law was "succinct and straightforward" and "truly clear"; *Padilla* v. *Kentucky*, supra, 559 U.S. 369; that a violation of § 53a-55 (a) (3) constituted a crime of moral turpitude that would result in the petitioner's certain deportation.

Although deportation may have been very likely, we do not agree with the petitioner's contention that "his deportation was inevitable" as a result of his plea. (Emphasis omitted.) In *Padilla*, the court emphasized the importance of consulting practice guides for advice on how to proceed when considering immigration consequences of a plea. *Padilla* v. *Kentucky*, supra, 559 U.S. 368. One such guide that was available to Sturman at the time of the petitioner's plea hearing advised that, unlike aggravated felonies, crimes involving moral turpitude "do not render a noncitizen removable in every case—[it] will depend on the immigration status, prior criminal record, and actual and potential sentence for the offense." J. Baron, A Brief Guide to Representing Noncitizen Criminal Defendants in Connecticut (Rev. 2010). That guide also advised that, "even if removable," noncitizens convicted of a crime involving moral turpitude "may still be eligible for discretionary relief from deportation . . . ." (Emphasis omitted.) Id. For example, under federal law, the United States Attorney General is permitted to waive certain grounds of inadmissibility, including conviction of a crime of moral turpitude, if the alien's removal would result in "extreme hardship" to a lawful resident family member.[6] 8 U.S.C. § 1182 (h) (1) (B) (2018); see also *Palma-Martinez* v. *Lynch*, 785 F.3d 1147, 1149 (7th Cir. 2015).

In light of the foregoing, we conclude that, although the petitioner's deportation was extremely likely as a result of his plea in 2012, it was not a certainty. For that reason, we agree with the habeas court that Sturman "adequately conveyed the near certainty of deportation to the petitioner." The court credited Sturman's testimony that he advised the petitioner that his plea "could very well likely result in his deportation," that the peti-

[6] At the habeas trial, the petitioner testified that he moved to the United States to join his wife in 2008, explaining that she had completed "the [immigration] paperwork for me to move here with her after two years."

tioner "would probably get deported" and that the petitioner should "expect the worst."

As the United States Supreme Court emphasized in *Padilla*, surmounting the high bar necessary to establish ineffective assistance of counsel "is never an easy task"; *Padilla* v. *Kentucky*, supra, 559 U.S. 371; and, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, a reviewing court "should . . . presume that counsel satisfied their obligation to render competent advice at the time their clients considered pleading guilty." Id., 372; see also *Budziszewski* v. *Commissioner of Correction*, supra, 322 Conn. 517 n.2 ("the habeas court must presume that counsel acted competently and the burden lies with the petitioner . . . to overcome this presumption and prove that [counsel] failed" to properly advise on immigration consequences). In the present case, the habeas court properly determined that the petitioner has not satisfied his burden of demonstrating deficient performance on the part of Sturman.

The judgment is affirmed.

In this opinion the other judges concurred.

RENEE GIORDANO *v.* CARL V. GIORDANO
(AC 42737)

Prescott, Moll and Suarez, Js.

Syllabus

The defendant, whose marriage to the plaintiff previously had been dissolved, appealed to this court from the judgment of the trial court granting the plaintiff's motion for contempt and awarding her appellate attorney's fees. *Held*:

1. The trial court did not err in granting the plaintiff's motion for contempt; contrary to the defendant's argument of a good faith misunderstanding, the court did not err in concluding that the defendant wilfully violated a clear and unambiguous court order that provided that he was required to make weekly payments to the plaintiff until a lump sum alimony award was paid in full, which he failed to do, as the court credited evidence from the plaintiff showing that the defendant owed her an

outstanding balance, and the court found that the defendant had the ability to pay and did not present credible testimony or evidence that he had a good faith belief that he had paid the lump sum alimony obligation in full.

2. The trial court did not abuse its discretion in awarding appellate attorney's fees to the plaintiff; the court found that the defendant was not credible with respect to his purported inability to pay and that, pursuant to statute (§ 46b-62), the award of attorney's fees was necessary to avoid undermining the judgment of contempt and the court's orders regarding the defendant's obligation to pay the outstanding balance of the lump sum alimony owed to the plaintiff, regardless of the plaintiff's ability to pay the fees.

Argued January 7—officially released April 6, 2021

Procedural History

Action for the dissolution of a marriage, and for other relief, brought to the Superior Court in the judicial district of Hartford and tried to the court, *Solomon, J.*; judgment dissolving the marriage and granting certain other relief in accordance with the parties' separation agreement; thereafter, the court, *Margaret Murphy, J.*, granted the plaintiff's motion for contempt, and the defendant appealed to this court; subsequently, the court, *Margaret Murphy, J.*, granted the plaintiff's motion for appellate attorney's fees, and the defendant filed an amended appeal. *Affirmed.*

Carl V. Giordano, self-represented, the appellant (defendant).

Steven R. Dembo, with whom were *Caitlin E. Kozloski*, and, on the brief, *P. Jo Anne Burgh*, for the appellee (plaintiff).

Opinion

MOLL, J. In this dissolution matter, the defendant, Carl V. Giordano, appeals from the judgment of the trial court granting two postjudgment motions filed by the plaintiff, Renee Giordano. On appeal, the defendant claims that the court improperly granted the plaintiff's (1) motion for contempt and (2) motion for appellate attorney's fees.

We disagree and, accordingly, affirm the judgment of the trial court.

The following facts and procedural history are relevant to our resolution of this appeal. The parties were married in 1992. In 2004, the plaintiff commenced the present dissolution action against the defendant. In October, 2005, the trial court, *Solomon*, *J.*, rendered a judgment of dissolution, which incorporated a separation agreement executed by the parties. Under article VI of the separation agreement, titled "Property Settlement," the defendant was required to pay the plaintiff $425,000, in various installments, in exchange for retaining his ownership interests in certain commercial properties. In addition, article VI provided that, "[i]f the [defendant] sells, transfers or otherwise divests himself of any of his interest in [the commercial properties], he shall immediately pay the [plaintiff] any funds due her at that time so that she is paid in full."

In 2009, the plaintiff filed a postjudgment amended motion for contempt, asserting that the defendant had sold the commercial properties in a "like-kind" exchange; see generally 26 U.S.C. § 1031 (2018); and, as a result, he was obligated to make immediate payment of the sums owed to the plaintiff in accordance with article VI of the separation agreement. The trial court, *Frazzini*, *J.*, granted the motion for contempt, and this court affirmed the judgment of contempt on appeal. See *Giordano* v. *Giordano*, 127 Conn. App. 498, 499, 14 A.3d 1058 (2011).

Following this court's decision in *Giordano* v. *Giordano*, supra, 127 Conn. App. 498, the parties entered into an agreement, dated May 5, 2011, for the purpose of "settling all of the claims and demands which each may have against the other arising from the [j]udgment dissolving their marriage and all subsequent court matters as it relates to the property settlement." The agreement was entered as a court order on June 1, 2011

(June, 2011 order). Pursuant to the June, 2011 order, the defendant was required to "satisfy his obligations to pay to the [p]laintiff a property settlement per [a]rticle IV of the [j]udgment of [d]issolution, by payments to the [p]laintiff as outlined herein, totaling $350,000." The June, 2011 order provided that $175,000 of the $350,000 owed to the plaintiff would be paid from the sale of the defendant's interest in certain real estate in East Windsor. That particular payment is not at issue in this appeal. The June, 2011 order further provided that the remaining $175,000 would be paid to the plaintiff as lump sum alimony. Such alimony was ordered to be paid at a rate of $200 per week for one year commencing upon the termination of the periodic alimony orders in place at the time, which was expected to occur in April, 2012, and, thereafter, at a rate of $300 per week until the sum was paid in full. The defendant was also required to make payments toward the foregoing lump sum alimony obligation in the event he received certain monies described in the June, 2011 order.

On February 8, 2019, the plaintiff, representing herself, filed the postjudgment motion for contempt at issue in this appeal.[1] The plaintiff contended that the defendant (1) owed her a balance of $62,510 in lump sum alimony and (2) had failed to remit to her the prior three $300 weekly payments owed under the June, 2011 order. On March 12, 2019, following an evidentiary hearing at which both parties were self-represented, the court orally granted the motion for contempt. The same day, the court issued a written order setting forth its decision. As relief, the court ordered the defendant to pay the plaintiff (1) $2745 on or before March 15, 2019,

[1] In 2012, the plaintiff filed a postjudgment motion for contempt, asserting that the defendant had failed to comply with a portion of the June, 2011 order that is not at issue in this appeal. The trial court, *Westbrook*, *J.*, granted the motion for contempt, and this court affirmed the judgment of contempt on appeal. See *Giordano* v. *Giordano*, 153 Conn. App. 343, 344, 101 A.3d 327 (2014).

and (2) $1300 per month starting on April 1, 2019, continuing until the outstanding lump sum alimony due to the plaintiff was paid off on February 1, 2023. On March 26, 2019, the defendant filed this appeal from the judgment of contempt.

On April 3, 2019, the plaintiff, represented by counsel, filed a motion for appellate attorney's fees. On April 4, 2019, the defendant, representing himself, filed an objection. On May 1, 2019, following an evidentiary hearing, the court orally granted the motion, awarding the plaintiff $10,000 in attorney's fees to be paid by the defendant at a rate of $100 per week.[2] On May 9, 2019, the defendant amended this appeal to encompass the court's award of attorney's fees. Additional facts and procedural history will be set forth as necessary.

I

The defendant's first claim is that the trial court improperly granted the plaintiff's postjudgment motion for contempt. We disagree.

"Contempt is a disobedience to the rules and orders of a court which has power to punish for such an offense. . . . Our review of a trial court's judgment of civil contempt involves a two part inquiry. [W]e first consider the threshold question of whether the underlying order constituted a court order that was sufficiently clear and unambiguous so as to support a judgment of contempt. . . . Second, if we conclude that the underlying court order was sufficiently clear and unambiguous, we must then determine whether the trial court abused its discretion in issuing, or refusing to issue, a judgment of contempt, which includes a review of the trial court's determination of whether the violation was wilful or excused by a good faith dispute or misunder-

[2] The trial court submitted a signed transcript of its oral decision. See Practice Book § 64-1 (a).

standing. . . . Whether a party's violation was wilful depends on the circumstances of the particular case and, ultimately, is a factual question committed to the sound discretion of the trial court." (Citations omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Hall* v. *Hall*, 335 Conn. 377, 391–92, 238 A.3d 687 (2020). "[T]his court will not disturb the trial court's orders unless it has abused its legal discretion or its findings have no reasonable basis in fact. . . . It is within the province of the trial court to find facts and draw proper inferences from the evidence presented. . . . [E]very reasonable presumption will be given in favor of the trial court's ruling, and [n]othing short of a conviction that the action of the trial court is one which discloses a clear abuse of discretion can warrant our interference." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Casiraghi* v. *Casiraghi*, 200 Conn. App. 771, 787, 241 A.3d 717 (2020).

The following additional facts are relevant to our resolution of the defendant's claim. During the evidentiary hearing on the plaintiff's motion for contempt, the court heard testimony from the parties. In addition, the court admitted into evidence an accounting offered and prepared by the plaintiff, which reflected payments made by the defendant against the $175,000 in lump sum alimony owed to the plaintiff under the June, 2011 order (plaintiff's accounting). The plaintiff's accounting indicated that the defendant (1) made a $12,090 payment to her in 2013, and (2) made payments to her from April, 2012, through 2018, in either $200 or $300 weekly increments in accordance with the June, 2011 order, but paid her only $900 in 2019, leaving an outstanding balance of $62,510 in lump sum alimony.

The court also admitted into evidence several exhibits offered by the defendant, including (1) two letters, dated January 24, 2019, and February 5, 2019, respectively, which the defendant had mailed to the plaintiff,

and (2) an accounting prepared by the defendant (defendant's accounting). In the January 24, 2019 letter, the defendant wrote, inter alia, that he was "about 95 [percent] certain" that he had overpaid the plaintiff by approximately $22,190, and he asked the plaintiff to review an attached accounting that he had prepared that purportedly supported his calculations. He further wrote that "[o]f course it is also possible that I am wrong and if that is the case of course I would resume paying you what I owe you . . . but I do not plan to pay you if indeed I have already overpaid as I have stated herein." In the February 5, 2019 letter, the defendant wrote, inter alia, that he was "98 [percent] sure" of the data he had provided to the plaintiff in the prior letter, and he asked the plaintiff to respond indicating whether she agreed with his claim. It is undisputed that the plaintiff received, but did not reply to, the letters.

The defendant's accounting[3] reflected various payments made by the defendant, including some that predated the June, 2011 order, which he credited against the lump sum alimony owed to the plaintiff. According to his calculations, the defendant either overpaid the plaintiff by $22,190 or owed her $2810, depending on whether a certain $25,000 payment could be credited against the lump sum alimony award.

In granting the plaintiff's motion for contempt, the court determined that (1) the June, 2011 order was clear and unambiguous in requiring the defendant, starting in April, 2013, to pay the plaintiff $300 per week until the $175,000 lump sum alimony award was paid in full, and (2) the defendant wilfully violated the order. In addition, the court found that (1) the defendant was

[3] During the evidentiary hearing on the plaintiff's motion for contempt, both parties represented that the defendant's accounting, which was admitted into evidence, was not identical to the accounting that the defendant had mailed to the plaintiff as an attachment to the January 24, 2019 letter. The defendant's accounting contained an entry indicating that it had been revised on March 9, 2019.

not credible, (2) the defendant had the ability to pay, and (3) the plaintiff was credible and the plaintiff's accounting was correct.

The defendant does not challenge the court's conclusion that the June, 2011 order was clear and unambiguous, but he claims that the court improperly determined that his noncompliance with the June, 2011 order was wilful. Specifically, the defendant asserts that the court failed to consider the two letters and the defendant's accounting, which, he contends, demonstrated that he had a good faith belief that he had paid the lump sum alimony obligation in full. He further asserts that the court ignored the undisputed fact that the plaintiff did not reply to his letters, which, he posits, established that a good faith disagreement existed as to whether he had satisfied his payment obligations under the June, 2011 order. We are not persuaded.

During the hearing on the plaintiff's motion for contempt, before granting the motion, the court stated that it had reviewed the parties' respective exhibits and testimony. As the court expressly stated on the record and in its written order, however, it found that the defendant was not credible. It is reasonable to infer that the court's finding regarding the defendant's lack of credibility extended to the contents of the defendant's letters mailed to the plaintiff and to the defendant's accounting, which were all crafted by the defendant.[4] Put simply, the court did not ignore the defendant's letters and the defendant's accounting; rather, the court discredited them. "We will not disturb credibility determinations made by the court. See *Greco* v. *Greco*, [275 Conn. 348, 359, 880 A.2d 872 (2005)] (on appeal, '[w]e cannot retry the facts or pass on the credibility of the witnesses' . . .)." *Fronsaglia* v. *Fronsaglia*, 202 Conn. App. 769,

[4] Moreover, the court expressly credited the plaintiff's accounting. It logically follows that the court discredited the defendant's accounting.

779, A.3d (2021); see also *Talbot* v. *Talbot*, 148 Conn. App. 279, 293, 85 A.3d 40 (stating that trial court was not required to credit new financial affidavit submitted by plaintiff), cert. denied, 311 Conn. 954, 97 A.3d 984 (2014). Accordingly, we reject the defendant's claim that the court erred in determining that he had wilfully violated the June, 2011 order, and, thus, we conclude that the court did not commit error in granting the plaintiff's motion for contempt.

II

The defendant's next claim is that the trial court improperly granted the plaintiff's motion for appellate attorney's fees. This claim is unavailing.

"When making an order for the payment of attorney's fees, the court must consider factors that are essentially the same as those that must be considered when awarding alimony. . . . [General Statutes §] 46b-62[5] governs the award of attorney's fees in dissolution proceedings and provides that the court may order either spouse . . . to pay the reasonable attorney's fees of the other in accordance with their respective financial abilities and the criteria set forth in [General Statutes §] 46b-82[6]. . . . This reasonableness requirement balances

[5] General Statutes § 46b-62 provides in relevant part: "(a) In any proceeding seeking relief under the provisions of this chapter . . . the court may order either spouse or, if such proceeding concerns the custody, care, education, visitation or support of a minor child, either parent to pay the reasonable attorney's fees of the other in accordance with their respective financial abilities and the criteria set forth in section 46b-82. . . ."

[6] General Statutes § 46b-82 provides in relevant part: "(a) At the time of entering the decree, the Superior Court may order either of the parties to pay alimony to the other, in addition to or in lieu of an award pursuant to section 46b-81. . . . In determining whether alimony shall be awarded, and the duration and amount of the award, the court shall consider the evidence presented by each party and shall consider the length of the marriage, the causes for the annulment, dissolution of the marriage or legal separation, the age, health, station, occupation, amount and sources of income, earning capacity, vocational skills, education, employability, estate and needs of each of the parties and the award, if any, which the court may make pursuant to section 46b-81, and, in the case of a parent to whom the custody of minor children has been awarded, the desirability and feasibility of such parent's securing employment. . . ."

the needs of the obligee spouse with the obligor spouse's right to be protected from excessive fee awards. . . .

"Courts ordinarily award counsel fees in divorce cases so that a party . . . may not be deprived of [his or] her rights because of lack of funds. . . . Where, because of other orders, both parties are financially able to pay their own counsel fees they should be permitted to do so. . . . An exception to the rule . . . is that an award of attorney's fees is justified even where both parties are financially able to pay their own fees if the failure to make an award would undermine its prior financial orders. . . . Whether to allow counsel fees [under §§ 46b-62 and 46b-82], and if so in what amount, calls for the exercise of judicial discretion. . . . An abuse of discretion in granting counsel fees will be found only if [an appellate court] determines that the trial court could not reasonably have concluded as it did." (Citations omitted; footnotes added; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Lynch* v. *Lynch*, 153 Conn. App. 208, 246–47, 100 A.3d 968 (2014), cert. denied, 315 Conn. 923, 108 A.3d 1124, cert. denied, 577 U.S. 839, 136 S. Ct. 68, 193 L. Ed. 2d 66 (2015).

The following additional facts are relevant to our disposition of the defendant's claim. Both parties filed updated financial affidavits with the court in connection with the plaintiff's motion for appellate attorney's fees. During the evidentiary hearing on the motion, the defendant provided testimony regarding his financial circumstances and argued that he did not have the ability to pay the plaintiff's attorney's fees. The plaintiff testified that she had paid her attorney a $10,000 retainer via credit card and that the payment of that charge would have to come from the monies remitted to her by the defendant under the June, 2011 order.

In orally granting the plaintiff's motion for appellate attorney's fees, the court found that (1) the defendant was not credible regarding his purported inability to

pay the plaintiff's attorney's fees, (2) the defendant had the ability to pay, and (3) awarding the plaintiff attorney's fees was "necessary to prevent undermining by the defendant of prior court orders, which included finding him liable for a contempt and ordering him to pay what he owes the plaintiff." In a subsequent written articulation,[7] the court further stated in relevant part that it had "granted the plaintiff's request for attorney's fees for the appeal . . . pursuant to § 46b-62 and the relevant case law because the failure to award attorney's fees would undermine the court's other financial orders after finding the defendant in contempt."

