

IN THE  
**Supreme Court of the United States**

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UNITED STATES

*Respondent,*

v.

MARICIA VAZQUEZ RIJOS

*Petitioner.*

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*ON PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI  
TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS  
FOR THE FIRST CIRCUIT*

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**PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI**

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## QUESTIONS PRESENTED

Rule 37 of the Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure allows a party to seek an indicative ruling from the district court while an appeal is pending. While the indicative ruling litigation is taking place at the district court, the Court of Appeals does not lose jurisdiction. The question presented is whether Rule 4 of the Federal Rules of Appellate Procedure allows for the filing of an Amended Notice of Appeal or does Rule 4 require the filing of a new notice of appeal for every indicative ruling, given that the Court of Appeals never lost its jurisdiction over the case.

A conspiracy to commit murder for hire under 18 U.S.C. § 1958 ends with the death of the victim. At trial in this case, however, the District Court held that the Section 1958 conspiracy to commit murder for hire under 18 U.S.C. § 1958 is extended until all opportunities to get paid are finished. The Court of Appeals for the First Circuit refused to review that erroneous legal determination, which allowed the government to present evidence relating to post murder conduct as if it was part of the conspiracy, a conspiracy which ended with death of the victim.

The Sixth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution guarantees a criminal defendant a fair trial. In this case, the district court instructed the jury not once, but twice at the trial held in 2018 that it had found the government's cooperator Alex "El Loco" Pabón competent during the change of plea hearing held in 2008. Such

judicial notice impermissibly vouched for Pabón’s credibility and destroyed petitioner Marcia Vazquez’s right to a fair trial in violation of her Sixth Amendment

## **PARTIES TO THE PROCEEDING**

Petitioner Marcia Vazquez Rijos was the defendant-appellant below.

Co-defendants Aurea Vazquez Rijos and Jose Ferrer were also codefendants and appellants.

Respondent United States of America was the plaintiff-appellee below

## STATEMENT OF RELATED PROCEEDINGS

This case arises from the following proceedings:

*United States of America v. Marcia Vázquez Rijos*, No. No. 19-1312; No. 20-1603; No. 20-1951; No. 21-1100 (1st Cir. Sept. 30, 2025)

*United States of America v. Marcia Vázquez Rijos*, No. 08-cr-216 (D.P.R.)

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Petitioner Marcia Vazquez Rijos respectfully petitions for a writ of certiorari in this case.

**OPINIONS BELOW**

The First Circuit's Opinion affirming the conviction and judgment of Marcia's sentence to life in prison without the possibility of parole was issued on October 15, 2025. The First Circuit denied a motion for a rehearing or for a rehearing *en banc* filed by Petitioner on September 30, 2025.

## **JURISDICTION**

The Court of Appeals for the First Circuit issued its judgment denying the motion for rehearing filed by Petitioner on September 30, 2025. This Court's jurisdiction is invoked under 28 U.S.C. 1254(1).

## **CONSTITUTIONAL AND STATUTORY PROVISIONS INVOLVED**

U.S. Const. Amend. VI, § 1, provides:

In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury of the State and district wherein the crime shall have been committed, which district shall have been previously ascertained by law, and to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation; to be confronted with the witnesses against him; to have compulsory process for obtaining witnesses in his favor, and to have the Assistance of Counsel for his defence.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Petitioner Marcia Vazquez Rijos was deprived of a fair trial by the conduct of the trial court in providing, *not once, but twice*,<sup>1</sup> a judicial notice to bolster the credibility of the government's cooperator, Alex Pabon. Marcia was also deprived of the opportunity to cross-examine Pabon by the government's intentional concealing of *Giglio* material, including Pabon's medical record showing that he is a Schizophrenic, Delusional type and that right before trial, he told the prosecutors that he wanted to break his cooperation agreement.

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<sup>1</sup> Joint Appendix ("JA") at 2317, L.14-19 (right after Pabon's cross examination and before the government submitted its case); at 3339, L. 9-13 (as a jury instruction).

## **STATEMENT**

Adam Anhang, a Canadian businessman, was murdered in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico, on September 22, 2005 by Alex Pabón.<sup>2</sup> Mr. Anhang was married to Aurea Vazquez Rijos for only six months and was seeking to divorce her. A prenuptial agreement meant Aurea would inherit significantly more if Mr. Anhang died rather than if they divorced.

Alex Pabón became the government's cooperator and implicated Petitioner Marcia Vazquez at trial. although before the Grand Jury he testified that Marcia was not present at the key meeting to plan the murder of Mr. Anhang.

Petitioner Marcia Vazquez Rijos is the younger sister of Aurea Vazquez Rijos. At the time of her arrest, Marcia Vazquez was a single, thirty-six-year old woman, living with her mother and her twin brother, who suffers from cerebral palsy. As the evidence shows, Marcia's mental and emotional functioning is limited, in the borderline range.

On June 30, 2013, the government charged Aurea, her sister Marcia, and Marcia's then boyfriend, José Ferrer Sosa with a conspiracy to commit murder for hire in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 1958(a). From August 21, 2018 until October 3, 2018, the case was tried with the government relying heavily on the testimony of

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<sup>2</sup> Pabon's nickname was "the Crazy One".

Pabón, to convict Marcia. On March 15, 2019, Marcia was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

*A. The Government's Theory of a Never-Ending Conspiracy:* The prosecution alleged a conspiracy among Aurea Vazquez, her sister Marcia Vazquez, and Jose Ferrer (Marcia's boyfriend) and the triggerman, cooperator Pabón. The government's case theory was that they conspired to kill Mr. Anhang for financial gain, constituting a murder-for-hire in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 1958. Importantly, the government's theory was that the Section 1958 conspiracy did not end with the death of the victim Mr. Anhang but when all attempts by the trigger man Alex Pabon to get paid ended.

Pabon was arrested in 2008, pleaded guilty, and then served as the government's main cooperating witness. His testimony was the sole evidence directly implicating Marcia Vazquez in the conspiracy to murder Mr. Anhang and it was contradictory. Before the Grand Jury, Pabón stated that Marcia only participated in a discussion about beating Mr. Anhang and then he changed his claim at trial for the first time alleging that Marcia was present in a meeting where the killing of Mr. Anhang was discussed.

*B. The Government Intentionally Hides Key Giglio Materials Before Trial.* Despite a district court order of July 24, 2018 requiring the government to produce the BOP medical records of cooperator Pabon, the government intentionally

withheld evidence from Petitioner Marcia Vazquez that its cooperator Pabón was diagnosed with Schizophrenia, Delusional Type by the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) in November of 2008 after Pabon's change of plea hearing. Those medical records were never provided to Petitioner Marcia Vazquez. As a result, Marcia was denied key impeachment that could have challenged the credibility of Pabon.

To make matters worse, the government also hid from Marcia the fact that just before the trial Pabón told prosecutors he planned to breach his cooperation agreement and would not testify.<sup>3</sup>

At trial, Pabón materially changed his story from his Grand Jury testimony. Initially, before the Grand Jury, Pabon placed Marcia only at a meeting where a "beating" was discussed; at trial, he claimed she was also present at the key meeting where the murder of Mr. Anhang was planned.

After the trial in 2018, cooperator Pabon wrote letters to defense counsel offering "help," leading to three contradictory mental health evaluations conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice's BOP. The BOP evaluations alternated between finding Pabon incompetent and competent, raising serious doubts about his mental state during the trial.

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<sup>3</sup> The government disclosed this *Giglio* to the trial judge in an *ex parte* conference but never to the defense as it was its obligation.

As the Initial Brief and the Reply emphasized, the trial judge displayed unusual hostility to the defense and undermined the defense at every turn.<sup>4</sup> The judge interjected during testimony, at times appearing to assist the prosecution in framing questions or to bolster the credibility of government witnesses like Pabón. The district court repeatedly refused or failed to conduct the required Rule 403 balancing test to exclude evidence whose prejudicial effect outweighed its probative value.

Petitioner Marcia Vazquez, a woman with documented intellectual and psychological limitations, was convicted after a deeply flawed and unfair trial largely based on the uncorroborated, and changing testimony of a single witness; Pabon, the government's cooperator. This testimony was presented in a trial environment poisoned by judicial bias, the improper admission of highly prejudicial evidence against her co-defendant sister, and the prosecution's intentional suppression of material impeachment evidence that would have destroyed the key witness's credibility.

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<sup>4</sup> The judge repeatedly interrupted cross-examinations by the defense by *sua sponte* creating an objection accusing defense attorneys of a "repeat performance." This created the appearance of bias throughout the trial and limited the defense's ability to challenge witnesses.

C. *The District Court Impermissibly Instructs The Jury Twice That Pabón*

*Is Competent:* Whether cooperator Pabón was credible or not was a question for the jury, which necessarily included whether he was competent. It was a factual determination entrusted to the jury.

The main issue in the case against Marcia was whether Pabón was a credible witness. As noted by Judge Lipez:

Among other inquiries, defense counsel asked him about a series of letters that he had written both before and during his incarceration in which he used various ink colors and added stamps to the pages as decorations. Many of the letters appeared to converse with celebrity figures with whom Pabón did not have a relationship. Pabón explained that he enjoyed writing to different people and that he saw his letters as "gifts" to the recipient and "art that comes from the heart." Throughout the cross-examination, Pabón rambled and, at times, provided answers that were not directly responsive to the questions asked of him. He often gave answers containing irrelevant information and had to be reminded by the trial judge to answer the question asked of him.

Aurea's attorney was the only defense counsel who explicitly asked Pabón about his mental health. When introducing Pabón's plea agreement into evidence, she asked Pabón about the terms of that agreement and focused on the lower sentence he expected to receive. The questioning included the following:

Q: At that time, before this judge, were you asked as to your health; mental health?

A: Yes, they did, I think. I believe that I remember that they asked me something.

Q: Okay. And you stated to the Court here that you, at that time, had been with a psychiatrist because you had depression, correct?

A: I think something like that. I think I did, yes.

Aurea's attorney also inquired into Pabón's mental health while he was in prison, including whether he took specific medications during his incarceration. Counsel also asked if he had requested a psychological evaluation in 2018 "to prove that you were not crazy."

Appendix, at Pages 87a-88a. As further explained:

Defense counsel heavily emphasized Pabón's bizarre behavior and mental health treatment over many years as one factor, among others, for discrediting his testimony. In other words, the defense challenged Pabón's "competency" only in the sense that nonlawyers would understand that concept, suggesting that Pabón's testimony about the murder was unreliable because of his long history of mental illness.

Appendix, at Page 92a.

At the end of Pabón's cross examination and re-direct, the government made an incredibly prejudicial and unusual request: that the district court inform the jury that it was taking judicial notice of the fact that Pabón had been found competent to plead guilty in 2008. Even the prosecutor noted the completely unusual request for such a judicial notice by commenting: "Normally we don't have that issue where you have a cooperator...we never asked for judicial notice that a cooperator was competent to plead guilty because everybody is presumed to be competent, right? But in this case, the problem is that the Defense has put his mental competency at issue. , . ."<sup>5</sup> The government was distorting the picture; it was for the jury, and not the district court, to determine as a matter of fact if Pabón was a competent and

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<sup>5</sup> Joint Appendix, at 1919-20.

credible witness. Unfortunately, the district court usurped the fact-finding role of the jury with its judicial notice, which it provided twice to the jury, as it also provided it as jury instruction at the close of the case.

As noted by Judge Lipez noted: “In explaining his decision, the [district court] judge stated that he “ha[d] to balance the equities here.” Ferrer’s attorney then argued, to no avail, that “[taking judicial notice of this fact] isn’t fair because . . . as an attorney, I am competing with the Court, because the Court said he was competent.”” Appendix, at 89a. The district court’s intrusion into fact finding by providing to the jury a judicial notice relating to facts that were subject to reasonable dispute such whether Pabón’s credibility was shot because of mental illness was contrary to the Sixth Amendment’s right to a fair trial.

To make the prejudice against Petitioner Marcia Vazquez’s right to a fair trial even more severe, the district court at the end of the case provided an instruction to the jury repeating again, *for the second time in the trial*, that Pabón was competent during the change of plea hearing in 2008.<sup>6</sup>

The twice given judicial notice in this case was so shocking because the district court had the medical records of Pabón showing that barely four (4) months after the change of plea hearing, in November of 2008 the BOP—the DOJ’s own

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<sup>6</sup> Docket No. 1614, at 67- 68.

agency—diagnosed Pabón as a Schizophrenic, Delusional type. Additionally, at his change of plea hearing, Pabón informed the district court about his extensive mental psychiatric condition and history since he was 14 years old. Further, showing how impermissible and prejudicial this notice was, this district court received material information that Pabón’s Schizophrenia was manifesting itself right before trial, when Pabón informed the prosecutors that he wanted to break his cooperation agreement “in a very excited fashion...” “and that he was not wanting to cooperate any longer”.<sup>7</sup>

*D. Post-trial; The Indicative Rulings are Filed and Denied.* In November 2019, and while her appeal was pending, Marcial filed three motions for indicative rulings under Federal Criminal Rule 37. Relevant to this petition, Marcia sought an indicative ruling on a new-trial motion alleging the government had violated its duties under *Brady v. Maryland*, 373 U.S. 83 (1963), by withholding Pabón's prison medical records (including his diagnosis of schizophrenia on November 2008) and had ignored its obligations under *Giglio v. United States*, 405 U.S. 150 (1972), by suppressing the impeachment evidence and for the appointment of an independent psychiatric to examine Pabón.<sup>8</sup> On December 6, 2019, the First Circuit granted a

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<sup>7</sup> Joint Appendix, at 1317.

<sup>8</sup> Marcia also filed for an indicative ruling requesting the Court to order the production of the notes of Pabón's evaluator, e-mails exchanged between them and more than 60 drawings by Pabón, among others.

defendants' motion to stay their pending appeals in their criminal case stating in the order that defendants should "file status reports every thirty days advising [the First Circuit] of the status of the pending district court motions for indicative rulings."

On February 21, 2020, the district court denied the motion filed by Marcia for indicative rulings. Marcia Vazquez filed her Amended Notice of Appeal on May 12, 2020, after the denial of a motion for reconsideration.

## **IX. REASONS FOR GRANTING THE WRIT**

### **A. The First Circuit's Opinion Is An Erroneous Interpretation Of Rule 4 Of The Rules Of Appellate Procedure And Rule 37 Of The Rules of Criminal Procedure As The *Brady/Giglio* Issue Was Merged In The First Notice Of Appeal And The Court's Conclusion That It Lacked Jurisdiction Is An Erroneous Interpretation Of Rule 37**

In November 2019, following the denial of a motion to remand on October 3, 2019, Petitioner Marcia Vazquez filed a motion for indicative rulings under Federal Criminal Rule 37. Marcia sought an indicative ruling for a new trial alleging the government had violated its duties under *Brady v. Maryland*, 373 U.S. 83 (1963), by withholding Pabón's prison medical records (including his November 2008 schizophrenia diagnosis by the BOP) and had breached its obligations under *Giglio v. United States*, 405 U.S. 150 (1972), by suppressing impeachment evidence that Pabon told the prosecutors that he had a plan all along to not cooperate, that he was going to break the plea agreement in court, and that he would not testify at trial. Marcia also sought an indicative ruling

requesting the District Court appoint a psychiatrist as an independent medical examiner to examine Pabón.<sup>9</sup>

On November 13, 2019, Marcia filed a “Motion to Stay Temporarily the Appeal Pending Adjudication By The District Court Of Three Motions Seeking Indicative Rulings” which was granted by the First Circuit on December 6, 2019 and lifted on June 23, 2020.

### **1. The *Brady/Giglio* violations Were Part of the Notice of Appeal**

As explained before, as the *Brady/Giglio* violation occurred at trial, it was one of the issues on appeal when the original Notice of Appeal was filed by Marcia on May 12, 2020. In other words, on appeal, leaving aside Marcia’s argument that the indicative ruling appeal was timely by way of an Amended Notice of Appeal, Marcia argued that the misconduct by the trial prosecutors in hiding the government’s cooperator’s medical records and hiding the *Giglio* impeachment material were part of the initial appeal when Appeal 19-1312 was filed on March 18, 2019. This interpretation is supported by Federal Rule of Appellate Procedure 3(c)(1), which holds that the notice of appeal does not

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<sup>9</sup> Marcia also filed a motion seeking indicative ruling that the District Court order the production of the notes of Pabon Colon’s evaluator, e-mails exchanged between them and more than 60 drawings made by Pabón, among other documents.

need to specify orders that merge into the final judgment or appealable order, as these are automatically encompassed by the notice.<sup>10</sup>

The First Circuit rejected the issue claiming that it was part of the indicative ruling notwithstanding that the events giving rise to the appellate issue occurred prior to and during the trial. That ruling is an error of law and a misinterpretation of Rule 4 of the Rules of Appellate Procedure.

Marcia's Notice of Appeal stated that "Defendant [Marcia Vazquez Rijos] wishes to exercise her right to appeal the conviction and sentence imposed by the court [on] Friday, March 15, 2019." Accordingly, the issue of the intentional conduct by the government in refusing to produce the medical records of Alex "EL Loco" Pabón Colón and the government's intentional conduct in hiding the *Giglio* impeachment material occurred shortly before and during trial and as such, both issues were an integral part of the original appeal as they related directly to the original judgment in the case.

## **2. The Ruling Rejecting Marcia's Amended Notice Of Appeal And Interpreting An "Indicative Ruling" And Rule 37 Is A Novel Issue Of Law Warranting Review By This Court**

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<sup>10</sup> Importantly, the rule was amended in 2021 to clarify that identifying the issues on appeal is the function of the briefs, not the notice of appeal, and to remove the requirement to specify a "part" of a judgment or order being appealed.

Petitioner Marcia filed her notice of appeal on March 18, 2019 and her Amended Notice of Appeal on May 12, 2020. *See* CRIM. NO. 08-CR-216 (DRD), Docket No. 1963. It is undisputed that since March 18, 2019, the First Circuit never lost jurisdiction over the original appeal in this case. "[A] docketed notice of appeal suspends the sentencing court's power to [modify a sentence while on appeal]."  
*United States v. Distasio*, 820 F.2d 20, 23 (1st Cir. 1987). The First Circuit's own procedural orders conclusively demonstrate that it retained jurisdiction over the defendants' appeals throughout the indicative ruling process. The First Circuit granted on December 6, 2019 a motion to stay filed by Marcia to stay her appeals and directed Marcia (and the other defendants) to "file status reports every thirty days advising [us] of the status of the pending district court motions for indicative rulings." Appendix, at 118a. A court cannot stay proceedings over which it lacks jurisdiction, and these orders are inconsistent with any claim of jurisdictional divestiture.

Rule 37 of the Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure provides in pertinent part:

**Rule 37. Indicative Ruling on a Motion for Relief That Is Barred by a Pending Appeal**

(a) Relief Pending Appeal. If a timely motion is made for relief that the court lacks authority to grant because of an appeal that has been docketed and is pending, the court may:

- (1) defer considering the motion;
- (2) deny the motion; or

(3) state either that it would grant the motion if the court of appeals remands for that purpose or that the motion raises a substantial issue.

(b) Notice to the Court of Appeals. The movant must promptly notify the circuit clerk under Federal Rule of Appellate Procedure 12.1 if the district court states that it would grant the motion or that the motion raises a substantial issue.

Nothing in Rule 37 suggests that a denial -- the most common outcome -- requires any special action to preserve appellate review. The natural inference is that review of that denial would be sought through the already-pending appeal. Rule 37 refers to “must promptly notify” and does not refer to the filing of another notice of appeal pursuant to Fed.R.App. P.4 if the lower court denies the indicative ruling.

In view of Rule 37, when Marcia Vazquez filed an Amended Notice of Appeal, and the First Circuit accepted it, the First Circuit recognized that it never lost its jurisdiction. In *United States v. Bolden*, 850 Fed. Appx. 734 (11th Cir. 2021) the Eleventh Circuit held that the district court's order entered after the defendant filed his notice of appeal was not properly before the appellate court under the procedures for indicative rulings in Fed. R. App. P. 12.1. The Eleventh Circuit emphasized that jurisdiction passes to the appellate court upon the filing of a notice of appeal, and any actions taken by the district court thereafter are generally null and void unless the case is remanded.

Since the First Circuit never lost its jurisdiction in Appeal No. 19-1312, when Marcia Vazquez filed her Amended Notice of Appeal on May 12, 2020, it was

timely. See Crim. Case 08-cr-00216 (DRD), at Docket 1963.<sup>11</sup> Notice that Marcia Vazquez did not file a “new appeal”; she amended the existing appeal by filing an amended notice of appeal. The First Circuit’s majority Opinion dismissed this argument stating that:

“[M]arcia next argue that their May 2020 appeals are timely because we never surrendered jurisdiction over their direct appeals from their criminal trial and because they complied with our October 2019 order denying their remand request “without prejudice to [their] following the procedures set forth in [Criminal Rule] 37 and [Appellate Rule] 12.1.” But they cite no supporting authority for these never-surrendered-jurisdiction arguments. See Zannino, 895 F.2d at 17.

But Marcia did point out that the denial of an indicative ruling under Fed. R. Crim. P. 37 is not a final order as that term is used in the Rules and cited to In Re: Syngenta AG MIR 162 Corn Litig., 2020 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 234116, \*448 (D. Kansas 2020) (noting distinction in the civil context between an indicative ruling and a final order) and Walsh v. Wellfleet Comm’s., 2021 U.S. App. LEXIS 30683, \*6 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2021) (“[T]he district court correctly concluded that it lacked jurisdiction and that its

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<sup>11</sup> As clearly stated in the Notice of Amended Appeal:

NOTICE is hereby given that Defendant Marcia Vazquez Rijos, amends her notice of appeal to the United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit filed on March 18, 2019 (DE No. 1782) from the conviction, judgment and sentence imposed by the District Court on Friday, March 15, 2019, to include, but not limited to, the district court’s denial of her various motions for a new trial and for acquittal, its denial of her three motions for Indicative Rulings and her motion for reconsideration and its denial of a motion for post-conviction discovery, which Appellant joined, among others. At the time of this filing, the appeal is stayed before the First Circuit.

See *Id.* at Docket 1963.

indicative ruling was not an appealable final order.”). The First Circuit’s opinion in this case reflects an erroneous understanding of the interplay between Federal Rule of Criminal Procedure 37 and Federal Rule of Appellate Procedure 4 (“FRAP 4”). According to the First Circuit when a district court denies a motion for an indicative ruling under Rule 37, the movant must file a new, separate notice of appeal within 14 days under FRAP 4(b) to secure appellate review of that denial. Slip Op. at 71–74. Failure to do so, the court concluded, deprives the appellate court of jurisdiction over the denial, even though the underlying criminal appeal remained pending before the same panel. *Id.*

The First Circuit’s rule imposes a hyper-technical requirement on defendants and their counsel. They have already filed a notice of appeal. The district court, the government, and the appellate court are all aware of the pending Rule 37 motion. To demand a second notice of appeal—filed within 14 days of a denial that the appellate court is already monitoring via status reports—serves no purpose other than to forfeit rights. This elevates form over substance in a manner inconsistent with the “just, speedy, and inexpensive” determination of proceedings. Fed. R. Crim. P. 2.

The indicative ruling procedure exists precisely to address situations where post-judgment motions are filed during pending appeals. Federal Rule of Appellate Procedure 12.1 only requires parties to “promptly notify the circuit clerk” when “the district court states that it would grant the motion or that the motion raises a

substantial issue." Rule 37. This notification requirement applies only to favorable rulings or substantial issues, not to denials of indicative ruling requests. The advisory committee notes to Criminal Rule 37 explicitly state that the rule adopts the practice that most courts follow when a party makes a motion under civil rule 60(b) to vacate a judgment that is pending on appeal. This framework contemplates continued appellate jurisdiction during the indicative ruling process, not automatic divestiture requiring a new appeal.

