United States Court of Appeals
For the Eighth Circuit

No. 25-3498

United States of America

Plaintiff - Appellee

v.

Michael Patton

Defendant - Appellant

Appeal from the United States District Court
for the Western District of Missouri - Springfield

Submitted: September 24, 2026
Filed: November 10, 2026

Before COLLOTON, Chief Judge, L.R. SMITH, and TRAYNOR, Circuit Judges.

TRAYNOR, Circuit Judge.

A jury convicted Michael Patton of three drug- and firearm-related offenses. On appeal, Patton challenges the district court's[1] denial of his request for new counsel and its admission of evidence regarding three traffic stops. We affirm.

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[1]The Honorable Brian C. Wimes, then United States District Judge for the Western District of Missouri, now Chief Judge.

I

In May 2021, Appellant Michael Patton was stopped for driving without a front license plate. Patton's furtive movements and the officer's previous experience with him prompted the officer to detain Patton and search the vehicle. The officer found firearms and methamphetamine in the vehicle, leading to Patton's arrest. An indictment charged him with: (1) possession with intent to distribute 50 grams or more of methamphetamine; (2) possession of a firearm in furtherance of a drug trafficking crime; and (3) possession of a firearm by a convicted felon.

Before trial, the United States filed a Federal Rule of Evidence 404(b) notice of its intent to rely on other acts of a similar nature, including three separate traffic stops in August 2020, January 2021, and August 2021. During the August 2020 stop, Patton admitted he was on parole and was arrested for being a felon in possession of a firearm. In January 2021, Patton was again arrested after police discovered firearms in his possession during a traffic stop. The officer who arrested Patton in January 2021 stopped him again in May 2021, leading to the charges now on appeal. During the August 2021 stop — three months after the charged conduct — officers recovered firearms from a vehicle in which Patton was the passenger. Patton moved to exclude evidence of those stops. The district court denied his motion, concluding the evidence regarding the August 2020 and January 2021 traffic stops was intrinsic to the charged conduct and the evidence regarding the August 2021 traffic stop was admissible under Rule 404(b).

At the start of trial, Patton requested a new attorney. Patton stated he was "not happy" with his appointed counsel, who declined Patton's request to file a suppression motion and met with him "at the last minute." The district court denied the request, explaining counsel's refusal to file a frivolous motion did not warrant appointing new counsel and doing so would cause undue delay.

During trial, the United States introduced evidence regarding the challenged traffic stops. On each occasion, Patton renewed his objection. The district court overruled those objections and law enforcement officers testified as to each stop.

The jury convicted Patton on all three charges. He appeals, requesting his sentence be vacated and his case be remanded for a new trial, arguing the district court abused its discretion in denying his request for a new attorney and in admitting testimony of the three separate traffic stops contrary to Rule 404(b).

II

Patton argues the district court erred in concluding he did not establish a justifiable dissatisfaction in the attorney-client relationship. We review such conclusions for abuse of discretion. *United States v. Harriman*, 970 F.3d 1048, 1059 (8th Cir. 2020).

"The Sixth Amendment guarantees a criminal defendant the right to counsel," but "a defendant has no right to an attorney who will docilely do as [he] is told or to a 'meaningful relationship' with appointed counsel." *United States v. Baisden*, 713 F.3d 450, 454 (8th Cir. 2013) (quoting *United States v. Swinney*, 970 F.2d 494, 499 (8th Cir. 1992)). To warrant appointment of new counsel, a defendant must show "justifiable dissatisfaction" stemming from "difficulties such as irreconcilable conflict" or "a complete breakdown in communication." *United States v. Pendleton*, 832 F.3d 934, 942 (8th Cir. 2016) (citation modified). The justifiable dissatisfaction standard is strict; a defendant's mere frustration with counsel or counsel's tactical decisions is insufficient. *Id.*; *Hunter v. Delo*, 62 F.3d 271, 274 (8th Cir. 1995).

When prompted, district courts must adequately inquire "into the nature and extent of an alleged breakdown in attorney-client communications." *United States v. Barrow*, 287 F.3d 733, 738 (8th Cir. 2002). In doing so, "the district court must balance several factors, including the need to ensure effective legal representation, the need to thwart abusive delay tactics, and the reality that a person accused of

crime is often genuinely unhappy with an appointed counsel who is nonetheless doing a good job." *Id.* (citation modified). Where relevant facts have been established, a district court may act on motions for new counsel "without engaging in an intensive inquiry." *United States v. Rodriguez*, 612 F.3d 1049, 1054 (8th Cir. 2010) (noting "the nature of the factual inquiry into potential conflicts is case-specific"). Particularly relevant here, last-minute requests to substitute counsel are disfavored. *United States v. Klein*, 13 F.3d 1182, 1185 (8th Cir. 1994).