The defendant claims that the court improperly granted the plaintiff's motion for appellate attorney's fees for two reasons. First, he contends that his financial affidavit and testimony during the evidentiary hearing on the motion demonstrated that he did not have the ability to pay the attorney's fees award. This contention is unavailing because the court, in finding that the defendant had the ability to pay, expressly found that the defendant was not credible with respect to his purported inability to pay. We will not second-guess the court's credibility determination or retry the facts on appeal. See *Fronsaglia* v. *Fronsaglia*, supra, 202 Conn. App. 779.

Second, the defendant contends that the record established that the plaintiff had the ability to pay her own attorney's fees, which the court failed to consider, in effect punishing the defendant for filing this appeal. We are not persuaded. As our Supreme Court has explained, "ample liquid funds [are] not an absolute litmus test for an award of counsel fees. . . . [To] award counsel fees to a spouse who had sufficient liquid assets would be justified, if the failure to do so would

[7] On May 22, 2019, the plaintiff filed a motion for articulation of the court's decision granting her motion for appellate attorney's fees. On June 10, 2019, the court granted the motion and issued an articulation.

substantially undermine the other financial awards." (Citation omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Maguire* v. *Maguire*, 222 Conn. 32, 44, 608 A.2d 79 (1992); see also *Ramin* v. *Ramin*, 281 Conn. 324, 352, 915 A.2d 790 (2007) ("the general rule under *Maguire* is that an award of attorney's fees in a marital dissolution case is warranted only when at least one of two circumstances is present: (1) one party does not have ample liquid assets to pay for attorney's fees; or (2) the failure to award attorney's fees will undermine the court's other financial orders"). In the present case, the court found that awarding the plaintiff $10,000 in appellate attorney's fees was necessary to avoid undermining the judgment of contempt and its attendant orders regarding the defendant's obligation to pay the plaintiff $62,510, the outstanding balance of lump sum alimony owed to the plaintiff. On the basis of the record, we conclude that the foregoing finding justified the court's award of attorney's fees to the plaintiff.[8]

[8] In his objection to the plaintiff's motion for appellate attorney's fees, the defendant argued that paragraph 10 of the June, 2011 order, which provided in relevant part that "[e]ach party shall be responsible for his or her own past, present or future counsel fees," prohibited the court from awarding the attorney's fees requested by the plaintiff. The defendant also raised this argument during the evidentiary hearing on the motion. In its June 10, 2019 articulation, the court rejected this argument, concluding that paragraph 10 of the June, 2011 order did not preclude it from granting the plaintiff's motion.

As the plaintiff observes in her appellate brief, although the defendant preserved the issue concerning paragraph 10 of the June, 2011 order in the trial court, he did not raise this issue in his appellate brief. "[A]n appellant who fails to brief a claim abandons it." (Emphasis omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Harris* v. *Bradley Memorial Hospital & Health Center, Inc.*, 306 Conn. 304, 319, 50 A.3d 841 (2012), cert. denied, 569 U.S. 918, 133 S. Ct. 1809, 185 L. Ed. 2d 812 (2013). We are mindful that the defendant is self-represented; however, "[t]he solicitous treatment we afford a self-represented party does not allow us to address a claim on his behalf when he has failed to brief that claim." *Traylor* v. *State*, 332 Conn. 789, 807, 213 A.3d 467 (2019). Thus, notwithstanding that the defendant raised the argument regarding paragraph 10 of the June, 2011 order before the trial court and during oral argument before this court, we decline to address the merits thereof as a result of his failure to brief it in his appellate brief.

In sum, we conclude that the court did not abuse its discretion in granting the plaintiff's motion for appellate attorney's fees.

The judgment is affirmed.

In this opinion the other judges concurred.

JENNIFER BOYD-MULLINEAUX *v.* DANIEL MULLINEAUX (AC 43509)

Bright, C. J., and Alvord and DiPentima, Js.

Syllabus

The plaintiff, whose marriage to the defendant had previously been dissolved, appealed to this court from the decision of the trial court denying her postdissolution motion for contempt as to a claimed arrearage for unallocated alimony and child support, claiming that the court incorrectly determined that she was not entitled to receive a percentage of profit distributions received by the defendant from his purchased membership interest in a company, P Co. The trial court found that the defendant received income from two sources: commission income as an employee of C Co., and distributions as a member of P Co. The court denied the plaintiff's motion for contempt, concluding that the distributions that the defendant received from P Co. were not included in the defendant's gross annual earned income from employment, as defined in the parties' separation agreement. *Held* that the trial court properly denied the plaintiff's motion for contempt because the distributions received by the defendant as a member of P Co. were not included in the definition of gross annual earned income from employment as defined in the parties' separation agreement: the evidence supported the court's conclusion that the distributions were not derived from the defendant's employment with C Co., including expert testimony that the defendant had paid for an equity interest in P Co., and that the income he received derived from that interest; moreover, there was no provision in the members' agreement, which concerned distributions from P Co., that required members of P Co. to be employed by C Co., the defendant purchased his membership interest in P Co. postdissolution, and he receives distributions on that investment, and the separation agreement provides that all income received by the defendant due to his investment of certain assets shall not be considered in the definition of gross annual earned income from employment.

Argued January 19—officially released April 6, 2021

Procedural History

Action for the dissolution of a marriage, and for other relief, brought to the Superior Court in the judicial district of Stamford-Norwalk, where the court, *Emons*, *J.*, rendered judgment dissolving the marriage and granting certain other relief in accordance with the parties' separation agreement; thereafter, the court, *M. Moore*, *J.*, denied the plaintiff's motion for contempt, and the plaintiff appealed to this court. *Affirmed.*

Gary I. Cohen, for the appellant (plaintiff).

Olivia M. Eucalitto, with whom, on the brief, was *Gaetano Ferro*, for the appellee (defendant).

Opinion

DiPENTIMA, J. The plaintiff, Jennifer Boyd-Mullineaux, appeals from the decision of the trial court denying her postjudgment motion for contempt as to a claimed arrearage for unallocated alimony and child support. She claims that the court incorrectly determined that, according to the parties' separation agreement, she was not entitled to receive as unallocated alimony and child support a percentage of profit distributions received by the defendant, Daniel Mullineaux, from his purchased membership interest in a company. We affirm the judgment of the trial court.

The following facts and procedural history are relevant. The marriage of the parties was dissolved by the court, *Emons*, *J.*, in 2013, and the dissolution judgment incorporated by reference the parties' separation agreement. Article III of the separation agreement provides in relevant part that the defendant shall pay the plaintiff unallocated alimony and child support based on percentages of his "Gross Annual Earned Income from Employment" (earned income from employment). (Internal quotation marks omitted.)

Throughout the relevant time period, the defendant was employed as a managing director by an investment company, Liquidity Finance, LLC (LLC). In 2014, the defendant accepted an appointment to become a member of Liquidity Finance, LLP (LLP), and, over time, he paid approximately $624,000 for his interest in the LLP. He received distributions as a member of the LLP and continued to earn commission income as an employee of the LLC. The defendant did not include the distributions he received as a member in his earned income from employment when calculating his support obligations. In June, 2018, the plaintiff filed a postjudgment motion for contempt seeking an order of arrearage. In this motion, she argued that she was entitled to an arrearage because the distributions were related to the defendant's employment, and, therefore, were included in the definition of earned income from employment contained in the parties' separation agreement. The defendant filed an objection in which he argued that the income in dispute was not earnings "related to [his] employment," and, therefore, was properly excluded from his earned income from employment. (Internal quotation marks omitted.)

Following an evidentiary hearing, the court, *M. Moore, J.*, denied the motion for contempt. The court concluded that the distributions that the defendant received as a result of his membership in the LLP, which he had expended significant funds to purchase, were not included in the definition of earned income from employment as defined by the parties' separation agreement. The plaintiff filed a motion for "reconsideration, correction, and/or clarification . . . ." In response, the court clarified that it had ruled on the plaintiff's June, 2018 motion for contempt, and it denied the plaintiff's request to reconsider its order. This appeal followed.

The plaintiff claims that the court incorrectly concluded that the distributions, which the defendant

received as a result of his purchased interest in the company that employed him as a manager, were not included within the definition of earned income from employment in the separation agreement.[1] She contends that the distributions paid to the defendant as a result of his membership interest in the LLP must be included in his earned income from employment because the distributions arise from a source related to the services rendered by the defendant by way of past, current, or future employment. The defendant argues that the distributions were not derived from his employment with the LLC, and, therefore, the court correctly determined that they were excluded from his earned income from employment. We agree with the defendant.

The following principles guide our analysis. "Our interpretation of a separation agreement that is incorporated into a dissolution decree is guided by the general principles governing the construction of contracts. . . . A contract must be construed to effectuate the intent of the parties, which is determined from the language used interpreted in the light of the situation of the parties and the circumstances connected with the transaction. . . . [T]he intent of the parties is to be ascertained by a fair and reasonable construction of the written words and . . . the language used must be accorded its common, natural, and ordinary meaning and usage where it can be sensibly applied to the subject matter of the contract. . . . Where the language of the contract is clear and unambiguous, the contract is to be given effect according to its terms. A court will not torture words to import ambiguity where the ordinary meaning leaves no room for ambiguity . . . . Moreover, the mere fact that the parties advance different interpretations of the language in question does not necessitate

[1] The plaintiff does not challenge the court's conclusion that the defendant was not in wilful contempt of any court order.

a conclusion that the language is ambiguous." (Citations omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Eckert* v. *Eckert*, 285 Conn. 687, 692, 941 A.2d 301 (2008).

In the present case, both parties agree that the separation agreement is clear and unambiguous as to the definition of earned income from employment contained in paragraph 3.5, but disagree as to whether the distributions are included within that clear definition. "If the language of a contract is clear and unambiguous, the intent of the parties is a question of law, subject to plenary review." Id.

We agree that the separation agreement clearly and unambiguously defines earned income from employment as "any and all earnings of any nature whatsoever actually received by the [defendant] in the form of cash or cash equivalents, or which the [defendant] is entitled to receive, from any and all sources relating to the services rendered by the [defendant] by way of his past, current or future employment . . . ." The separation agreement specifies that earned income from employment includes but is not limited to: "[S]alary and bonus, contract payments, commission payments, severance payments, and voluntary payments made to qualified and [nonqualified] retirement plans for his benefit, and if applicable, disability benefits. All deferred compensation including, but not limited to, deferred cash compensation, stock grants, stock units, and stock options shall be deemed [earned income from employment] in the year in which the [defendant] receives such items." The separation agreement expressly excludes from earned income from employment "[c]apital [g]ains, interest and dividends, and all other income earned by the [defendant] due to his investment of assets distributed to him in connection with this dissolution proceeding . . . ."

As found by the trial court, the defendant received income from two sources: commission income as an

employee of the LLC, and distributions as a member of the LLP. These moneys were received by the defendant pursuant to the terms of two separate agreements, both of which were admitted into evidence at the hearing on the motion for contempt as full exhibits, specifically, a service agreement, which governed the defendant's employment with the LLC, and a members' agreement, which concerned the distributions from the LLP. The parameters of the defendant's employment with the LLC, as managing director, were set forth in the service agreement, which provided a method of calculation of the defendant's compensation for his services. The members' agreement, which identified the defendant as an initial member of the LLP, defined "[m]embers" as "any persons who are from time to time admitted as members of the LLP in accordance with the terms of this [a]greement and the [United Kingdom Limited Liability Partnerships Act 2000])." The members' agreement required members, also referred to as initial members, to have made a specified capital contribution to the LLP, and it provided that residual profits were to be shared among the members in their "[r]elevant [p]roportion . . . ."

The evidence presented at the hearing supported the court's conclusion that the distributions received by the defendant from the LLP were not included in earned income from employment because they were not properly included as "any and all earnings of any nature whatsoever actually received by the [defendant] . . . or which [the defendant] is entitled to receive, from any and all sources relating to the services rendered by the [defendant] by way of his past, current or future employment . . . ." The defendant's expert witness, Mark Harrison, a certified public accountant, testified that the formulaic calculation set forth in the service agreement of how the defendant was to be paid for his services as an employee did not change after he pur-

chased an equity interest in the LLP.[2] Harrison further testified that, pursuant to the members' agreement, the defendant paid for an equity interest and that "the income that he receives by virtue of stock ownership is solely as a result of an equity interest he acquired by deploying his own capital . . . ." Contrary to the plaintiff's contention, the defendant's testimony on cross-examination that he was receiving distributions as a result of his membership in the LLP and that no one other than employees of the LLC were receiving distributions as of the time of the hearing, does not demonstrate that his distributions are related to his employment. Rather, this testimony merely indicates the source of the income, namely, his status as a member of the LLP, and it provides details on the current composition of its members.

The plaintiff raises several arguments in support of her contention that the profit distributions received by the defendant arise from his employment, but none of these arguments demonstrates that the distributions the defendant receives as a member of the LLP are related to his employment as a manager of the LLC. The plaintiff contends that the defendant's obligations as a member pursuant to schedules 2 and 3 of the members' agreement are substantially the same as his obligations as a manager pursuant to paragraph 2 of his service agreement. These two agreements, she claims, are intended to enhance the defendant's cash income from the services he renders to the LLC and the LLP as both an employee and a partnership member. The claimed similarity between the documents does not exist.[3] There

[2] The plaintiff does not claim that the defendant manipulated his salary and member distributions to reduce his support obligation.

[3] The plaintiff cites to schedules 2 and 3 of the members' agreement and quotes language purportedly from those provisions regarding the responsibilities and duties of new members. Schedules 2 and 3 of the members' agreement do not contain language regarding the duties and responsibilities of new members; rather, those sections pertain to "[d]etails of the LLP" and "[v]aluation of [u]nits," respectively. The language relied on by the plaintiff

is no provision in the members' agreement requiring members to be *employed* by the LLC, and the plaintiff does not refer to any provision purporting to establish such a requirement. Specifically, paragraph 16.1 of the members' agreement, which pertains to the admission of new members, does not require employment by the LLC as a prerequisite for becoming a member, but, rather, it provides that "[a]ny person may at any time be admitted as a [m]ember by agreeing to contribute such amount of [c]apital . . . ."

The defendant purchased his membership interest in the LLP postjudgment, and receives distributions as a return on that investment. Paragraph 3.5 of the separation agreement clearly provides that "all other income earned by the [defendant] due to his investment of assets distributed to him in connection with this dissolution proceeding shall not be considered in the definition of [earned income from employment] herein." The court correctly concluded that the return on the defendant's investment of the purchased membership interest in the LLP is not related to his employment with the LLC, and, therefore, is excluded from the definition of earned income from employment.

The plaintiff further argues that the members' agreement provides that, if the defendant leaves his employment with the LLC, his capital account would be paid back to him and he would no longer qualify for further profit distributions as a member of the LLP. This is a misreading of the members' agreement, as no such provision regarding employment at the LLC exists. Rather, the members' agreement provides in paragraph 22.3.2 that a *member who leaves the LLP* shall have his capital returned to him.

Finally, the plaintiff contends that the underlying facts of the present case are substantially similar to

regarding "responsibilities" and "duties" is not contained within the members' agreement.

those in *Halperin* v. *Halperin*, 196 Conn. App. 603, 230 A.3d 757 (2020). In *Halperin*, the parties' separation agreement, which was incorporated by reference into the dissolution judgment, provided that unallocated support was to be paid based on a certain percentage of, inter alia, the husband's gross base income. Id., 605 and n.1. The separation agreement in that case defined income as the parties' total income, which had been historically listed on line 22 of the parties' joint 1040 federal tax returns, and included all employment, business, partnership, consulting or real estate income whether received in cash or not. Id., 607. This court concluded that the income received by the husband as a result of an interest he acquired postjudgment in two companies was included in the unallocated support calculation, because such income or losses from S corporations and partnerships historically had been listed on line 22 of the parties' federal tax return. See id., 609–20. The facts in *Halperin* are distinguishable from those in the present case. The separation agreement in *Halperin* defined income for support purposes by reference to line 22 of the parties' federal tax return, which the separation agreement in the present case does not do. Rather, the separation agreement in the present case defines income for support purposes as "any and all earnings of any nature whatsoever actually received by the [defendant] . . . or which [the defendant] is entitled to receive, from any and all sources relating to the services rendered by the [defendant] by way of his past, current or future employment," which is markedly distinguishable from the separation agreement in *Halperin*, which defined income by referring to a specific line in the parties' federal tax return.

For the foregoing reasons, we conclude that the court properly denied the plaintiff's motion for an order finding an arrearage. The distributions received by the defendant were not included in the clear and unambiguous definition of gross annual earned income from

employment, as set forth in the parties' separation agreement.

The judgment is affirmed.

In this opinion the other judges concurred.

DIANE LUTH *v.* OEM CONTROLS, INC.
(AC 43702)

Bright, C. J., and Elgo and Alexander, Js.

Syllabus

The plaintiff sought to recover damages for gender discrimination and retaliatory discharge in violation of statute (§ 46a-51 et seq.) as a result of the termination of her employment by the defendant. The plaintiff claimed that the defendant paid her less than it paid two male employees, whose job responsibilities she recognized were different from her own. After the defendant began to experience financial difficulties, the plaintiff was laid off, and her duties were absorbed by other employees, including one of the two male employees she claimed had been paid more than her. The trial court granted the defendant's motion for summary judgment and rendered judgment for the defendant, from which the plaintiff appealed to this court. *Held* that the judgment of the trial court was affirmed, and because the court thoroughly analyzed the legal issues in concluding that the defendant was entitled to judgment as a matter of law, this court adopted the trial court's comprehensive and well reasoned decision as a proper statement and analysis of the applicable law on the issues presented.

Argued February 8—officially released April 6, 2021

Procedural History

Action to recover damages for, inter alia, alleged gender discrimination, brought to the Superior Court in the judicial district of Ansonia-Milford, where the court, *Stevens*, *J.*, granted the defendant's motion for summary judgment and rendered judgment thereon, from which the plaintiff appealed to this court. *Affirmed.*

Zachary T. Gain, with whom, on the brief, was *James V. Sabatini*, for the appellant (plaintiff).

Jody N. Cappello, with whom was *Sidd Sinha*, for the appellee (defendant).

Opinion

PER CURIAM. In this action, brought pursuant to the Connecticut Fair Employment Practices Act (act), General Statutes § 46a-51 et seq., the plaintiff, Diane Luth, appeals from the summary judgment, rendered by the trial court, in favor of her former employer, the defendant, OEM Controls, Inc. On appeal, the plaintiff claims that the court erred in rendering summary judgment on her two count complaint sounding in gender discrimination and retaliatory discharge. We affirm the judgment of the trial court.