Furthermore, a notice of appeal in a criminal case is not jurisdictional as it is in a civil case. Unlike in civil cases, a timely appeal in a criminal case is not jurisdictional because the time limits of Rule 4(b) are not based on a federal statute. See *U.S. v. Lopez*, 562 F.3d 1309, 1311 (1<sup>st</sup> Cir. 2009). In contrast, under 28 U.S.C. §2107(A) "no appeal shall bring any judgment, order or decree in an action, suit or proceeding of a civil nature before a court of appeals for review unless notice of appeal is filed, within thirty days after the entry of such judgment, order or decree." No such congressionally mandated limitation exists as to criminal appeals. This Court has clarified that Rule 4(b) operates as a non-jurisdictional claims-processing rule, not a jurisdictional bar. *Eberhart v. United States*, 546 U.S. 12 (2005). This distinction is critical because claims-processing rules do not strip courts of subject matter jurisdiction.

The Opinion also dismisses Marcia’s argument that another notice of appeal is not needed because an “indicative ruling [is] not an appealable final order.” Appendix, 73a. But the First Circuit never lost jurisdiction over the subject matter of the indicative ruling request; it merely mismanaged its docket by requiring a superfluous second notice of appeal for a matter that was already part of the pending case. The First Circuit’s majority Opinion’s lack of jurisdiction argument is premised on a new interpretation of Rule 37 by essentially holding that the denial of an “indicative ruling” is a “final order”. But the First Circuit never relinquished its jurisdiction so the lower court did not have authority to issue any “final order” and Marcia filed an Amended Notice of Appeal.

Petitioner Marcia did comply with Appellate Rule 4(b)(1), when she amended her Notice of Appeal already filed. See *United States v. Reyes-Santiago*, 804 F.3d 453, 459 (1st Cir. 2015) (noting that “[i]n a criminal case, a defendant’s notice of appeal must be filed in the district court within 14 days after the later of: (i) the entry of either the judgment or the order being appealed; or (ii) the filing of the government’s notice of appeal,” and adding that “the time limits in [Appellate] Rule 4(b), ‘even if not jurisdictional, are mandatory when raised by the government’” (quoting United States v. Gonzalez-Rodriguez, 777 F.3d 37, 40 n.4 (1st Cir. 2015))).

The First Circuit’s Opinion cites United States v. Rivera-Carrasquillo, 933 F.3d 33 (1st Cir. 2019) for holding that “caselaw says that an additional appeal is

required when a judge denies a motion pursuant to Criminal Rule 37.” Appendix, at 71a. But *Rivera Carrasquillo* is not a precedent clearly holding that pursuant to Rule 37, an additional notice of appeal -- instead of an Amended Notice of Appeal -- must be filed when the Court of Appeals never lost its jurisdiction. *Rivera Carrasquillo* is distinguishable as it dealt with request for a new trial under the test established in *U.S. v. Wright*, 625 F.2d 1017, 1019 (1st Cir. 1980). Respectfully, the Opinion in this case is a new precedent about a novel issue of law that was not resolved in *Rivera Carrasquillo*.<sup>12</sup>

Petitioner Marcia also argued that her appeals should be considered under Rule 4(b)(4)'s "excusable neglect standard," but the First Circuit dismissed this argument without adequate consideration of whether the court's own procedural framework created reasonable reliance on continued jurisdiction. The First Circuit court's management of the appeals through stay orders and status requirements created a reasonable expectation that jurisdiction was retained.

The First Circuit's requirement of a separate notice of appeal from the denial of a Rule 37 motion is an unwarranted and erroneous interpretation of the rules. It finds no support in the text of Rule 37 or FRAP 4, undermines judicial economy,

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<sup>12</sup> The reference in the Opinion to footnote 19 is not support for the Opinion's holding as footnote 19 states: “Earlier, the government questioned whether our appellants filed timely notices of appeal. But the government now agrees with them that they did. And we will assume without deciding that they are right.” (citation omitted).

and creates a procedural trap that risks denying review on the merits for no good reason. The First Circuit's conclusion is an error of law that warrants correction, to clarify that no separate appeal is necessary from the denial of an indicative ruling under Rule 37.

**B. A Conspiracy For Murder For Hire Under 18 U.S.C. § 1958 As A Matter Of Law Terminates With The Accomplishment Of The Conspiracy's Goal**

The district court's interpretation that a conspiracy to commit murder for hire under 18 U.S.C. § 1958 ends when all efforts to collect payment have ceased is a misinterpretation of § 1958. The First Circuit refused to address this error of law. Under 18 U.S.C. § 1958, the federal murder-for-hire statute provides that whoever travels in or causes another to travel in interstate or foreign commerce, or uses or causes another to use the mail or any facility of interstate or foreign commerce, with intent that a murder be committed in violation of the laws of any State or the United States as consideration for the receipt of, or as consideration for a promise or agreement to pay, anything of pecuniary value, or who conspires to do so, shall be subject to criminal penalties. 18 U.S.C. § 1958. The penalties escalate based on the outcome, with enhanced punishment if death results, including potential death penalty or life imprisonment. *Id.*

At trial, the district court concluded that a conspiracy to commit murder for hire under 18 U.S.C. § 1958 is extended until all opportunities to get paid are

extinguished. According to the District Court, although Mr. Anhang was killed in 2005, the conspiracy in this case did not end until August 17, 2011, when the dismissal of the civil case for division of property filed by Aurea was affirmed by the First Circuit in *Vazquez v. Anhang*, 654 F.3d 122 (1st Cir. 2011).

For support for this novel interpretation of the elements of a conspiracy to commit murder for hire under 18 U.S.C. § 1958, the district court referred to *United States v. Gurrola*, 898 F.3d 524 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2018), as holding that an element of the conspiracy under §1958 is the “fulfillment of the lucrative opportunities”. Appendix, at 40a. According to the district court in this case the opportunity to get paid did not end until August 17, 2011, when the dismissal of the civil case for division of property filed by Aurea was affirmed by the First Circuit.

But *Gurrola* does not stand for that holding or for the proposition of an unlimited conspiracy under Section 1958 beyond the clear elements of Section 1958. Instead, *Gurrola* clearly holds that the element of compensation is satisfied with *a promise* “to funnel lucrative kidnapping opportunities...” *Id.* at 536 (emphasis added). In other words, the *Gurrola* decision is in direct contradiction of the district court’s holding that a conspiracy under Section 1958 is extended until all opportunities to get paid are foreclosed. The *Gurrola* decision hold that the conspiracy is achieved with a promise to pay, which satisfies the element of “for hire” in Section 1958. “[S]ection 1958(a) includes no requirement of an act

subsequent to the use of interstate facilities in order to complete the offense.” United States v. Gordon, 875 F.3d 26, 36 (1st Cir. 2017).

Petitioner Marcia Vazquez submits that the murder for hire conspiracy under Section 1958 in this case ended with the death of the victim, Mr. Anhang. The elements of a murder for hire required the United States to prove that the accused (1) “uses or causes another (including the intended victim) to use the mail or any facility of interstate or foreign commerce, travelled or caused another to travel in interstate commerce,” (2) with the intent that a murder be committed, (3) for hire. See 18 U.S.C. § 1958. The district court’s interpretation is a manifest error of law; Section 1958 has only three elements: (1) the use of the mail or interstate commerce facilities; (2) with the intent that a murder be committed; (3) as consideration for the receipt of or promise to pay anything of pecuniary value. Contrary to the district court’s interpretation, the element of payment or consideration only requires the showing of an intent to pay for the crime to be complete, not the foreclosure of the ability to pay, as erroneously held by the court.

The district court’s erroneous interpretation had enormous prejudicial consequences as an evidentiary holding as mountains of irrelevant and highly prejudicial evidence relating to co-defendant Aurea Vázquez was introduced in the trial against Petitioner Marcia Vazquez, including e-mails to prove Aurea Vazquez’s attempt to falsify her identity as a Jew and unreliable and ambiguous e-mails sent

years after the conspiracy had ceased, among others. Indeed, the district court's admission of numerous out-of-court statements violated Marcia Vazquez's rights to due process because the admissions allowed Marcia Vazquez to be convicted on the basis of unreliable evidence. *See California v. Green*, 399 U.S. 149, 163 n.15 (1970) ("considerations of due process, wholly apart from the *Confrontation Clause*, might prevent convictions where a reliable evidentiary basis is totally lacking").

Indeed, the federal murder "outlaws using interstate-commerce facilities with the intent that murder-for-hire be committed. Once the interstate commerce facility is used with the required intent the crime is complete." *See U. S. v. Delpit*, 94 F.3d 1134, 1148 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1996). "The gist of the offense is the travel in interstate commerce or the use of the facilities of interstate commerce or of the mails with the requisite intent and *the offense is complete whether or not the murder is carried out or even attempted*. S. Rep. No. 225, 98th Cong., 2d Sess. 306 (1984), reprinted in, 1984 U.S.C. Cong. & Admin. News 3182, 3485" (emphasis added), (quoted in *Delpit*, 94 F.3d at 1149).

This Court should hold that the conspiracy prohibited by 18 U.S.C. § 1958 terminates, as a matter of law, upon the death of the victim. While the statute proscribes both the conspiracy and the substantive murder-for-hire act, the conspiracy's object is singular and discrete: causing a murder to be committed. Once that object is achieved—whether by completion of the killing or, under the statute's

terms, even by a mere agreement followed by an overt act involving travel or use of interstate commerce -- the core conspiratorial agreement is fulfilled. Subsequent acts of payment, concealment, or evasion are not part of the § 1958 conspiracy itself. Thus, the district court committed an error of law when it held that the conspiracy did not end until all efforts to get paid ended.

This Court has long held that a conspiracy ends when its central criminal purpose has been attained. *Grunewald v. United States*, 353 U.S. 391, 401 (1957). Holding that the § 1958 conspiracy ends with the victim's death also provides crucial clarity for the statute of limitations as the clock for conspiracy begins to run upon the murder, not upon later payments or acts of concealment. Furthermore, this clarity will avoid co-conspirators from being charged with substantive offenses committed by other members after the murder, such as separate acts of obstruction, or witness tampering under a § 1958 conspiracy theory.

### **C. The District Court's Judicial Notice Violated Marcia's Sixth Amendment Rights As It Usurped The Jury's Factfinding**

The Sixth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution guarantees a criminal defendant a fair trial. In this case, the District Court instructed the jury not once, but twice<sup>13</sup> at the trial held in 2018 that it had found the government's cooperator Alex "El Loco" Pabón competent during the change of plea hearing held in 2008. Such

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<sup>13</sup> Joint Appendix ("JA") at 1917; 1922; 1926; JA at 2307. See Docket 1614, at 67-68.

judicial notice impermissibly vouched for Pabón's credibility and prejudiced Petitioner Marcia depriving her of a fair trial.

According to the majority opinion, the district court's taking judicial notice (in response to defense attacks on Pabón's sanity) was a proper adjudicative fact under Federal Rule 201 and found no abuse of discretion in the court's decision to give that notice because "the judge carefully limited the notice to Pabón's plea competency in 2008" and "said nothing about Pabón's trial credibility in 2018". Appendix, at 44a-45a. In dissent Judge Kermit V. Lipez found that that the district court's judicial notice impermissibly vouched for Pabón's credibility and prejudiced Marcia and José; he would have reversed their convictions for a new trial since they were facing life sentences.

Marcia's and the other defense strategy against cooperator Pabon was to show that he was mentally unstable and capable of making up facts due to his instability. The main issue in the case against Marcia was whether Pabon was a credible witness. Pabón was the only witness who claimed that Marcia was present at a meeting where the conspiracy was hatched. As noted by Judge Lipez:

Among other inquiries, defense counsel asked him about a series of letters that he had written both before and during his incarceration in which he used various ink colors and added stamps to the pages as decorations. Many of the letters appeared to converse with celebrity figures with whom Pabón did not have a relationship. Pabón explained that he enjoyed writing to different people and that he saw his letters as "gifts" to the recipient and "art that comes from the heart." Throughout the cross-examination, Pabón rambled and, at times, provided answers

that were not directly responsive to the questions asked of him. He often gave answers containing irrelevant information and had to be reminded by the trial judge to answer the question asked of him.

Aurea's attorney was the only defense counsel who explicitly asked Pabón about his mental health. When introducing Pabón's plea agreement into evidence, she asked Pabón about the terms of that agreement and focused on the lower sentence he expected to receive. The questioning included the following:

Q: At that time, before this judge, were you asked as to your health; mental health?

A: Yes, they did, I think. I believe that I remember that they asked me something.

Q: Okay. And you stated to the Court here that you, at that time, had been with a psychiatrist because you had depression, correct?

A: I think something like that. I think I did, yes.

Aurea's attorney also inquired into Pabón's mental health while he was in prison, including whether he took specific medications during his incarceration. Counsel also asked if he had requested a psychological evaluation in 2018 "to prove that you were not crazy."

Opinion, at Page 87-88. As further explained:

Defense counsel heavily emphasized Pabón's bizarre behavior and mental health treatment over many years as one factor, among others, for discrediting his testimony. In other words, the defense challenged Pabón's "competency" only in the sense that nonlawyers would understand that concept, suggesting that Pabón's testimony about the murder was unreliable because of his long history of mental illness.

Opinion, at Page 92.

At the end of Pabón's cross examination and re-direct, the government made an incredibly prejudicial and unusual request: that the District Court inform the jury that it was taking judicial notice of the fact that Pabón had been found competent to plead guilty in 2008. Even the prosecutor noted the completely unusual request for such a judicial notice by commenting: "Normally we don't have that issue where you have a cooperator...we never asked for judicial notice that a cooperator was competent to plead guilty because everybody is presumed to be competent, right? But in this case, the problem is that the Defense has put his mental competency at issue. . . ."<sup>14</sup> The government was distorting the picture; it was for the jury, and not the district court, to determine as a matter of fact if Pabón was a credible witness. Unfortunately, the district court usurped the fact-finding role of the jury with its judicial notice, which it provided twice to the jury, as it also provided it as jury instruction at the close of the case.

As noted by Judge Lipez: "In explaining his decision, the [district court] judge stated that he "ha[d] to balance the equities here." Ferrer's attorney then argued, to no avail, that "[taking judicial notice of this fact] isn't fair because . . . as an attorney, I am competing with the Court, because the Court said he was competent."<sup>15</sup> The district court's intrusion into fact finding by providing to the jury a judicial notice

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<sup>14</sup> Joint Appendix, at 1919-20.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 89.

relating to facts that were subject to reasonable dispute such whether Pabon's credibility was shot because of mental illness was contrary to the Sixth Amendment.

Federal Rule of Evidence 201(b) governs judicial notice of adjudicative facts and establishes strict requirements for when courts may take judicial notice. Courts may only take judicial notice of facts outside the trial record that are not subject to reasonable dispute, and such facts must either be generally known within the territorial jurisdiction of the trial court or capable of accurate and ready determination by resort to sources whose accuracy cannot reasonably be questioned.

*Int'l Star Class Yacht Racing Ass'n v. Tommy Hilfiger U.S.A., Inc.*, 146 F.3d 66 (2d Cir. 1998). Facts adjudicated in a prior case do not meet either test of indisputability contained in Federal Rule of Evidence 201(b): they are not usually common knowledge, nor are they derived from an unimpeachable source. *Id.*

First, the prior competency finding in 2008 fails to meet the indisputability standard required under Federal Rule of Evidence 201(b). A determination of competency from a decade-old proceeding (2008) cannot be considered beyond reasonable dispute when applied to assess a witness's current credibility in 2018. Competency can fluctuate over time due to various factors including mental health changes, substance abuse, medical conditions, or other circumstances that could affect a person's cognitive abilities. The ten-year gap between the 2008 finding and

the 2018 trial makes the prior determination even less reliable as an indisputable fact regarding the cooperator's current state.

More importantly, the taking of judicial notice deprived Marcia of her right to a fair trial under the Sixth Amendment as it deprived Marcia of her right to attack the credibility of Pabon based on his undisputed mental illness; Schizophrenia, Delusional Type. Indeed, unknown to Marcia as the records were hidden from her by the prosecutors, despite a Court order to provide them before trial, after the change of plea hearing in July of 2008, in November of 2008, Pabón is first diagnosed as a Schizophrenic, Delusional Type by the U.S. Department Of Justice's agency, the Bureau Of Prisons ("BOP").<sup>16</sup> That is another reason why taking judicial notice of the prior competency finding in 2008 improperly interfered with the jury's constitutional role in making credibility determinations. *Cf. United States v. Jones*, 29 F.3d 1549, 1553 (11<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1994) (vacating the judgment, holding that it was improper to take judicial notice of the fact that appellant refused to report for work unless he received an increase in salary because the district court's findings in the previous action did not indisputably establish that appellant refused to work). Credibility assessments are quintessentially within the jury's province and the district

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<sup>16</sup> Supplemental Appendix, at 183. This crucial, key impeachment information is intentionally withheld from Marcia's trial attorneys by the government, even when the Court entered an order ordering the production of the BOP medical records on July 24, 2018. Supp.A. at 168.

court's judicial notice of a prior competency finding effectively directed the jury's evaluation of the Pabon's reliability. As noted by Judge Lipez:

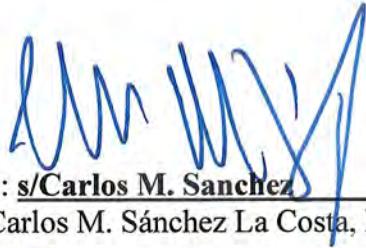
In the context of the defense strategy, the district court's judicial notice that it had found "Alex El Loco" competent at that time -- despite his apparently longstanding mental illness and bizarre past behaviors -- spoke directly to the jury on Pabón's credibility. That intervention by the court created the unacceptable risk that the jurors understood the judicial notice of the competency finding to reflect the trial judge's view that Pabón's mental illness did not make him untrustworthy – regardless of the jury's perception of his performance on the witness stand.

*Id.* at 93. The fact that after the first judicial notice, the district court provided as part of the jury instructions again the judicial notice telling the jury that Pabon was competent in 2008 unfairly destroyed any ability by Marcia to challenge Pabon's credibility. What the court did in simple terms is to tell the jury that Pabon's credibility was a fact that was beyond controversy. The key to a fair trial is opportunity to use the appropriate weapons including cross-examination, and argument to meet the government's evidence particularly testimonial evidence from a Schizophrenic, Delusional type like Pabon. Taking judicial notice of the prior competency finding completely removed the effect of these essential tools from Marcia in this case and it violated her right to a fair trial. It is not an exaggeration to state that in this case, the district court's use of judicial notice was used by the government with the assistance of the court as a backdoor method for introducing disputed factual findings about Pabon's Schizophrenia, Delusional type as an undisputed fact.

## CONCLUSION

In view of all the above, the petition for a writ of certiorari in this case should be granted.

Respectfully submitted.



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## **APPENDIX**

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APPENDIX

**United States Court of Appeals  
For the First Circuit**

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Nos. 19-1305  
19-1312  
19-1315  
20-1603  
20-1604  
20-1920  
20-1951  
21-1098  
21-1100

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

Appellee,

v.

AUREA VÁZQUEZ RIJOS, a/k/a Beatriz Vázquez, a/k/a Aurea Dominicci; MARCIA VÁZQUEZ RIJOS; and JOSÉ FERRER SOSA,

Defendants, Appellants.

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APPEALS FROM THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
FOR THE DISTRICT OF PUERTO RICO

[Hon. Daniel R. Domínguez, U.S. District Judge]

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Before

Barron, Chief Judge,  
Lipez and Thompson, Circuit Judges.

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Lydia Lizarribar Masini for appellant Aurea Vázquez Rijos.

Carlos M. Sánchez La Costa for appellant Marcia Aurea Vázquez Rijos.

José R. Olmo Rodríguez for appellant José Ferrer Sosa.

Sofia M. Vickery, Attorney, Appellate Section, Criminal Division, United States Department of Justice, with whom W. Stephen Muldrow, United States Attorney, Mariana E. Bauzá Almonte, Assistant United States Attorney, Chief, Appellate Division, José A. Ruiz Santiago, Assistant United States Attorney, Jenifer Yois Hernández, Assistant United States Attorney, Kenneth A. Polite, Jr., Assistant Attorney General, and Lisa H. Miller, Deputy Assistant Attorney General, were on brief, for appellee.

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July 31, 2024

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**THOMPSON, Circuit Judge.** Old San Juan, September 22, 2005, around midnight. Husband and wife Adam Anhang Uster (a Canadian entrepreneur) and Aurea Vázquez Rijos (a former "Miss Puerto Rico Petite") were walking down the cobbled streets of Puerto Rico's capital city after leaving a trendy bistro. A man emerged from the shadows. "This is a robbery," he said in English. Adam punched him in the face and shoved Aurea away, screaming "Run, Baby, run." She did not, however. And the mugger stabbed and beat Adam to death. Turning to Aurea, the man then hit her in the head. But sensing others' eyes now on him, he took off.<sup>1</sup>

In the years after that, a Puerto Rico jury would convict an innocent person of the murder. He would later win release, thankfully. Meanwhile private investigators hired by Adam's family would traipse all over (including Europe) looking for helpful evidence. And after plenty of twists and turns, police would arrest Aurea, Aurea's sister Marcia Vázquez Rijos, and Marcia's boyfriend José Ferrer Sosa on federal murder-for-hire charges — one of the twists and turns involved a complex extradition process to retrieve Aurea from Spain, a country she had fled to.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Our opinion will be an easier read if we sometimes use first names. We mean no disrespect.

<sup>2</sup> By agreement with Spain the government promised to try Aurea under the original indictment. Count one of that indictment

The government's trial case included lots of incriminating particulars. Like how six months before the murder Adam and Aurea signed a prenup that would pay her about \$8 million if he died but only \$3,500 a month for 36 months (unless she remarried) if they divorced within a year. Like how Aurea also came to believe that she was "better off" under the prenup with Adam "dead than alive" and asked someone if he knew a hitman who could kill Adam. Like how 12 hours before the murder Adam told Aurea that he wanted a divorce, to which she replied, "I am not going to let you go that easy." And like how Aurea's description of the attacker differed from others' and how she acted uncooperatively with police.

The government's biggest witness was probably Alex Pabón Colon. Nicknamed "El Loco" (Spanish for "The Crazy One"), Pabón (as we will call him, per Spanish naming customs we follow for the rest of the opinion) testified that Aurea, Marcia, and José had hired him to kill Adam and hurt Aurea – while making it all look like a robbery gone wrong. The defense pushed back with questions

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charged her with conspiring to commit murder for hire resulting in Adam's death. Count two charged her with use of an interstate facility to commit murder for hire. The government tried Marcia and José under a second superseding indictment. Count one of that indictment accused them of conspiring to commit murder resulting in Adam's death.

designed to highlight Pabón's history of mental instability (among other efforts).

A federal jury eventually convicted Aurea of murder for hire, and her, Marcia, and José of conspiring to commit murder for hire. Each got life behind bars.

The trio now appeal, raising a dizzying array of issues spanning the trial, sentencing, and post-trial phases. We address the claims one by one below, filling in details needed to put things into workable perspective. At the end of it all, however, we **affirm** across the board.