Upon hearing Patton's complaints about his attorney, the district court inquired into each, took time to consider them and provided a reasoned decision denying the request. We are satisfied the district court provided Patton sufficient opportunity to express his concerns and adequately inquired into the nature of the attorney-client relationship. As such, the district court did not abuse its discretion in denying Patton's start-of-trial request for new counsel. *See Rodriguez*, 612 F.3d at 1054.

III

Patton also argues the district court erred in admitting evidence of three traffic stops. "[W]e review admission of evidence for a clear abuse of discretion and will reverse only if admission affected [Patton's] substantial rights." *United States v. Watson*, 895 F.3d 589, 594 (8th Cir. 2018).

A

Rule 404(b) applies only to extrinsic — not intrinsic — evidence. *United States v. Johnson*, 463 F.3d 803, 808 (8th Cir. 2006). Evidence is "intrinsic when it is offered for the purpose of providing the context in which the charged crime occurred" because it "'completes the story' or provides a 'total picture' of the charged crime." *Id.* (quoting *United States v. Forcelle*, 86 F.3d 838, 842 (8th Cir. 1996)). Evidence of another crime "blended or connected" with the one being tried such that "proof of one incidentally involves the other; or explains the circumstances

thereof; or tends logically to prove any element of the crime charged, . . . is admissible as an integral part of the immediate context of the crime charged." *Forcelle*, 86 F.3d at 841 (quoting *United States v. Bass*, 794 F.2d 1305, 1312 (8th Cir. 1986)).

During the August 2020 traffic stop, Patton admitted to being on parole before police found firearms in the vehicle. This tends to logically prove an element of Patton's conviction for possession of a firearm as a convicted felon: that he knew he was a felon. *See United States v. Fisher*, 115 F.4th 875, 877–78 (8th Cir. 2024). It was therefore intrinsic. Testimony regarding the January 2021 stop — conducted by the same officer who arrested Patton for the charged conduct — was intrinsic because it provided the context in which the charged crime and subsequent arrest occurred. The officer's decisions at the traffic stop in May 2021 were informed by his previous interaction with Patton in January 2021, where Patton illegally possessed firearms. Accordingly, the district court did not abuse its discretion in admitting this evidence as intrinsic and thus outside the scope of Rule 404(b).

B

Rule 404(b) excludes evidence of other crimes, wrongs or acts for propensity purposes. However, such evidence may be admitted to show "motive, opportunity, intent, preparation, plan, knowledge, identity, absence of mistake, or lack of accident" if it is "(1) relevant to a material issue; (2) similar in kind and close in time to the crime charged; (3) supported by sufficient evidence; and (4) its probative value . . . [is] not . . . outweighed by any prejudicial impact." Fed. R. Evid. 404(b); *United States v. Steele*, 550 F.3d 693, 700–01 (8th Cir. 2008) (quoting *United States v. Ruiz-Estrada*, 312 F.3d 398, 403 (8th Cir. 2002)).

Patton argues evidence of the August 2021 traffic stop is not relevant and is more prejudicial than probative. Where knowing possession is an element of a crime charged, as it is for unlawful possession of a firearm by a previously convicted felon, "[e]vidence that a defendant possessed a firearm on a previous occasion is relevant

to show knowledge and intent." *United States v. Walker*, 470 F.3d 1271, 1274 (8th Cir. 2006). Patton's possession of a firearm at the August 2021 traffic stop is therefore relevant to show his knowledge and intent at the May 2021 traffic stop. Further, Patton's actions in August 2021 were probative of his knowledge and intent to possess a firearm in May 2021. Especially because "[t]he district court addressed the potential for unfair prejudice by giving a limiting instruction," we do not find an abuse of discretion in admitting evidence of the August 2021 stop under Rule 404(b). *United States v. Harrison*, 70 F.4th 1094, 1098 (8th Cir. 2023).

The district court did not abuse its discretion in admitting the challenged evidence.

IV

We affirm the judgment of the district court.