The following facts and procedural history are revealed by the record. The plaintiff, who is a woman, began working for the defendant in January, 1996, as a sales administrator. At approximately the same time, Jay Monahan also began working for the defendant. According to the plaintiff, Monahan helped to establish the data delivery unit of the company; "he was the sales person going out there. And then—he's the one [who] started installing." Monahan was involved with engineering designs, had engineering ability that permitted him to assist with software and hardware issues, and he also focused on sales. The plaintiff believed that Monahan was paid more than she was paid. Monahan revealed at his deposition that he had an annual base salary of less than $100,000, which was augmented by commissions on sales.

In the years that followed, the plaintiff was promoted to various positions with the defendant, and, at some point after 2004, she was promoted to implementation manager in the data delivery department, where her annual salary increased from less than $50,000 to between $88,000 and $92,000. The plaintiff and Monahan shared certain roles, but Monahan was responsible for handling the technical aspect of the projects, including making sales, while the plaintiff handled customer

related issues but not sales. The plaintiff had wanted to move to New Hampshire and work for the defendant remotely for quite some time. The defendant, however, was reluctant to permit the plaintiff to do so and did not give her an answer. Finally, in or about 2011, the defendant approved the plaintiff's request, and she moved to New Hampshire, where she worked remotely for the defendant. She still was expected to work in Connecticut every six to ten weeks or so.[1]

In 2015, the defendant began to experience financial difficulties, of which the plaintiff was aware. The defendant implemented layoffs and a freeze on raises. In an attempt to increase sales, the defendant hired a male, Mick Lauer, a former customer, whose salary consisted of a base salary of approximately $125,000 plus commission, generally totaling approximately $160,000. The plaintiff believed Lauer's salary was $170,000. The plaintiff complained to her manager, Samuel Simons, about the compensation of Monahan and Lauer. Simons conducted a review of the salaries and determined that the employees were being paid appropriately. The plaintiff recognized that the job responsibilities of Monahan and Lauer were different from her own job responsibilities, including the fact that Monahan worked on and developed hardware, trained clients, and made sales, and that Lauer primarily worked in sales. The plaintiff often referred to Monahan and Lauer collectively as the "sales team." Although the plaintiff was not subject to the initial round of layoffs in 2015, the defendant laid off four additional people in October, 2016, including three men and the plaintiff. Many of those laid off in both rounds of layoffs had been with the defendant for more than twenty years. The plaintiff's job title was eliminated and her duties were absorbed by others, including Monahan.

[1] When asked during her deposition whether she ever had refused to attend these in-person meetings or any telephone meetings, the plaintiff stated that she could not recall.

The plaintiff initiated a complaint with the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, where she received a release of jurisdiction on August 31, 2017, and then commenced an action in the Superior Court. On December 3, 2018, the plaintiff filed a revised complaint against the defendant, alleging one count each of gender discrimination and retaliatory discharge. On April 15, 2019, the defendant filed a motion for summary judgment, attaching to its accompanying memorandum of law various documents in support thereof, including portions of the depositions of the plaintiff, Simons, Monahan, and Lauer. The plaintiff filed a memorandum in opposition, attaching portions of the same depositions, among other things. On July 22, 2019, the trial court heard oral argument on the motion for summary judgment.[2]

On December 6, 2019, the court, *Stevens*, *J.*, issued a memorandum of decision on the defendant's motion for summary judgment. In its decision, the court set forth the uncontested facts, the plaintiff's claims, and the relevant legal authority, followed by a thorough analysis of the legal issues presented. The court then concluded that the defendant was entitled to judgment as a matter of law. We carefully have reviewed the record, the parties' briefs, and their oral argument before this court. Applying the well established principles that govern our review of a court's decision to grant a motion for summary judgment in cases alleging violations of the act; see, e.g., *Stubbs* v. *ICare Management*, *LLC*, 198 Conn. App. 511, 520–22, 233 A.3d 1170 (2020); we conclude that the judgment of the trial court should be affirmed. We adopt the trial court's comprehensive and well reasoned decision as providing a proper statement and analysis of the applicable law on the issues presented. See *Luth* v. *OEM Controls*, *Inc.*, Superior Court,

[2] The plaintiff has not provided this court with a copy of that transcript. We conclude, however, that the transcript is not crucial to our consideration of her appeal.

judicial district of Ansonia Milford, Docket No. CV-17-6025657-S (December 6, 2019) (reprinted at 203 Conn. App. 677, A.3d). It would serve no useful purpose for us to repeat the thorough discussion contained therein. See, e.g., *State* v. *Sebben*, 201 Conn. App. 376, 380, 243 A.3d 365 (2020); *Gawlik* v. *Semple*, 197 Conn. App. 83, 86, 231 A.3d 326, cert. denied, 335 Conn. 953, 238 A.3d 730 (2020), cert. denied, U.S. , S. Ct. , L. Ed. 2d (2021); *Samakaab* v. *Dept. of Social Services*, 178 Conn. App. 52, 54, 173 A.3d 1004 (2017); *Hayes* v. *Yale-New Haven Hospital*, 82 Conn. App. 58, 60, 842 A.2d 616 (2004).

The judgment is affirmed.

APPENDIX

DIANE LUTH *v.* OEM CONTROLS, INC.*

Superior Court, Judicial District of Ansonia-Milford
File No. CV-17-6025657-S

Memorandum filed December 6, 2019

Proceedings

Memorandum of decision on defendant's motion for summary judgment. *Motion granted.*

James V. Sabatini, for the plaintiff.

Jody N. Cappello and *Sidd Sinha*, for the defendant.

Opinion

STEVENS, J.

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

The plaintiff, Diane Luth, filed a two count revised complaint against the defendant, OEM Controls, Inc., on

* Affirmed. *Luth* v. *OEM Controls, Inc.*, 203 Conn. App. 673, A.3d (2021).

December 3, 2018, alleging gender discrimination and retaliation. The complaint alleges the following facts. The defendant hired the plaintiff in January of 1996 as a sales administrator. Throughout the plaintiff's employment, she held different titles. Her most recent position was implementation manager in the data delivery department where she made $88,000 to $92,000 annually. The plaintiff is the only female in her job position. The defendant allegedly hired Mick Lauer in October, 2015, to perform the same or substantially similar job duties as the plaintiff. The defendant allegedly pays Lauer $170,000 annually in compensation. Lauer was not the plaintiff's manager, nor was he in charge of the data delivery team. The defendant also employs Jay Monahan. Monahan shares some of the same job functions as the plaintiff, and he allegedly is paid more than the plaintiff.

When the plaintiff found out about the difference in pay, she expressed her concerns to the defendant. The defendant stated that it was going to look at all the salaries of individuals on the data delivery team. The plaintiff asked about her salary again a few months later, and she was told to not take it personally and that it was not her concern. On October 6, 2016, the plaintiff's employment with the defendant was terminated.

The first count of the plaintiff's complaint alleges gender discrimination. The plaintiff alleges that the defendant discriminated against her because of her gender by paying her unequally and by constructively discharging her. In the second count, the plaintiff's complaint alleges that the defendant retaliated against the plaintiff for complaining about the gender discrimination in the workplace and the pay disparity between men and women at the company.

Pending before the court is the defendant's motion for summary judgment filed on April 15, 2019, with a

supporting memorandum of law. The plaintiff filed a memorandum in opposition to the motion for summary judgment on July 1, 2019. The defendant filed a reply memorandum to the plaintiff's opposition on July 15, 2019. The court heard oral argument on the motions on July 22, 2019. The court ordered the parties to file supplemental briefs. The plaintiff filed a supplemental opposition on July 29, 2019, and the defendant filed a reply on August 19, 2019.

DISCUSSION

"Summary judgment is a method of resolving litigation when pleadings, affidavits, and any other proof submitted show that there is no genuine issue as to any material fact and that the moving party is entitled to judgment as a matter of law. . . . The motion for summary judgment is designed to eliminate the delay and expense of litigating an issue when there is no real issue to be tried." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Grenier* v. *Commissioner of Transportation*, 306 Conn. 523, 534–35, 51 A.3d 367 (2012). "The party seeking summary judgment has the burden of showing the absence of any genuine issue [of] material facts which, under applicable principles of substantive law, entitle him to a judgment as a matter of law . . . and the party opposing such a motion must provide an evidentiary foundation to demonstrate the existence of a genuine issue of material fact. . . . A material fact . . . [is] a fact which will make a difference in the result of the case." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Stuart* v. *Freiberg*, 316 Conn. 809, 821, 116 A.3d 1195 (2015).

I

GENDER DISCRIMINATION

"With respect to employment discrimination claims, our Supreme Court has held that we review federal precedent concerning employment discrimination for

guidance in enforcing our own antidiscrimination statutes." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Phadnis* v. *Great Expression Dental Centers of Connecticut, P.C.*, Superior Court, judicial district of Hartford, Docket No. CV-13-6042558 (January 26, 2015) (reprinted at 170 Conn. App. 82, 86, 153 A.3d 691), aff'd, 170 Conn. App. 79, 153 A.3d 687 (2017). "Under the [analysis set forth in *McDonnell Douglas Corp.* v. *Green*, 411 U.S. 792, 802–804, 93 S. Ct. 1817, 36 L. Ed. 2d 668 (1973)], the employee must first make a prima facie case of discrimination, The employer may then rebut the prima facie case by stating a legitimate, nondiscriminatory justification for the employment decision in question. The employee then must demonstrate that the reason proffered by the employer is merely a pretext and that the decision was actually motivated by illegal discriminatory bias." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Phadnis* v. *Great Expression Dental Centers of Connecticut, P.C.*, supra, 87.

A

Prima Facie Case of Discrimination

"In order for the employee to first make a prima facie case of discrimination, the plaintiff must show: (1) the plaintiff is a member of a protected class; (2) the plaintiff was qualified for the position; (3) the plaintiff suffered an adverse employment action; and (4) the adverse employment action occurred under circumstances that give rise to an inference of discrimination." *Feliciano* v. *Autozone, Inc.*, 316 Conn. 65, 73, 111 A.3d 453 (2015). "The burden of establishing a prima facie case [of discrimination] is a burden of production, not a burden of proof, and therefore involves no credibility assessment by the fact finder. . . . The level of proof required to establish a prima facie case is minimal and need not reach the level required to support a jury verdict in the plaintiff's favor." (Internal quotation marks

omitted.) *Perez-Dickson* v. *Bridgeport*, 304 Conn. 483, 513, 43 A.3d 69 (2012).

"In addition to proffering direct evidence of discrimination with respect to the fourth prong, a litigant may present circumstantial evidence from which an inference may be drawn that similarly situated individuals were treated more favorably than she was." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Phadnis* v. *Great Expression Dental Centers of Connecticut, P.C.*, supra, 170 Conn. App. 88. "To establish the fourth element of a prima facie case, [the plaintiff] must show that she was treated differently from similarly situated [employees]. To be similarly situated, the individuals with whom [the plaintiff] attempts to compare herself must be similarly situated in all material respects." (Citation omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Shumway* v. *United Parcel Service, Inc.*, 118 F.3d 60, 64 (2d Cir. 1997). "Whether a plaintiff is similarly situated to comparators is generally a question for the jury. . . . But a court can properly grant summary judgment where it is clear that no reasonable jury could find the similarly situated prong met." (Citation omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Brown* v. *Waterbury Board of Education*, 247 F. Supp. 3d 196, 209 (D. Conn. 2017).

"That an employee's conduct need not be identical to that of another for the two to be similarly situated is also reflected in the language of *McDonnell Douglas* [*Corp.*], where the Supreme Court used the phrase 'comparable seriousness' to identify conduct that might help to support an inference of discrimination." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Graham* v. *Long Island Rail Road*, 230 F.3d 34, 40 (2d Cir. 2000). "[T]he standard for comparing conduct requires a reasonably close resemblance of the facts and circumstances of [the] plaintiff's and comparator's cases, rather than a showing that both cases are identical." Id. "What constitutes 'all material respects' . . . must be judged based on

(1) whether the plaintiff and those [s]he maintains were similarly situated were subject to the same workplace standards and (2) whether the conduct for which the employer imposed discipline was of comparable seriousness." Id.

"When a plaintiff attempts to satisfy the ultimate burden of proving discriminatory intent by presenting circumstantial evidence of disparate treatment, the plaintiff must show that the better-treated workers with whom the plaintiff compares herself are a representative sample of all the workers who are comparable to her. . . . She must not pick and choose [comparators]." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Perez-Dickson* v. *Bridgeport*, supra, 304 Conn. 524 n.45. "Employees need show only a situation sufficiently similar to [their own] to support at least a minimal inference that the difference of treatment may be attributable to discrimination." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *United Technologies Corp.* v. *Commission on Human Rights & Opportunities*, 72 Conn. App. 212, 226, 804 A.2d 1033, cert. denied, 262 Conn. 920, 812 A.2d 863 (2002).

"Nothing in *McDonnell Douglas Corp.* . . . limits the type of circumstantial evidence that may be used to establish the fourth prong of the test for a prima facie case of . . . discrimination." (Citation omitted.) *Craine* v. *Trinity College*, 259 Conn. 625, 640–41, 791 A.2d 518 (2002). "[T]he inference of discriminatory intent could be drawn in several circumstances including, but not limited to: the employer's continuing, after discharging the plaintiff, to seek applicants from persons of the plaintiff's qualifications to fill that position; or the employer's criticism of the plaintiff's performance in . . . degrading terms; or its invidious comments about others in the employee's protected group; or the more favorable treatment of employees not in the protected group; or the sequence of events leading to the plaintiff's discharge." (Internal quotation marks

omitted.) *Abdu-Brisson* v. *Delta Air Lines, Inc.*, 239 F.3d 456, 468 (2d Cir.), cert. denied, 534 U.S. 993, 122 S. Ct. 460, 151 L. Ed. 2d 378 (2001).

The defendant argues that the plaintiff has failed to prove a prima facie case of discrimination. For the purposes of the motion for summary judgment, the defendant does not challenge that the plaintiff has met the first three prongs of her prima facie case of discrimination. The defendant only argues that the plaintiff has not proved the fourth prong of a prima facie case for discrimination. Specifically, the defendant argues that the plaintiff's position was not filled by an individual outside the plaintiff's protected class, and the comparators given by the plaintiff are not "similarly situated" to the plaintiff. In response, the plaintiff argues that she has presented evidence that the defendant treated similarly situated male employees more favorably than the plaintiff. The plaintiff argues that her male coworkers had similar job titles and responsibilities but were paid significantly more than the plaintiff. The court agrees with the defendant.

In the present case, the plaintiff offers two comparators, Lauer and Monahan. The key question is whether Lauer and Monahan were similarly situated to the plaintiff. Lauer and Monahan are similarly situated if their positions were "substantially equal in skill, effort, and responsibility" to the plaintiff. (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Andrus* v. *Dooney & Bourke, Inc.*, 139 F. Supp. 3d 550, 554 (D. Conn. 2015). The undisputed facts establish that, although both men worked with the plaintiff on the data delivery team, they had different job titles and responsibilities than the plaintiff.

The plaintiff's title was implementation manager. Sam Simons, the copresident and chief operating officer for the defendant, testified at his deposition that the plaintiff's job in 2016 was to "support the customer,

primarily Kiewit, and manage implementation projects or installation and implementation." Defendant's Motion for Summary Judgment, exhibit A, Simons Deposition, 15:19–22. Simons states that some of the work [of] the plaintiff overlapped with other employees but no one else had her specific duties.

The plaintiff's testimony about her job responsibilities is generally consistent with Simons' description of these responsibilities. In her deposition, the plaintiff stated that her job duties included taking out teams to job sites and supervising and overseeing them in the field; making suggestions on how to improve the products when out in the field; troubleshooting and fixing the product; working with mechanics either in person or over the phone to walk them through how to install the products; troubleshooting the software and software uploads; and other similar tasks.

Monahan stated in his deposition that he worked at the defendant for twenty years. During the relevant time period, he had worked as a project manager for about seven years. As part of his job, Monahan stated in his deposition, he helps "direct, design, install, [and] configure the asset management side of [the] product line." Defendant's Motion for Summary Judgment, exhibit A, Monahan Deposition, 4:25–5:1. Monahan further explains that, if a customer had problems with the data, the plaintiff would work on that issue, but if a customer had a hardware problem or issues with the installation or product, he would work on that, too.

Despite the plaintiff's claims to the contrary, the undisputed facts establish that the work performed by the plaintiff and Monahan was significantly different. In the plaintiff's deposition, when she was asked whether she had a similar role to Monahan, she initially answered, "[y]es, absolutely, we both sort of . . . did the exact same thing," but then further explained that, "*except*

Jay did more—got more involved with maybe training and process and trouble—we both did troubleshooting, yeah." (Emphasis added.) Defendant's Motion for Summary Judgment, exhibit A, Plaintiff's Deposition, 39:4–8. In short, the plaintiff admits that her role and Monahan's were dissimilar, and considering this evidence fully and in a light most favorable to the plaintiff, there is no factual dispute that the job responsibilities of the plaintiff and Monahan were different because his tasks were more expansive.[1]

An identical conclusion must be reached regarding Lauer. Lauer was hired in late 2015, and his job title was account manager and sales. Lauer's job was to develop new business and to provide better services to the customers. Specifically, Simons testified that Lauer's main focus was to sell products as well as to engage account management activities, which would lead to sales. Simons Deposition, 50:10–20. There can be no real or bona fide question that Lauer's job responsibilities were dramatically different from the plaintiff's tasks.

In summary, the plaintiff has not presented any evidence indicating that similarly situated male employees were treated more favorably. The plaintiff has neither discussed nor present[ed] evidence as to employees on the data delivery team other than Lauer and Monahan, and a reasonable jury could not find that the plaintiff was similarly situated to either of them. The plaintiff was obviously displeased that these two employees were working in the same data delivery team of the company and were making more money than she was, but she cannot contest this disparate treatment on the ground that they were similarly situated and that this

[1] As another example, the plaintiff was also asked whether Luke Manney, another male sales employee who was receiving commissions for sales, had essentially the same role that she did, to which she replied, "[n]o, the same as supposedly [Lauer]." Defendant's Motion for Summary Judgment, exhibit A, Plaintiff's Deposition, 77:5–9. The answer to this question also indicates that the plaintiff had a different role than Lauer.

similarity creates an inference of gender discrimination. The plaintiff's job was dissimilar to her male counterparts; therefore, her salary may be expected to be dissimilar to these individuals. Moreover, the plaintiff's position on the data delivery team was not filled by someone outside her protected class.

B

Legitimate, Nondiscriminatory Reason

Furthermore, assuming arguendo that the plaintiff established a prima facie case of discrimination, the defendant has provided a nondiscriminatory reason for the plaintiff's termination, and the plaintiff has failed to provide any sufficient evidence indicating that these reasons were pretextual.