## I **Sufficiency of the Evidence**

Marcia and José say that the government did not present enough evidence to support their conspiracy-to-commit-murder-for-hire convictions.<sup>3</sup>

We assess their preserved challenges *de novo*, taking all the evidence — including credibility choices and reasonable inferences — in the light most favorable to the prosecution and asking whether a sensible jury could find the crime's essential elements proven beyond a reasonable doubt. See, e.g., United

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<sup>3</sup> We start like this because a winning sufficiency argument would compel us to vacate the challenged conviction and block any retrial for the same offense under the Fifth Amendment's Double Jeopardy Clause. See United States v. Raymundí-Hernández, 984 F.3d 127, 138 (1st Cir. 2020).

States v. Maldonado-Peña, 4 F.4th 1, 50 (1st Cir. 2021). And to simplify slightly (but without affecting our analysis), the statute of conviction punishes anyone "[w]ho[] travels in or causes another . . . to use . . . any facility of interstate . . . commerce . . . with the intent that a murder be committed" for hire, "or who conspires to do so." See 18 U.S.C. § 1958(a).<sup>4</sup> "As used in this section . . . 'facility of interstate . . . commerce' includes means of transportation and communication." See id. § 1958(b)(2).

**A**

**Marcia's Arguments**

Marcia first argues that the conspiracy had to have ended with Adam's death and so the evidence against her did not suffice

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<sup>4</sup> The statute reads in full:

Whoever travels in or causes another (including the intended victim) to travel in interstate or foreign commerce, or uses or causes another (including the intended victim) to use the mail or any facility of interstate or foreign commerce, with intent that a murder be committed in violation of the laws of any State or the United States as consideration for the receipt of, or as consideration for a promise or agreement to pay, anything of pecuniary value, or who conspires to do so, shall be fined under this title or imprisoned for not more than ten years, or both; and if personal injury results, shall be fined under this title or imprisoned for not more than twenty years, or both; and if death results, shall be punished by death or life imprisonment, or shall be fined not more than \$250,000, or both.

because the government focused on "acts and statements" after his passing. Consistent with the adage that "'the simplest'" way to decide an issue "is often 'best,'" see Calvary Chapel of Bangor v. Mills, 52 F.4th 40, 48 n.5 (1st Cir. 2022) (quoting United States v. Cruz-Ramos, 987 F.3d 27, 39 (1st Cir. 2021)), we bypass the dispute about the conspiracy's precise end date because ample evidence showed her active participation from the beginning.

Asked directly by a prosecutor about "[w]ho hired you to commit the murder?" Pabón answered categorically, "Marcia . . . , Aurea . . . , and José." And he identified all three in open court too.

Pabón's testimony painted a grim picture. A dope dealer, Pabón met with "clients" at The Pink Skirt – a nightclub Adam had bought Aurea. José worked there as a cook. And he was one of Pabón's drug clients as well. So were Aurea and Marcia. The day before Adam died, Pabón spent time with Aurea, Marcia, and José at The Pink Skirt and then at an eatery called El Hamburger (they drove there in Aurea's Porsche SUV). They agreed that Pabón would find a gun, kill Adam after Adam had dinner with Aurea, make the murder look like a robbery by taking Adam's wallet and hurting Aurea, and later get \$3 million from Aurea (part of the money she expected to get from Adam's estate).

All of this undercuts Marcia's claim that the evidence showed only her "mere presence" at a conspiratorial event. She is right that mere presence cannot establish knowing participation in a conspiracy. See, e.g., United States v. Munyenyeyezi, 781 F.3d 532, 538 (1st Cir. 2015). But Pabón's fingering her as one of the three persons who hired him to kill Adam shows she was culpably present, not merely present. See United States v. Echeverri, 982 F.2d 675, 678 (1st Cir. 1993) (explaining that "a defendant's 'mere presence' argument will fail in situations where the 'mere' is lacking"). If more were needed — and we do not think that it is — the jury could "rely on [the] common[-]sense . . . infer[ence] that criminal conspirators do not involve innocent persons at critical stages of a" crime's planning. See United States v. Llinas, 373 F.3d 26, 32 (1st Cir. 2004) (citation omitted).

Marcia responds by attacking Pabón's credibility, arguing that his grand-jury testimony indicated that the conversation at The Pink Skirt centered on just "beating" Adam and that she did not go to El Hamburger. But her attorney explored the inconsistency theme with Pabón during cross-examination — unsuccessfully it turns out, because the jury convicted her anyway. And we cannot reweigh witness credibility on a sufficiency challenge. See, e.g., United States v. Acosta-Colón, 741 F.3d 179, 191 (1st Cir. 2013).

Perhaps anticipating this critique, Marcia calls Pabón's testimony uncorroborated as to her role. But our caselaw says that "the uncorroborated testimony of a single cooperating witness may be sufficient to support a conviction, so long as the testimony is not facially incredible." See United States v. Velazquez-Fontanez, 6 F.4th 205, 215 (1st Cir. 2021). And Marcia makes no convincing argument that Pabón's testimony falls into that facially-incredible category for sufficiency purposes, thus waiving whatever argument she may have had. See Rodríguez v. Mun. of San Juan, 659 F.3d 168, 175 (1st Cir. 2011).<sup>5</sup>

**B**

**José's Arguments**

Pabón named José as one of his hirers in this murder-for-hire crime. He gave José props for getting his payment bumped from \$2 million to \$3 million. And he explained how José called him on the night of the murder, met up with him in Old San Juan, pointed out the restaurant where Adam and Aurea were, and told him to wait for them to come out. Questioning Pabón's memory and calling his answers "unreliable" and "unresponsive" (along with other pejoratives), José suggests that the jury should not have

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<sup>5</sup> Marcia's very brief suggestion that no evidence showed she "knew . . . any cars or phones would be used with the required intent to murder" is too underdeveloped for us to consider. See, e.g., United States v. Zannino, 895 F.2d 1, 17 (1st Cir. 1990).

believed that incriminating account. What he is doing though is picking a credibility fight – for example, José writes that Pabón "testified" at trial that he (Pabón) did not have an affair with Aurea (a person he was starstruck over), yet he admitted telling his friends and also the grand jury that he had had sex with her. José's lawyer, however, delved into these areas during cross-examination – to no avail, because the jury still found José guilty. And such a routine credibility call is for the jurors, with us required to assume on sufficiency review that they called it in the government's favor. See, e.g., Acosta-Colón, 741 F.3d at 191.

Unlike Marcia, José labels Pabón's testimony "facially incredible." But he offers no persuasive explanation for why this is so. And "developing a sustained argument out of . . . legal precedents is a litigant's job, not ours." Díaz-Alarcón v. Flández-Marcel, 944 F.3d 303, 313 (1st Cir. 2019) (quotation marks omitted).

Relying mostly on his own trial testimony, José next claims that "[s]ubstantial evidence" created reasonable doubt about his guilt. But because he took the stand, the jury could disbelieve his testimony that he did not hire Pabón to murder Adam. See United States v. Iossifov, 45 F.4th 899, 916 (6th Cir. 2022); United States v. Williams, 390 F.3d 1319, 1325-26 (11th Cir. 2004).

Also and critically, we need not rule "that no verdict other than . . . guilty . . . could sensibly be reached, but must only be satisfied that the verdict finds support in a plausible rendition of the record." See United States v. Liriano, 761 F.3d 131, 135 (1st Cir. 2014) (quotation marks omitted) – a standard met here.

José also offers two sufficiency arguments that target the interstate-commerce element for his conviction. First he claims that the government had to – but did not – show that a defendant used an interstate-commerce facility (e.g., an auto or a phone) across borders. While he preserved that argument by raising it in the district court, it fails here as it did there. The murder-for-hire statute once barred the use of a "facility *in* interstate . . . commerce." See United States v. Fisher, 494 F.3d 5, 9 (1st Cir. 2007) (quoting statute). But a 2004 amendment changed "facility *in* interstate commerce" to "facility *of* interstate . . . commerce." See id. at 10 (quoting statute and amendment). And devastating to José's position, that change codified the prevailing view that "a showing of *intrastate usage* of a requisite facility, such as a telephone, suffices." See id. (emphasis added). Second – citing no authority – José also argues that vehicles on the island of Puerto Rico are *per se* not facilities of interstate or foreign commerce because Puerto Rico is an island unto itself. As the government rightly points out,

however, he did not press this claim below – thus making it reviewable (if at all) only for plain error. See United States v. Rivera-Rivera, 555 F.3d 277, 285 (1st Cir. 2009). But because he neither supports this claim nor tries to show plain error, he waived it. See United States v. Rivera-Carrasquillo, 933 F.3d 33, 49 n.15 (1st Cir. 2019).

## II Severance

Raising a preserved claim, Marcia and José next contend that the judge should have severed their trials from Aurea's.

Defendants may be tried together "if they are alleged to have participated in the same act or transaction." Fed. R. Crim. P. 8(b). Such trials serve important interests, like easing the burdens on victims, witnesses, and jurors, shrinking the risk of inconsistent verdicts, and conserving scarce judge time. See Zafiro v. United States, 506 U.S. 534, 537 (1993); United States v. Josley, 99 F.3d 1182, 1188 (1st Cir. 1996). So "[t]here is a preference in the federal system for joint trials of defendants who are indicted together," Zafiro, 506 U.S. at 537 – a preference that is especially strong in conspiracy cases, United States v. Floyd, 740 F.3d 22, 36 (1st Cir. 2014).

A preference of course is not an unwavering command. See Fed. R. Crim. P. 14(a) (declaring that "[i]f the joinder of . . . defendants in an indictment . . . appears to prejudice a

defendant . . . , the court may . . . sever the defendants' trial[], or provide other relief that justice requires"). But the exceptions to it are few and far between. See United States v. Houlihan, 92 F.3d 1271, 1295-96 (1st Cir. 1996). Severance-seeking "defendant[s] must demonstrate *extreme* prejudice, such as by showing a 'serious risk that a joint trial would compromise a specific trial right,' or would 'prevent the jury from making a reliable judgment about guilt or innocence.'" Id. at 1295 (emphasis added and quoting Zafiro, 506 U.S. at 539). And even if the risk of prejudice is high, they must show that severance is the proper cure — usually meaning that jury instructions or some other remedy short of severance will *not* work. See Zafiro, 506 U.S. at 539. Making matters more difficult for Marcia and José, we review their challenge to the judge's severance refusal only for a "manifest abuse of discretion" — knowing that even in "gray area[s]" where "reasonable people might disagree about the advisability of severance," a severance fight normally will be "won or lost in the district court." See Houlihan, 92 F.3d at 1296 (quotation marks omitted).

Measured against these benchmarks, Marcia and José cannot prevail. Separate trials in a case like this — where the focus is on the interconnected relationships among defendants — would be repetitive, forcing witnesses to provide the same

testimony again and again, and placing incredible demands on every participant in the judicial system (as described above). Hoping to counter this point, Marcia and José argue that the joint trial caused spillover or guilt-by-association prejudice based on certain testimony – including about Aurea's hitman search, civil suit against Adam's parents, and fleeing to avoid capture. We doubt that this is the kind of extreme prejudice required to win reversal. See, e.g., United States v. DeCologero, 530 F.3d 36, 54 (1st Cir. 2008) (holding in a severance-denial case that evidence of one defendant's murder of a witness was relevant because it "tended to prove the existence and nature of the . . . conspiracy"). Certainly anything that ups the chance of conviction "prejudices" defendants in the word's usual sense. But severance law does *not* use "prejudice" like that. Which is why – despite what Marcia and José imply – it does not matter that the government's case against Aurea may have been stronger than against them, or that they may have gotten off at trials separate from Aurea's. See Zafiro, 506 U.S. at 540; see also United States v. O'Bryant, 998 F.2d 21, 26 (1st Cir. 1993). Regardless, whatever prejudice existed got scotched by the judge's explicit instructions that the jury consider the case against each defendant

separately and individually.<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Houlihan, 92 F.3d at 1296. We presume that juries follow such directives. See, e.g., United States v. Chisholm, 940 F.3d 119, 129 (1st Cir. 2019). And neither Marcia nor José has persuasively rebutted that presumption. So we cannot say the judge manifestly abused his discretion.

### **III Evidentiary Matters**

Aurea, Marcia, and José make a series of evidentiary arguments.

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<sup>6</sup> The instruction read:

Counts are charged against each of the defendants in each count of their corresponding indictment. Each count, and the evidence pertaining to it, should be considered separately as to each defendant. The fact that you may find guilty or not guilty on one count should not control your verdict on another count as to each defendant. You must provide separate consideration to the evidence as to each count and as to each defendant. Aurea Vazquez-Rijos is charged as to two counts in the original Indictment. Co-defendants Marcia Vazquez-Rijos and Jose Ferrer-Sosa are charged as to one count in the Second Superseding Indictment. You must provide separate consideration as to each defendant in the indictment filed against him/her.

The judge also gave separate limiting instructions for certain categories of evidence. Consider, as a for-instance, his telling the jurors that neither Marcia nor José was "involved" with the hitman "testimony."

**A**  
**Flight Evidence**

Aurea claims that the judge erred by admitting "flight evidence" to show her "consciousness of guilt."

That evidence – by way of background – included some of the following. In June 2006 – not long after Adam's murder and a few months after police arrested a man named Jonathan Roman Rivera for the crime – Aurea moved to Italy. She had very little money. She started going by the name "Aurea Dominicci." And she tried to make a living as a tour guide. Over the next year she sued Adam's parents for a piece of his estate, travelled to Puerto Rico for a deposition in that case, and returned to Italy. Roman got convicted around then too. And Aurea declined to come back for another deposition in her suit. In spring 2008 a federal probe into Adam's murder led to Roman's release, Pabón's arrest, and Pabón's and Aurea's indictment on murder-for-hire-related charges (Marcia and José would be indicted years later). Pabón pled guilty. Aurea promised to voluntarily return to the United States. She never would. Instead she began faking documents to prove she was Jewish in the hopes of finding refuge in Israel (she had asked a legal expert whether "the law in Israel" would "protect" her "[i]f there was ever an order of extradition with a death

sentence"). But authorities arrested her in Spain in June 2013.

And two years later she got extradited back to Puerto Rico.<sup>7</sup>

Aurea offers innocent explanations for her moves, saying for example that she went overseas to start a new life and to protect herself from Adam's father (whom she alleges had sicced private investigators on her as part of his plan to avenge his son's death). From there she argues that the government did not (and here we quote a case she quotes) "present sufficient extrinsic evidence of guilt to support an inference that [her] flight was not merely an episode of normal travel but, rather, the product of a guilty conscience related to the crime alleged." See United States v. Benedetti, 433 F.3d 111, 116 (1st Cir. 2005) (stressing that "[b]ecause flight may be consistent with innocence as easily as with guilt, this precursor helps ensure that a jury does not infer guilt based solely on a defendant's meanderings"). And she

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<sup>7</sup> The judge (capitalization altered) told the jurors that intentional flight by Aurea . . . may be considered by you in light of all the other evidence in the case. The burden is upon the government to prove intentional flight. Intentional flight after Aurea . . . was accused of a crime is not alone sufficient to conclude that she is guilty.

The judge added that "[f]light does not create a presumption of guilt," that "feelings of guilt, which are present in many innocent people, do not necessarily reflect actual guilt," and that "you should consider there may be reasons for Aurea['s] . . . actions that are fully consistent with innocence."

implies that the judge should have kept the flight evidence out under Fed. R. Evid. 403 – a rule that says that a court may exclude "relevant" evidence "if its probative value is substantially outweighed by a danger of unfair prejudice."

We need not decide whether Aurea has shown error because even if she has (which we in no way intimate) any error was harmless. Just consider some of the other evidence against her besides the flight evidence. Pabón credibly testified that Aurea had hired him to kill Adam. Another person testified that she had said she was "better off" under the prenup "with [Adam] dead than alive" and had asked if he knew a hitman who could "do the job" for her. And an officer testified that her description of the attacker clashed with those given by other witnesses (suggesting she made things up to cover her crime) and that she did not fully cooperate with police (indicating a desire to keep the constabularies at bay). So by our lights, the judge's decision to admit the flight evidence did not substantially affect the jury's verdict – which makes his decision (at worst) harmless error. See, e.g., United States v. Galíndez, 999 F.3d 60, 64 (1st Cir. 2021) (discussing the standard).

**B**  
**Email Evidence**

Marcia and José – sometimes separately, sometimes together – challenge the judge's admission of several emails.<sup>8</sup>

**1**  
**June 2007 Email**

An email from Marcia to Aurea – sent in June 2007 – said she (Marcia) needed more money for José and did not "want to have him as an enemy because he knows a lot about me." "Mommy doesn't want me to even see him," Marcia added (emphasis ours), "because *supposedly he is a violent crazy person.*"

José calls the italicized phrase excludable hearsay because (his argument goes) "it was not Marcia['s] . . . statement but her mother's[,] . . . and her mother . . . did not testify at trial." But his lawyer conceded during a trial sidebar that *Marcia* made the violent-and-crazy point, *not* her mother. So José waived the argument that someone other than Marcia made the statement. See United States v. Walker, 538 F.3d 21, 23 (1st Cir. 2008). He next says that if Marcia made the statement, it came (in his view at least) "after the conspiracy" and thus constituted "inadmissible hearsay" (as a reminder, the defendants theorize

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<sup>8</sup> To the extent the emails have grammatical and syntactical errors, we still quote them as-is because using "[sic]" would be too distracting and might change their meaning.

that the conspiracy ended with Adam's death). But his trial attorney objected to the statement as forbidden "character" evidence. And he gives us no persuasive reason not to follow our usual rule that "legal theories not raised squarely in the lower court cannot be broached for the first time on appeal." See Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Warehousemen & Helpers Union, Loc. No. 59 v. Superline Transp. Co., 953 F.2d 17, 21 (1st Cir. 1992).

2  
July 2007 Email

Another email from Marcia to Aurea – sent in July 2007 – said she (Marcia) was "getting frustrated" but hoped "[t]hat old man will pay sooner or later"; worried José, who "was present during the good and the bad," would "think that I abandoned him and think that we used him"; and warned her (Aurea) to "[b]e careful with your back" because "[t]here are a lot of enemies close who you owe for a long time, and they are aware of your every move." Aurea responded by email saying she empathized with how she (Marcia) and José felt, promised to call José, and noted "we are all in the same boat."

Raising a preserved challenge – thus activating abuse-of-discretion review, see United States v. Polanco, 634 F.3d 39, 44 (1st Cir. 2011) – Marcia and José argue that the judge wrongly admitted the emails under Evidence Rule 403, which (again) excludes evidence if its "unfair" prejudicial effects "substantially

outweigh[]" its probative value. Still claiming that the conspiracy ended with Adam's murder in 2005, they call these post-murder emails irrelevant. They then say that "[t]he unfair prejudicial damage of these communications after the conspiracy ended is that it allows the government through post-murder conduct that has nothing to do with [the-murder-for-hire-related] elements . . . to convict [them] on speculation."

Even assuming without granting that Marcia and José are right about the conspiracy's end point (the government counters that the conspiracy actually ended years later when Aurea's suit against Adam's parents ended in defeat in 2011), this does not help them.

A defendant's conduct after the crime's commission can be relevant. Otherwise, for example, a defendant's bid to cover up a crime's occurrence could never be admitted to show consciousness of guilt — which we know is *not* true. See, e.g., United States v. Sasso, 695 F.3d 25, 29 (1st Cir. 2012). The relevance threshold is a small one, "requiring only that the evidence have 'any tendency to make a fact more or less probable.'" Cruz-Ramos, 987 F.3d at 42 (quoting Fed. R. Evid. 401). And the disputed evidence cleared it. Marcia's email touched on efforts to get money from Adam's estate (discussing her "frustrat[ion] that old man will pay sooner or later"), José's conspiracy

involvement (mentioning she "wouldn't want him to think I abandoned him and think that we used him"), and the need to pay Pabón (telling Aurea to "be careful with your back," adding "[t]here are a lot of enemies close who you owe for a long time"). Aurea replied that she would call José and that "we are all in the same boat." From that evidence a jury could infer Marcia's and José's conspiracy involvement. See Bielunas v. F/V Misty Dawn, Inc., 621 F.3d 72, 76 (1st Cir. 2010) (noting that "[a] relevancy-based argument is usually a tough sell," and adding that "the evidence need not definitively resolve a key issue in the case" but "need only move the inquire forward to some degree").

Marcia and José also give us no convincing reason for believing that any of this evidence, even if prejudicial, was *unfairly* prejudicial let alone *so unfairly prejudicial* as to *substantially* outbalance its probative worth. See In re PHC, Inc. S'holder Litig., 894 F.3d 419, 440 (1st Cir. 2018) (emphasizing that "battles over how to strike the balance between probative value and unfairly prejudicial effect are usually won or lost in the district court").

It is a pretty "[r]are[]" day when we will "override a judge's balancing of relevance and prejudice." Polanco, 634 F.3d

at 44. And we see no credible basis for "second-guess[ing] the judge's discretionary judgment here."<sup>9</sup> See id.

3

**March 2012 Email**

Yet another email from Marcia to Aurea – sent in March 2012 – noted that their brother said that she (Marcia) and José had "PLANNED EVERYTHING" and that she had told him:

YOU MENTALLY RETARDED ANIMAL DEVIL LUCIFER  
DON'T YOU KNOW THAT THEY ARE RECORDING  
EVERYTHING AND EVERYTHING YOU SAY THEY WILL  
BELIEVE IT AND WE ARE GONNA GET SCREWED BY  
YOUR FAULT LUCIFER.

Pushing another preserved error claim – again generating abuse-of-discretion review, see id. – Marcia says that comment by her brother was inadmissible hearsay and so had "dubious probative value and an exponential high risk of prejudice." José tries to challenge the email's admission too. But the judge admitted the email against Marcia only. And José develops no spillover-prejudice argument keyed to this situation, resulting in waiver. See Zannino, 895 F.2d at 17.

The judge admitted the brother's statement that Marcia and José had "PLANNED EVERYTHING" to provide "context" for Marcia's

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<sup>9</sup> José wishes to "adopt" Marcia's arguments about emails "between him and [her]," presumably referring to some 2010 emails where he asks Marcia and Aurea for money. But Marcia does not challenge the 2010 emails. So we need not consider this undeveloped claim. See Zannino, 895 F.2d at 17.

reaction ("DON'T YOU KNOW THAT THEY ARE RECORDING EVERYTHING AND EVERYTHING YOU SAY THEY WILL BELIEVE IT AND WE ARE GONNA GET SCREWED BY YOUR FAULT LUCIFER") – a reaction that indicates a need for a cover up. Statements offered not for their truth but to provide the context of a reply are not hearsay. See United States v. Cruz-Díaz, 550 F.3d 169, 176-77 (1st Cir. 2008). And the judge told the jury to consider the statements of nonparties in the email not "for the truth of the matter, but only to provide context to statements made by a defendant." See id. (concluding that testimony was not hearsay based in part on fairly similar jury instructions).

As a last-gasp argument, Marcia accuses the judge of not conducting a "meaningful [Evidence Rule 403] analysis" for this email (or any of them, for that matter). But as reflected in the many pages of trial transcript, the judge actively engaged with counsel at side bar and carefully considered their objections. The judge did enough, seeing how our "great deference" applies "even when a judge does not expressly explain the Evidence Rule 403 balancing process on the record." See United States v. Breton, 740 F.3d 1, 14 (1st Cir. 2014).

#### IV Judicial Bias

Marcia and José think that the judge displayed bias against them – a claim that (a) requires them to show that the

judge "gave the appearance of bias" and that the "apparent bias seriously prejudiced" them, and (b) requires us to review preserved challenges for abuse of discretion only. See Raymundí-Hernández, 984 F.3d at 145 (quotation marks omitted).<sup>10</sup> They make a number of arguments for reversing, all insinuating that the judge showed impermissible bias against them by acting like an advocate for the prosecution in front of the jury. We find some arguments waived through inadequate briefing, however. And while always "sensitive to a judge's unflagging duty to be impartial," see United States v. Caramadre, 807 F.3d 359, 373 (1st Cir. 2015), we find the other arguments are not difference-makers.

## A

### **Marcia's and José's Waived Arguments**

We lead with the waived arguments.

An investigating officer testified that at one point the same attorney represented Roman (the originally accused killer) and Aurea (before her indictment). The judge asked him, "So how could he be an attorney when Aurea was a victim? At that time, Aurea was a victim, right?" "Correct," the officer answered. Marcia contends that "[t]his intervention showed judicial bias in

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<sup>10</sup> José calls these supposed errors "structural" for which prejudice is presumed. But his claim "runs head first into our precedent which has consistently required proof of 'serious prejudice.'" See United States v. Lanza-Vázquez, 799 F.3d 134, 145 (1st Cir. 2015).

favor of the prosecution." Not only does she fail to explain how the judge's questions "favor[ed]" the prosecution, but she also fails to make a serious-prejudice showing – *i.e.*, she has not shown how, "but for" the allegedly improper intervention, "the verdict would have been different." See United States v. Rivera-Rodríguez, 761 F.3d 105, 112 (1st Cir. 2014). And that will not do. See Zannino, 895 F.2d at 17.

Marcia suggests in passing that the judge should not have "presided over the criminal case" because he also "presided over Aurea's civil case." But by making the suggestion without any developed rationale, she waived it. See id.

José argues that the judge "unfairly undermined" his credibility by asking certain questions. With José on the stand, the judge's first contested question clarified whether the "Alex El Loco" his lawyer had mentioned in a question was Pabón. José replied that he "later knew him as" Pabón. He now says that the judge's inquiry implied that he (José) "knew [Pabón] very well and not only as a drug dealer." We do not see how. But José's team did not object to this question, as the government notes – without any protest from José. That requires him to show plain error.

But this he never even tries to do, thus waiving the argument.

See Rivera-Carrasquillo, 933 F.3d at 49 n.15.

José also claims that the judge "unfairly" confronted him with a police report to refresh his memory. But the record shows that the prosecutor did that, not the judge (when José gave a nonresponsive answer to the prosecutor's question about his work hours, the judge read him the question again) – something José's brief never convincingly takes on. See Cioffi v. Gilbert Enters., Inc., 769 F.3d 90, 94 (1st Cir. 2014).

José contends as well that the judge showed bias by letting prosecutors present certain testimony about the murder scene, plus photos and a video of Adam's dead body. In his telling, prosecutors had no need for any of that because "there was already sufficient evidence that [Adam] was dead." But the government is generally allowed "to prove its case by evidence of its own choice." See Old Chief v. United States, 519 U.S. 172, 186 (1997). And a judge "is not required to scrub the trial clean of all evidence that may have an emotional impact, where the evidence is part of the [g]overnment's narrative." United States v. Morales-Aldahondo, 524 F.3d 115, 120 (1st Cir. 2008) (quotation marks omitted). Yet José cites no on-point cases and develops no argument that tests the limits of these maxims. And (again) "developing a sustained argument out of . . . legal precedents" is

the party's job. See Town of Norwood v. FERC, 202 F.3d 392, 405 (1st Cir. 2000).

**B**

**Marcia's and José's Nonwaived Arguments**

We move next to the nonwaived arguments.

Marcia and José pan the judge for asking Adam's business partner Roberto Cacho Perez certain questions during Aurea's lawyer's cross-examination.<sup>11</sup> Cacho had testified for the government that Aurea "became literally a partner in the business through Adam." The judge asked – without objection – if "[s]he became that if he died[.]" And Cacho replied, "Exactly, if he died." Then – during part of Aurea's lawyer's cross that focused on how the partners funded the projects – the judge asked Cacho if Aurea had money invested in the business. He responded that "she had no money invested in any project." "So," the judge said, "she has money if [Adam] dies?," to which Cacho said, "Only." Marcia's and José's attorneys objected. But the judge rebuffed them, though he later instructed the jurors that "the [c]ourt occasionally asks questions of a witness in order to bring out facts not then fully covered in the testimony"; that they should "not assume that [the court] hold[s] any opinion on the matters to which [the] questions

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<sup>11</sup> A real estate developer and investor, Cacho formed a coequal partnership with Adam that developed properties in Puerto Rico.

are related"; and that "it is you, and you alone, who will determine this case, not the [court]." The judge denied the attorneys' motion for a mistrial, concluding that his questions clarified Cacho's testimony and that his limiting instruction minimized any prejudice. The judge also later repeated that just-quoted instruction in his final charge.

Marcia and José describe the judge's questions here as bombshells, establishing Aurea's motive to murder Adam. The judge's questions certainly showed — given Cacho's understanding of the partnership and the prenup (which he had personal knowledge of) — that Aurea had no stake in the business *unless Adam died*, in which case she would inherit a stake. But the jury already knew this — thanks to the unobjection-to testimony from Cacho, who said that Adam listed the partnership properties in the prenup, which would give Aurea Adam's interest in them on his (Adam's) death. See United States v. Espinal-Almeida, 699 F.3d 588, 608 (1st Cir. 2012) (noting that the judge's interjections "were relatively benign given that the jury had already heard testimony" establishing the same). See generally United States v. Cruz-Feliciano, 786 F.3d 78, 84 (1st Cir. 2015) (explaining that "a question is not improper simply because it clarifies evidence to the disadvantage of the defendant"). Also prompt curative instructions like the judge's here eliminated the potential for

prejudice. See, e.g., United States v. Ayala-Vazquez, 751 F.3d 1, 25-26 (1st Cir. 2014). And Marcia and José give us no good reason for why this is not so.

Marcia and José also pan the judge's comment at the end of Roman's brother's testimony. Roman's brother had testified about getting a letter in which Pabón supposedly copped to killing Adam – a letter the brother made sure the FBI got too. The judge then said, "I guess you were elated when you read the letter." "Very elated," Roman's sibling revealed. The defendants objected. Outside the jury's presence, the judge explained his question by saying that "[h]ere we have a gentleman reading a letter that is going to liberate his brother about a crime that he did not do" and that defense counsel would be "wrong" to "think that they are going to make this [c]ourt a piece of furniture." The judge again told the jurors that "the [c]ourt occasionally asks questions of a witness . . . to bring out facts not then fully covered in the testimony" and that they should "not assume that [it] hold[s] any opinion on the matters to which [its] questions are related." But in his final charge, the judge instructed the jurors "not to take [the very-elated] statement at all in your determination as to your conferences in the deliberating room because the [c]ourt has eliminated [the] question and [the] answer."

Marcia and José claim that the judge's eliciting the very-related comment bolstered the letter's credibility as well as Pabón's (Pabón would later testify about the letter's content). The insuperable difficulty for their attacks on the very-related remark is that the judge struck that exchange from the record — which "sufficed to alleviate any risk of prejudice." See Rivera-Carrasquillo, 933 F.3d at 45. They do say that it was "impossible for a juror to erase from his memory the picture of the judge celebrating [Pabón's] letter as the reason for freeing Roman and for bringing [them and Aurea] to trial." But the jurors-follow-instructions presumption is overcome only if "there is an overwhelming probability that [they] will be unable to follow [them] . . . and a strong likelihood that the effect of the evidence would be devastating to the defendant[s]." Greer v. Miller, 483 U.S. 756, 766 n.8 (1987). And neither Marcia nor José attempt to meet this difficult standard. See Zannino, 895 F.2d at 17.

Marcia and José criticize the judge for using the phrase "repeat performance" as a shorthand to limit repeat questions. As the judge explained to counsel, "Anytime you have an answer, you don't need to go to the answer again. I think the jury heard it, and they know it. . . . That's repeat performances for me." As Marcia and José see it, the judge's repeat-performance comments showed a level of "vituperation" that made the jury believe that

he "thought the defense presented . . . was ludicrous" – that the defense lawyers were mere "actors in a movie and not really defending someone presumed to be innocent." But "because protracted trials drain" precious "judicial resources (judge and jury time, to name just two)," judges enjoy wide discretion to "keep the proceedings moving – by, for instance, making sure evidence presentation does not become rambling and repetitive (to state the obvious, district courts have heavy caseloads and jurors have family and work obligations)." See Rivera-Carrasquillo, 933 F.3d at 45; accord United States v. Perez-Montañez, 202 F.3d 434, 440 (1st Cir. 2000). And what the judge did here fulfilled his affirmative duty to stop this highly contentious multi-defendant, multi-day trial from consuming "needless" amounts of "time." See Fed. R. Evid. 611(a); see also Lanza-Vázquez, 799 F.3d at 143 (commenting that the trial "lasted 18 days and was a massive, multi-defendant conspiracy" prosecution, which the judge "had the authority to move through expeditiously"). Marcia and José protest that the judge used the repeat-performance "admonish[ment]" more with them than with prosecutors. But rather than showing bias, this more reasonably reflects that the judge's "interactions" here "were largely driven by defense counsels' own conduct," see Lanza-Vázquez, 799 F.3d at 143 – the defendants' lawyers spent more time cross-examining the government's witnesses than vice versa and so

tended to ask more repetitive questions, see id. (stressing that a judge "is not a mere moderator, but is the governor of the trial for the purpose of assuring its proper conduct" (quoting Querica v. United States, 289 U.S. 466, 469 (1933))). And to the extent the defendants further suggest that the judge's demeanor or tone reflects bias – José, for example, says that when his lawyer corrected the judge's recall of testimony, the judge asked counsel if he would "like to take the stand" – we do not believe that the judge crossed legal lines (even if he may have come close to them). See Caramadre, 807 F.3d at 375 (stressing that judge's "'remarks during the course of trial that are critical or disapproving of, or even hostile to, counsel, the parties, or their cases' are usually insufficient to prove bias" – as are "'expressions of impatience, dissatisfaction, annoyance, and even anger'" (quoting Liteky v. United States, 510 U.S. 540, 555-56 (1994))).

José also takes the judge to task for asking if he (José) had worked at The Pink Skirt on September 22, the night Adam died. José had testified that he was on vacation and not at The Pink Skirt on that date but later testified that he had been there that afternoon to set the bar up for the night. José's lawyer asked, "Now, you saw Alex El Loco on September 22, 2005?" "No," José responded – just before the judge asked (after a sidebar), "[N]otwithstanding that you did work, you didn't see him?" The

problem for José now is that the judge withdrew the question, in response to the defense's objection – which (again) worked to blunt "any risk of prejudice." See Rivera-Carrasquillo, 933 F.3d at 45.

v  
**Judicial Notice**

The defendants argue that the judge erred in taking judicial notice of the fact that he had found Pabón competent to plead guilty in 2008.<sup>12</sup>

As readers by now know, Pabón's testimony at the 2018 trial devastated the defendants' innocence theory because he provided details that no other witness could about how they hired him to kill Adam. After the government's direct examination –

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<sup>12</sup> The defendants spend only a small fraction of their 300-plus pages of briefing on the judicial-notice issue. And their arguments (below and here) are not a picture of clarity. But we do the best we can with the way we understand them, often quoting at length to avoid any paraphrastic imprecision. We again remind the bar, however, that litigants – on pain of forfeiture – must "spell out [their] arguments squarely and distinctly" before us. See Alston v. Town of Brookline, 997 F.3d 23, 41 (1st Cir. 2021) (quotation marks omitted); see also Rodríguez, 659 F.3d at 175 (noting that "we consider waived arguments 'confusingly constructed and lacking coherence'" (quoting United States v. Eirby, 525 F.3d 31, 36 n.4 (1st Cir. 2008))). It is not our job to develop appellate arguments that they may have had in mind. That is for *them* to do. See, e.g., Rodríguez-Machado v. Shinseki, 700 F.3d 48, 49, 50 (1st Cir. 2012) (per curiam) (observing that "busy appellate judges depend on [the parties] to help bring issues into sharp focus," and adding that "doing [the parties'] work for [them] is not an option" because "that would divert precious judge-time from other[s] . . . who could have their cases resolved thoughtfully and expeditiously").

which brought out how Pabón was testifying under a 2008 plea deal – the judge instructed the jurors that they "should consider his testimony with particular caution." Pabón, the judge added, may have had reasons to make up stories or exaggerate what others did because he wants to help himself. You must determine whether the testimony of such a witness has been affected by any interest in the outcome of this case, any prejudice for or against the defendants or by any of the benefits he has or may receive from the [g]overnment or the [c]ourt as to his sentence.

Continuing, the judge said that the jurors

may consider [Pabón's] guilty plea in assessing his credibility, but you are not to consider his guilty plea as evidence that other individual defendants may have participated with him. . . . In other words, the fact that he accepts that he is guilty, that does not mean that the other defendants are guilty. That's for you to decide when all the evidence is in.

(The judge's final charge to the jury included a similar instruction.)

The defense's hours-long cross-examination of Pabón covered lots of subjects – all designed to ruin Pabón's credibility by painting him as a mentally unstable person with an agenda. The defendants' lawyers, for instance, cross-examined him on his drug doings; community reputation; taste for lying and bragging; past violent acts; and mental-health history, including his psychiatric symptoms and prescribed medications (granting the defendants'

request, the judge took judicial notice that one of Pabón's meds – Risperdal – is "an 'atypical antipsychotic drug' used to treat mental illnesses including schizophrenia, bipolar disease, and irritability associated with autistic disorder"). And at Aurea's lawyer's request, the judge also admitted Pabón's 2008 plea agreement into evidence (the same judge who accepted the 2008 plea agreement ran the 2018 trial).

Not surprisingly, Aurea's attorney focused on the favorable treatment Pabón hoped to get from the government for testifying. Turning to Pabón's plea hearing, her lawyer asked, "At the time, before this judge, were you asked as to your health; mental health?" "Yes," Pabón said, the judge "did, I think." "And," her lawyer continued, "you stated to the [c]ourt here that you, at that time, had been with a psychiatrist because you had depression, correct?" "I think something like that," Pabón answered.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Now is as good a place as any to address José's claim that the judge wrongly kept him from "cross-examining" Pabón about "delusional letters" he wrote to other famous women that he "became infatuated with" (like a former "Miss Universe"). What damages this claim is that he does not provide the necessary record citations or sustained case analysis to back up his "rhetoric" (he cites to one instance where the government objected to a question on recross-examination about one woman, but his appendix lacks a vital excerpt showing the judge's ruling). See Reyes-García v. Rodríguez & Del Valle, Inc., 82 F.3d 11, 14 (1st Cir. 1996). He does not even offer "any indicium that [his argument] was seasonably advanced and properly preserved in the lower court."

After Pabón left the stand the government (outside the jury's presence) asked the judge to judicially notice that he (the judge) had found Pabón competent to plead guilty in 2008. The government thought that since the defendants "have been allowed to ask and to bring evidence of [Pabón's] mental state and everything," fairness required that the judge note that he had ruled Pabón competent to make a plea. The attorneys for each defendant objected.<sup>14</sup>

"Who put the plea agreement in evidence?" the judge asked. Aurea's lawyer said that he had. And when the judge asked him if he had "protest[ed] the evidence" that he had "put[] on," he answered that he had not. The plea agreement "happened in 2008," the judge noted, and "we are now in 2018." "It's a matter of factfinding by the jury," Aurea's lawyer responded, because "[i]f the jury is told that the [c]ourt made a particular determination," it is "going to put more weight to that, and that is our objection."

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See id. So his claim "is a nonstarter." See Págán-Lisbon v. Soc. Sec. Admin., 996 F.3d 1, 7 (1st Cir. 2021).

<sup>14</sup> The ensuing discussion between the lawyers and the judge was extensive and not always as clear as we might wish. See generally United States v. Rivera-Morales, 961 F.3d 1, 12 (1st Cir. 2020) (underscoring that appellants must present their arguments "face up and squarely in the court below" to preserve them for appeal). We offer a flavor of it here.

Marcia's lawyer spoke up too and said that granting the government's request would make the jurors think that the judge "believes that [Pabón] is competent, when the truth of the matter is that what the [c]ourt held was that [Pabón] was competent at the time of the change of plea hearing." "What's wrong if I say it that way?" the judge asked – "that he was competent at that time, that date that he pled guilty with me, with this judge."

José's attorney responded that the complained-about information "isn't relevant" because the judge "found [Pabón] competent within the context of the change of plea hearing" in "2008" while "the facts of this case" occurred "in 2005." "And if the [c]ourt states that in 2008 he was found competent . . . it will bring an imprimatur that he was competent upon the jury, when it is the jury that has to decide the issue." Marcia's attorney agreed, stating that "the issue in this case is not whether [Pabón] was competent at his change of plea hearing, but during the events that allegedly took place." But the judge felt that he had "to balance the equities here." "What you wanted," the judge said, was that the plea agreement goes in as a plea agreement, but the fact that he was then competent, you don't want it there." Marcia's counsel then repeated that "[i]nformation pertaining to the process of a change of plea hearing, and that he was found competent[,] is not relevant" to whether "at the time of the events

he was competent."<sup>15</sup> And he added that he "believe[d] the instruction" would "confuse the jury because the competence that is discussed in the context of" a plea change "is a legal term" — "[i]t is not necessarily a matter related to facts."

"They introduced the [p]lea and [c]ooperation [a]greement," the prosecutor argued right back. And they asked Pabón "for half an hour all his obligations" and "benefits." But, the prosecutor added, they now do not want the jury "to hear the [other] half of the story that is inconvenient for them" — that "he was competent" to plead "guilty before the [c]ourt." Witnesses are presumed "competent to testify," the prosecutor stressed, and "[t]he [d]efense has put this [in] issue." Responding, Marcia's lawyer argued that when the judge — "the highest authority in this room" — talks, the jurors "might think" that "the [c]ourt has already found him competent." What the government wants, Marcia's attorney claimed, "is to . . . influence the jury that [Pabón] is of a state of mind different to that that was presented to them" during the direct and cross-examinations.

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<sup>15</sup> We have no idea why Marcia's and José's lawyers kept talking about Pabón's competency at the time of Adam's murder. And we suspect the judge had no idea either. That is because criminals can commit crimes while incompetent — they just cannot (generally speaking) face certain criminal processes since incompetents cannot make a defense. See Indiana v. Edwards, 554 U.S. 164, 170 (2008).

Aurea's counsel jumped back in and noted why she had questioned Pabón about the plea hearing. Pabón had answered "yes" when asked at the plea proceeding whether he had had "psychiatric treatment," her lawyer said. So "we cross-examined him extensively on that issue, because there is a record after that . . . plea [hearing] of years of [him] saying that he is not well, and taking X, Y, and Z for years." Making this point again, Aurea's attorney said that "[f]or years [Pabón] took medicines, treatment, and he himself asked for it, saying that he heard voices, saying that he saw things" — which "is why we went into that issue."

At the end of the government's case the judge took judicial notice and advised the jury that

on June 13, 2008, [Pabón] entered a plea of guilty in Criminal Case Number 08-216, which is this case. During the plea and at the end of the hearing, the [c]ourt found [Pabón] competent and capable of entering an informed plea on this date.

The judge repeated that instruction in his final charge. And after telling the jurors that witness credibility was entirely a matter of their judgment — and thus they did "not have to accept the testimony of any witness if" they found the witness "not credible" — the judge instructed the jurors that "the final decision whether

or not to accept" a judicially noticed fact was theirs "to make" and that they did not have "to agree with the [c]ourt."<sup>16</sup>

Forgoing any relevance-based grounds on appeal, the defendants use different legal frameworks here to contest the judge's taking judicial notice of Pabón's competency to plead guilty. Aurea characterizes her challenge as one of instructional error (focusing on the judge's final charge), Marcia's as part of a broader pattern of judicial bias, and José's as one of evidentiary error. The standard of review applicable to each of those challenges is abuse of discretion. See United States v. Cantwell, 64 F.4th 396, 409-10 (1st Cir. 2023) (instructional challenge); Raymundí-Hernández, 984 F.3d at 145 (judicial-bias challenge); United States v. Vázquez-Soto, 939 F.3d 365, 373 (1st Cir. 2019) (evidentiary challenge). Noting that the root cause of the claimed error is the judge's judicial-notice taking, the government treats the defendants' attacks as a freestanding judicial-notice challenge — which also gets abuse-of-discretion review. See United States v. Bello, 194 F.3d 18, 23 (1st Cir. 1999). No party disagrees with the government's approach. So we follow that approach too.

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<sup>16</sup> For what it is worth, the defendants had argued that "[t]he first thing the [g]overnment will do in closing" will be to "say, hey, members of the jury, the judge said that [Pabón] was competent." But the government did nothing of the sort.

A judge may judicially notice an "adjudicative fact" – i.e., a fact that is "particularly related" to the parties' proceeding – if the fact is "not subject to reasonable dispute" in that it is either "generally known within the trial court's territorial jurisdiction" or "can be accurately and readily determined from sources whose accuracy cannot reasonably be questioned." See Fed. R. Evid. 201(b).<sup>17</sup> In a criminal case, a judge who judicially notices an adjudicative fact must "instruct the jury that it may or may not accept the noticed fact as conclusive." See id. 201(f). This rider protects the jury's traditional right to discount even an uncontested fact in reaching a verdict and so prevents the judge from violating a defendant's constitutional jury right by directing a verdict on that fact. See, e.g., United States v. Dávila-Nieves, 670 F.3d 1, 8 (1st Cir. 2012); Bello, 194 F.3d at 25.

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<sup>17</sup> The "particularly related" quote comes from a leading legal dictionary. See Black's Law Dictionary (11th ed. 2019) (look up "adjudicative fact," which says "SEE FACT"; go to "fact," which provides a definition of "adjudicative fact"). Our caselaw says that "[a]djudicative fact is . . . a fuzzy concept (indeed, there is more than one usage, and [Evidence] Rule 201's advisory committee notes do little more than borrow – and may well misconceive – . . . several formulations: e.g., facts concerning the immediate parties." United States v. Hilton, 257 F.3d 50, 55 (1st Cir. 2001). But no one doubts that the judge here judicially noticed an adjudicative fact. See generally United States v. Bauzó-Santiago, 867 F.3d 13, 23 (1st Cir. 2017) (holding that a fact on the docket "is a proper subject of judicial notice").

The defendants do not contest the fact that in 2008 the judge found Pabón competent to plead guilty (a transcript of Pabón's plea hearing appears in the joint appendix filed in this appeal). Nor do they dispute that this fact clearly appears in the court's records. Instead they contend that the judge's judicial-notice taking "placed the prestige of the [c]ourt behind the mental competence of Pabón" and so endorsed his "credibility and bolstered his testimony" in 2018. And pointing to the judge's "I have to balance the equities" comment, they suggest that the notice offset their bid to destroy Pabón's "credibility" on cross by "impermissibly" presenting his "competen[cy]" "as a proven fact" that the jury "could not" contest. But their thesis rests on an incorrect premise – namely, that by judicially noticing Pabón's *competency* to plead guilty in 2008, the judge vouched for the *credibility* of Pabón's trial testimony a decade later in 2018. Explaining why we think this will require a bit of unpacking (please bear with us).