"Once an employee has made a prima facie case, the employer may rebut by stating a legitimate, nondiscriminatory justification for the employment decision in question." *Phadnis* v. *Great Expression Dental Centers of Connecticut, P.C.*, supra, 170 Conn. App. 90. "This, too, is a burden of production, and the defendant merely needs to state a nondiscriminatory reason. The defendant does not have to prove the absence of discrimination." *Craine* v. *Trinity College*, supra, 259 Conn. 643.

In the present case, Simons, the copresident and chief operating officer of the defendant, states that the reason for the plaintiff's termination was because the defendant's business was doing poorly, especially in the data delivery unit. The defendant has experienced layoffs and budget cuts. There were actually two sets of layoffs in 2016, one in June and one in October when the plaintiff was terminated. Simons also stated that the data delivery team was restructured. In October of 2016 when the plaintiff was laid off, four to six other people were also laid off, and they ranged from new employees to employees who worked at the defendant for just as

long as the plaintiff. The plaintiff even stated in her deposition that the company was doing poorly in 2015 and states that there were freezes on raises in 2015 and cuts in pay around the same time. Therefore, the evidence presented shows that the defendant had a legitimate, nondiscriminatory business reason for terminating the plaintiff.

C

Pretext

"[The plaintiff] now must have the opportunity to demonstrate that the [defendant's] proffered reason was not the true reason for the employment decision. This burden now merges with the ultimate burden of persuading the court that [the plaintiff] has been the victim of intentional discrimination." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *DaSilva* v. *Weik*, Superior Court, judicial district of Litchfield at Torrington, Docket No. CV-17-6014797-S (*Hon. John W. Pickard*, judge trial referee) (August 27, 2019). "[The plaintiff] may succeed in this either directly by persuading the court that a discriminatory reason more likely motivated the employer or indirectly by showing that the employer's proffered explanation is unworthy of credence. . . . Employment discrimination therefore can be proven directly, with evidence that the employer was motivated by a discriminatory reason, or indirectly, by proving that the reason given by the employer was pretextual." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) Id. "The plaintiff, in proving pretext by a preponderance of the evidence, can rely on evidence used in setting forth her prima facie case." Id. "A showing that similarly situated employees belonging to a different . . . group received more favorable treatment can also serve as evidence that the employer's proffered legitimate, [nondiscriminatory] reason for the adverse job action was a pretext for discrimination." *Graham* v. *Long Island Rail Road*, supra, 230 F.3d 43.

The plaintiff here presents two insufficient reasons to support her claim that the defendant's reason for her termination is pretextual: (1) the plaintiff made far less than her fellow male employees; and (2) Simons' characterization of his employment relationship with the plaintiff is different in his deposition than his testimony in another civil action involving the defendant.

First, the plaintiff argues that she made far less than her male counterparts. Based on the deposition testimony, Lauer made around $125,000 in addition to commission in 2016, Monahan made between $100,000 to $115,000, and the plaintiff made between $88,000 to $92,000. As discussed above, the plaintiff was not a salesperson, nor was she a project manager; therefore, it may be both expected and reasonable that her pay would be different from these other employees. Simply because they all worked on the data delivery team does not mean, as the plaintiff insists, that their pay should be similar to her pay, particularly when their job descriptions differed, as previously discussed. Therefore, the fact that the plaintiff was paid less than these male employees does not show that the defendant's reason for the plaintiff's termination is pretextual.

Second, the plaintiff contends that the pretextual nature of the defendant's reason for her termination can be found in Simons' differing explanations for her termination. However, a careful review of his testimony, even in the light most favorable to the plaintiff, does not establish any factual basis to support this claim.

In Simons' deposition, he consistently states that the reason for the plaintiff's termination was due to the business doing poorly and a restructuring of the data delivery team. He also characterizes his relationship with the plaintiff as being good in the beginning of her employment, but [that it] then turned negative after she moved to New Hampshire in 2011. He explains that he ignored or tolerated the plaintiff's negative behavior

in the workplace because she worked hard and did an overall good job. The plaintiff contends that, in Simons' testimony in a separate civil case, he states that the reason for the termination was due to her behavior.[2] The court can find no bona fide factual basis for this contention. In his trial testimony, Simons again states that the cause of the plaintiff's termination was due to a change in business. He also testifies that his relationship with the plaintiff became negative after she moved to New Hampshire. His entire trial testimony about the plaintiff is consistent with his deposition testimony. Even on a motion for summary judgment, the plaintiff must present some factual basis to support her claims and cannot rely solely on naked claims or arguments unsupported by any actual evidence or at least some evidence from which reasonable, supportive inferences may be made. The plaintiff has failed to make this showing here and, in turn, has failed to show that there is any genuine issue of material fact regarding whether the defendant's explanation for her termination is pretextual.

II

RETALIATION

The second count of the plaintiff's complaint alleges that the defendant terminated her in retaliation for her complaining about the gender discrimination in the workplace and the pay disparity between men and women at the company. The defendant essentially argues that the plaintiff's retaliation claim fails as a matter of law because of the long period of time between her complaints and her termination. In response, the plaintiff contends that the defendant's argument raises material issues of disputed facts which cannot be resolved on motion. The court agrees with the defendant.

[2] The plaintiff attaches the full testimony of Simons at this trial to her supplemental objection to the defendant's motion for summary judgment (#130).

"Federal and state law retaliation claims are reviewed under the burden-shifting approach of *McDonnell Douglas* [*Corp.*] . . . ." *Kwan* v. *Andalex Group LLC*, 737 F.3d 834, 843 (2d Cir. 2013). The plaintiff must first establish a prima facie case of retaliation. "To establish a prima facie case of retaliation, an employee must show (1) the employee was engaged in protected activity; (2) the employer was aware of that activity; (3) the employee suffered an adverse employment action; and (4) there was a causal connection between the protected activity and the adverse employment action." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Samakaab* v. *Dept. of Social Services*, Superior Court, judicial district of Hartford, Docket No. CV-15-6056335-S (March 10, 2016) (reprinted at 170 Conn. App. 54, 62, 173 A.3d 1007), aff'd, 178 Conn. App. 52, 173 A.3d 1004 (2017).

"Once a prima facie case of retaliation is established, the burden of production shifts to the employer to demonstrate that a legitimate, [nondiscriminatory] reason existed for its action. . . . If the employer demonstrates a legitimate, nondiscriminatory reason, then [t]he burden shifts . . . back to the plaintiff to establish, through either direct or circumstantial evidence, that the employer's action was, in fact, motivated by discriminatory retaliation." (Citation omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Summa* v. *Hofstra University*, 708 F.3d 115, 125 (2d Cir. 2013).

In the present case, the plaintiff's claim for retaliation is based on her asking for a pay increase after discovering that some male employees made more money than she did at the defendant. The defendant argues that the only prong of the prima facie case for retaliation that is at issue is the fourth prong where the plaintiff has to prove a causal connection between the protected activity and the adverse employment action. The following additional information is necessary for the determination of the retaliation claim.

The plaintiff first spoke to Simons about a pay raise to match her male counterparts in late 2015. Simons at that time stated that he would look at the salaries of the data delivery team to see if anything needed to be adjusted. The plaintiff later brought up raising her salary in April of 2016. The plaintiff was terminated in October of 2016. Between the last time the plaintiff spoke to Simons about her salary and her termination there was a round of layoffs in June of 2016. Six months passed between the last time the plaintiff spoke to Simons about her salary and when she was terminated, and about a year passed between when she spoke to Simons about the pay differences and her termination.

The plaintiff argues that the six months between when she spoke to Simons about her salary and when she was terminated are sufficient to establish causation and to establish a prima facie case of retaliation. "[T]he temporal proximity between [the] two events as circumstantial evidence of causation . . . standing alone, is insufficient." *Dixon* v. *International Federation of Accountants*, 416 Fed. Appx. 107, 110 (2d Cir. 2011). "Moreover, Second Circuit precedent makes clear that the relevance of temporal proximity to the question of whether there is a causal nexus between a plaintiff's protected activity and the defendant's allegedly retaliatory action will depend on the facts and circumstances of each particular case." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Bryant* v. *Greater New Haven Transit District*, 8 F. Supp. 3d 115, 133 (D. Conn. 2014). The United States Supreme Court has stated that the two events must be " 'very close' " and that a proximity of three months or more is insufficient where the court is solely relying on temporal proximity. *Clark County School District* v. *Breeden*, 532 U.S. 268, 273, 121 S. Ct. 1508, 149 L. Ed. 2d 509 (2001). Therefore, on the basis of this precedent, the plaintiff has not established a prima facie case for retaliation, so the burden does not shift to the defendant. Because there is no genuine issue of material

fact on whether the plaintiff has established a prima facie case of retaliation, the defendant's motion for summary judgment as to the plaintiff's retaliation claim must be granted.

CONCLUSION

For these reasons, the defendant's motion for summary judgment is granted.

STATE OF CONNECTICUT *v.* JAMIE LOVE (AC 43484)

Moll, Alexander and Suarez, Js.

Syllabus

The defendant, who had been convicted, on a plea of guilty, of assault in the first degree and carrying a pistol without a permit, appealed to this court from the judgment of the trial court denying his motion to correct an illegal sentence. The defendant claimed that the trial court erred by failing to appoint counsel pursuant to statute (§ 51-296 (a)) and *State* v. *Casiano* (282 Conn. 614). *Held* that the trial court improperly denied the defendant's motion to correct an illegal sentence without appointing counsel: the central holding of *Casiano* is that, pursuant to § 51-296 (a), a self-represented defendant has the right to counsel to determine whether a sound basis exists for a motion to correct an illegal sentence, and the defendant's specific reference to *Casiano* in his motion constituted an affirmative request for counsel; accordingly, the judgment of the trial court denying the defendant's motion to correct an illegal sentence was reversed and the case was remanded in order for counsel to be appointed in accordance with *Casiano*.

Argued February 4—officially released April 6, 2021

Procedural History

Substitute information charging the defendant with the crimes of assault in the first degree, conspiracy to commit assault in the first degree, criminal use of a firearm, carrying a pistol without a permit, and unlawful discharge of a firearm, brought to the Superior Court in the judicial district of Waterbury, where the defendant was presented to the court, *Fasano*, *J.*, on a plea

of guilty to assault in the first degree and carrying a pistol without a permit; judgment of guilty in accordance with the plea; thereafter, the court, *Hon. Roland D. Fasano*, judge trial referee, denied the defendant's motion to correct an illegal sentence, and the defendant appealed to this court. *Reversed; further proceedings.*

David B. Bachman, assigned counsel, for the appellant (defendant).

Sarah Hanna, senior assistant state's attorney, with whom, on the brief, was *Maureen Platt*, state's attorney, for the appellee (state).

Opinion

ALEXANDER, J. The defendant, Jamie Love, appeals from the judgment of the trial court denying his motion to correct an illegal sentence. On appeal, the defendant claims that the court erred by failing to appoint counsel pursuant to General Statutes § 51-296 (a)[1] and *State* v. *Casiano*, 282 Conn. 614, 922 A.2d 1065 (2007). We agree and, accordingly, reverse the judgment of the trial court and remand the case for further proceedings in accordance with this opinion.

The following undisputed facts and procedural history are relevant to this appeal. On November 9, 2017, the defendant pleaded guilty pursuant to the *Alford* doctrine[2] to assault in the first degree in violation of General Statutes § 53a-59 (a) (1) and to carrying a pistol without a permit in violation of General Statutes § 29-35 (a). On January 31, 2018, the court imposed a total

[1] General Statutes § 51-296 (a) provides in relevant part: "In any criminal action . . . the court before which the matter is pending shall, if it determines after investigation by the public defender or his office that a defendant is indigent as defined under this chapter, designate a public defender, assistant public defender or deputy assistant public defender to represent such indigent defendant . . . ."

[2] See *North Carolina* v. *Alford*, 400 U.S. 25, 37, 91 S. Ct. 160, 27 L. Ed. 2d 162 (1970).

effective sentence of eight years of incarceration followed by ten years of special parole.

Thereafter, on or about June 20, 2019, the defendant, representing himself, filed a motion to correct an illegal sentence and an accompanying memorandum of law, arguing, inter alia, that the sentencing court was not provided with accurate information; that he was not given an opportunity to review the presentence investigation report and therefore was unable to correct potential mistakes contained therein; and that a conflict of interest existed between his trial counsel and the prosecutor. Significant for purposes of this appeal, the defendant stated that his motion was made "[p]ursuant to . . . *State* v. *Casiano* . . . ." On June 30, 2019, the court, without conducting a hearing, denied the defendant's motion "'[without] prejudice pending the outcome of habeas filed by petitioner."

On appeal, the defendant argues that the court improperly denied his motion to correct an illegal sentence because it did not appoint counsel pursuant to § 51-296 (a) to determine whether there was a "sound basis" for his motion as required by *State* v. *Casiano*, supra, 282 Conn. 627–28. The state argues that the right to appointed counsel under *Casiano* is not self-executing. The state contends that, because the defendant made only a cursory reference to "*State* v. *Casiano*" in his motion, this reference was not an affirmative request for counsel. Although we agree with the state that the appointment of counsel for a motion to correct an illegal sentence is not self-executing and that a request for counsel must be made before counsel is appointed,[3] we

[3] The right to counsel in connection with the filing of a motion to correct an illegal sentence is statutory in nature. See *State* v. *White*, 182 Conn. App. 656, 666, 191 A.3d 172, cert. denied, 330 Conn. 924, 194 A.3d 291 (2018). A defendant must affirmatively request the appointment of counsel in connection with his motion and the trial court must grant such request for the initial inquiry of determining whether a sound basis exists for the motion. See *State* v. *Francis*, 322 Conn. 247, 267, 140 A.3d 927 (2016); *State* v. *Casiano*, supra, 282 Conn. 627–28; see also Practice Book § 44-2 ("[i]n any

determine that the defendant's reference to *Casiano* in his motion constituted an affirmative request for counsel.

Our analysis is guided by the following legal principles. "[I]t is axiomatic that [t]he judicial authority may at any time correct an illegal sentence or other illegal disposition, or it may correct a sentence imposed in an illegal manner. . . . A motion to correct an illegal sentence constitutes a narrow exception to the general rule that, once a defendant's sentence has begun, the authority of the sentencing court to modify that sentence terminates. . . . Indeed, [i]n order for the court to have jurisdiction over a motion to correct an illegal sentence after the sentence has been executed, the sentencing proceeding [itself] . . . must be the subject of the attack. . . . Therefore, the motion is directed to the sentencing court, which can entertain and resolve the challenge most expediently." (Citation omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *State* v. *Francis*, 322 Conn. 247, 259–60, 140 A.3d 927 (2016).

A review of *State* v. *Casiano*, supra, 282 Conn. 614, and its progeny will facilitate the resolution of this appeal. In *Casiano*, our Supreme Court analyzed whether the term "any criminal action" in § 51-296 (a) encompassed a motion to correct an illegal sentence and, thus, whether the appointment of counsel was required for indigent defendants with respect to such motions. Our Supreme Court determined that, in connection with a motion to correct an illegal sentence filed pursuant to Practice Book § 43-22, "a defendant has a right to the appointment of counsel for the purpose of determining whether a defendant who wishes to file such a motion has a sound basis for doing so.

other situation in which a defendant is unable to obtain counsel by reason of indigency, and is . . . statutorily entitled to the assistance of counsel, such defendant may *request* the judicial authority to appoint a public defender in accordance with Section 44-1" (emphasis added)).

If appointed counsel determines that such a basis exists, the defendant also has the right to the assistance of such counsel for the purpose of preparing and filing such a motion and, thereafter, for the purpose of any direct appeal from the denial of that motion." *State* v. *Casiano*, supra, 627–28.

In *State* v. *Francis*, supra, 322 Conn. 259, our Supreme Court concluded that it was harmful error for a trial court to fail to appoint counsel to represent the defendant "even for the limited purpose of determining whether a sound basis existed for him to file his motion [to correct illegal sentence]." In that case, the trial court did not appoint a public defender for the purposes of sound basis review after the defendant had filed his third motion to correct an illegal sentence.[4] Id., 268. Instead, the court clerk's office alerted a public defender, who reported to the court that it was his opinion that the defendant's motion "does not have sufficient merit." Id., 252–53. The defendant objected and requested that the public defender state the specific grounds and reasoning on which he had formed his conclusion. Id., 255. The trial court denied the request and subsequently denied the defendant's motion. Id.

Consistent with the holding of *Casiano*, our Supreme Court in *Francis* outlined the following procedure to be used in a motion to correct an illegal sentence: "[W]hen an indigent defendant requests that counsel be appointed to represent him in connection with the filing of a motion to correct an illegal sentence, the trial court must grant that request for the purpose of determining whether a sound basis exists for the motion. . . . If, after consulting with the defendant and examining the record and relevant law, counsel determines that

[4] In *Francis*, the defendant himself did not request counsel under *Casiano*. Instead, the court, sua sponte, inquired as to whether the defendant understood that he had the right to counsel under *State* v. *Casiano*, supra, 282 Conn. 627–28. See *State* v. *Francis*, supra, 322 Conn. 252.

no sound basis exists for the defendant to file such a motion, he or she must inform the court and the defendant of the reasons for that conclusion, which can be done either in writing or orally. If the court is persuaded by counsel's reasoning, it should permit counsel to withdraw and advise the defendant of the option of proceeding as a self-represented party." (Citation omitted; footnote omitted.) Id., 267–68. The court concluded that the trial court's denial of counsel to represent the defendant constituted harmful error and remanded the case for further proceedings. Id., 268–70.

In *State* v. *White*, 182 Conn. App. 656, 670, 191 A.3d 172, cert. denied, 330 Conn. 924, 194 A.3d 291 (2018), this court further outlined the role of appointed counsel in a motion to correct an illegal sentence under *Casiano*, and noted the dual roles of counsel in such circumstance. This court stated: "Perhaps the role can best be described by requiring traditional standards of advocacy in the preparatory stage, including thorough legal and factual review of the record with an eye to developing a plausible favorable position, but also requiring objective candor in presenting the client's best claims to the court and his client. A client may well not be pleased by his attorney's presentation of a negative appraisal, but this tension results from the dual nature of the role required by *Casiano* and *Francis* . . . ." Id.

With this background in mind, we turn to the specific facts at issue in the present case. The limited question on appeal is whether the defendant's reference to "*State* v. *Casiano*" in his motion to correct an illegal sentence constituted a request for counsel under § 51-296 (a) and *State* v. *Casiano*, supra, 282 Conn. 614. We conclude that it did.

In his motion to correct an illegal sentence the defendant stated that his motion was made "[p]ursuant to . . . *State* v. *Casiano* . . . ." The state argues that this

cursory reference to *Casiano* did not constitute a request for counsel and could be read as supporting only a general reference to the filing of a motion to correct an illegal sentence. We disagree.