Competency and credibility are different concepts in important respects. Compare Competency, Black's Law Dictionary (11th ed. 2019) (defined as "[t]he mental ability to understand problems and make decisions," which in the criminal-law context includes a defendant's "fitness to plead" or "to stand trial"), and Competence, id. (defined as "[a] basic or minimal ability to

do something; qualification, esp[ecially] to testify"),<sup>18</sup> with Credibility, Black's Law Dictionary (11th ed. 2019) (defined as "[t]he quality that makes something" – like "a witness" – "worthy of belief"), and Witness, sub-definition for "credible witness" (defined as "[a] witness whose testimony is believable"). One can be competent to testify yet still testify with no credibility, for example. Competency (if contested) is for the judge, not the jury. See United States v. Devin, 918 F.2d 280, 291-92 (1st Cir. 1990). But credibility is for the jury, not the judge.<sup>19</sup> See United States v. Alicea, 205 F.3d 480, 483 (1st Cir. 2000).

Now give the at-issue judicial notice another read:

[O]n June 13, 2008, [Pabón] entered a plea of guilty in Criminal Case Number 08-216, which is this case. During the plea and at the end of the hearing, the [c]ourt found [Pabón] competent and capable of entering an informed plea on this date.

What jumps out is that in giving the jury context for the plea's acceptance despite (as the defense showed) Pabón's getting psychiatric treatment then, the judge carefully limited the notice

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<sup>18</sup> See generally District of Columbia v. Arms, 107 U.S. 519, 521-22 (1883) (stating that even "a person affected with insanity is admissible as a witness if he has sufficient understanding to apprehend the obligation of an oath, and to be capable of giving a correct account of the matters which he has seen or heard in reference to the questions at issue") (cleaned up).

<sup>19</sup> If anyone is wondering, no defendant questioned Pabón's competency to appear as a witness or moved to strike his testimony.

to Pabón's *plea competency* in 2008 – *i.e.*, to his "entering an informed plea on th[at] date" (emphasis added). The judge said nothing about Pabón's *trial credibility* in 2018 – the phrase "trial credibility in 2018" (or one like it) is nowhere to be found there. So Pabón's trial credibility still remained a disputed fact.

Yet the defendants still think that the judge's notice "convey[ed] to the jurors that [Pabón] was not crazy," when he instead "should have allowed the jury to come to its own conclusion." But their claim butts up against the judge's explicit instructions that the jurors (and they alone) remained the evaluators of witness credibility and so did not "have to accept the testimony of any witness" they found "not credible."<sup>20</sup> And

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<sup>20</sup> Under the heading "Number of witnesses," the judge instructed the jury in part:

You do not have to accept the testimony of any witness if you find the witness is not credible. You must decide which witnesses to believe and which facts are true. To do this, you must look at all the evidence, drawing upon your common sense and personal experience.

You may want to take into consideration such factors as the witnesses' conduct and demeanor while testifying; their apparent fairness or any bias they may have displayed; any interest you may discern that they may have in the outcome of the case; any prejudice they may have shown; their opportunities for seeing and knowing the things about which they testified; the reasonableness or unreasonableness of the events that they have related to you in their testimony; and any other facts or circumstances disclosed by the evidence that tend to corroborate or contradict their versions of the events.

these instructions – which the law presumes they followed, see United States v. Stewart-Carrasquillo, 997 F.3d 408, 423 (1st Cir. 2021) – did not carve out an exception for Pabón.

As if to make this more emphatic, both the government and the defense (seemingly following the judge's lead) acted like Pabón's credibility – his *believability* – remained a question for the jury even after the judge gave the disputed notice. A prosecutor, for example, told the jurors during closing argument

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And under the heading "Credibility of witnesses," the judge instructed the jury as follows:

In deciding what the facts are, you may have to decide what testimony you believe and what testimony you do not believe. You may believe everything a witness says or only part of it or none of it. In deciding what to believe, you may consider a number of factors, including the following: The witness' ability to see or hear or know the things the witness testifies to; number two, the quality of the witness' memory; number three, the witness' manner while testifying; four, whether the witness has an interest in the outcome of the case or any motive, bias or prejudice; five, whether the witness is contradicted by anything the witness said or wrote before the trial or by other evidence; and six, how reasonable the witness' testimony is when considered in light of other evidence which you believe.

You are to judge the credibility of all witnesses fairly and reasonably, and you are to consider any interest that each of them may have in the outcome of the case in determining the weight to be given to their testimony.

Therefore, after evaluating all the evidence, and a particular witness' testimony pursuant to this instruction, you have three choices: You believe him or her totally; you reject his or her testimony totally or; you believe him or her partially.

that "[i]t is your duty to *adjudge credibility* and determine what to believe" (emphasis added) – without excepting Pabón. Not to be outdone, a defense lawyer told them that "Alex El Loco" had "no *credibility*" but "that is up to you to *decide*" (emphases added). The defense's closings also pushed the crazy-Pabón-has-no-credibility theme with gusto, telling the jurors that "Alex El Loco" "is a fantasiz[ing]" "psychopath" who is "detached from reality," "was prescribed psychotic drugs" for a very long time, and "does not deserve an iota of *credibility*" – so "[t]ake care when you weigh his *testimony*" (emphases added). Which caused a prosecutor during rebuttal closing argument to highlight evidence "corroborat[ing]" Pabón's "testimony" (the prosecutor's words, not ours), a significant development that – because "[c]orroboration goes to *credibility*," see Robinson v. Pezzat, 818 F.3d 1, 9 (D.C. Cir. 2016) – further shows how everyone (the judge, the government, and the defense) believed Pabón's credibility remained a live issue for the jury even after the judge gave the contested notice.

The defendants' briefs might be read to say that the jury did not know the difference between competency and credibility. José, for example, claims that the judge botched things by not instructing the jury "what it meant to be found competent to plead guilty." Damaging to their position, however, is that they give us no sign that they ever asked the judge to

instruct the jury on the difference between competency and credibility. Anyway, any confusion about the scope of the judicial notice got straightened out by the judge's multiple charges to the jurors (which the law assumes they obeyed, as we keep saying, see Stewart-Carrasquillo, 997 F.3d at 423), like how they "should consider [Pabón's] testimony with *particular caution*" and how they remained the *sole deciders* of witness credibility, meaning they – as the exclusive finders of fact – did "not have to accept the testimony of *any witness*" (no Pabón carve-out exception) if they found the witness "not credible" (emphases added). And even after those instructions, the defendants (as we just intimated) still did not ask the judge to clarify the difference between competency and credibility.

So on this record we cannot say that the judge's judicial notice represents an abuse of discretion – which would require us to hold that "no reasonable person" could have done what this judge did.<sup>21</sup> See Rivera-Carrasquillo, 933 F.3d at 44.

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<sup>21</sup> Since we reject the defendants' arguments on these grounds, we need not reach (and take no position on) the government's additional claim that we can uphold the judge's action because he repeatedly told the jurors that they could – per Evidence Rule 201 – disregard any judicially noticed fact. See generally PDK Labs. Inc. v. DEA, 362 F.3d 786, 799 (D.C. Cir. 2004) (Roberts, J., concurring in part and concurring in the judgment) (declaring that "if it is not necessary to decide more, it is necessary not to decide more").

Siding with the defense, the dissent raises some concerns.<sup>22</sup> But they do not change the outcome.

The dissent dismisses our mentioning how the judge directed the jurors to a specific moment in time – 2008, *not* 2018 – involving a specific subject – competency, *not* credibility – and later instructed that they should view Pabón's testimony with special care and could reject "any witness['s]" account as the absolute arbiters of witness credibility (emphasis added). In the dissent's telling, the judge's "intervention . . . created the unacceptable risk that the jurors understood the . . . notice of the [2008] competency finding to reflect the . . . judge's view that Pabón's mental illness did not make" his 2018 trial testimony "untrustworthy – regardless of the jur[or]s' perception of his [2018] performance on the witness stand." In other words, "[b]y instructing the jury on its finding of Pabón's competence in 2008, the judge was inescapably telling the jury that [that] finding was relevant to the jury's evaluation of Pabón's credibility at trial" in 2018 – or so the dissent believes.

Two responses. One is that – as we showed five paragraphs above (beginning "As if to make this more emphatic . . .") – everyone operated below on the view that the credibility

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<sup>22</sup> The "dissent" refers to the opinion that follows ours, concurring in part and dissenting in part.

of *all* witnesses remained a jury question even after the judge gave the challenged notice. Another – deeply embedded in our jurisprudence (and this should sound familiar by now) – is that jurors can and do make distinctions among the different issues at trial and follow judges' instructions, see Stewart-Carrasquillo, 997 F.3d at 423 – including those saying that *they* decide who is credible, based on factors like *their* perception of a witness's "ability to see or hear or know the things the witness testifies to" and "the witness'[s] manner while testifying" (quotes pulled from the instructions displayed a few footnotes ago). Our bottom-line view is that the judge's instructions could not be any clearer that the jurors got to make all *credibility* decisions and that the judicial notice's mention of Pabón's *competency* concerned only a finding of his *competency* when he pled guilty in 2008. And (allow us to say again, because it bears repeating) if the defendants felt that the credibility instructions might mystify the jurors when paired with the notice's competency reference, then it was on them to ask for clarification on the difference between credibility and competency. Yet they never did.

The dissent next claims that the-jurors-decide-credibility charge could not "cure the harm from the" judge's "error." And as support, the dissent leans on Raymundí-Hernández.

But there are important night-and-day differences between that case and the defendants'.

Among other "intercessions," see 984 F.3d at 154, the district judge there said "before the jury" that the testimony of a then-testifying defense witness "[wa]s not relevant," id. at 147. Raymundí-Hernández did hold that "where the reliability of witness testimony is so strongly implicated . . . 'such interference with jury fact-finding cannot be cured by standard jury instructions,'" id. at 153-54 (quoting United States v. Tilghman, 134 F.3d 414, 421 (D.C. Cir. 1998)) — including instructions saying that witness credibility is for the jury, see id. at 149-50. But Raymundí-Hernández did not involve judicial notice. Plus nothing like the fact-finding interference that happened there happened here, where (as we have been at pains to stress) the judge's words focused the jurors on Pabón's plea competence in 2008 — not his testimonial credibility a decade later in 2018.<sup>23</sup>

The dissent tries to downplay the significance of the lawyers' "treat[ing] Pabón's credibility as a live issue" during closing arguments, writing that "[i]t is certainly no surprise"

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<sup>23</sup> Perhaps we should say that no one argues here that the judge violated Evidence Rule 403 (recall the probative worth/unfair prejudice analysis discussed above) by judicially noticing Pabón's plea competency in 2008.

that they "argued that point." As the dissent sees it, "[t]he problem with the judicial notice in this case is not that the district court entirely preempted the jury's factfinding on Pabón's credibility, but that it weighed in on the government's behalf." But that theory depends on the same plea-competency-in-2008-implicates-testimonial-credibility-in-2018 idea that we cannot accept, for the reasons already given.

And that is that for the judicial-notice matter (though we should add that because we see no abuse of discretion, we – unlike the dissent – need not run through harmless error here).

## VI

### **Constructive Amendment and Prejudicial Variance**

Aurea claims that the government's closing arguments and the judge's jury instructions constructively amended the indictment. Marcia claims that the government's proof constructively amended or prejudicially varied from the indictment.

A constructive amendment (roughly speaking) occurs when either the government (typically through evidence presentation or argument) or the judge (typically through jury instructions) changes the indictment's terms to the point that the defendants are "effectively charged with" a crime different from "the one returned by the grand jury." See United States v. Katana, 93 F.4th 521, 530 (1st Cir. 2024); see also United States v. Condron, 98

F.4th 1, 24 (1st Cir. 2024). A prejudicial variance (also roughly speaking) occurs when there is a difference between the facts charged and the facts proved that affected the defendants' "substantial rights," say by surprising them at trial or by exposing them to the risk of double jeopardy. See Condron, 98 F.4th at 24-25; see also Katana, 93 F.4th at 530.

**A**  
**Aurea's Arguments**

Aurea presents two constructive-amendment arguments.

The first argument is that the government's comment in closing arguments that cellphones and cars are facilities of interstate commerce shows a "changed . . . theory as to the interstate commerce facility." Exactly how Aurea does not clearly say. But as the government notes without contradiction, this is an unpreserved contention that prompts (at most) plain-error review. See United States v. McBride, 962 F.3d 25, 31 (1st Cir. 2020). And because Aurea "do[es] not tie this unpreserved . . . argument to the demanding plain-error standard," she has "waived it." See Rivera-Carrasquillo, 933 F.3d at 49 n.15.

The second argument — which the parties treat as preserved (and so will we) — is that the judge instructed the jurors that Aurea stood trial only for the counts in the original indictment but that they could consider overt acts alleged in the second superseding indictment. Put aside that she identifies no

overt acts in the second superseding indictment that would fundamentally alter the charging terms of her indictment. Her claim at bottom rests on the idea that the jury could have convicted her under the second superseding indictment rather than the first. But the judge's repeated instructions — which we presume the jury followed, see Chisholm, 940 F.3d at 129 — that Aurea faced trial on the original indictment throw cold water on that proposition.

**B**  
**Marcia's Arguments**

Marcia contends that Pabón's testimony that she was at El Hamburger — which the second superseding indictment does not specifically mention — constructively amended or prejudicially varied from the operative indictment.<sup>24</sup>

Starting with Marcia's constructive-amendment claim, the government again says without pushback that she did not preserve that theory. Which means review is (at best) for plain error. See United States v. DeCicco, 439 F.3d 36, 44 (1st Cir. 2006). But by making no effort to show plain error, she waived it. See Rivera-Carrasquillo, 933 F.3d at 49 n.15.

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<sup>24</sup> Among the many overt acts alleged, the indictment said that Aurea and José "met with Pabón . . . at a restaurant in Puerta de Tierra" — El Hamburger — on September 21, 2005, "and proposed that [he] murder [Adam], in exchange for" \$3 million.

And Marcia's prejudicial-variance theory — which the parties treat as preserved (and so will we) — goes nowhere too. An indictment (as we intimated at the beginning of this discussion) must say enough so a defendant knows the charges and can plead double jeopardy in any later prosecution for the same crime. See, e.g., Katana, 93 F.4th at 530. But prosecutors need not list all of their evidence in the indictment. See, e.g., United States v. Marrero-Ortiz, 160 F.3d 768, 773 (1st Cir. 1998). Nor must they limit themselves at trial to the overt acts in that document. See id. Getting back to this case, the second superseding indictment gave Marcia notice that prosecutors would present evidence of her meeting with Pabón before Adam's murder. As a "manner and means" of the conspiracy, the indictment stated (emphasis ours) that Aurea, Marcia, and José "approach[ed] . . . Pabón . . . , and propose[d] that he murder" Adam and "met with Pabón . . . on several occasions, . . . to discuss the particulars of the murder for hire." The indictment also alleged as an overt act that on September 21, 2005 — the date of the El Hamburger meet-up — Aurea, Marcia, and José "agreed that Pabón . . . would be notified of the specific location, date, and time of the murder of [Adam]." And the statement of facts in Pabón's plea agreement — submitted as an exhibit below — said (again emphasis ours) that Aurea, Marcia, and José "all boarded Aurea's SUV . . . and drove to a nearby

restaurant in Puerta de Tierra known as El Hamburger." So because Marcia "cannot credibly claim surprise," her variance argument fails for lack of prejudice. See id.; see also United States v. Rivera-Donate, 682 F.3d 120, 130 (1st Cir. 2012) (making a similar point in rejecting a variance argument because "[a]lthough the indictment did not spell out every single location at which activities related to the conspiracy took place, it gave a sufficient description of the manner and means of the same to put [the defendant] on notice of the charges against him").

**VII**  
**Death Resulted**

The defendants also ask us to vacate their sentences because the judge did not have the jury specifically find that a death resulted from the murder-for-hire scheme.

The murder-for-hire statute punishes offenders on a sliding scale. If no injury occurs, they can get up to 10 years in prison. If an injury does occur, they can get up to 20 years in prison. And if death occurs, they can get death or life in prison. See 18 U.S.C. § 1958(a). The defendants are right that other than the fact of a prior conviction, any fact that controls minimum and maximum sentences must be alleged in the indictment and found by the jury beyond a reasonable doubt. See United States v. Rabb, 5 F.4th 95, 104 (1st Cir. 2021); see also Burrage v.

United States, 571 U.S. 204, 210 (2014). But they are wrong to think that their argument is a winner.

Using the more defendant-friendly harmless-error standard (rather than the less defendant-friendly plain-error model), see United States v. Pizarro, 772 F.3d 284, 296-97 (1st Cir. 2014), we "conclude[] beyond reasonable doubt that the omitted" death-results "element was uncontested and supported by overwhelming evidence, such that the jury verdict would have been the same absent the error," see id. at 297-98 (quotation marks omitted). The operative indictments charged the defendants with conspiring to commit murder for hire "result[ing]" in "the death of Adam Joel Anhang Uster." The judge read the indictments to the jury during his preliminary and final instructions, including the allegations that the death of Adam resulted. And as reflected on the verdict forms, the jury found each defendant guilty "as charged." But put that away. The defendants conceded at trial that Adam died at Pabón's hands. Lawyers for Aurea and Marcia, for example, told the jury in their opening statements that "[t]he evidence will show that Adam died" (Aurea's lawyer) and that Pabón "brutally murdered Adam" (Marcia's lawyer). And to give another example, counsel for each defendant relied on this concession to convince the judge to limit the government's use of a murder-scene video that showed Adam's dead body lying on the street. A

representative quote is Aurea's lawyer's saying that because "[t]here is no issue" that Adam "is dead," the video need not come in. More, Pabón testified about how he took Adam's life; a forensic pathologist testified about how Adam died; a lawyer testified about how Aurea sued Adam's parents to recover her claimed share of her "deceased" husband's estate; and José testified about how he felt after learning of Adam's death (among other evidence). And more still (as the judge noted at sentencing), no witness testified that Adam did *not* die. See United States v. Razo, 782 F.3d 31, 40 (1st Cir. 2015) (concluding that "a 'reasonable jury necessarily would have found an aggravating [drug-quantity] element beyond a reasonable doubt' even though it was not asked to do so," noting that the defendant "point[ed] to no evidence contradicting the drug quantities testified to at trial" and never "assert[ed] that he was responsible for a lower quantity" (quoting Pizarro, 772 F.3d at 296)).

Trying to distinguish his case from Pizarro, José says (emphasis ours) that there was "no overwhelming evidence about his *participation* in the murder." Marcia seems to make a similar argument for herself. But the harmless-error analysis here focuses on the omitted aggravating element that a death resulted from the charged crime, not on other elements of the offense.

**VIII**  
**Mental Health**

Aurea, Marcia, and José contest a bunch of post-trial rulings rejecting claims for relief based on Pabón's mental health.

**A**  
**Background**

To get to the issues we must first sort through a fairly complicated procedural history (some of which we have already touched on).

Pabón pled guilty in June 2008 to conspiring to commit murder for hire resulting in Adam's death. Because his sentence depended on his "substantial assistance to the United States and [his] truthful testimony" in the defendants' case, particularly after "the cross-examination and all of the evidence," the judge did not set a sentencing date (again, Pabón's sentencing judge was the defendants' trial judge).

The defendants' trial began and ended in 2018. They got sentenced in 2019. And they timely appealed their convictions and sentences. Pabón remained unsentenced because his lawyer had concerns about his competency (a defendant must be competent at all stages of the prosecution, including sentencing, see Droepe v. Missouri, 420 U.S. 162, 181 (1975)). What happened was Pabón sent letters to José's and Aurea's lawyers in June 2019 (about three months after the defendants' sentencing) promising "helpful"

information for each client's appeal. At Pabón's lawyer's *ex parte* request the judge in July 2019 issued an *ex parte* order for a competency evaluation.

Aurea, Marcia, and José later learned about the *ex parte* order and the letters that had triggered it. They also learned that before trial Pabón had told prosecutors "in a very excited fashion that he did not want to cooperate[;] that he had had a plan all along that he was going to break the plea agreement in court[;] and that he was not wanting to cooperate any longer" – information prosecutors shared with the judge (in an *ex parte* sidebar at trial), but not with the defendants.

The defendants then asked us in September 2019 to remand their pending appeals so that the judge could assess Pabón's letters – which they described as "impeachment evidence." They also argued that the government's "fail[ure] to disclose [this] evidence at trial, which appear[ed] to be related to [Pabón's] lack of competence," had not been "presented below" and "should be first addressed by the [d]istrict [c]ourt."

Before we ruled on that remand motion, the Bureau of Prisons ("BOP") in September 2019 released its court-ordered competency evaluation of Pabón. The psychologist diagnosed him with "Schizophrenia, Continuous." According to the psychologist, Pabón was "experiencing symptoms of a psychotic disorder that do

substantially impair his present ability to understand the nature and consequences of the court proceedings brought against him, and substantially impair his ability to properly assist counsel in a defense." The psychologist also noted that in November 2008, Pabón had been diagnosed with "Schizophrenia, Delusional Type" while in BOP custody. And the psychologist ultimately "recommended that [Pabón] be transferred to a federal medical center for competency restoration treatment." Acting on Pabón's counsel's motion, the judge ordered Pabón to undergo that treatment.

Days after the evaluation's release, we denied the defendants' remand motion in October 2019, but "without prejudice to [their] following the procedures set forth in Fed. R. Crim. P. 37 and Fed. R. App. P. 12.1."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Fed. R. Crim. P. 37 provides:

- (a) **Relief Pending Appeal.** If a timely motion is made for relief that the court lacks authority to grant because of an appeal that has been docketed and is pending, the court may:
  - (1) defer considering the motion;
  - (2) deny the motion; or
  - (3) state either that it would grant the motion if the court of appeals remands for that purpose or that the motion raises a substantial issue.
- (b) **Notice to the Court of Appeals.** The movant must promptly notify the circuit clerk under Federal Rule of Appellate Procedure 12.1 if the district court states

In November 2019 – more than a year after their trial – the defendants filed motions for indicative rulings under Criminal Rule 37. Marcia sought an indicative ruling on a new-trial motion alleging the government had violated its duties under Brady v. Maryland, 373 U.S. 83 (1963), by withholding Pabón's prison medical records (including his 2008 schizophrenia diagnosis) and had ignored its obligations under Giglio v. United States, 405 U.S. 150 (1972), by suppressing the "impeachment evidence." Because

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that it would grant the motion or that the motion raises a substantial issue.

(c) **Remand.** The district court may decide the motion if the court of appeals remands for that purpose.

And Fed. R. App. P. 12.1 says:

(a) **Notice to the Court of Appeals.** If a timely motion is made in the district court for relief that it lacks authority to grant because of an appeal that has been docketed and is pending, the movant must promptly notify the circuit clerk if the district court states either that it would grant the motion or that the motion raises a substantial issue.

(b) **Remand After an Indicative Ruling.** If the district court states that it would grant the motion or that the motion raises a substantial issue, the court of appeals may remand for further proceedings but retains jurisdiction unless it expressly dismisses the appeal. If the court of appeals remands but retains jurisdiction, the parties must promptly notify the circuit clerk when the district court has decided the motion on remand.

Aurea – and *only* Aurea – had gotten Pabón's prison medical records before trial (unlike the other defendants, she had served the BOP with a subpoena after the judge had ordered the records turned over), she sought an indicative ruling on a new-trial motion claiming "newly discovered evidence" about Pabón's mental health after the trial and accusing the government of defying Brady/Giglio by not producing the "impeachment evidence." Marcia and Aurea also argued that they had a right to an independent psychiatric examination of Pabón, post-trial discovery, and an evidentiary hearing. José joined their motions.

The following month – December 2019 – we granted the defendants' motion to stay their pending appeals in their criminal case. Of note, our order directed them to "file status reports every thirty days advising [us] of the status of the pending district court motions for indicative rulings."