The central holding of *Casiano* is that, pursuant to § 51-296 (a), a self-represented defendant has the right to counsel to determine whether a sound basis exists for a motion to correct an illegal sentence. *State* v. *Casiano*, supra, 282 Conn. 627; see also *State* v. *Francis*, supra, 322 Conn. 261. When a self-represented defendant specifically refers to "*State* v. *Casiano*" in a motion to correct an illegal sentence, we conclude that this reference is sufficient to constitute an affirmative request for counsel.[5]

In the present case, the court made no inquiry of the defendant as to his invocation of *Casiano* in his motion to correct an illegal sentence and instead summarily disposed of the motion without holding a hearing.[6] In

[5] The state contends that the defendant did not properly cite *Casiano* because he provided no citation to the reported decision, stating only "*State* v. *Casiano*," and that this incomplete citation could not have put the court on notice that the defendant was actually referring to *State* v. *Casiano*, supra, 282 Conn. 614. We find this argument unavailing given our "established policy . . . to be solicitous of [self-represented] litigants"; (internal quotation marks omitted) *State* v. *Cotto*, 111 Conn. App. 818, 820, 960 A.2d 1113 (2008); and the fact that "*Casiano*" has become a well-known shorthand for a self-represented defendant's right to counsel to determine whether a sound basis exists for a motion to correct an illegal sentence.

The state additionally argues that, because the defendant did not file an application for appointment of counsel with his motion, the court could not have known that the defendant intended to invoke his right to counsel. The state contends that the "application [for appointment of counsel], or its functional equivalent, is the only avenue by which a court can determine . . . whether a defendant seeks to avail himself of his statutory right to counsel . . . ." We disagree. An application for appointment of counsel is not required to be attached to a motion to correct an illegal sentence to properly notify the court that the defendant may wish to invoke his right to counsel.

[6] In *State* v. *Miller*, 186 Conn. App. 654, 659, 200 A.3d 735 (2018), this court held that a trial court "is not authorized to dispose summarily of a motion to correct an illegal sentence," and concluded that a hearing is necessary before disposing of the motion. In that case, the defendant also

light of the case law set forth herein, we conclude that the court improperly denied the motion without appointing counsel and we remand the case so that counsel may be appointed to represent the defendant in accordance with *Casiano*.

The judgment is reversed and the case is remanded for further proceedings in accordance with this opinion.

In this opinion the other judges concurred.

JOE BALTAS *v.* COMMISSIONER OF CORRECTION (AC 43836)

Prescott, Cradle and DiPentima, Js.

Syllabus

The petitioner, who had been sentenced to ninety-five years of incarceration, sought a writ of habeas corpus, claiming that his constitutional rights were violated when he was placed in administrative segregation. Pursuant to the applicable rule of practice (§ 23-29 (4)), the habeas court rendered judgment dismissing the petitioner's appeal as moot because the petitioner was no longer in administrative segregation. Thereafter, the court denied the petition for certification to appeal, and the petitioner appealed to this court. *Held* that because the petitioner failed to address the threshold question of whether the habeas court abused its discretion in denying his petition for certification to appeal, he was not entitled to appellate review and this court declined to review his claims on appeal.

Argued February 16—officially released April 6, 2021

Procedural History

Petition for a writ of habeas corpus, brought to the Superior Court in the judicial district of Tolland, where the court, *Chaplin*, *J.*, denied the respondent's motion to dismiss; thereafter, the case was tried to the court; judgment dismissing the petition; subsequently, the court

raised the claim that the trial court failed to protect his right to counsel under *Casiano*. Id., 655 n.1. This court did not address that claim, however, noting that "on remand the defendant will have an opportunity to obtain counsel from the trial court in accordance with *Casiano*." Id., 656 n.1.

denied the petition for certification to appeal, and the petitioner appealed to this court. *Appeal dismissed.*

Joe Baltas, self-represented, the appellant (petitioner).

Zenobia G. Graham-Days, assistant attorney general, with whom, on the brief, were *William Tong*, attorney general, and *Clare E. Kindall*, solicitor general, for the appellee (respondent).

Opinion

DiPENTIMA, J. Following the denial of his petition for certification to appeal, the self-represented petitioner, Joe Baltas, appeals from the judgment of the habeas court dismissing as moot his petition for a writ of habeas corpus. Because the petitioner failed to brief the threshold issue of whether the habeas court abused its discretion in denying his petition for certification to appeal, we dismiss the petitioner's appeal.

The following facts and procedural history are relevant to our disposition of this appeal. The petitioner is a state prisoner currently serving a total effective sentence of ninety-five years of incarceration. On December 21, 2016, Warden Henry Falcone of the Garner Correctional Institution in Newtown initiated a request for a hearing regarding the placement of the petitioner in administrative segregation "for safety and security concerns based on his extremely violent behavior and gang influence." On December 27, 2016, the petitioner received notice that a hearing would take place on December 30, 2016, "to determine whether [his] presence in general population present[ed] a threat to the safety and security of the institutional community due to repetitive disciplinary infractions and/or involvement in a serious incident." At the hearing, both the petitioner and another inmate, Stephen Curtis, provided written statements. On January 13, 2017, the petitioner received notice that Falcone's request had been approved, and the petitioner was placed in administrative segregation.

On that same date, the petitioner filed an appeal with the Department of Correction, claiming that his placement in administrative segregation was "unwarranted [and] improper." On January 30, 2017, the petitioner's appeal was denied.

On April 13, 2017, the petitioner filed a petition for a writ of habeas corpus, alleging that his constitutional rights were violated when he was placed in administrative segregation. The sole relief sought by the petitioner was his release from administrative segregation. On September 5, 2019, pursuant to a state agreement, custody of the petitioner was transferred to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to continue his incarceration. On the same date, the respondent, the Commissioner of Correction, filed a motion to dismiss the habeas petition as moot because the petitioner was no longer in administrative segregation.

On September 11, 2019, the day that the habeas trial was scheduled to commence, the habeas court heard argument on the respondent's motion to dismiss and initially denied the motion.[1] The trial proceeded and, after its conclusion, the respondent filed a posttrial brief renewing his argument that there was no actual case or controversy because the petitioner was no longer in administrative segregation. On November 22, 2019, the court issued a memorandum of decision. The court noted that "the petitioner [was] no longer being held in Connecticut," and concluded that "there is no actual case or controversy at issue because the petitioner is no longer in administrative segregation." For these reasons, the court dismissed the petition as moot pursuant to Practice Book

[1] In denying the respondent's motion to dismiss, the court stated that, although "[the petitioner is in Massachusetts' custody . . . there's been no pleading indicating that the [administrative] segregation as argued has ended. The court is stuck without enough information to make the determination that that . . . would not affect his placement in Massachusetts based on the pleadings of the record."

§ 23-29 (4). On December 12, 2019, the petitioner filed a petition for certification to appeal, which was denied by the habeas court. This appeal followed.

The petitioner claims on appeal that (1) "the [habeas] court erred in dismissing [his] petition as moot," (2) "the [habeas] court based its ruling on errors of fact," (3) "the petitioner was entitled to [a] ruling on the merits of his petition," and (4) the habeas court denied the petitioner due process. The petitioner, however, has failed to brief the threshold issue of whether the habeas court abused its discretion in denying his petition for certification to appeal. Because a petitioner who has failed to brief that issue is not entitled to further appellate review; see *Goguen* v. *Commissioner of Correction*, 195 Conn. App. 502, 505, 225 A.3d 977, cert. granted, 335 Conn. 925, 234 A.3d 980 (2020); we decline to review his claims on the merits.

"Faced with a habeas court's denial of a petition for certification to appeal, a petitioner can obtain appellate review of the dismissal of his petition for habeas corpus only by satisfying the two-pronged test enunciated by our Supreme Court in *Simms* v. *Warden*, 229 Conn. 178, 640 A.2d 601 (1994), and adopted in *Simms* v. *Warden*, 230 Conn. 608, 612, 646 A.2d 126 (1994). First, he must demonstrate that the denial of his petition for certification constituted an abuse of discretion. . . . Second, if the petitioner can show an abuse of discretion, he must then prove that the decision of the habeas court should be reversed on its merits. . . .

"To prove an abuse of discretion, the petitioner must demonstrate that the [resolution of the underlying claim involves issues that] are debatable among jurists of reason; that a court could resolve the issues [in a different manner]; or that the questions are adequate to deserve encouragement to proceed further. . . . If this burden is not satisfied, then the claim that the judgment

of the habeas court should be reversed does not qualify for consideration by this court." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Goguen* v. *Commissioner of Correction*, supra, 195 Conn. App. 504.

The petitioner's appellate brief does not address the threshold question of whether the habeas court abused its discretion in denying his petition for certification to appeal. By failing to demonstrate that the denial of his petition for certification to appeal constituted an abuse of discretion, the petitioner has failed to satisfy the first prong of *Simms*. See *Simms* v. *Warden*, supra, 230 Conn. 612. Accordingly, we decline to review his claims on appeal.[2]

The appeal is dismissed.

In this opinion the other judges concurred.

[2] We note that our Supreme Court has granted certification to review this court's decision in *Goguen*, specifically, to determine whether this court "properly dismiss[ed] the self represented petitioner's appeal because he failed to brief whether the habeas court had abused its discretion in denying his petition for certification to appeal . . . ." *Goguen* v. *Commissioner of Correction*, 335 Conn. 925, 234 A.3d 980 (2020). In light of that, we briefly address the merits of the dismissal by the habeas court. In short, it is apparent from the record that the habeas court properly dismissed the underlying petition as moot.

"Mootness . . . implicates subject matter jurisdiction, which imposes a duty on the [trial] court to dismiss a case if the court can no longer grant practical relief to the parties. . . . Mootness presents a circumstance wherein the issue before the court has been resolved or had lost its significance because of a change in the condition of affairs between the parties. . . . A case becomes moot when due to intervening circumstances a controversy between the parties no longer exists." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Paulino* v. *Commissioner of Correction*, 155 Conn. App. 154, 160, 109 A.3d 516, cert. denied, 317 Conn. 912, 116 A.3d 310 (2015).

The habeas court concluded that it could not grant the sole practical relief that the petitioner sought—removal from administrative segregation—because the petitioner, by his own admission, was no longer in administrative segregation at the time the habeas court rendered judgment. We agree that the habeas court properly determined that, at the time it rendered judgment, the case was moot. Moreover, we disagree with the petitioner's assertion on appeal that this case falls into one of the recognized exceptions to the mootness doctrine. Accordingly, even if the petitioner had briefed the threshold question of whether the habeas court had abused its discretion by denying certification to appeal, we would still conclude that the habeas court did not abuse its discretion in denying certification because it is not debatable among jurists of reason that the habeas court properly dismissed the habeas petition as moot.

TRICIA COCCOMO *v.* COMMISSIONER OF CORRECTION (AC 42933)

Alvord, Prescott and Moll, Js.

Syllabus

The petitioner, who had been convicted of manslaughter in the second degree with a motor vehicle, misconduct with a motor vehicle and operating a motor vehicle while under the influence of intoxicating liquor or drugs, sought a writ of habeas corpus, claiming that her trial counsel rendered ineffective assistance. The petitioner contended that she was prejudiced by counsel's responses to evidence of her blood alcohol content and consciousness of guilt in connection with a motor vehicle collision that killed the occupants of a vehicle that was struck by the petitioner's vehicle. The petitioner had consumed alcohol at a party prior to the accident. A paramedic at the accident scene drew and labeled five tubes of the petitioner's blood, which were placed in a biohazard bag and taken with the petitioner in an ambulance to a hospital. Each of the tubes had a different colored cap. A computer in the hospital's laboratory scanned the tubes and printed labels that identified the test to be performed on each tube of blood. After a hearing outside the jury's presence, the trial court denied the petitioner's motion to exclude the blood alcohol content evidence. W, a laboratory director at the hospital, then testified that a printout from the laboratory's computer had indicated that the type of tube normally used to test blood alcohol content had a cap that was different in color from the caps on the five tubes that were in the biohazard bag. The petitioner's counsel thereafter did not renew his motion to exclude the blood alcohol content evidence on chain of custody grounds. The state also offered consciousness of guilt evidence that, shortly after the accident, the petitioner had executed a quitclaim deed transferring her one-half interest in her home to her mother. Defense counsel objected unsuccessfully to the admission of that evidence on the ground that, although evidence of a transfer of property to shield assets from recovery may be admissible in a civil case as probative of liability, it was not admissible to establish consciousness of guilt in a criminal case, and that the prejudicial effect of the evidence outweighed its probative value. *Held*:

1. The petitioner could not prevail on her claim that trial counsel rendered deficient performance when he did not renew his motion to exclude the blood alcohol content evidence after W's testimony or discuss it during closing argument to the jury:

   a. There was no reasonable probability that the trial court would have excluded the blood alcohol evidence if counsel had renewed his objection or that a reviewing court would have concluded that the trial court abused its discretion in overruling such an objection: counsel's more

than sufficient, reasonable explanation for the discrepancy between the color of the tube cap in the hospital's records and the color of the cap on the tube into which the paramedic drew the petitioner's blood did not undermine the chain of custody evidence so as to require the exclusion of the test results, as the evidence tended to demonstrate that the hospital and the ambulance service used tubes with different colored caps relative to blood alcohol testing, the tubes the ambulance service used were a smaller, acceptable version of the tubes the hospital used, and, as it was unclear whether the hospital's computer system had an option in a drop-down menu to describe the color of the tube that contained the blood sample being tested, it was likely that the technician inputting the data selected the option that showed the type of tube used by the hospital, despite its not having been the precise color of the cap on the actual blood tube from which the sample tested was drawn; moreover, the state elicited substantial testimony tracing the chain of custody of the petitioner's blood samples, no witness from the laboratory testified as to any confusion, problems or mix-ups in processing the laboratory's work at the time the blood test was conducted, and the only other blood sample that was tested that night, which was from another patient, showed no detectable alcohol, a result that made it highly unlikely that it came from the petitioner in light of her admissions and other evidence that she drank a significant amount of alcohol before the accident.

b. The habeas court properly concluded that the petitioner failed to establish that her counsel rendered deficient performance by failing to emphasize during closing argument W's testimony regarding the discrepancy in the color of the test tube caps: the petitioner did not demonstrate that there was a reasonable probability that the outcome of the trial would have been different had counsel emphasized W's testimony, as counsel gave a well reasoned, detailed closing argument in which he attempted to undermine the reliability of the blood alcohol test result by focusing on discrepancies in the collection, labeling and testing of the petitioner's blood, he highlighted the testimony of the medical professionals and witnesses who had attended the party that she did not exhibit behavior there that was consistent with intoxication, and, had counsel emphasized W's testimony, the state could have responded by focusing on facts that provided a reasonable explanation for the discrepancy; moreover, as there was strong evidence of the petitioner's guilt, which included her statement to a paramedic at the accident scene that she had been drinking at the party, the petitioner failed to establish that she was prejudiced by her counsel's failure during closing argument to emphasize W's testimony.

2. The habeas court properly concluded that the petitioner was not prejudiced by her counsel's performance with respect to consciousness of guilt evidence concerning the transfer of her interest in her home to her mother shortly after the accident:

a. Testimony from witnesses that counsel decided not to call, who would have corroborated the petitioner's explanation that she was planning

to divorce her husband and wanted to protect her mother's finances from him, was not reasonably likely to have resulted in the exclusion of the property transfer evidence or changed the outcome of the trial, as the petitioner did not initiate divorce proceedings until fourteen months after the accident, which placed in issue her motivation for the transfer so soon after the accident, and, as the evidence of the property transfer itself was mundane, it was unlikely that the jury gave significant credence to the state's contention that it evidenced a guilty conscience. b. The petitioner failed to prove that her counsel undermined her innocent explanation for the property transfer when he elicited from her testimony that her interest in the property was transferred back to her because the initial transfer to her mother was inappropriate; it was unlikely that the trial was impacted by that single response from the petitioner, given the collateral relationship of the property deed when viewed against the substantial direct evidence against her, as the trial court sustained the state's objection to her testimony and, in its charge to the jury, instructed that the jury was not to consider testimony that had been stricken, which it must be presumed the jury followed in the absence of evidence to the contrary.

Argued October 21, 2020—officially released April 6, 2021

Procedural History

Amended petition for a writ of habeas corpus, brought to the Superior Court in the judicial district of Tolland and tried to the court, *Newson, J.*; judgment denying the petition, from which the petitioner, on the granting of certification, appealed to this court. *Affirmed.*

Damian K. Gunningsmith, assigned counsel, with whom was *Drew Cunningham*, assigned counsel, for the appellant (petitioner).

Melissa L. Streeto, senior assistant state's attorney, with whom, on the brief, were *Richard J. Colangelo, Jr.*, chief state's attorney, and *Joseph C. Valdes* and *Brenda L. Hans*, senior assistant state's attorneys, for the appellee (respondent).

Opinion

PRESCOTT, J. This habeas corpus action arises out of the conviction of the petitioner, Tricia Coccomo, of multiple offenses related to a drunken driving accident

in which she caused the death of three individuals. She appeals from the judgment of the habeas court denying her petition for a writ of habeas corpus. On appeal, the petitioner claims that the habeas court improperly concluded that her trial counsel had not rendered constitutionally ineffective assistance in the manner in which he responded to evidence of the petitioner's (1) blood alcohol content and (2) consciousness of guilt. We affirm the judgment of the habeas court.

The following facts, as set forth by our Supreme Court on the petitioner's direct appeal, are relevant to the claims on appeal. "On the evening of July 26, 2005, the [petitioner] attended a dinner party hosted by Louise Orgera at her home on Dannell Drive in the city of Stamford. Orgera had prepared two pitchers of sangria, each containing a 'double bottle' of wine, to which the party guests helped themselves. Between the time that the [petitioner] arrived at the party shortly after 7 p.m. and the time that she left at approximately 9 p.m., she consumed approximately one and three quarters cups of sangria.

"After leaving the party, the [petitioner] was driving northbound on Long Ridge Road at approximately 9:30 p.m. when her vehicle crossed the center line and collided with a southbound vehicle occupied by James Inverno, Barbara Inverno and Glenn Shelley. The estimated combined speed of the impact was ninety miles per hour, and both vehicles sustained severe damage. All three occupants in the other vehicle died as a result of the injuries that they incurred in the collision. The [petitioner] suffered broken bones in her left foot and lacerations, and was transported to Stamford Hospital (hospital), where a blood test revealed that she had a blood alcohol content of 241 milligrams per deciliter or 0.241 percent. It was estimated that the [petitioner's] blood alcohol content at the time of the collision was

approximately 250 milligrams per deciliter or 0.25 percent." *State* v. *Coccomo*, 302 Conn. 664, 666–67, 31 A.3d 1012 (2011).

The petitioner was charged with numerous offenses and was convicted, following a jury trial, of three counts of manslaughter in the second degree with a motor vehicle in violation of General Statutes § 53a-56b (a), three counts of misconduct with a motor vehicle in violation of General Statutes § 53a-57 (a), and one count of operating a motor vehicle while under the influence of intoxicating liquor or drugs in violation of General Statutes § 14-227a (a) (2). Id., 667.[1] On direct appeal, this court declined to review the petitioner's unpreserved claim that the trial court improperly had admitted evidence of her blood alcohol content in light of a discrepancy in the evidence regarding the color of the test tube cap on the vial containing a sample of her blood. *State* v. *Coccomo*, 115 Conn. App. 384, 394, 396, 972 A.2d 757 (2009). This court reversed the petitioner's conviction, however, concluding that the trial court improperly had admitted consciousness of guilt evidence. Id., 386. Following the granting of the state's petition for certification to appeal, our Supreme Court reversed the decision of this court and affirmed the petitioner's conviction. *State* v. *Coccomo*, supra, 302 Conn. 666.