The judge denied all the indicative-rulings motions in February 2020. But he then granted the defendants' motions to extend the "deadline" to file a reconsideration motion from March 6 to March 20, 2020. Responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, the District Court of Puerto Rico issued an order saying that "all deadlines originally set from March 16, 2020, to and including April 9, 2020 are extended until April 10, 2020."

The defendants filed status reports with us a little later, informing us about the judge's ruling.

Then on April 30, 2020, Marcia moved the judge for reconsideration and an evidentiary hearing. But the judge denied that "extremely overdue" motion on May 1, 2020, noting that Marcia had filed it "twenty days after the expiration of the District Court's mandated extension of deadlines." José moved three days later to join Marcia's untimely reconsideration motion. And the judge denied that motion too.

But those were not the only things that happened in May 2020. Aurea moved the judge for post-trial discovery on the "same matter" raised in her previously denied indicative-rulings bid – a motion Marcia and José joined as well. Before the judge ruled on that request, José appealed the February 2020 denial of the indicative-rulings motions. The judge then denied the post-trial-discovery motion. And Aurea and Marcia filed amended notices of appeal that same day. Aurea's amended notice challenged "all motions[] filed after the filing of [her] original notice of appeal" and "motions where a joinder was requested" but was "denied." Marcia's amended notice challenged "the district court's denial of "her . . . motions for [i]ndicative [r]ulings and her motion for reconsideration and its denial of a motion for post-conviction discovery, which [she] joined, among others."

The BOP completed Pabón's court-ordered competency-restoration treatment in June 2020. The psychologist diagnosed him with "antisocial personality disorder" but found he was "competent to proceed to" sentencing. That same month we lifted the "stay of appellate proceedings" given "the conclusion of the district court proceedings related to defendants' motions for indicative rulings."

After getting the June 2020 evaluation, Marcia moved the judge in August 2020 for an indicative ruling on a request for the appointment of an independent psychiatrist to evaluate Pabón, post-trial discovery of all documents "in the possession of the . . . BOP [p]sychologists," and an evidentiary hearing. The judge denied the motion the same day. And Marcia appealed that denial.

Taking a page from Marcia, Aurea moved the judge in September 2020 for an indicative ruling on a request that essentially mirrored Marcia's. The judge denied that motion too. And Aurea appealed that denial.

This brings us to October 2020. Concerned that José's May 2020 appeal might be untimely under Fed. R. App. P. 4(a)(1)(B), we ordered him "to move for voluntary dismissal of the appeal . . . , or to show cause, in writing, why this appeal should not

be dismissed."<sup>26</sup> José then dismissed his May 2020 appeal and filed a document in his appeal from the criminal trial asking us to "take notice" of the judge's February 2020 denial of the indicative-rulings motions.

December 2020 saw a flurry of activity. José asked us if he could file a separate addendum under seal in the appeal from his criminal trial. We granted his request but said that "[t]he merits panel w[ould] decide whether to consider the post-conviction orders contained in the supplemental addendum, which post-date defendant's direct appeal." Back in the district court Pabón's lawyer told the judge that Pabón had acted in ways that suggested he "may again be incompetent" to help his "defense." As support, counsel pointed to a letter Pabón had written him and the judge, which (in relevant part and reproduced as it appears in the record) began:

I: Alex Pabón Colón – star witness in the case of the Canadian multi-millionaire investor, ask for a new trial against the defendants. I know that I will be sentenced on December 16, 2020, and that I will be present that day since I am asking the

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<sup>26</sup> Fed. R. App. P. 4(a)(1)(B) requires that a defendant in a civil case file a notice of appeal within sixty days of the judgment or order appealed from. Our order should have referred to Fed. R. App. P. 4(b)(1)(A), which requires that a defendant in a criminal case file a notice of appeal within fourteen days of the judgment or order appealed from. But José's notice of appeal was late under either rule.

Honorable federal judge, Daniel Domínguez that he see a new trial.

Pabón added:

I admit there are two powerful families that have been putting a lot of pressure on me since the beginning of the case, even more so when I was asked to testify in the case in federal court, and those people that have been strongly pressuring me I strongly suspect that they have contracts with persons from my past.

Pabón continued:

I will need the federal authorities, the F.B.I., to conduct a full investigation by intercepting the calls they make from the first moment I sit to testify as well their emails up to this day. To me, my life has been full of worries since the moment these families have been harassing me. I will not show up on . . . the day of my sentencing. Because I want a new trial to be held to demonstrate to the court and the whole world everything that has happened to me.

And Pabón ended:

Therefore, please Counsel . . . don't insist on calling me for video conferences, because I will not attend, at my own expense. I am sick and tired of being harassed and I feel deceived in this case, which has been a nightmare to me. Enough abuse and I want a new trial.

The judge postponed Pabón's previously scheduled sentencing hearing "until such time as [Pabón could] be mentally evaluated."

Pointing to that letter Marcia asked the judge at December's end for "permission to file a motion" under Criminal Rule 37 "to request an evidentiary hearing . . . because of newly

discovered evidence." Aurea and José joined her motion. Before deciding that motion, the judge granted Pabón's lawyer's request and ordered the BOP to evaluate Pabón's competency for a third time.

As the calendar turned to January 2021 Aurea again asked the judge to appoint an independent psychiatrist to examine Pabón. And she "incorporate[d] the argument made in [her] previous filings." The judge denied that motion. And Aurea appealed that denial (she also purported to appeal the denial of her end-of-December motion, even though the judge would not deny it until April 2021).

Because the BOP did not conduct the third competency evaluation swiftly enough, the judge issued an order in April 2021 telling the agency to get to it. And the defendants jointly asked us to have the judge appoint an independent psychiatrist to evaluate Pabón and hold an evidentiary hearing to see if his "lack of competence and deficits in his ability to make rational decisions was of such importance that it should have been considered by the jury."

That takes us to July 2021. The BOP issued its third competency evaluation. The psychologist again diagnosed Pabón with "antisocial personality disorder" but found he "[did] not currently have a mental disease or defect that would render him

unable to understand the nature and consequences of the proceedings against him or to assist properly in his defense." A little later we denied the defendants' April 2021 motion pending before us (the one asking us to direct the judge to appoint an independent psychiatrist and conduct an evidentiary hearing) and told them to "place all of their appellate arguments and requests for relief in their opening briefs."

Another detail worth noting is that in April 2022 the judge sentenced Pabón to 228 months in prison plus 4 years of supervised release.

**B**  
**Arguments and Analysis**

Against this intricate backdrop, the defendants (some or all of them) present three groups of concerns for us to address. The first involves Pabón's 2019 competency evaluation, his 2019 letters to counsel, and the government's supposed Brady/Giglio infractions – issues that come here via the defendants' appeals from both the judge's denial of certain post-trial motions and their direct appeals from their criminal trial. The second involves Pabón's 2020 competency evaluation and his 2020 letter to his lawyer and the judge – issues that come here via Aurea's and Marcia's appeals from the judge's denial of their post-trial motions. And the third involves Pabón's 2021 competency evaluation – issues that come here via the defendants' direct appeals from

their criminal trial. For easy reference we label these groups (commonsensically but perhaps somewhat unimaginatively) as "First Group," "Second Group," and "Third Group." <sup>27</sup>

1  
**First Group**

We begin with the defendants' challenges involving Pabón's 2019 competency evaluation, his 2019 letters to counsel, and the government's alleged Brady/Giglio violations.

The defendants' initial attack centers on the judge's February 2020 denial of their post-trial requests under Criminal Rule 37 for indicative rulings on motions seeking (a) a new trial based on Brady/Giglio; (b) a new trial based on Pabón's 2019 competency evaluation and his 2019 letters to counsel; (c) the appointment of an independent psychiatrist to evaluate Pabón; (d) the grant of post-trial discovery of all documents related to the 2019 competency evaluation; and (e) an evidentiary hearing to assess the evidence.

The defendants appealed from the judge's February 2020 denial in May 2020. José withdrew his May 2020 appeal, however.

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<sup>27</sup> A quick housekeeping matter. The government also argues that "[b]ecause no defendant filed a timely appeal of the Indicative Ruling" below, the law-of-the-case doctrine bars each of them from now appealing their subsequent challenges to that ruling. But given the other bases we identify for ruling in the government's favor (which we announce shortly), we consider the argument moot and so express no opinion on the subject.

So his challenges to that denial are not before us (but even if they were, they would wash out for the same reasons his codefendants' challenges do – as we are about to show).<sup>28</sup>

Aurea and Marcia claim that their appeals are timely because (they write) nothing in Criminal Rule 37 or Appellate Rule 12.1 "requires that an additional notice of appeal be filed within [] 14 days of the denial of a request for an indicative ruling" (their belief is that they did not have to file any other notices of appeal beyond their original (and timely) 2019 notices of appeal from the criminal trial). But caselaw says that an additional appeal *is* required when a judge denies a motion pursuant to Criminal Rule 37. See Rivera-Carrasquillo, 933 F.3d at 50-52, 52 n.19 (affirming the denial of appellants' Criminal Rule 33 motion – filed through the indicative-ruling process – where the government "agree[d] with [appellants]" that they had filed timely notices of appeal from that denial); see also United States v. Graciani, 61 F.3d 70, 77 (1st Cir. 1995) (noting that "[i]f the district court denies the [Criminal Rule 33] motion" filed during the pendency of the direct appeal, "the defendant may take a

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<sup>28</sup> Our December 2021 order did say that the "[t]he merits panel w[ould] decide whether to consider the post-conviction orders contained in [José's] supplemental addendum, which post-date defendant's direct appeal." But José does not suggest that that order entitles him to appellate review of the judge's February 2020 decision. See Zannino, 895 F.2d at 17.

further appeal"); United States v. Fuentes-Lozano, 580 F.2d 724, 725-26 (5th Cir. 1978) (per curiam) (explaining that "[i]f upon hearing the [Criminal Rule 33] motion, the trial court is inclined to deny it, the court may do so; a separate appeal may then be taken from the denial of the motion and consolidated with the pending appeal"). See generally Jackson v. AT&T Ret. Sav. Plan, No. 21-30052, 2021 WL 2177674, at \*1 (5th Cir. Mar. 31, 2021) (per curiam) (dismissing a civil appeal from the denial of an "indicative ruling" on a Fed. R. Civ. P. 60(b) motion where the plaintiff's notice of appeal was untimely); Jordan v. Bowen, 808 F.2d 733, 736-37 (10th Cir. 1987) (holding that the denial of an "indicative ruling" on a Fed. R. Civ. P. Rule 60(b) motion filed while an appeal was pending was not before the court of appeals where "no appeal was taken" of that denial).<sup>29</sup> A party is only required to "promptly notify the circuit clerk" under Appellate Rule 12.1 if the district court says that it would grant the underlying motion or that the motion raises a substantial issue.

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<sup>29</sup> Fed. R. Civ. P. 62.1 is the civil counterpart to Criminal Rule 37. These rules have the same text. And Criminal Rule 37 explicitly "adopts . . . the practice that most courts follow when a party makes a motion under [Civil] Rule 60(b) . . . to vacate a judgment that is pending on appeal." Fed. R. Crim. P. 37 advisory committee's notes to 2011 amendment. We had already adopted Civil Rule 60(b)'s framework in the context of Criminal Rule 33 motions long before Criminal Rule 37 came on the scene. See Graciani, 61 F.3d at 77-78.

See Fed. R. Crim. P. 37(b); Fed. R. App. P. 12.1; see also United States v. Maldonado-Rios, 790 F.3d 62, 64-65 (1st Cir. 2015); United States v. Cardoza, 790 F.3d 247, 248-49 (1st Cir. 2015); Graciani, 61 F.3d at 77 (citing United States v. Frame, 454 F.2d 1136, 1138 (9th Cir. 1972) (per curiam) (stating that "[o]nly after the district court has heard the [Criminal Rule 33] motion and decided to grant it is it necessary to request a remand from the appellate court")).<sup>30</sup> So Aurea and Marcia had to – but did *not* – comply with Appellate Rule 4(b)(1). See United States v. Reyes-Santiago, 804 F.3d 453, 459 (1st Cir. 2015) (noting that "[i]n a criminal case, a defendant's notice of appeal must be filed in the district court within 14 days after the later of: (i) the entry of either the judgment or the order being appealed; or (ii) the filing of the government's notice of appeal," and adding that "the time limits in [Appellate] Rule 4(b), 'even if not

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<sup>30</sup> Citing Walsh v. Wellfleet Commc'ns, No. 20-16385, 2021 WL 4796537, at \*3 (9th Cir. Oct. 14, 2021), Marcia argues that another notice of appeal is not needed because an "indicative ruling [is] not an appealable final order." But even assuming one could read the judge's decision only as a refusal to *consider* their underlying motions (or as an *indication* that he would deny them if he had jurisdiction), we do not see how that helps the defendants. After all, the Walsh court held that it "lacked jurisdiction" to review an "indicative ruling [that] was not an appealable final order." See id. And Marcia says that our jurisdiction rests on 28 U.S.C. § 1291 – a statute that gives us "jurisdiction over appeals from final decisions and orders of the district courts within this circuit." See Royal Siam Corp. v. Chertoff, 484 F.3d 139, 142 (1st Cir. 2007) (emphasis added).

jurisdictional, are mandatory when raised by the government'" (quoting United States v. Gonzalez-Rodriguez, 777 F.3d 37, 40 n.4 (1st Cir. 2015))). Cf. Eberhart v. United States, 546 U.S. 12, 17 (2005) (confirming that certain "untimely notices of appeal [that] sprang from 'excusable neglect'" had to be "dismiss[ed] on the basis of untimeliness . . . because district courts must observe the clear limits of the Rules of Criminal Procedure when they are properly invoked" (quoting United States v. Robinson, 361 U.S. 220, 222 (1960))).

Aurea and Marcia next argue that their May 2020 appeals are timely because we never surrendered jurisdiction over their direct appeals from their criminal trial and because they complied with our October 2019 order denying their remand request "without prejudice to [their] following the procedures set forth in [Criminal Rule] 37 and [Appellate Rule] 12.1." But they cite no supporting authority for these never-surrendered-jurisdiction arguments. See Zannino, 895 F.2d at 17.

Aurea also tries to get mileage from our (a) December 2019 order staying the defendants' direct appeals from their criminal trial and ordering them to "file status reports every thirty days advising this court of the status of the pending district court motions for indicative rulings"; (b) March 2020 order continuing "the stay of [those direct] appeals" and requiring

the defendants to file "status reports every thirty days advising this court of the status of the district court proceedings related to defendants' motions for indicative rulings"; and (c) June 2020 order lifting the stay of the appellate proceedings because the events related to the motions for indicative rulings in the district court had concluded. But *none* of these orders purport either to excuse the defendants from appealing from the denial of their motions for post-trial relief or to (as Marcia seems to suggest) toll the time they could take a timely appeal from them (also the June 2020 order Aurea cites came *after* their May 2020 appeals).<sup>31</sup> And – on top of that problem – they cite no authority supporting their views. See Zannino, 895 F.2d at 17.

Aurea and Marcia reckon that their May 2020 appeals are timely because we "accepted" their notices and "consolidated" them with their direct appeals from their criminal trial. But they again offer no supporting authority for that idea. See id.

Marcia contends that her May 2020 appeal is timely because Appellate Rule 4(a)(1)(B)'s 60-day window to appeal applied and because she filed that appeal soon after the judge

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<sup>31</sup> To the extent the defendants think that our July 2021 order directing them to "place all of their appellate arguments and requests for relief in their opening briefs" makes a difference, they would be wrong – because that order came *after* the May 2020 appeals as well.

"accepted and entertained" her motion for reconsideration. But as already noted, Appellate Rule 4(a)(1)(B) refers to *civil* appeals and so does not apply here. As for her reconsideration-based argument, the judge deemed her reconsideration motion "extremely overdue," having been filed "twenty days" late. And "*an untimely motion for reconsideration . . . [is] a nullity and [will] not toll the time in which to appeal even though the court considered and denied the motion on its merits.*" Feinstein v. Moses, 951 F.2d 16, 18 (1st Cir. 1991) (first and second alterations in original) (emphasis added) (quoting Flint v. Howard, 464 F.2d 1084, 1086 (1st Cir. 1972)).

Marcia argues as well that the government waived the timeliness challenge by waiting until its opening brief to make it. But she provides no authority *requiring* the government to object to the untimeliness of an appeal — an issue solely within a court of appeals's purview — before it files its opening brief. Maybe that is because other courts have held the opposite of what she argues. See, e.g., United States v. Singletary, 471 F.3d 193, 196 (D.C. Cir. 2006); United States v. Sadler, 480 F.3d 932, 940-41 (9th Cir. 2007); United States v. Garduño, 506 F.3d 1287, 1292 (10th Cir. 2007); United States v. Sealed Appellant, 304 F. App'x 282, 284 (5th Cir. 2008); United States v. Lopez, 562 F.3d 1309, 1313 (11th Cir. 2009). And while the government may waive such an

objection by not making the objection in its opening brief, see Reyes-Santiago, 804 F.3d at 459-60, no such problem occurred here.

Aurea and Marcia also assert that we should "exercise [our] discretion" and review their challenges to the denial of their motions under Appellate Rule 4(b)(4)'s "excusable neglect standard." But they make no developed argument that we have that kind of discretion when the government properly invokes the *mandatory* claims-processing rule of Appellate Rule 4(b)(1). Marcia does cite United States v. Randall, 666 F.3d 1238 (11th Cir. 2011), where an appellate court exercised discretion to consider an untimely appeal. But there – unlike here – the government did *not* invoke the "inflexible claim-processing rule" (Randall involved an application for a certificate of appealability, which per that circuit's rules meant the government could not file a response brief unless the court of appeals okayed it). See id. at 1241.

The defendants also touch on some of these or similar claims as part of their direct appeals from their criminal trial.

For example, the defendants argue that the judge abused his discretion at the 2018 trial by not appointing an independent psychiatrist to see if Pabón could testify competently. They also fault the judge for concluding in his 2020 indicative ruling that Pabón's behavior in the decade after the 2008 plea hearing did not

spark suspicions about his competency in 2018 – a glaring error (the argument continues) because BOP medical records show him diagnosed as schizophrenic five months after that hearing. But no defendant cites any record evidence showing that the defense contested Pabón's competency before or during the 2018 trial. And no defendant argues that these challenges survive plain-error analysis. See Rivera-Carrasquillo, 933 F.3d at 49 n.15. The defendants could be seen as suggesting that the judge had an *independent* duty to investigate Pabón's competency to testify in 2018. That suggestion is possible given claims (like those in José's brief) that the judge (a) knew before the trial that Pabón had undergone psychiatric treatment a decade earlier (information that emerged from the 2008 plea hearing); (b) heard on the eve of trial that Pabón had "excited[ly]" told prosecutors that he planned on breaking the plea agreement and would not cooperate any further; and (c) saw at trial that Pabón had testified "vague[ly], bizarre[ly], contradictorily and unresponsive[ly]." But they do not substantiate any independent-duty suggestion with supporting authority. See Zannino, 895 F.2d at 17.

Aurea somewhat relatedly argues that the judge erred by "hastily determin[ing Pabón] was competent to plead [guilty in 2008] without any further inquiry of mental conditions or even asking what medication he was taking." But she develops no

argument that she can contest a judge's finding that another person could competently plead guilty in a proceeding that pre-dates her trial by ten years (*i.e.*, that she has "standing" to make that claim, if you will). See id.

Marcia and José also make Brady/Giglio claims as part of their direct appeals from their criminal trial. According to them,

[t]he issue of intentional conduct by the government in refusing to produce the medical records of [Pabón] and the government's intentional conduct to hide the Giglio impeachment material occurred shortly before and during trial and as such, both issues of misconduct are part of the original appeal as they relate directly to the original judgment in that case.

José also contends that the issue of "the prosecution's intentional misconduct" is properly before us because the defendants raised it in their September 2019 remand motion. And Marcia argues that our considering her Brady/Giglio claims would not "surprise" the government because she hyped them in the same joint remand motion José mentioned and because the general "issue of the prosecutors' misconduct was raised at the [d]istrict [c]ourt before sentencing," even though the Brady/Giglio arguments "w[ere] not specifically raised [in] the [d]istrict [c]ourt before sentencing." But they did not preserve their Brady/Giglio challenges in their direct appeals from their criminal trial,

because the September 2019 remand motion that they spotlight came after their direct appeals from their criminal trial.

Aurea develops no argument that her Giglio claim is part of her direct appeal from her criminal trial. See Zannino, 895 F.2d at 17. She also admits that she received the medical records at the center of Marcia and José's Brady claim. And she does not dispute that those same medical records included Pabón's 2008 diagnosis of schizophrenia. Instead she insists that those records also show that before "trial [Pabón] was evaluated at his own request and diagnosed as not having a mental defect" and "the entry in said records is to the effect that [he] has no history of a mental condition." Pivoting off that claim, she argues that the "[medical] records with a false diagnoses [sic] unfairly prejudiced [her] defense . . . and deprived her of a fair trial and due process rights." But she did not preserve this theory through her direct appeal from her criminal trial. So we can review it at most (if at all) for plain error. And because she does not try to address the plain-error test, she waived it. See Rivera-Carrasquillo, 933 F.3d at 49 n.15.

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**Second Group**

With that (and at long last) we switch to Aurea's and Marcia's challenges involving Pabón's 2020 competency evaluation and his 2020 letter to his counsel and the judge – challenges that

attack the judge's denials of their motions for indicative rulings to permit post-trial discovery based on that evaluation (which changed Pabón's diagnosis from schizophrenia to antisocial personality disorder), appoint an independent psychiatrist to examine Pabón, and hold an evidentiary hearing based on both the evaluation and the letter. The appeals raising these issues are docketed separately from the direct appeals from the criminal trial.<sup>32</sup>

What sinks Aurea's and Marcia's claims, however, is that they failed to develop them. For example, they do not cite any authority explaining either how evidence of Pabón's then-present competence in 2020 to help his own defense shows he lacked competence to testify against them in 2018 or how they can force him to undergo an independent psychiatric evaluation. See Zannino, 895 F.2d at 17.

Aurea does say that her request for post-trial discovery is "predicated on due process rights integral to exercising the substantive right that [Fed. R. Crim. P. 33(a)] creates for 'a new

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<sup>32</sup> José joined at least one of Marcia's and Aurea's motions below. But he did not appeal any of the judge's motion denials. So his challenges to Pabón's 2020 competency evaluation and his 2020 letter are not before us.

trial i[f] the interest of justice so requires.'"<sup>33</sup> And quoting a district court case that in turn quotes a couple Supreme Court opinions, she insists that "[e]ven though defendants do not have a 'free[-]standing right' to post[-]conviction discovery in this specific case[,] the possible avenues of discovery are 'fundamentally inadequate to vindicate the substantive rights provided' by [Criminal] Rule 33(a)." But the Supreme Court has described any such right as a limited one. See Dist. Att'y's Off. For Third Jud. Dist. v. Osborne, 557 U.S. 52, 67-69 (2009) (explaining that a convicted defendant's "right to due process is not parallel to a trial right, but rather must be analyzed in light of the fact that he has already been found guilty at a fair trial, and has only a limited interest in postconviction relief"); see also Tevlin v. Spencer, 621 F.3d 59, 69-70 (1st Cir. 2010) (same). And she develops no argument that she has a due-process right to post-trial discovery in her circumstances. See Zannino, 895 F.2d at 17.

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**Third Group**

We end then with the defendants' challenges involving Pabón's 2021 competency evaluation — challenges that call their

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<sup>33</sup> Criminal Rule 33(a) says that "[u]pon the defendant's motion, the court may vacate any judgment and grant a new trial if the interest of justice so requires."

judgments of convictions into question because of the light that evaluation supposedly casts on Pabón's mental state before and during their trial.

But hurting the defendants here is that the 2021 competency evaluation is *not* part of the record in their direct appeals from their criminal trial. True (as they note) they briefed this challenge following our July 2021 order that – after refusing to direct the judge to appoint an independent psychiatrist and hold an evidentiary hearing – told them to "place all of their appellate arguments and request for relief in their opening briefs." But that order simply said that they should brief whatever "arguments" they wished to in their pending appeals from their criminal trial – it never said that they could make the 2021 competency evaluation part of the appellate record in those appeals. See generally Mount Vernon Fire Ins. Co. v. VisionAid, Inc., 875 F.3d 716, 726 n.10 (1st Cir. 2017) (holding that an order from us granting a party's request for supplemental briefing did not imply that "we would ignore longstanding" rules of appellate practice).

The defendants also imply that if the 2021 competency evaluation does not (on its own) call their judgments of convictions into question, it does provide grounds for the selection of an independent psychiatrist to assess Pabón. To their

way of thinking, the 2021 competency evaluation "contradict[ed] earlier BOP evaluations; "declare[d]" Pabón "competent, but by neatly avoiding conducting relevant testing to make such a determination"; and did not "address the fundamental question of whether [he] was delusional in 2018 and whether he can be restored to competency . . . with medical evidence." Aurea adds that she should get post-trial discovery of the materials behind the 2021 competency evaluation. And José adds that he should also get a hearing based on the 2021 competency evaluation. But the predicate for these claims remains the 2021 competency evaluation — which again is not in the record in their direct appeals from their criminal trial, which also makes these claims hopeless.

## IX Wrap Up

Having considered and rejected all of the defendants' many arguments, we **affirm**.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> We reject the defendants' request that we find reversible cumulative error from any combination of the errors they alleged above. That is because the aggregate effect of the instances where we invoked harmless error "do not come close to achieving the critical mass necessary to cast a shadow upon the integrity of the verdict." See United States v. Sepulveda, 15 F.3d 1161, 1196 (1st Cir. 1993). And to the extent the defendants think that one could pull other arguments from their briefs, we would consider those arguments waived. See Rodríguez, 659 F.3d at 175-76.

One last bit of housekeeping. Aurea moved after oral argument to join certain issues pressed in Marcia's reply brief. Whatever else may be said of Aurea's effort, all we need say is that we

**-Concurring and Dissenting Opinion Follows-**

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deny her motion as "moot" because none of Marcia's reply-brief arguments moves the needle off our affirmance conclusion. See United States v. Bennett, 75 F.3d 40, 49 (1st Cir. 1996).

**LIPEZ, Circuit Judge, concurring in part and dissenting in part.** Although I agree with my colleagues that most of appellants' claims of error fail, I strongly disagree that the district court judge permissibly advised the jury, via judicial notice, that he had found in 2008 that Alex Pabón Colon ("Pabón") was competent to plead guilty. The majority finds no abuse of discretion in the court's decision to give that notice because "the judge carefully limited the notice to Pabón's plea competency in 2008" and "said nothing about Pabón's trial credibility in 2018." As I explain below, that rationale fails to withstand scrutiny, and the record indicates that the court's error caused serious prejudice to two of the appellants: Marcia Vázquez Rijos ("Marcia")<sup>35</sup> and José Ferrer Sosa ("Ferrer"). Accordingly, Marcia's and Ferrer's convictions and sentences should be vacated.

### **I. Background**

After Pabón provided the testimony that, in the majority's words, "devastated the defendants' innocence theory," defense counsel cross-examined him for roughly eight hours. The cross-examination was wide-ranging, with the defendants seeking to paint Pabón as someone who regularly bragged, exaggerated, and

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<sup>35</sup> Like the majority, I refer to Marcia Vázquez Rijos and her sister, Aurea Vázquez Rijos, by their first names to avoid confusion.

lied. Their effort to undermine his credibility included questioning about statements he made in grand jury testimony in 2008 and during FBI interviews, both of which included descriptions of the events surrounding Adam Anhang's death that differed from the account he had just given in his direct examination at trial. The defendants also implied that Pabón could not be trusted because of the deals he had made with the government.

A central part of the defense strategy in attacking Pabón's credibility was to suggest that he was mentally unbalanced and thus an unreliable witness about the details of the murder. Among other inquiries, defense counsel asked him about a series of letters that he had written both before and during his incarceration in which he used various ink colors and added stamps to the pages as decorations. Many of the letters appeared to converse with celebrity figures with whom Pabón did not have a relationship. Pabón explained that he enjoyed writing to different people and that he saw his letters as "gifts" to the recipient and "art that comes from the heart." Throughout the cross-examination, Pabón rambled and, at times, provided answers that were not directly responsive to the questions asked of him. He often gave answers containing irrelevant information and had to be reminded by the trial judge to answer the question asked of him.

Aurea's attorney was the only defense counsel who explicitly asked Pabón about his mental health. When introducing Pabón's plea agreement into evidence, she asked Pabón about the terms of that agreement and focused on the lower sentence he expected to receive. The questioning included the following:

Q: At that time, before this judge, were you asked as to your health; mental health?

A: Yes, they did, I think. I believe that I remember that they asked me something.

Q: Okay. And you stated to the Court here that you, at that time, had been with a psychiatrist because you had depression, correct?

A: I think something like that. I think I did, yes.

Aurea's attorney also inquired into Pabón's mental health while he was in prison, including whether he took specific medications during his incarceration. Counsel also asked if he had requested a psychological evaluation in 2018 "to prove that you were not crazy."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Pabón denied that he requested the evaluation and said "[i]t was the psychologist who came to me." The brief exchange concluded as follows:

Q: So you never told her that you needed to prove that you were not crazy?

A: She knows it since the beginning, and many people there know so.

When Pabón's testimony was complete, the government asked the court to take judicial notice of the fact that Pabón had been found competent to plead guilty in 2008. All three defendants objected, raising concerns about the impact of the requested judicial notice on the jury's factfinding. After extensive colloquy, the court decided to give the disputed notice, acquiescing, in effect, to the government's argument that the court needed "to put the jury in perspective" about Pabón's mental health when he entered his guilty plea in 2008. In explaining his decision, the judge stated that he "ha[d] to balance the equities here." Ferrer's attorney then argued, to no avail, that "[taking judicial notice of this fact] isn't fair because . . . as an attorney, I am competing with the Court, because the Court said he was competent."

## **II. Competency vs. Credibility**

As I have described, the defense launched an all-out attack on Pabón's credibility that included questions designed to show that he had been mentally unstable for a long time and that, consequently, the jury should distrust his testimony about the details of Anhang's murder. The government plainly was concerned that the defendants' aggressive cross-examination of Pabón might have raised doubts among the jurors about the reliability of his testimony. The government understandably wanted to counter the

negative depiction of its star witness and restore his credibility. It could have attempted to do so in the redirect questioning it conducted by focusing on Pabón's ability to understand and accurately report on the events in which he was involved, including his decision to admit that he killed Anhang. The government instead asked the court to offset the damage from the cross-examination on Pabón's mental health by "complet[ing] the picture" with the challenged judicial notice.

My colleagues reject appellants' contention that the judicial notice improperly intruded into the jury's role as factfinder on Pabón's credibility. Emphasizing the distinction in the law between competency -- an issue for the court -- and credibility -- an issue for the jury, the majority seems to suggest that appellants have no basis for objecting to the court's accurate statement that it found Pabón competent to plead guilty in 2008. And the majority further emphasizes that appellants' challenge to the judicial notice falls flat because they failed to ask for an instruction explaining the difference between competency and credibility.

To the extent the majority is relying on appellants' failure to request an explanatory instruction in finding no abuse of the district court's discretion, their reasoning falls short. Appellants made eminently clear that the judicial notice was

problematic because, regardless of the actual difference between the two concepts, the jury was likely to understand the court's statement on Pabón's competence as commentary on his credibility. In the district court, Marcia's attorney explicitly raised a concern about jury confusion, contrasting the legal and factual issues concerning Pabón's capacity:

[W]e believe the instruction will confuse the jury because the competence that is discussed in the context of a change of plea hearing is a legal term. It is not necessarily a matter related to facts. It is a legal term very specific to this. And I don't believe that the jury will be able to distinguish between the both, Your Honor. It is too much of a risk to do so.

On appeal, Ferrer notes the defense objection at trial "that the district court's instruction would cause confusion on the jury." He asserts that the prejudice from the judicial notice "is compounded by the fact that the district court did not explain to the jury what it meant to be found competent to plead guilty" and that, consequently, "the district court placed its imprimatur on [Pabón]'s credibility." In my view, these arguments clearly express appellants' concern that the judicial notice would (and did) compromise the jury's factfinding on Pabón's credibility and, for that reason, was improper.

Moreover, the majority's treatment of the merits -- particularly their focus on the legal distinction between

competency and credibility -- seriously misses the mark. As the majority acknowledges, there was no challenge to Pabón's capacity to be a witness at trial and therefore his "competency" in the sense of an individual's ability to understand the legal proceedings in which he was involved was never relevant in this case. The question for the jury at trial was whether Pabón was a reliable, believable witness. Defense counsel heavily emphasized Pabón's bizarre behavior and mental health treatment over many years as one factor, among others, for discrediting his testimony. In other words, the defense challenged Pabón's "competency" only in the sense that nonlawyers would understand that concept, suggesting that Pabón's testimony about the murder was unreliable because of his long history of mental illness.

The defense reliance on this understanding of competency is apparent in the concern expressed by Ferrer's attorney at trial, and echoed on appeal, that the proposed instruction would place "the imprimatur of the Court upon the issue, which is an issue of fact." Although defense counsel used the term "competence" throughout the colloquy on the government's request for judicial notice -- a potentially confusing way to make their point -- it was obvious that they were opposing the court's interference with the jury's factfinding and, hence, were necessarily referring to the jury's credibility determination.

Yet, despite defense counsel's making it clear that the defendants were not challenging Pabón's competency to testify or otherwise engage in legal proceedings, the government insisted that the judicial notice was needed to rebut such a challenge. And, in seeking the court's intervention on that basis, the prosecutor incorrectly characterized the defense argument as unusual: "They are making the issue of his competency. . . . Normally that part goes without saying, but because it is an issue in this case brought by the Defense, the jury is entitled to have the whole package."

The "package" the court could properly give to the jury, however, did not include Pabón's competency to enter the guilty plea. In the context of the defense strategy, the district court's judicial notice that it had found "Alex El Loco" competent at that time -- despite his apparently longstanding mental illness and bizarre past behaviors -- spoke directly to the jury on Pabón's credibility. That intervention by the court created the unacceptable risk that the jurors understood the judicial notice of the competency finding to reflect the trial judge's view that Pabón's mental illness did not make him untrustworthy -- regardless of the jury's perception of his performance on the witness stand. It thus does not matter that the instruction specifically referred to a time well before the 2018 trial. By instructing the jury on

its finding of Pabón's competence in 2008, the judge was inescapably telling the jury that its finding was relevant to the jury's evaluation of Pabón's credibility at trial.

That very concern was voiced by Marcia's counsel: "What they want from the Court is to create an effect and . . . to influence the jury that [Pabón] is of a state of mind different to that that was presented to them through the presentation of evidence, cross-examination and direct examination." Indeed, with Pabón's "legal" competency to testify not at issue, the jury had no basis for understanding the judicial notice as other than a veiled commentary on his credibility. And that, of course, was precisely what the government was hoping to accomplish with its request for judicial notice.

To be clear, I am not saying that evidence of Pabón's mental capacity, as a rebuttal to the defense's attack on his credibility, was impermissible. Rather, the problem is that the court itself informed the jury that it had found Pabón competent -- highlighting and thereby elevating the importance of that fact -- when the government should have borne full responsibility for rehabilitating the credibility of its key witness and persuading the jury of appellants' guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. The court thus plainly abused its discretion when it chose to "balance the equities" by giving the requested judicial notice instead of

leaving the burden on the government -- where it belonged -- to "complete the picture" on Pabón's mental health.

The trial court's intervention on the issue of Pabón's credibility is no small matter. We have oft noted the impact that a court's words may have on jurors. See, e.g., United States v. Moffett, 53 F.4th 679, 685 (1st Cir. 2022) (observing that "'the influence of the trial judge on the jury is necessarily and properly of great weight' and [the] trial judge's 'lightest word or intimation is received with deference'" (quoting Starr v. United States, 153 U.S. 614, 626 (1894))); United States v. Márquez-Pérez, 835 F.3d 153, 158 (1st Cir. 2016) (noting that judges "should be most cautious in front of the jury, which may be vulnerable to judges' 'lightest word or intimation'" (quoting United States v. Ayala-Vazquez, 751 F.3d 1, 28 (1st Cir. 2014))). That influence is particularly sensitive in the realm of credibility. When judges "exercise their power to actively involve themselves at trial, they must remain constantly vigilant to ensure they do not infringe upon the province of the jury by commenting or appearing to comment (positively or negatively) on a witness's credibility." Ayala-Vazquez, 751 F.3d at 28 (emphasis added); see also United States v. Starks, 861 F.3d 306, 310 (1st Cir. 2017) (noting the impropriety of "judicial statements adding information to the record that bears on a witness's credibility").

Unsurprisingly, judicial statements touching on credibility are especially problematic when they bear on the testimony of a critical witness. In United States v. Raymundí-Hernández, we explained that "[w]here the Government builds its case against criminal defendants predominantly on cooperating witness testimony, . . . 'the [district] court must take particular care to avoid any appearances that it favors the government's view of the case.'" 984 F.3d 127, 152 (1st Cir. 2020) (per curiam) (second alteration in original) (quoting United States v. Rivera-Rodríguez, 761 F.3d 105, 120 (1st Cir. 2014)). We found that the trial court "cause[d] serious prejudice" in Raymundí-Hernández when commenting that a defense witness's testimony, which was designed to undermine the credibility of a cooperating witness, was "not relevant in this case." Id. at 152-53.

In the circumstances here, the bland instruction that "the jurors remain[] the sole deciders of witness credibility" does not suffice to cure the harm from the court's decision to -- in effect -- "complete the picture" on Pabón's believability as a witness. As we stated in Raymundí-Hernández, "where the reliability of witness testimony is so strongly implicated (here, that of the cooperating witnesses against that of the defense witnesses), 'such interference with jury fact-finding cannot be cured by standard jury instructions.'" 984 F.3d at 153-54 (quoting

United States v. Tilghman, 134 F.3d 414, 421 (D.C. Cir. 1998)).<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, telling the jurors that they remain the decisionmakers on credibility allows them to use whatever evidence they heard -- including the court's judicial notice -- in making their judgment.

The majority makes much of the fact that both the government and the defense treated Pabón's credibility as a live issue in addressing the jury during closing arguments. It is certainly no surprise that the lawyers argued that point. The problem with the judicial notice in this case is not that the district court entirely preempted the jury's factfinding on Pabón's credibility, but that it weighed in on the government's behalf. Given the judicial notice, the burden on the defendants to create doubt about Pabón's credibility was greater than it should have been, and the defense's arguing "with gusto" -- in the majority's words -- was simply counsel doing their job. Nor did the government's arguments in any way offset the impact of the court's intervention. The predictable and traditional credibility arguments in closing plainly provide no support for the majority's view that the court's ill-advised intrusion into the jury's factfinding was appropriate.

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<sup>37</sup> Although Raymundí-Hernández does not involve a judicial-notice challenge -- as the majority points out -- the underlying concern expressed there about interference in the jury's factfinding on witness credibility is equally apt in this context.

In sum, in acceding to the government's request that the court inform the jurors through judicial notice that it determined that Pabón was competent when he entered his guilty plea in 2008, the court assisted the prosecution on arguably the most important issue in the case for the defense: Pabón's credibility. The judge's explanation for doing so -- that he "ha[d] to balance the equities" in the aftermath of Pabón's cross-examination -- reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the court's role. It was for the government, not the judge, to undo any damage to Pabón's credibility caused by the defense's attack on Pabón's mental stability. The court's intrusion into the jury's factfinding -- by adding its "great weight" to the prosecution's case, Starr, 153 U.S. at 626 -- was a palpable abuse of discretion.

### **III. The Question of Prejudice**

The district court's error inescapably had the effect of bolstering the testimony of Pabón to the detriment of the defendants. The remaining question is whether the error was sufficiently prejudicial that appellants are entitled to a new trial. We have noted some uncertainty in our caselaw about the applicable standard of harmless error when the trial judge has, in effect, "commented on the credibility" of a key witness and "put additional facts before the jury that bore on the witness['s] credibility." Starks, 861 F.3d at 310 & n.1. Although Aurea

argues that the court's error is constitutional in nature, requiring the government to prove that it was "harmless beyond a reasonable doubt," see, e.g., Moffett, 53 F.4th at 691, the circumstances here are equivalent to the sort of improper judicial intervention that our court repeatedly has assessed under a "serious prejudice" standard -- i.e., asking whether "there is a reasonable probability that, but for the error, the verdict would have been different," Rivera-Rodríguez, 761 F.3d at 112; see also, e.g., Raymundí-Hernández, 984 F.3d at 152-53. I therefore use the "serious prejudice" standard in reviewing the evidence against each appellant.<sup>38</sup>

Hence, to determine harmlessness, it is necessary to ask whether it is "reasonably probable" that the jury would have reached the same verdict for each defendant if the court had not informed the jurors that Pabón was deemed competent at the time of

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<sup>38</sup> In Moffett, the error at issue involved a verdict form and related instructions that "invaded the jury's power over factfinding by over-emphasizing certain of the government's evidence in a manner that was contrary to [the defendant]'s interests." 53 F.4th at 686. We considered the error "of a 'constitutional dimension'" and used the beyond-a-reasonable-doubt formulation of harmless error. Id. at 691 (quoting United States v. Rivera-Santiago, 107 F.3d 960, 967 (1st Cir. 1997) (per curiam)). Here, as I have explained, the court's error likely influenced the jury's assessment of Pabón's credibility, but I cannot say that it "'usurped the jury's factfinding role'" on that issue or on appellants' guilt. Id. at 686 (emphasis added) (quoting Rivera-Santiago, 107 F.3d at 965).

his plea -- a fact that the jurors reasonably could have understood as an implicit observation on the credibility of Pabón's testimony at trial. Put differently, did the guilty verdicts likely depend on the credibility of Pabón, whose veracity was improperly enhanced by the judicial notice?

Pabón was the critical witness at trial. As the majority recounts, he testified that the three appellants planned the crime and hired him to carry it out. Given Pabón's importance to the government's case, assessing the likely impact of the court's improper boosting of his credibility requires determining whether sufficient evidence other than Pabón's testimony supported the jury's findings of guilt for each of the threesome.

#### **A. Aurea Vázquez Rijos**

The government's case against Aurea included evidence showing a strong motive, planning steps, and efforts to impede law enforcement's investigation of the crime. The record before the jury included Aurea and Anhang's prenuptial agreement, which provided Aurea with a substantial inheritance if Anhang died and much less if the couple divorced. Witness testimony revealed that Aurea and Anhang's marriage was turbulent, that Anhang came to believe the prenuptial agreement gave too much to Aurea, and that Anhang was seeking a divorce within weeks of the wedding. The government's theory that Aurea wanted to kill her husband and avoid

a divorce was supported by witness accounts of comments she had made, including that she would be "better off" if her husband died than if he were alive.

The evidence that Aurea planned the murder included testimony from two witnesses who said she had asked them if they knew a "hit man," a question one of them understood to mean she was looking to hire one. The government also offered testimony that Aurea had called Anhang's office repeatedly during the afternoon preceding his evening murder to confirm the couple's dinner plans, permitting an inference that her "insistent calls" were made to ensure that they would be in Old San Juan at the time she had arranged for the attack.

Aurea's behavior after Anhang's death also was suspicious and seemingly designed to impede and evade law enforcement's attempts to investigate the murder and prosecute the case. One agent testified that Aurea gave him an incorrect description of the perpetrator, including clothing details that did not match those given by other eyewitnesses. She failed to appear at the prosecutor's office in response to a summons, and law enforcement's multiple efforts to arrange an interview with her were unsuccessful. The evidence revealed that Aurea moved to Italy soon after the murder, which the government characterized as "flight." Aurea also sought the assistance of a criminal defense

attorney in Israel, explaining to him that she wanted to move to Israel but wanted to know if she would be protected there "[i]f there was ever an order of extradition [from the United States] with the death sentence."

In sum, while Pabón's testimony that Aurea hired him to kill her husband reinforced the prosecution's narrative, there was ample and compelling evidence from sources other than Pabón to support a finding that Aurea was motivated to kill Anhang and developed a plan to get the deed done. I thus cannot conclude that it is "reasonably probable" that, absent the district court's error, the jury would have acquitted Aurea.

#### **B. Marcia Vázquez Rijos**

By contrast with the evidence from multiple sources suggesting Aurea's guilt, the government's evidence against Marcia -- other than Pabón's testimony -- was far from compelling. The sinister connotation of the evidence against her depended heavily on Pabón's testimony that she had conspired with the others to murder Anhang. Indeed, the majority's analysis of Marcia's sufficiency challenge relies almost entirely on Pabón's testimony.

The thinness of the case against Marcia is apparent from a review of the other evidence offered by the government. The government easily proved the uncontroverted fact that Marcia knew Pabón and had done business with him before the murder. An

employee at the Pink Skirt, a restaurant that Anhang had purchased for Aurea, testified that she sometimes saw Marcia with Pabón there. A friend of Pabón's, Derick Osterman Kim, testified that Marcia on occasion bought marijuana from Pabón. This evidence of her prior relationship with Pabón obviously provides no support for a finding that Marcia was involved in a conspiracy to pay Pabón to murder Anhang.

Nor is the evidence of Marcia's conduct following Anhang's death sufficient. Most suggestively, a friend of Pabón's, Isadoro Perez-Muñoz, testified about letters Pabón asked him to deliver to the Pink Skirt on three separate occasions. The first letter was intended for Aurea, but she was not at the Pink Skirt when Perez-Muñoz arrived to deliver it. Perez-Muñoz brought the letter back to Pabón, who directed him to deliver the letter to Marcia the next day. Marcia read the letter and gave Perez-Muñoz a message for Pabón: her sister was sick and depressed, she had no money because Anhang's father had cancelled her accounts, the family was in crisis, and "the business was going bad." Perez-Muñoz delivered the second letter to Marcia, at Pabón's direction. After reading the letter, Marcia instructed Perez-Muñoz to tell Pabón that she had "already told [him] the situation and nothing can be done." She then went on to say "no to the money," Aurea "is still with the depression," "the business isn't going well and

. . . we are in a crisis; the accounts are frozen." The third time, when Perez-Muñoz went to the Pink Skirt with two letters, neither Aurea nor Marcia was there, but he encountered the women's brother, Charbel, and Ferrer. Both men refused to take the correspondence, which Perez-Muñoz took home and later read. One letter, which was read to the jury, was addressed to "Marcial," but it includes a closing addressed to both "Audrea<sup>39</sup> or Marcial." The four-page letter, dated March 3, 2006, stated in part:

I don't want any excuses and I am truly counting on you to help me with this big favor. You denied me the \$30,000 I asked you to lend me. . . . Well, now I need \$200,000 in order to support myself and for expenses, debts, and other things I cannot tell you about.