On September 26, 2016, the petitioner filed a petition for a writ of habeas corpus alleging ineffective assistance of her trial counsel, Michael Sherman. Count one of the petition alleged various ways in which Sherman was ineffective in responding to the evidence of the petitioner's blood alcohol content. Count two of the petition alleged various ways that Sherman was ineffective in response to consciousness of guilt evidence

[1] The petitioner was sentenced to a total effective term of twenty years of incarceration, execution suspended after twelve years, followed by five years of probation and a $1000 fine. *State* v. *Coccomo*, 115 Conn. App. 384, 391, 396, 972 A.2d 757 (2009).

offered by the state that, shortly after the accident, the petitioner had executed a quitclaim deed transferring her interest in her home to her mother.

Following a habeas trial on July 5 and 6, 2018, the habeas court, *Newson*, *J.*, issued a memorandum of decision denying the petition. The habeas court thereafter granted the petitioner certification to appeal to this court. The petitioner then filed the present appeal, claiming that the habeas court improperly concluded that Sherman had not rendered ineffective assistance of counsel with regard to both evidence of her blood alcohol content and her consciousness of guilt evidence. Additional facts will be set forth as necessary.

Before addressing the petitioner's specific claims on appeal, we first set forth the applicable law governing a claim of ineffective assistance of counsel and our appellate standard of review. "It is well established that [a] criminal defendant is constitutionally entitled to adequate and effective assistance of counsel at all critical stages of criminal proceedings . . . . This right arises under the sixth and fourteenth amendments to the United States [c]onstitution and article first, § 8, of the Connecticut constitution. . . . As enunciated in *Strickland* v. *Washington*, [466 U.S. 668, 687, 104 S. Ct. 2052, 80 L. Ed. 2d 674 (1984)], this court has stated: It is axiomatic that the right to counsel is the right to the effective assistance of counsel. . . . A claim of ineffective assistance of counsel consists of two components: [A] performance prong and a prejudice prong. To satisfy the performance prong . . . the petitioner must demonstrate that his attorney's representation was not reasonably competent or within the range of competence displayed by lawyers with ordinary training and skill in the criminal law. . . . To satisfy the second prong of *Strickland*, that his counsel's deficient performance prejudiced his defense, the petitioner must establish

that, as a result of his trial counsel's deficient performance, there remains a probability sufficient to undermine confidence in the verdict that resulted in his appeal. . . . The second prong is thus satisfied if the petitioner can demonstrate that there is a reasonable probability that, but for [his counsel's] ineffectiveness, the outcome would have been different. . . . An ineffective assistance of counsel claim will succeed only if both prongs [of *Strickland*] are satisfied. . . . The court, however, may decide against a petitioner on either prong, whichever is easier." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Francis* v. *Commissioner of Correction*, 182 Conn. App. 647, 651–52, 190 A.3d 985, cert. denied, 330 Conn. 903, 191 A.3d 1002 (2018).

"The habeas court is afforded broad discretion in making its factual findings, and those findings will not be disturbed [on appeal] unless they are clearly erroneous. . . . Thus, the [habeas] court's factual findings are entitled to great weight. . . . Furthermore, a finding of fact is clearly erroneous when there is no evidence in the record to support it . . . or when although there is evidence to support it, the reviewing court on the entire evidence is left with the definite and firm conviction that a mistake has been committed. . . . The application of the habeas court's factual findings to the pertinent legal standard, however, presents a mixed question of law and fact, which is subject to plenary review." (Citation omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Rogers* v. *Commissioner of Correction*, 194 Conn. App. 339, 346–47, 221 A.3d 81 (2019).

I

The petitioner asserts two related claims regarding the blood alcohol content evidence admitted at trial. First, she claims that the habeas court improperly concluded that she failed to demonstrate that she was prejudiced by Sherman's failure to object, on chain of custody grounds, to evidence of her blood alcohol content

following testimony from a hospital employee regarding a discrepancy between the color of the test tube used to draw the petitioner's blood and the color of the test tube listed in the hospital's computer records.[2] The petitioner further claims that the habeas court improperly concluded that she failed to demonstrate that Sherman engaged in deficient performance by failing to argue the chain of custody issue in closing argument, and that, even if his performance was deficient, the petitioner suffered no prejudice. We disagree with both of the petitioner's assertions.

The following testimony, as summarized by our Supreme Court on direct appeal, was elicited at trial and is relevant to the disposition of the petitioner's claim. "[Paramedic Kirsten] Engstrand testified that she drew five tubes of the [petitioner's] blood, each with a different colored cap, namely, gold, green, pink, purple and blue, placed the tubes in a biohazard bag, rolled the bag up, and taped it to the [petitioner's] intravenous fluid bag, all before the ambulance arrived at the hospital. Although Engstrand did not label the blood tubes or the biohazard bag, she stated that, upon arriving at the hospital, she placed the intravenous fluid bag and the biohazard bag containing the tubes on or between the [petitioner's] legs. She then turned the [petitioner's] care over to [Toren] Utke, the [hospital] nurse who met Engstrand and the [petitioner] when the ambulance arrived at the hospital.

"Utke testified that Engstrand identified the biohazard bag as belonging to the [petitioner] and that he left the bag with the [petitioner] while he went to obtain the printed labels produced for each patient during the hospital registration process. At that time, Shelley, the

[2] As to this portion of the petitioner's claim, the habeas court concluded that, because the petitioner had suffered no prejudice, it need not address the adequacy of Sherman's performance.

only other patient in the trauma room, was approximately twenty-five feet away from the [petitioner] and was separated from the [petitioner] by several curtains. Utke stated that he knew the blood in the biohazard bag was the [petitioner's] blood because Engstrand had informed him that it was, the bag was taped to the [petitioner's] intravenous fluid bag and each emergency medical team dealt with only one person at a time. Utke stated that, after he obtained the sheet of printed labels containing information identifying the [petitioner], he affixed a label to each tube of blood, initialed the labels, returned the tubes and a requisition sheet listing the tests to be performed to the biohazard bag, placed the bag in a special canister for transport to the laboratory and sent the canister to the laboratory through the hospital's pneumatic tube system. Utke also testified that the labels contained bar codes and that all of the other documentation pertaining to the [petitioner] contained printed labels from the same label sheet.

"No witness recalled testing the [petitioner's] blood after it arrived at the laboratory, but William H. Wilson, the administrative director of the laboratory, testified as to the procedures that were typically followed at the time in question. Wilson explained that the technician receiving the canister would take the biohazard bag out of the canister, open it, compare the name on the blood tube labels with the name on the requisition sheet to make sure they matched and then order the requested tests through the laboratory computer system by identifying the name of the patient and the tests to be performed. If a label indicated the time that the blood was drawn, the technician would enter that time into the system, but, if no time was indicated, the computer would default to the time that the information was entered into the system. Similarly, if the label contained the initials of the person who had drawn the blood, that person's initials would be entered into the system. Following

entry of this information, the computer would scan the tests to be performed and print out a new label for each tube containing the patient's name, a laboratory identification number, a new bar code and the tests to be performed on the blood in that tube. The technician would then compare the name on the new laboratory label and the name on the label affixed to each tube by the emergency department staff to determine that the names matched before placing the new bar coded and numbered laboratory label over the previous label. At that point, the technician would centrifuge the bar coded tubes, if necessary, before setting them on a rack between the processing and testing areas. Once inside the testing area, the tubes would be placed in the testing machine, which would read the bar code on each tube and perform the requested tests. In short, once the new bar coded label was placed on the tube and the tube was accepted for testing, there would be no human intervention, and the machine would mechanically read the label, conduct the tests and produce a report containing the test results. At the conclusion of this process, the technician would take the printout, check the computer screen to make sure the printout matched the information on the screen and verify and release the results, which would be communicated back to the emergency department.

"With respect to the testing of the [petitioner's] blood, Wilson testified that, after checking the records for the night of the collision, it appeared that the blood from the [petitioner] and three other patients had been tested around the same time. Neither Wilson nor [Mariela] Borrero, the laboratory technician who processed the requisition, recalled any problems or mix-ups that night. *In responding to a question as to whether any of the five tubes used to draw the* [*petitioner's*] *blood was the type of tube normally used for testing blood alcohol content*,

Wilson testified that '[*t*]*he* [*type of*] *tube that was indicated in the computer is not in that bag.'* [3] *In other words, the computer printout indicated that the tube used to test the* [*petitioner's*] *blood alcohol content had a red and gray cap, but none of the five tubes in the* [*petitioner's*] *biohazard bag had a red and gray cap.* Wilson further explained, however, that, although a tube with a red and gray cap normally was used for testing blood alcohol content because it contained a gel that separates serum from red blood cells, a smaller tube with a gold cap, like one of the tubes in the [petitioner's] biohazard bag, contained the same gel and also could be used to test a person's blood alcohol content. In addition, Wilson explained that the computer printout describing each patient's test results contained a check mark indicating that the technician on duty had compared the printed report and the patient information with the computer results for accuracy." (Emphasis added; footnote added.) *State* v. *Coccomo*, supra, 302 Conn. 691–94.[4]

The following procedural history is also relevant to the disposition of this claim. On January 26, 2007, after the trial had started, the court held a hearing, outside the presence of the jury, on the petitioner's motion challenging the admissibility of the blood alcohol content evidence.[5] At this hearing, Wilson testified generally "about

[3] Prior to Wilson's testimony, the court admitted, as demonstrative evidence, exhibit 25, a bag containing five tubes that were representative of the type of tubes used to draw the petitioner's blood on July 26, 2005. Wilson's testimony that "[t]he tube that was indicated in the computer is not in that bag" was not based on a specific recollection of the actual tubes used to draw the petitioner's blood but, rather, was based on his review of the demonstrative evidence.

[4] Wilson further testified in front of the jury that, in October, 2005, the hospital changed its procedure for labeling blood tubes; under the new procedure, the blood tubes are not relabeled by the laboratory. This change in procedure was done to eliminate the potential that the laboratory could mislabel a blood sample.

[5] The habeas court noted that, although this motion purportedly was filed pursuant to *State* v. *Porter*, 241 Conn. 57, 698 A.2d 739 (1997), cert. denied, 523 U.S. 1058, 118 S. Ct. 1384, 140 L. Ed. 2d 645 (1998), which involves

hospital and laboratory protocols relating to the collection, processing, and laboratory testing of blood samples, as well as the workings of some of the relevant machinery." Although the petitioner challenged the admissibility of the blood alcohol content evidence at this hearing, she did not assert a challenge on the basis of any discrepancy in the color of the test tube cap containing the sample of her blood because no such testimony had yet been elicited. Following the hearing, the trial court admitted the evidence of the petitioner's blood alcohol content, concluding that the chain of custody was sufficient to allow the jury to consider the test results.[6] Accordingly, the blood alcohol content test results were admitted into evidence that day through the testimony of James Sarnelle, the trauma surgeon on call on July 26, 2005. Wilson's later testimony regarding the color of the test tube cap, which was described in the records, took place in front of the jury on January 30, 2007. After

challenges to the reliability of scientific evidence, the hearing focused on a challenge to the chain of custody of the blood evidence.

The petitioner had filed a prior motion to suppress any and all of the blood evidence on the ground that the search warrant obtained by the police sought the analysis of blood that was drawn at the hospital, and the petitioner's blood was drawn in the ambulance before she arrived at the hospital. Following a hearing, the court denied this motion to suppress.

[6] In its ruling, the court stated: "I mean, there's a line of evidence here, which, if the jury chooses to accept it, that the [petitioner's] blood was drawn in the ambulance, and taped to a saline bag and then taken down by the emergency department nurse, and a label put on the tubes and put in this pneumatic system up to the lab and tested. And there's things that the defense will raise to question that chain of events, but I don't see it as sufficiently affecting the integrity of the sample so that the jury should not be in a position to weigh that evidence and make a decision as to its credibility.

"So, to the extent the [challenge pursuant to *State* v. *Porter*, 241 Conn. 57, 698 A.2d 739 (1997), cert. denied, 523 U.S. 1058, 118 S. Ct. 1384, 140 L. Ed. 2d 645 (1998)] is addressed to the actual machine that did the chemistry, I think the law is clear in Connecticut that that's an accepted method of testing blood, and is—that question has been settled law in Connecticut.

"As to the other matters the defense has raised, I do see them as going to the weight of the evidence, all in the nature of a chain of custody challenge. And I think the custody is sufficient to allow the jury to consider the test results."

Wilson testified in front of the jury that the "[t]he [type of] tube that was indicated in the computer is not in that bag," Sherman did not renew his prior objection to the admission of the blood alcohol content evidence.

In concluding that the trial court's admission of the blood alcohol content evidence did not constitute plain error,[7] our Supreme Court stated that "the testimony indicates that the procedures used in collecting, labeling and testing the [petitioner's] blood were straightforward and apparently free of errors and that, even though the administrative director of the laboratory and the technician who processed the requisition for the tests could not specifically recall testing the [petitioner's] blood, their testimony regarding the course of conduct and their inability to recall or identify any errors in the testing procedures at the time the blood was tested supports the conclusion that there was no break in the chain of custody.

"To the extent the . . . [petitioner claims] that the inconsistent evidence regarding the color of the blood tube caps indicates that the [petitioner's] blood alcohol test results could have been obtained from a sample of someone else's blood, we reiterate that the discrepancy arises solely from a single computer record and that Wilson merely testified that the tube identified in the computer printout as containing the [petitioner's] blood did not resemble any of the tubes in the biohazard bag." *State* v. *Coccomo*, supra, 302 Conn. 694–95.

[7] Because the Appellate Court concluded that this evidentiary claim had not been preserved adequately for appellate review, the petitioner argued in our Supreme Court, as an alternative ground for affirming the decision of the Appellate Court, that the trial court committed plain error in admitting the results of the blood alcohol test. *State* v. *Coccomo*, supra, 302 Conn. 678 n.6. Specifically, the petitioner challenged the admission of the test results "on the basis of a discrepancy between the type of tube used by the paramedics to draw her blood and the type of tube listed in the computer records as the one that was used to test her blood." Id.

In her habeas petition, the petitioner alleged, inter alia, that Sherman provided ineffective assistance of counsel by failing to renew the motion to exclude the blood alcohol content evidence in light of Wilson's testimony regarding the different colored tube cap. At the habeas trial, Sherman was asked about the discrepancy regarding the color of the test tube cap. In response, he indicated that Wilson's testimony was confusing and that he did not think it would be helpful for him to follow up regarding the discrepancy because of the technical nature of the testimony. Instead, Sherman focused on other aspects of the case. When asked about the fact that the "audit trail" of the testing performed on the petitioner's blood reflected that the blood sample came from a tube with a "red/gray" top, Sherman testified that it was his understanding that the description of the tube tested came from a computer screen drop-down menu that had limited choices.

In its decision, the habeas court focused on the issue created by Wilson's testimony in front of the jury that "[t]he tube that was indicated in the computer is not in that bag." The habeas court noted that this "subject . . . had not necessarily been addressed by Wilson during his testimony outside the presence of the jury." In considering the petitioner's claim, the habeas court noted Wilson's trial testimony that the tube that was used for blood alcohol testing, which "was not in that bag," was a red-gray speckled topped tube called a "tiger top" and that the "audit trail" of the blood alcohol testing performed on the petitioner indicated that the tube tested for the petitioner's blood had a "red/gray" top. As also noted by the habeas court, however, almost immediately after Wilson's statement regarding the "tiger top" tube not being in the bag, he testified that the gold topped tube in the Stamford Emergency Medical Services (EMS) array was an appropriate substitute for the standard tiger top tube; it was just a smaller version.

Furthermore, as the habeas court pointed out, it was undisputed that EMS did not carry "tiger top" tubes in their vehicles.

In its decision, the habeas court rejected the petitioner's claim because she failed to demonstrate prejudice as a result of Sherman's allegedly deficient performance. The court stated that, although "Wilson's statement provided obvious fodder for cross-examination, given the substantial direct evidence from the witnesses who actually handled the petitioner's blood, and the unrefuted testimony they provided about quality controls protocols they observed, there is no reasonable basis in law, or fact, upon which this evidence could have, or should have, been kept from the jury by the trial judge. . . . The petitioner's intoxication level was directly relevant to the operating under the influence charge, and consumption of alcohol was also relevant to the manslaughter charges. Therefore, evidence supporting or refuting intoxication was presumably admissible. . . . Further, all of the witnesses who testified to the direct handling of the petitioner's blood—paramedic Engstrand, nurse Utke, and lab technician Borrero—if believed, established an unbroken chain of custody from the drawing of the petitioner's blood to the reporting of the lab results. So, while the petitioner can legitimately argue that . . . Wilson's statement, if accepted for the meaning she advocates, conflicts with chain of custody evidence offered by other witnesses, there is no reasonable probability that the trial judge would have excluded the blood evidence, even had defense counsel specifically emphasized Wilson's lone statement." (Citations omitted; footnote omitted.) The habeas court concluded by stating that, "[i]n sum, given the totality of the evidence, [because] there is no reasonable basis upon which this court can conclude that the trial court could have, or would have, excluded the blood evidence from the jury's consideration . . . the

petitioner has suffered no prejudice. . . . Therefore, the claim fails, and there is no need for the [c]ourt to address defense counsel's performance." (Citation omitted.)

A

On appeal, the petitioner argues that the habeas court improperly concluded that she had not demonstrated prejudice as a result of Sherman's failure to object to the blood alcohol content evidence on chain of custody grounds following Wilson's testimony because it likely would have led the trial court to strike the previously admitted test results derived from the blood sample or, in the alternative, to success on appeal in challenging the trial court's overruling of such a renewed objection. We disagree.

We agree with the habeas court's conclusion that, given the totality of the evidence, there was no reasonable probability (1) that the trial court would have excluded the blood alcohol evidence from the jury's consideration if a renewed objection had been made or (2) that a reviewing court would conclude that the trial court abused its discretion by overruling a renewed objection to the admissibility of that evidence. "Preliminary questions concerning . . . the admissibility of evidence shall be determined by the court." Conn. Code Evid. § 1-3 (a). The admissibility of the blood alcohol test results in this case primarily revolved around the question of whether the blood tested was in fact drawn from the petitioner. In other words, the petitioner's claim raises a question of authentication: Are the blood alcohol test results what the state purports them to be?

Typically, "[t]he requirement of authentication as a condition precedent to admissibility is satisfied by evidence sufficient to support a finding that the offered evidence is what its proponent claims it to be. Conn. Code Evid. § 9-1 (a)." (Internal quotation marks omit-

ted.) *State* v. *Smith*, 179 Conn. App. 734, 761, 181 A.3d 118, cert. denied, 328 Conn. 927, 182 A.3d 637 (2018). In such cases, "[t]he proponent need only advance prima facie proof that the proffered evidence is what it is claimed to be before the evidence may be admitted, with the ultimate determination of authenticity resting with the fact finder." *State* v. *Petitt*, 178 Conn. App. 443, 451, 175 A.3d 1274 (2017), cert. denied, 327 Conn. 1002, 176 A.3d 1195 (2018).

In many cases, a preliminary showing of authenticity is established by a witness with a basis of knowledge, often from the appearance and distinct nature of the evidence, that the item is in fact what it purports to be. See id., 452. If, however, "the offered evidence is of such a nature as not to be readily identifiable, the foundation for authentication will be substantially more elaborate. Typically, it will entail testimony that traces the chain of custody of the item from the moment it was found to its appearance in the courtroom, with sufficient completeness to render it reasonably probable that the original item has neither been exchanged nor altered." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) Id., quoting 2 C. McCormick, Evidence (7th Ed. 2013) § 213, pp. 13–14.

"[W]hen the chain of custody of evidence is at issue, as in this case, [t]he state's burden . . . is met by a showing that there is a reasonable probability that the substance has not been changed in important respects. . . . The court must consider the nature of the article, [and] the circumstances surrounding its preservation and custody . . . ." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *State* v. *Coccomo*, supra, 302 Conn. 685. As long as the state makes a sufficient preliminary showing regarding the chain of custody, a challenge to the chain of custody pertains to the weight of the evidence rather than to its admissibility. *State* v. *Russo*, 89 Conn. App. 296, 302–303, 873 A.2d 202, cert. denied, 275 Conn. 908, 882 A.2d 679 (2005).

In the petitioner's direct appeal, our Supreme Court thoroughly analyzed the question of whether the state had met its burden at trial to demonstrate a sufficient chain of custody in order to authenticate the test results of the petitioner's blood despite the minor discrepancy in the description of the color of the test tube cap. Although this analysis was conducted in the context of whether the petitioner could prevail on a claim of plain error, we conclude that it is just as apt in the procedural context of this habeas appeal.

First, as our Supreme Court noted, the state elicited substantial testimony tracing the chain of custody of the petitioner's blood samples from the paramedic who drew the petitioner's blood into five tubes to the laboratory technician who performed the laboratory analysis on the blood contained in those tubes. *State* v. *Coccomo*, supra, 302 Conn. 682–84, 691–94. No witness from the laboratory testified as to any confusion, problems or mix-ups in processing the work of the laboratory that evening. See id., 693. Second, only one other blood sample from another hospital patient was tested for blood alcohol content at about the same time that the petitioner's blood was tested that evening, and there was no detectable alcohol in that sample; id., 684; a result that would make it highly unlikely that the sample came from the petitioner in light of her admissions and other evidence that she drank a significant amount of alcohol before the accident. See id., 682–83.

Most importantly, at the habeas trial, Sherman provided a reasonable explanation for the discrepancy between the description of the color of the tube cap contained in the hospital medical records and the color of the cap on the blood tube into which the paramedic drew the petitioner's blood sample. The evidence tended to demonstrate that the hospital utilized only test tubes with a red-grey speckled cap ("tiger-top") to collect blood samples drawn in the hospital. The ambulance

service, however, used blood test tubes with a yellow-gold cap to collect blood taken in the field for testing for blood alcohol content and did not carry tiger-topped tubes in their vehicles. Wilson explained at trial that the tubes with a yellow-gold cap were merely a smaller, acceptable version of the tiger-top tubes used by the hospital. The hospital's computer system, however, contained a drop-down menu to describe the color of the tube containing the sample being tested by the laboratory, and it is unclear whether that menu gave an option for a tube with a yellow-gold cap. As a result, the technician inputting the data most likely selected the tiger-top menu option despite its not having been the precise color of the cap on the actual blood tube from which the sample tested was drawn.[8] This reasonable explanation was more than sufficient to explain the discrepancy described by Wilson in his testimony and did not undermine the chain of custody evidence so as to require the exclusion of the test results.

In light of the foregoing, the petitioner has not shown a reasonable probability that the trial court would have ruled in her favor had Sherman renewed his motion to exclude Wilson's testimony or that she would have been successful on appeal in challenging the denial of such a motion.[9] Accordingly, we are not persuaded that the

[8] "[C]omputer and human error was discussed in other contexts [in the criminal trial], such as when Robert Voss and James Duffy, two paramedics employed by [EMS], explained how inaccurate information could end up in the [EMS] computer system due to the fact that the options available for describing a patient's condition in the system's [drop-down] menus sometimes were limited." *State* v. *Coccomo*, supra, 302 Conn. 696 n.12.

[9] In support of her argument regarding prejudice, the petitioner relies on the dissenting opinions in *State* v. *Coccomo*, supra, 115 Conn. App. 403–404 (*Berdon*, *J.*, concurring in part and dissenting in part), and *State* v. *Coccomo*, supra, 302 Conn. 723–42 (*Eveleigh*, *J.*, dissenting), which concluded, contrary to the majority opinions in the Supreme Court and Appellate Court decisions, that Sherman had preserved adequately the chain of custody objections to the admissibility of the blood alcohol content evidence and, further, would have reversed the judgment of conviction because, in their view, the evidence was improperly admitted and the admission of the test results constituted harmful error. According to the petitioner in this habeas appeal, Judge

court improperly concluded that she failed to establish that she was prejudiced by counsel's failure to renew his objection. See *Haywood* v. *Commissioner of Correction*, 153 Conn. App. 651, 666–67, 105 A.3d 238, cert. denied, 315 Conn. 908, 105 A.3d 235 (2014).

B

The petitioner next asserts that the habeas court improperly concluded that Sherman did not render deficient performance by failing to discuss Wilson's testimony in his closing argument. We disagree and conclude that the habeas court properly concluded that Sherman's performance met constitutional requirements and that, even if it did not, the petitioner suffered no prejudice.

In considering this argument, we first emphasize that "[j]udicial scrutiny of counsel's performance must be highly deferential. . . . A fair assessment of attorney performance requires that every effort be made to eliminate the distorting effects of hindsight, to reconstruct the circumstances of counsel's challenged conduct, and to evaluate the conduct from counsel's perspective at the time. . . . [A] court must indulge a strong presump-

Berdon and Justice Eveleigh were the only judges to review the admissibility of the blood alcohol content as a preserved issue and, therefore, their dissenting opinions on this issue are the most persuasive indication of what would have occurred but for Sherman's failure to preserve adequately a challenge to the admissibility of this evidence.

The petitioner places more weight on these dissenting opinions than they will bear. Simply put, just because one judge on the Appellate Court and one justice of our Supreme Court would have reversed the judgment of conviction on this issue had it been preserved adequately does not mean necessarily that the trial court would have exercised its discretion to exclude the previously admitted test results had Sherman renewed an objection to the blood alcohol content evidence following Wilson's testimony or that the majority of any appellate panel reviewing a decision by the trial court to overrule an objection would have reversed the judgment of conviction, particularly in light of the relatively low burden necessary to make a prima facie showing of the authenticity of the blood sample and the deferential appellate standard of review of abuse of discretion that would have applied in reviewing the trial court's decision.

tion that counsel's conduct falls within the wide range of reasonable professional assistance; that is, the [petitioner] must overcome the presumption that, under the circumstances, the challenged action might be considered sound trial strategy." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *State* v. *Sinchak*, 173 Conn. App. 352, 373, 163 A.3d 1208, cert. denied, 327 Conn. 901, 169 A.3d 796 (2017).

In considering whether Sherman's performance was deficient, the habeas court stated that, "[r]eviewing the closing arguments, it is true that [Sherman] failed to directly mention . . . Wilson's 'it's not there' statement during his closing argument. Even absent this specific reference, however, it was abundantly clear to anyone participating in the trial that, from the moment the first witness took the [witness] stand, [Sherman] was attacking the collection and handling of the petitioner's blood from her first interaction with paramedics to the final lab results. [Sherman's] cross-examination of each witness was thorough and exhaustive. The court can find no support in the law that review of the reasonableness of defense counsel's conduct can be so hypertechnical that he could spend the entire trial emphasizing, with every medical witness who testified, that there were mistakes and violations in protocol, yet be found to have performed 'unreasonably' for failing to directly mention a single statement of a lone witness during his closing arguments. . . . Further, since counsel elicited the testimony before the jury, it was free to consider and credit it as [it] saw fit, notwithstanding his failure to specifically mention it in closing. . . . Therefore, the court finds that counsel's performance in this respect meets constitutional requirements." (Citations omitted.)

Our review of the record reveals that Sherman gave a well reasoned and detailed closing argument in which he attempted to undermine the reliability of the 0.241 blood alcohol content test result by focusing on discrep-

ancies in the collection, labeling, and testing of the petitioner's blood. Specifically, Sherman attempted to cast doubt on the qualifications of Yannick Passemart, an emergency medical technician, to draw the petitioner's blood, pointed out inconsistencies regarding whether Engstrand or Passemart drew the petitioner's blood, challenged the credibility of Engstrand's statement that the petitioner had told her she had been drinking on the night in question, and emphasized the fact that Engstrand did not label the tubes with the blood once it had been drawn. In addition, Sherman highlighted the testimony of the medical professionals and the witnesses who attended the dinner party on the night in question who stated that the petitioner did not exhibit behavior consistent with intoxication. In sum, Sherman argued that the 0.241 blood alcohol content test result was a mistake and that, in order for the jury to believe that it was accurate, it would have to disregard all of the other witnesses and evidence introduced at trial indicating that the petitioner was not intoxicated.

In *State* v. *Sinchak*, supra, 173 Conn. App. 372, the petitioner argued, in part, that trial counsel in his underlying criminal trial was ineffective in failing to marshal the facts in the petitioner's favor during closing argument. In concluding that the petitioner had failed to demonstrate that trial counsel's representation fell below an objective standard of reasonableness, we stated: "As [trial counsel] was not required to take any particular approach in the argument, nor to address every facet of the case, we conclude that he did not provide ineffective assistance of counsel. . . . [Trial counsel] had a limited amount of time in which to present the main themes of the petitioner's defense in a long and complicated trial, and he did so competently. He was not required to present every minor detail of his defense theory. Even if some of the arguments would unquestionably have supported the defense, it does

not follow that counsel was incompetent for failing to include them. Focusing on a small number of key points may be more persuasive than a shotgun approach.'' (Citation omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) Id., 377–78.[10] As in *Sinchak*, we conclude that the petitioner has failed to establish deficient performance by Sherman in failing to discuss Wilson's testimony regarding the discrepancy in the color of the test tube cap during his closing argument.

We also agree with the habeas court that the petitioner failed to demonstrate that she was prejudiced by Sherman's failure to emphasize Wilson's statement in his closing argument. If Sherman had emphasized Wilson's testimony regarding the discrepancy between the color of the cap on the test tube used to draw the petitioner's blood and the color of the cap on the test tube contained in the hospital medical records, the state could have responded by focusing on the facts, as set forth previously in this opinion, that provide a reasonable explanation for the discrepancy. Specifically, the state could have pointed out that, although the hospital utilized only the red-gray topped tubes, the ambulance service used tubes with a yellow-gold cap, which were also acceptable. The state also could have argued that it was likely that the hospital's drop-down menu did not contain an option for a tube with a yellow-gold cap. In light of this reasonable explanation for this discrepancy, the petitioner failed to demonstrate that there is a reasonable probability that, but for Sherman's failure to emphasize this aspect of Wilson's testimony, the outcome of the petitioner's criminal trial would have been different.

We also consider the strength of the state's case in determining whether the petitioner was prejudiced by

[10] The petitioner's claim of ineffective assistance of counsel in *State* v. *Sinchak*, supra, 173 Conn. App. 376, failed on both the performance and the prejudice prongs of *Strickland* v. *Washington*, supra, 466 U.S. 687.

Sherman's failure to emphasize Wilson's statement in his closing argument. "[T]he strength of the state's case is a significant factor in determining whether [any deficient performance] caused prejudice to the petitioner. The stronger the case, the less probable it is that a particular error caused actual prejudice." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Mercado* v. *Commissioner of Correction*, 183 Conn. App. 556, 567, 193 A.3d 671, cert. denied, 330 Conn. 918, 193 A.3d 1211 (2018). The petitioner acknowledges that, in evaluating prejudice, the habeas court was required to evaluate the strength of the state's case. She argues, however, that it is "indisputable that the state's case was very weak." We disagree.[11]

In evaluating the strength of the state's case, we note that the petitioner was convicted of three counts of manslaughter in the second degree with a motor vehicle in violation of § 53a-56b (a),[12] three counts of misconduct with a motor vehicle in violation of § 53a-57 (a),[13] and

[11] We acknowledge the prior statement by a panel of this court that "the state's case was not very strong and relied almost entirely on the admission of a blood alcohol content report." *State* v. *Coccomo*, supra, 115 Conn. App. 401. The decision containing that statement, however, has been reversed by our Supreme Court.

[12] General Statutes § 53a-56b provides in relevant part: "(a) A person is guilty of manslaughter in the second degree with a motor vehicle when, while operating a motor vehicle under the influence of intoxicating liquor or any drug or both, he causes the death of another person as a consequence of the effect of such liquor or drug. . . ."

As to this charge, the state was required to prove that "(1) the [petitioner] caused the death of another person (2) while operating a motor vehicle (3) under the influence of intoxicating liquor or any drug and (4) the victim's death was a consequence of the effect of such liquor or drug. . . . In this context, 'under the influence of intoxicating liquor,' means that, as a result of drinking such intoxicating liquor, the [petitioner's] mental, physical, or nervous processes 'have become so affected that he lacks to an appreciable degree the ability to function properly in relation to the operation of his motor vehicle.' " *State* v. *Perkins*, 271 Conn. 218, 247, 856 A.2d 917 (2004).

[13] General Statutes § 53a-57 provides in relevant part: "(a) A person is guilty of misconduct with a motor vehicle when, with criminal negligence in the operation of a motor vehicle, he causes the death of another person. . . ."

As to this charge, the state was required to prove that "(1) the [petitioner] was operating a motor vehicle; (2) the [petitioner] caused the death of another person; and (3) the [petitioner] possessed the mental state for

one count of operating a motor vehicle while under the influence of intoxicating liquor or drugs in violation of § 14-227a (a) (2).[14] The charges of manslaughter in the second degree with a motor vehicle and misconduct with a motor vehicle did not require proof of an elevated blood alcohol content. The charge of operating a motor vehicle while under the influence of intoxicating liquor or drugs required proof of an elevated blood alcohol content, which is defined as "a ratio of alcohol in the blood of such person that is eight-hundredths of one per cent or more of alcohol, by weight . . . ." General Statutes § 14-227a (a) (2). As we will discuss, there was substantial evidence to support a finding of guilt of all of these charges. With respect to the charge of operating a motor vehicle while under the influence of intoxicating liquor or drugs, we note that the petitioner's blood alcohol content was three times the legal limit set forth § 14-227 (a) (2) and the following undermines the petitioner's attempt to discredit the blood alcohol content results and buttresses the reliability of that evidence.

Jennifer Mardi, a paramedic with EMS, testified at trial that, when she approached the petitioner at the

criminal negligence." *State* v. *Carter*, 64 Conn. App. 631, 637, 781 A.2d 376, cert. denied, 258 Conn. 914, 782 A.2d 1247 (2001). "A person acts with 'criminal negligence' with respect to a result or to a circumstance described by a statute defining an offense when he fails to perceive a substantial and unjustifiable risk that such result will occur or that such circumstance exists. The risk must be of such nature and degree that the failure to perceive it constitutes a gross deviation from the standard of care that a reasonable person would observe in the situation . . . ." Id., quoting General Statutes § 53a-3 (14).

[14] General Statutes § 14-227a (a) provides in relevant part that "[a] person commits the offense of operating a motor vehicle while under the influence of intoxicating liquor or any drug or both if such person operates a motor vehicle . . . (2) while such person has an elevated blood alcohol content. For the purposes of this section, 'elevated blood alcohol content' means a ratio of alcohol in the blood of such person that is eight-hundredths of one per cent or more of alcohol, by weight . . . ."

We note that, although § 14-227a has been amended since the events at issue, those amendments are not relevant to this appeal. For convenience, we refer in this opinion to the current revision of § 14-227a.

scene of the accident to ask if she was okay, the petitioner told her to hold on because she was on the phone. Mardi smelled what appeared to be alcohol and asked the petitioner if she had been drinking, and the petitioner responded that she "had a few drinks." Engstrand, the paramedic who took over the petitioner's care, testified that the petitioner never asked about the other people involved in the accident but, rather, told Engstrand about her impending divorce. Engstrand noticed that the petitioner's speech was slightly slurred and asked the petitioner if she had been drinking. In response, the petitioner told Engstrand that she had consumed a few glasses of champagne and a glass of wine at a party downtown. Engstrand's partner, Passemart, also detected the odor of alcohol on the petitioner and recalled the petitioner stating that she had come from a party with a friend and had had a few drinks.

Upon arrival at the hospital, Utke, a registered nurse, took over the petitioner's care. He described the petitioner as very anxious. According to Utke, in response to questioning, the petitioner indicated that she did not know if she had been driving the vehicle involved in the accident. Utke did not notice any alcohol on the petitioner's breath but stated that something was not right in terms of the petitioner's mental status. Robert Bulman, a police officer with the Stamford Police Department, met the ambulance at the hospital and spoke with the petitioner in the trauma room. Due to the noise in the trauma room, Bulman had to bend down so that he was approximately one inch from the petitioner's face and he noticed the odor of alcohol. When asked about the intensity of the odor, Bulman responded: "Strong. It's strong. For [the petitioner], it's a strong smell. We're not talking, 'Gee, I wonder if,' or, 'Maybe,' or—no, it's there." Finally, the emergency room physician listed "alcohol intoxication" in his report under clinical impressions.

In sum, there was strong evidence of the petitioner's guilt of all of the crimes charged. In light of the foregoing, the habeas court properly concluded that the petitioner failed to establish that she was prejudiced by Sherman's failure to emphasize Wilson's statement in closing argument. The habeas court, therefore, properly concluded that the petitioner failed to establish ineffective assistance of counsel with regard to the admission of the blood alcohol content evidence.

II

The petitioner next claims that the habeas court improperly concluded that Sherman was not constitutionally ineffective in challenging the admissibility of evidence that, shortly after the accident, the petitioner had executed a quitclaim deed transferring her interest in her home to her mother. The petitioner claims that the habeas court improperly concluded that she suffered no prejudice from Sherman's performance with respect to this evidence. We disagree.

The following additional facts are relevant to this claim. "At trial, the state sought, over the [petitioner's] objection, to present evidence that, during her stay in the hospital, the [petitioner] had requested and received the results of a blood alcohol test that had been performed on her blood. It also sought to present evidence that, several days after the collision, the [petitioner] had quitclaimed to her mother her one-half interest in her Stamford residence (property), which she had coowned with her mother, for consideration of $1 and other value less than $100. The state argued that the foregoing evidence showed consciousness of guilt and was therefore relevant." *State* v. *Coccomo*, supra, 302 Conn. 668. Specifically, the state argued that the petitioner transferred the property to her mother shortly after the accident, for a price far below its value, because she knew that she had caused an accident that resulted in

the death of three people and wanted to protect herself from potential civil liability.

Sherman objected on the ground that, although evidence of a transfer of property to shield assets from recovery may be admissible in a civil case as probative of liability, it was not admissible to establish consciousness of guilt in a criminal case. He also contended that the prejudicial effect of the evidence outweighed its probative value and argued that this evidence, if admitted, "would necessitate us putting on the [witness] stand—which I can—we can do—members of her family as to the basis of the transaction, which is not necessarily so nefarious." Sherman then requested twenty-four hours to brief the matter, which the court granted. The following day, Sherman did not submit a brief but, rather, the defense renewed the argument that the probative value of the evidence was outweighed by its prejudicial effect.[15] The defense argued that the admission of the property transfer evidence would create "the ultimate distraction of a little mini civil trial determining the motives, putting lawyers on the [witness] stand and this type of thing." The court thereafter agreed with the state and admitted evidence of the property transfer as probative of consciousness of guilt.

The petitioner subsequently testified that, prior to the accident, she was planning to divorce her husband. With regard to the property transfer, the petitioner testified that, "[t]hroughout the course of the past five years, my husband has borrowed close to a quarter of a million dollars from my mom, and my mom felt it would be in her best interest to put the house back in her name to protect her money. As that would be the only way she would get that money back from him. So, I would say probably about two weeks before the accident, [the

[15] The argument on this issue was made by Attorney Stephan E. Seeger, not Sherman. Seeger also represented the petitioner.

real estate attorney] . . . started the paperwork to [quitclaim] it back." The petitioner further testified, however, that following the advice of Sherman, her mother subsequently executed another quitclaim deed that essentially reversed the earlier quitclaim deed.[16]

At the habeas trial, the petitioner testified that she had informed Sherman, over the course of several meetings, that she had quitclaimed the property to her mother to protect the family home and her mother's finances from her husband, whom she was planning to divorce.[17] She testified that, prior to the accident, she

[16] The petitioner testified as follows on direct examination:

"[Sherman]: And when was the [quitclaim] actually filed, if you know? If you know.

"[The Petitioner]: Filed, or—I don't know when it was filed. We signed it shortly after the accident.

"[Sherman]: It was after the accident?

"[The Petitioner]: Right.

"[Sherman]: Prepared before but signed after the accident?

"[The Petitioner]: Right.

"[Sherman]: And then did you ever wind up [quitclaiming] it back, or—

"[The Petitioner]: We did. We put it back to the original way. I don't, the original way has been back and forth so many times. But we put it back to my mother owning half and myself owning half.

"[Sherman]: Who told you to do that?

"[The Petitioner]: And that's the way it is right now.

"[Sherman]: Who told you to do that, to put it back to where it was?

"[The Petitioner]: You did.

"[Sherman]: Do you know why?

"[The Petitioner]: You said, because it was inappropriate.

"[The Prosecutor]: Objection, Your Honor. It calls for hearsay, it's basically—

"The Court: Objection sustained.

"[The Prosecutor]: Yes.

"[Sherman]: The bottom line is that the house was put back to where it was before the accident?

"[The Petitioner]: Right.

[17] The petitioner testified that, at a meeting with Sherman in late October or early November, 2005, Sherman brought up ownership of the home. She testified: "I had recently transferred my share of my home, the property, to my mother . . . . I explained to him that I was in a marriage. My husband was horrible at managing his finances. He was in a lot of trouble financially, and he had even been arrested for—on some occasions. So, I knew before I filed for divorce that I had to basically get the home out of my name because that was not—when we went into the marriage that had been a family home already. So, I did not want him being able to get any share of

had already scheduled an appointment with an attorney to represent her in her divorce action. She further testified that her real estate attorney had prepared the paperwork transferring the property to her mother two or three weeks prior to the accident; as a result of the accident, however, she was unable to sign the documents until she got out of the hospital in the first week of August following the accident. The petitioner testified that during her meetings with Sherman, she gave him the names of several witnesses who could corroborate the veracity of her explanation for the transfer of the property.[18] Sherman, however, insisted that the petitioner's mother transfer the property back to the petitioner to show the petitioner's good faith. Accordingly, on March 9, 2006, the petitioner's mother executed another quitclaim deed, reversing the effect of the earlier quitclaim deed.

Sherman testified at the habeas trial that, although the petitioner had explained her reasons for the property transfer to him, he was concerned that a judge or jury would not look favorably on it. He told her that, because of the accident, the transfer was "inappropriate" and that it "looked bad . . . ." Sherman told her that reversing the property transfer would show good faith and that "it was incumbent upon us to put the deed back to a situation where the jurors didn't believe [the petitioner] was doing a sneaky thing." He testified that he asked the petitioner at trial about reversing the property transfer because he "wanted the jury to see

that. You know, he owed my mother a lot of money. . . . I had explained this to [Sherman], and I—he was questioning it. He said, you know, it doesn't, it doesn't look good, and I said, but it was done, it was in the works prior to the accident." When asked for clarification about it being "in the works prior to the accident," the petitioner testified that she already had an appointment with her divorce attorney and that, although the appointment was scheduled on July 27, 2005, the day after the accident, she had made the appointment before the accident.

[18] These witnesses, Kelly Robb, Rebecca Siwicki, Atara Capalbo, Alda Bracchia, and Patricia Saxe, testified at the habeas trial.

that she had character and a good [conscience] and good measure of will, that she could undo something that needed to be done, and also a little insurance policy because she was telling the jury that the lawyer did it, not me, and it was true." Sherman further testified that he did not call the witnesses that the petitioner had provided because he did not know that they would be helpful to the presentation of his defense, and, depending on what they said, the testimony could have been potentially prejudicial.

In its decision, the habeas court noted the novelty of the state's theory, in that it appeared to be the first reported case in which the consciousness of guilt evidence in a criminal case was tied to conduct involving a defendant's attempt to avoid civil liability. The petitioner claimed at the habeas trial that she had provided Sherman with the names of numerous witnesses who would have testified at the criminal trial regarding the innocent motive for the property transfer; the habeas court, however, rejected the petitioner's contention that the testimony of these witnesses would have resulted in the trial court's excluding the evidence of the property transfer or, if it were admitted, the jury's rejection of that evidence.[19] The habeas court ultimately concluded that, because it was not reasonably probable that evidence of the quitclaim transfer could have, or should have, been excluded from evidence, the petitioner was not prejudiced by any alleged deficient performance. The habeas court did not address whether Sherman's performance was deficient.

[19] As to this claim, the habeas court indicated that "these witnesses simply reiterated or corroborated testimony the petitioner provided during her trial testimony. Generally, [the] witnesses testified to having conversations with the petitioner about [her] being unhappy in her marriage for some time, about her husband's alleged financial mismanagement, and that she had made the decision to move forward with filing for divorce. Adding, or attempting to add, the testimony of these witnesses, however, would not have changed the outcome of the trial . . . because none of them added anything that the petitioner had not testified to herself at trial." (Citation omitted.)

On appeal, the petitioner claims that the habeas court improperly concluded that she suffered no prejudice from Sherman's performance. She contends that, in the absence of deficient performance by Sherman, she would have been successful in obtaining the exclusion of the evidence of the property transfer. In support of this claim, she contends that, had the trial court been presented with the overwhelming evidence corroborating the fact that the transfer was made due to the petitioner's marital issues, evidence of the transfer could not reasonably have been admitted at trial. She further claims that, even if the evidence of the property transfer was potentially admissible as consciousness of guilt evidence, it is likely that the trial court would have excluded the evidence as being more prejudicial than probative.[20] Finally, the petitioner argues that she suffered prejudice as a result of Sherman's elicitation of her testimony that the property had been transferred back to her because the initial transfer was " 'inappropriate' . . . ." The respondent, the Commissioner of Correction, argues that the habeas court properly concluded that the petitioner had failed to prove that she was prejudiced by counsel's failure to exclude evidence of the quitclaim deed. We agree with the respondent.

A

The petitioner's primary argument is that the habeas court improperly concluded that she suffered no prejudice from Sherman's decision not to call as witnesses Kelly Robb, Rebecca Siwicki, Atara Capalbo, Alda Braccia, and Patricia Saxe. According to the petitioner, these

[20] In support of her argument, the petitioner relies, in part, on the majority opinion of this court in *State* v. *Coccomo*, supra, 115 Conn. App. 401–402 and the dissenting opinion in *State* v. *Coccomo*, supra, 302 Conn. 716–23 (*Eveleigh*, *J.*, dissenting), which concluded that the admission of the consciousness of guilt evidence was both improper and harmful. This reliance is misplaced because this court is bound by the majority opinion in *State* v. *Coccomo*, supra, 302 Conn. 674, which concluded that the trial court properly admitted the consciousness of guilt evidence.

witnesses would have corroborated her innocent explanation for the property transfer, and, therefore, their testimony likely would have affected the outcome of the trial. We disagree.

The petitioner cannot prevail on her claim because she cannot prove that she was prejudiced by the absence of these witnesses at trial. As the habeas court noted, the petitioner did not initiate divorce proceedings against her husband until September 29, 2006, which was fourteen months after the accident at issue. Thus, as recognized by the habeas court, "had defense counsel offered the urgency of preparing for divorce as the 'innocent' basis for the petitioner going through with the property transfer so soon after the accident, the defense would then have been left explaining the obvious, and easily discovered, fact that no divorce action had been filed. The fact that no divorce had been filed [until September 29, 2006] at a minimum, place[s] the question of the petitioner's true motivation for transferring the property so soon after the accident up for debate." In light of the foregoing, the habeas court properly concluded that it was neither reasonably likely that the testimony of these witnesses would have resulted in the evidence of the property transfer being excluded from trial, nor would it have changed the outcome of the trial.[21]

[21] In its opinion, the habeas court also stated that September 26, 2006, the date that the petitioner initiated divorce proceedings, was nine months after the criminal trial was completed. The record reflects, however, that the jury reached its verdict in the petitioner's criminal trial on February 7, 2007, and that the petitioner was sentenced on April 27, 2007.

We also note the petitioner's argument that the habeas court improperly took judicial notice of the filing of her divorce action to draw an unfavorable inference against her without giving her the opportunity to be heard. As to this argument, we note that it is unclear from the habeas court's decision whether it took judicial notice of the filing of the petitioner's divorce action. It would not have been necessary for the habeas court to take judicial notice of this fact, however, because the petitioner herself testified on direct examination at trial that she had filed for divorce in September, 2006.

It is also important to note that, on direct appeal, our Supreme Court concluded that the trial court had not abused its discretion in admitting the evidence of the property transfer. *State* v. *Coccomo*, supra, 302 Conn. 666. As part of its analysis, the court concluded that the admission of this evidence was not more prejudicial than probative. Id., 672. Specifically, the court stated: "First, defense counsel did not argue at trial that this evidence would unduly arouse the jurors' emotions, hostility or sympathy, nor do we believe that evidence as mundane as a transfer of property for less than valuable consideration is the type of evidence that would inflame a reasonable juror in a criminal manslaughter case. Second, there is nothing in the record to indicate that the admission of this evidence created an unduly distracting side issue. The state connected the relevance of the evidence to the underlying criminal charges, and no significant amount of time was expended exploring the factual or legal issues raised by the transfer. Third, the state's introduction and explanation of the evidence, and defense counsel's subsequent rebuttal, comprised only a small portion of the multi-day trial. . . . Fourth, the defense was permitted to provide an innocent explanation for the transfer, and the [petitioner] was allowed to testify that, at the time of the trial, a one-half interest in the property already had been transferred back to her. Furthermore, in light of the conflicting evidence on this issue, *we find it unlikely that the jury gave significant credence to the state's contention that the transfer evinced a guilty conscience.*" (Citation omitted; emphasis added.) Id., 673–74. The analysis by our Supreme Court on direct appeal is persuasive in this habeas appeal on the issue of prejudice suffered by the petitioner. See *Diaz* v. *Commissioner*, 125 Conn. App. 57, 67–70, 6 A.3d 213 (2010), cert. denied, 299 Conn. 926, 11 A.3d 150 (2011); id., 69 (because petitioner presented no evidence in habeas record undermining reasoning on direct appeal, "we allow our previous finding

of harmless error to influence the present prejudice inquiry").

As stated previously in this opinion, "[t]he strength of the state's case is a significant factor in determining whether an alleged error caused prejudice to the petitioner. The stronger the case, the less probable it is that a particular error caused actual prejudice." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Mercado* v. *Commissioner of Correction*, supra, 183 Conn. App. 567. As previously discussed, the case against the petitioner included her blood alcohol content test result of 0.241, her own admission that she had consumed "a few glasses of champagne and a glass of wine at a party downtown," testimony from witnesses who smelled alcohol on the petitioner's breath and noticed that her speech was slurred, and testimony that the petitioner was confused about what had happened.

For these reasons, the habeas court properly concluded that the petitioner had not demonstrated that she was prejudiced by Sherman's failure to present additional witnesses to explain the property transfer. This is especially so in light of the evidence of the petitioner's intoxication, and our Supreme Court's statements that the evidence of the property transfer was "mundane" and that it was "unlikely that the jury gave significant credence to the state's contention that the transfer evinced a guilty conscience." *State* v. *Coccomo*, supra, 302 Conn. 673–74.

B

Finally, the petitioner argues that she suffered prejudice as a result of Sherman's elicitation of her testimony on direct examination that the property had been transferred back to her because the initial transfer was " 'inappropriate' . . . ." See footnote 16 of this opinion. The petitioner argues that, with this testimony, Sherman

undermined her innocent explanation for the property transfer to her great prejudice. We disagree.

In concluding that the petitioner failed to prove that she was prejudiced by Sherman's elicitation of this testimony, the habeas court stated that, "given the collateral relationship of the deed when viewed against the substantial direct evidence against the petitioner, the court finds that it is not reasonably likely that the result of the trial was at all impacted by this single answer." On the basis of the strength of the state's case, as indicated previously, and our Supreme Court's statement that the evidence of the property transfer was "mundane" and that it was "unlikely that the jury gave significant credence to the state's contention that the transfer evinced a guilty conscience"; *State* v. *Coccomo*, supra, 302 Conn. 674; we agree with the habeas court that it was unlikely that this single response affected the outcome of the trial. We also note that, immediately after the petitioner's response, the state objected to the testimony, and the trial court sustained the objection. Furthermore, in its charge to the jury, the court instructed that, "[a]ny testimony that was ordered stricken must not be considered by you," which we must presume the jury followed in the absence of evidence to the contrary. See, e.g., *State* v. *Hazard*, 201 Conn. App. 46, 76, 240 A.3d 749, cert. denied, 336 Conn. 901, 242 A.3d 711 (2020). In sum, the habeas court properly concluded that the petitioner failed to prove that she was prejudiced by Sherman's elicitation of this single response from her at trial.

The judgment is affirmed.

In this opinion the other judges concurred.

STATE OF CONNECTICUT *v.* HASSAN FOSTER (AC 41235)

Prescott, Cradle and Suarez, Js.

Syllabus

Convicted, after a trial to the court, of the crimes of assault in the first degree and criminal possession of a firearm in connection with a shooting, the defendant appealed to this court. He claimed that the trial court lacked subject matter jurisdiction over his case and personal jurisdiction over him. *Held* that the defendant's challenges to the trial court's jurisdiction were without merit, as his assertions lacked an arguable legal basis in that they were sovereign citizen claims that were based on the argument that the state and federal governments lack constitutional legitimacy and therefore have no authority to regulate his behavior, a defense that has been uniformly held to have no conceivable validity in American law.

Submitted on briefs February 11—officially released April 6, 2021

Procedural History

Substitute information charging the defendant with the crimes of assault in the first degree and criminal possession of a firearm, brought to the Superior Court in the judicial district of Waterbury and tried to the court, *Harmon, J.*; judgment of guilty, from which the defendant appealed to this court. *Affirmed.*

Hassan Foster, self-represented, the appellant (defendant), filed a brief.

Maureen Platt, state's attorney, *Ana L. McMonigle*, special deputy assistant state's attorney, and *John J. Davenport*, senior assistant state's attorney, filed a brief for the appellee (state).

Opinion

PER CURIAM. The defendant, Hassan Foster, appeals from the judgment of conviction, rendered after a court trial, of assault in the first degree in violation of General Statutes § 53a-59 (a) (1) and criminal possession of a firearm in violation of General Statutes § 53a-217 (a)

(1). He claims that the trial court lacked subject matter jurisdiction over his case and personal jurisdiction over him. We affirm the judgment of the trial court.

On April 8, 2015, the defendant was arrested by warrant, and appeared before the court for arraignment, in connection with a shooting that occurred in Waterbury on March 27, 2015. On March 6, 2017, by way of a substitute information, he was charged with assault in the first degree and criminal possession of a firearm. At his request, the defendant was permitted to represent himself at his criminal trial with the assistance of appointed standby counsel. On April 12, 2017, the court found the defendant guilty of both crimes.

After the court found the defendant guilty, but before sentencing, the defendant filed several affidavits and three motions challenging the court's jurisdiction. He alleged, inter alia, that the state "fail[ed] to present a cause of action or crime" and failed to establish that the United States constitution, as well as federal and state law, apply to him in light of his contention that he is "an American national and a common man of the sovereign people."

On September 29, 2017, at the defendant's sentencing hearing, the court denied the defendant's motions and sentenced him to a total effective term of fifteen years of incarceration, execution suspended after ten years, followed by five years of probation. This appeal followed.

On appeal, the defendant claims that the trial court lacked subject matter jurisdiction over his case and personal jurisdiction over him, reasserting the grounds that he argued in support of his jurisdictional challenges before the trial court. The defendant's challenges to the trial court's jurisdiction are "sovereign citizen" claims, which are based on the argument that "the state and federal governments lack constitutional legitimacy and

therefore have no authority to regulate [the defendant's] behavior." *United States* v. *Ulloa*, 511 Fed. Appx. 105, 106 n.1 (2d Cir. 2013). It has been uniformly held that "[this] defense has no conceivable validity in American law." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Johnson* v. *Raffy's Café I, LLC*, 173 Conn. App. 193, 201, 163 A.3d 672 (2017), citing *United States* v. *Jonassen*, 759 F.3d 653, 657 n.2 (7th Cir. 2014), cert. denied, 577 U.S. 864, 136 S. Ct. 152, 193 L. Ed. 2d 114 (2015). The claims asserted by the defendant lack an arguable legal basis. Accordingly, the defendant's challenges to the trial court's subject matter and personal jurisdiction are without merit.

The judgment is affirmed.