Marcial, with all due respect, I want you to talk to your sister and tell her that I need that money by March 12th or March 18th, 2006. . . . [Y]our sister has not shown up to court, and now, and the last time I heard from her, she was hiding and about to flee the country. What is happening with you? I need favors from you and you are hiding from me . . . .

. . . I made it very clear to you, I have dealings with your husband Jose and your sister Audrea. And tell both of them that I am asking this second favor and the second one is the last one.

. . . After all this happened, you think that I am a dumb ass, but the truth is that I am not. I am not afraid to face this case which

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<sup>39</sup> Throughout the letter, Pabón refers to Marcia as "Marcial" and Aurea as "Audrea."

has become very ugly. Things didn't turn out the way we thought they would, but only I did you a big favor. I didn't know this person. For you, he was a bump in the road which got in your way.

• • •

• • • [Y]our sister told [a friend of mine] . . . that she is not going to pay absolutely anything because you were not completely in agreement with the favor I did for you because it had caused you a lot of problems. The truth is that I was not going to be the one to do the favor to her. You became very anxious and you did not give me the correct coordinates, and it happened very quickly, and it was a little crazy, but I accomplished what she wanted. Now, I need a favor from you.

• • •

• • • I don't give a damn if the victim's old man kept everything. . . . I am making this clear; if you let me down, I will betray you also. . . .

So, good fences make good neighbors. Well, remember, all of us are very much involved in this. So work with me and I will always be true to you. . . .

Now, send me the money that I am asking you and everything should continue as is. Don't let me down. Hope it's clear. Okay. I will be waiting for the favor I asked you. Audrea or Marcial, I will call you soon.

Although Pabón's demands and threats to Marcia in this letter are consistent with the government's narrative of her involvement in the murder conspiracy, that evidence is equally consistent with Marcia's knowing what happened but having played

no role in the planning. Pabón's communications show only that, having initially failed to reach Aurea herself, Pabón began using Marcia as a go-between in his attempts to extract money from Aurea after the crime. Even his assertion that "all of us are very much involved in this" indicates only that, months after Anhang's death, Marcia was "involved" in protecting her sister from prosecution. It is Pabón's testimony concerning Marcia's involvement in the planning that turns the correspondence into damning evidence. Moreover, to the extent Pabón's credibility was bolstered by the district court, that validation would extend to this communication.

The government also adduced evidence that Marcia was at Anhang's apartment the day after the murder. One witness said she carried black garbage bags containing clothing out of the apartment, another said that Marcia took Anhang's cats away, and a third testified that Marcia emerged from Anhang's apartment with keys, two cell phones, a phone charger, and a CD. But Marcia's appearance at Anhang's apartment is not probative evidence of her involvement in planning his murder. Aurea was in the hospital at that time, and there is nothing facially inculpatory about Marcia's retrieving cats that needed to be cared for and other items from an apartment where her sister's husband had been living.

Adding to the ambiguous evidence is a series of emails between Marcia and Aurea indicating that Marcia helped her sister create fraudulent documents about her Jewish roots.<sup>40</sup> Also among the emails between the sisters is a message from Marcia describing a conversation she had with their brother, Charbel:

Charbel he is screwed with me because I will treat him like a stranger. He deserves it. He is the pure devil. He said -- and atrocity that I and Jose planned everything and that is -- he have this karma that it's my fault. What a fucked up crazy. . . . Don't you know that they are recording everything and everything you say they will believe it and we are going to get screwed by your fault . . . .

Again, this message can be construed consistently with the government's narrative that Marcia conspired with Aurea (along with Ferrer), but it is also easily understood to express Marcia's outrage that Charbel is accusing her and Ferrer of a crime they did not commit. Indeed, if the message is read to refer to Anhang's murder, it would appear to exclude Aurea from involvement -- an implausible scenario. It is more plausible that the message reflects Marcia's frustration about her brother's "crazy" accusation or refers only to Marcia's and Ferrer's post-crime assistance to Aurea.

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<sup>40</sup> The government produced evidence showing that Aurea attempted to obtain the protection of the Jewish community in Florence, Italy, by falsely holding herself out as Jewish.

One other email exchange between Marcia and Aurea warrants consideration. Marcia warned her sister to be careful of "a lot of enemies [who are] close who you owe for a long time," noted that Ferrer was in bad shape "economically and emotionally" -- referring to his family difficulties -- and said she did not want Ferrer to think that she had abandoned him and "that we used him." In her reply, Aurea says "I am really sorry that you feel like that . . . I am more sorry that Jose feels that way too, but we are all in the same boat." The comment that the three of them are "in the same boat" obviously is consistent with the government's theory that all three defendants plotted and carried out the murder. But -- assuming it refers to Anhang's killing at all -- it is equally consistent with Marcia and Jose entering "the boat" after the murder had been committed by helping Aurea avoid prosecution.<sup>41</sup>

The evidence apart from Pabón's testimony was thus suggestive, but plainly inadequate to support Marcia's conviction beyond a reasonable doubt for conspiring to arrange a murder-for-hire. The government relied on Pabón's testimony -- improperly

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<sup>41</sup> Indeed, multiple members of Aurea's family helped to protect her in the aftermath of the murder, including her mother, brother, and sister. Aurea's brother, Charbel, was charged with several related crimes and eventually was sentenced to twenty-four months' imprisonment on a count charging him with obstruction of justice.

bolstered by the court's judicial notice -- to fill in the gaps in its circumstantial narrative of Marcia's guilt. Without his story of her collaboration, the evidence shows only that Marcia knew Pabón before the murder and that she took actions after the murder that supported her sister but do not on their own reflect complicity in a conspiracy. With the limited evidence that remains if Pabón's testimony is discounted, I can only conclude that the district court's improper judicial notice caused "serious prejudice" to Marcia's defense. Raymundí-Hernández, 984 F.3d at 152.

**C. Jose Ferrer Sosa**

As with Marcia, the majority dispatches Ferrer's sufficiency claim by citing Pabón's testimony and observing that Pabón's credibility was a jury judgment. But the paucity of the untainted evidence against Ferrer is notable.

The government established the inconsequential fact that Ferrer, a cook at the Pink Skirt, knew Pabón and had bought marijuana from him. After the murder, multiple government witnesses testified that they saw Ferrer approach Aurea's Porsche Cayenne in the parking lot of Anhang's apartment on the day after his death. Ferrer's presence at Anhang's home that day, and his attempt to retrieve the vehicle that testifying witnesses

consistently said belonged to Aurea, hardly constitutes evidence that he was involved in planning the murder.<sup>42</sup>

Other witnesses provided somewhat more probative evidence against Ferrer, but none of it is sufficient to establish his guilt for the charged conspiracy beyond a reasonable doubt. As described above, Perez-Muñoz testified that he tried to deliver one of Pabón's letters to Ferrer, but Ferrer would not accept it. According to Perez-Muñoz, Pabón had instructed him to deliver the letter "to any one of them, because Alex told me that all of them knew what happened." Even if the jury took this statement as true, "knowing" what had happened to Anhang differs from being a participant in a conspiracy. Similarly, Marcia's email to Aurea reporting that Charbel had accused Marcia and Jose of "plann[ing] everything" is no more revealing of Ferrer Sosa's involvement than it is of Marcia's.

The government also used a facially benign email exchange between Ferrer and Marcia as evidence of his culpability.

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<sup>42</sup> A Puerto Rico Police Department officer who detained Ferrer when he was "attempting to get the Porsche Cayenne" testified that Ferrer said that Marcia had asked him to get the vehicle. Aurea testified that Anhang gave her the deposit for the Porsche as a birthday gift and that she was making the monthly lease payments. Consistent with that testimony, the purchase-and-sale agreement described at trial listed Aurea as the buyer of the Porsche. Aurea and Anhang drove to the restaurant the night of the murder in Anhang's BMW, leaving the Porsche outside Anhang's apartment building.

Ferrer asked Marcia for "donations (in cash and in dollars please) to help the young adult Jose Ferrer, who is in need of everything." He also told Marcia that she could "tell Aury that if she wants to donate the most she can, she can give it to you and you can bring it." The government suggested that these emails represent Ferrer asking for hush money -- i.e., "money for him to stay in line." That inference, however, is unsupported by anything on the face of the messages.

To be sure, in his testimony, Ferrer offered an odd explanation for the "donations" -- he said he was using that terminology to ask for repayments on a loan he had made to the Vázquez Rijos family. But neither his request for funds nor his testimony explaining it indicates in any way that he participated in a conspiracy to kill Anhang. Indeed, Ferrer's email requests for "donations" are interspersed in an exchange of messages with Marcia that include expressions of love for each other and regards from Marcia to Ferrer's dogs and family members. In one message, Marcia asks him about his pants size and suggests that he needed money for essential items: "Remind me if you are still 32 for pants. That is what you most need, right?" It is only Pabón's testimony that even arguably contextualizes Ferrer's solicitation of "donations" as requests for a payoff related to the murder.

Hence, as with Marcia, I cannot conclude that it is "reasonably probable" that the jury would have reached the same verdict on the conspiracy charge against Ferrer if the court had not added to the evidence on Pabón's credibility with its judicial notice. Indeed, the court itself implied that the entirety of the government's case against Ferrer was Pabón's testimony. During his defense case, Ferrer sought to introduce a witness who had been in the courtroom during Pabón's testimony. During a sidebar conference about whether the witness was compromised and therefore unable to testify for Ferrer, the district court remarked that "if [the witness] heard the testimony of . . . Pabón Colón, if he heard that testimony, he heard the entire evidence relating to your client. He heard it completely."

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The jury verdicts in this case resulted in life sentences for each of the three defendants. It is therefore unsurprising that their advocates have raised numerous challenges to the way the trial and sentencing proceeded. The lack of merit in most of those claims should not deter us from acknowledging the very real harm caused to Marcia and Ferrer by the district court's improper intervention on behalf of the government on the key issue of Pabón's credibility. The court should not have provided judicial notice to the jurors that it found Pabón competent to enter his

guilty plea in 2008. Marcia and Ferrer's convictions inescapably are flawed because of that error, and they are therefore entitled to a new trial. Accordingly, I must respectfully dissent from the majority's decision to affirm their convictions.

# United States Court of Appeals For the First Circuit

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Nos. 19-1305  
19-1312  
19-1315  
20-1603  
20-1604  
20-1920  
20-1951  
21-1098  
21-1100

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

Appellee,

v.

AUREA VÁZQUEZ RIJOS, a/k/a Beatriz Vázquez, a/k/a Aurea Dominicci; MARCIA VÁZQUEZ RIJOS; and JOSÉ FERRER SOSA,

Defendants, Appellants.

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Before

Barron, Chief Judge,  
Lipez, Thompson, Gelpí, Montecalvo, Rikelman, and Aframe,  
Circuit Judges.

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## ORDER OF COURT

Entered: September 30, 2025

The petitions for rehearing having been denied by the panel of judges who decided the case, and the petitions for rehearing en banc having been submitted to the active judges of this court and a majority of the judges not having voted that the case be heard en banc, it is ordered that the petitions for rehearing and the petitions for rehearing en banc be denied.

**BARRON, Chief Judge, and THOMPSON, Circuit Judge, statement respecting the denial of the petitions for panel rehearing.** Defendants' petitions for rehearing and rehearing en banc raise many issues. But a majority of judges on the original panel vote to deny the petition for rehearing. Even so, we think it appropriate to say a little more to the bar and bench about the judicial-notice issue — the only issue that resulted in a panel split. See United States v. Vazquez Rijos, 119 F.4th 94, 112-19 (1st Cir. 2024); *id.* at 132-43 (Lipez, J., dissenting in part). As we proceed, we assume the reader's familiarity with Vazquez Rijos — including how the majority and partial dissent explained its take on the district judge's telling the jury (via judicial notice) that he had found witness Alex Pabón Colon "competent" in 2008 to plead guilty for his part in Adam Anhang's murder, 10 years before Defendants' 2018 trial for their parts in the murder.

With all that in mind, we wish to make the following very clear: (1) there is no dispute that the notice accurately recounted the facts described; (2) no objection to the notice was made below pursuant to either Federal Rule of Evidence 401 or Federal Rule of Evidence 403; (3) no argument pursuant to either of these rules as to that notice was pressed on appeal; (4) we do not address whether a different result might obtain if, for example, a challenge under Rule 403 were made to the district judge that the notice's prejudice would unfairly outweigh its probative value; and (5) lawyers and judges are cautioned to stay attuned to the possibility of jury confusion when addressing a judicial-notice matter concerning the plea competency of a testifying witness.

**LIPEZ, Circuit Judge, statement respecting the denial of en banc review.** With respect, I must express my strong disagreement with the decision by the majority of active judges in this murder case to deny en banc review on the ruling by the trial judge to take judicial notice that Alex Pabón Colon was found competent to plead guilty to murder for hire. As my dissent from the panel decision makes clear, the district court's intervention on the critical issue of witness Pabón's credibility was a legal error, and there is at least a reasonable probability that the error was the decisive factor in the jury's finding of guilt for two of the defendants, Marcia Vázquez Rijos and José Ferrer Sosa. See United States v. Rivera-Rodríguez, 761 F.3d 105, 112 (1st Cir. 2014) (stating the standard for evaluating the impact of improper judicial intervention in jury factfinding). Indeed, the panel majority acknowledged that Pabón's testimony "devastated the defendants' innocence theory." United States v. Vázquez Rijos, 119 F.4th 94, 112 (1st Cir. 2024). Aside from Pabón's testimony, the evidence showed no more than after-the-fact knowledge of the murder at the heart of the case on the part of Marcia and Ferrer, not their participation in the crime. Given the exceptionally severe consequences -- life sentences -- there is no justification for denying Marcia and Ferrer careful consideration of the judicial-notice issue by the en banc court.

As a legal matter, the petition for en banc review raises an important question about the relationship between a witness's competency -- an issue for the court -- and credibility -- a determination reserved for the jury. In the context of this case, the court's instruction on Pabón's competency inescapably would be understood by the jurors as commentary on his credibility as a witness at the trial:

[T]he district court's judicial notice that it had found [Pabón] competent at [the time of his guilty plea] -- despite his apparently longstanding mental illness and bizarre past behaviors -- spoke directly to the jury on Pabón's credibility. That intervention by the

court created the unacceptable risk that the jurors understood the judicial notice of the competency finding to reflect the trial judge's view that Pabón's mental illness did not make him untrustworthy -- regardless of the jury's perception of his performance on the witness stand.

Id. at 135 (Lipez, J., dissenting).

The timing of the district court's instruction and intervention was particularly devastating for the defense because it effectively constituted rehabilitation of Pabón by the court after "the defense launched an all-out attack on [his] credibility." Id. at 134. As the dissent observed, "[t]he government understandably wanted to counter the negative depiction of its star witness and restore his credibility. It could have attempted to do so in the redirect questioning it conducted . . . ." Id. Instead, at the government's request, the court effectively assumed that burden by taking judicial notice of its competency determination, thus placing its imprimatur on the credibility of the government's key witness at what probably was the most critical moment of the trial -- that is, a reasonable juror would probably have thought that the judge had chosen not to disbelieve Pabón, at least to some extent. The court's intervention on the government's behalf was legally improper and thus an abuse of discretion.

That error involved a fundamental misperception of the trial judge's role in relation to the jury. This misperception was plainly evident in the judge's comment that he needed to "balance the equities here." Id. at 133. There should be no disagreement that en banc review is needed to restore the correct balance of "the equities" -- i.e., to eliminate the prejudice from the court's improperly bolstering the government's case and, by doing so, to give Marcia and Ferrer the opportunity to obtain the fair trial to which they are entitled.

There is, however, such disagreement. In response to the petition for panel and en banc rehearing, the panel majority has taken the rarely employed step of issuing a speaking order emphasizing and clarifying aspects of their opinion. They highlight that defendants did not explicitly invoke Rules 401 and 403 of the Federal Rules of Evidence when objecting to the court's judicial notice on Pabón's competency. The speaking order shows that defense counsels' omission was a significant advocacy misstep and the vote to deny en banc review -- against the backdrop of that order -- reinforces that counsels' failure to expressly reference the rules had serious consequences for the defendants. "[C]ourts have held that, on a motion for judicial notice, relevant facts are subject to the exclusionary rules of evidence, including Rule 403." Deakle v. Westbank Fishing, LLC, 559 F. Supp. 3d 522, 526 (E.D. La. 2021); see also United States v. Villa-Guillen, 102 F.4th 508, 516-18 (1st Cir. 2024) (finding that the district court erred in its Rule 403 balancing on evidence for which it took judicial notice); 21B Wright & Miller's Federal Practice & Procedure § 5104 (2d ed. 2025) (describing as "sensible" the application of Rule 403 to judicially noticed facts). Notably, the panel majority acknowledges in their speaking order that "a different result might obtain if . . . a challenge under Rule 403 were made . . . that the notice's prejudice would unfairly outweigh its probative value."

Our criminal justice jurisprudence recognizes that attorney mistakes that cannot be addressed on direct appeal will sometimes lead to unjust outcomes. The federal habeas statute, 28

U.S.C. § 2255, exists to guard against such outcomes, permitting defendants to claim, *inter alia*, that their trial was fundamentally unfair because of attorney ineffectiveness. As I have articulated here and in my panel dissent, there are strong arguments for a finding of such unfairness here. The speaking order makes clear that the panel opinion should not be read as taking any view on the merits of the Rule 401 or 403 arguments that could have been made to challenge the district court's decision to judicially notice Pabón's competence. Thus, if the defendants choose to raise such claims in a collateral proceeding pursuant to § 2255, those claims will have considerable merit under the framework set out in Strickland v. Washington, 466 U.S. 668 (1984), because the evidence admitted through judicial notice was both irrelevant and plainly more prejudicial than probative. Although they have been denied relief by the *en banc* court, if Marcia and Ferrer seek collateral relief based on the omission of explicit advocacy on Rules 401 and 403, it should be granted. They deserve a new trial untainted by the court's highly prejudicial error.

By the Court:

Anastasia Dubrovsky, Clerk

cc: Hon. Daniel R. Dominguez, Ada García-Rivera, Clerk, United States District Court for the District of Puerto Rico, Lydia J. Lizarribar-Masini, Julia Meconiates, José A. Ruiz-Santiago, Jenifer Yois Hernández-Vega, Mariana E. Bauzá-Almonte, David O. Martorani-Dale, Sofia Vickery, Juan F. Matos-de Juan, Manuel San Juan DeMartino, José A. Contreras, Maria L. Montanez-Concepcion, Carlos M. Sánchez La Costa, Victor O. Acevedo-Hernández, José Ramon Olmo-Rodriguez, Ovidio E. Zayas-Perez, Aurea Vázquez-Rijos, José Ferrer-Sosa, Marcia Vázquez-Rijos

# United States Court of Appeals For the First Circuit

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No. 19-1305

UNITED STATES,

Appellee,

v.

AUREA VAZQUEZ-RIJOS, a/k/a Beatriz Vazquez, a/k/a Aurea Dominicci,

Defendant - Appellant.

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No. 19-1312

UNITED STATES,

Appellee,

v.

MARCIAS VAZQUEZ-RIJOS,

Defendant - Appellant.

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No. 19-1315

UNITED STATES,

Appellee,

v.

JOSE FERRER-SOSA,

Defendant - Appellant.

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## ORDER OF COURT

Entered: December 6, 2019

Defendants' motions to stay the appeals are granted. Defendants shall file status reports every thirty days advising this court of the status of the pending district court motions for indicative rulings.

By the Court:

Maria R. Hamilton, Clerk

cc:

Francisco Javier Adams-Quesada  
Lydia J. Lizarribar-Masini  
Julia Meconiates  
Jose A. Ruiz-Santiago  
Jenifer Yois Hernandez-Vega  
Victor O. Acevedo-Hernandez  
Mariana E. Bauza Almonte  
David O. Martorani-Dale  
Juan F. Matos-de Juan  
Manuel San Juan DeMartino  
Carlos M. Sanchez La Costa  
Jose Ramon Olmo-Rodriguez  
Ovidio E. Zayas-Perez

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
FOR THE DISTRICT OF PUERTO RICO

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

Plaintiff,

v.

AUREA VÁZQUEZ-RIJOS [1]  
MARCIA VÁZQUEZ-RIJOS [4]  
JOSÉ FERRER-SOSA [3],

Defendants.

Criminal No. 08-216 (DRD)

**INDICATIVE RULING**

**I. INTRODUCTION**

On October 3, 2019, a jury unanimously found Defendants Aurea Vázquez-Rijos (hereinafter, “Aurea”), José Ferrer-Sosa (hereinafter, “José”) and Marcia Vázquez-Rijos (hereinafter, “Marcia”) guilty for conspiring to use an interstate facility to commit murder for hire. Docket Nos. 1577-79. Subsequently, the Court sentenced the Defendants to the mandatory statutory term of life imprisonment.<sup>1</sup> Docket Nos. 1776, 1787, 1789. The Defendants filed individual appeals as to their sentences, which are currently pending before the First Circuit.

Recently, the Defendants filed various motions requesting the Court to issue indicative rulings. The motions were filed as a result of a recent psychological evaluation performed on Alex Pabón-Colón (“Alex”)<sup>2</sup> –a co-defendant in this case who was the

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<sup>1</sup> 18 U.S.C.A. § 1958 specifically states that if death results from the commission of murder-for-hire the individual shall be punished by death or life imprisonment. The Government did not request death penalty in the instant case, pursuant to the extradition agreement with Spain.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Pabón-Colón was allegedly the assassin hired to kill Aurea’s husband, Adam Anhang.

Government's cooperating witness—which concluded that Alex is currently experiencing symptoms, 9 months after trial, of a psychotic disorder that impairs his ability to understand the nature and consequences of the court proceedings brought against him.

See Docket No. 1854 at 14.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, co-defendant Marcia requested the Court to issue an indicative ruling as to whether a psychiatrist expert should be appointed to independently evaluate co-defendant Alex Pabón-Colón. Docket No. 1895. Moreover, Marcia requested the Court to issue an order requiring the Government to produce certain e-mails sent by co-defendant Alex, notes taken by the psychologist during his evaluation, and Alex's medical file at the Metropolitan Detention Center (hereinafter, "MDC") in Guaynabo. See Docket No. 1897. Most importantly, Marcia, Aurea and José requested an indicative ruling as to whether a new trial should be held based on the results of the psychological evaluation that recently concluded Alex is experiencing a psychotic disorder. See Docket Nos. 1899, 1900, 1901, 1904. The Government filed a response to Defendants' motions. See Docket No. 1906. Defendants then filed replies. See Docket Nos. 1920, 1921, 1923, 1924.

## II. BACKGROUND

### a. Defendants' Pre-Trial Discovery Requests

Two months before the jury trial commenced, on June 22, 2018, the Court entered a sealed order mandating the Warden of MDC Guaynabo to provide the Court a certified copy of the entire health record of co-defendant Alex at the institution upon co-defendant Aurea's request. See Docket No. 1065. On July 30, 2018, the legal department of MDC Guaynabo complied with the Court's order and sent an encrypted email with the entire

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<sup>3</sup> The forensic evaluation was performed by a Federal Bureau of Prisons' forensic psychologist. See Docket No. 1854.

health record of Alex to Aurea's attorney. The documents were specifically sent to Aurea only as she was the only Defendant who requested Alex's medical record at that time. See Docket No. 456.<sup>4</sup>

Specifically, the legal department at MDC produced the following documents to Aurea's attorney:

- Psychological reviews performed by different certified psychologists at MDC of Alex's mental condition while he was placed in the Special Housing Unit ("SHU") for different periods of time starting from 2014 thru 2018<sup>5</sup>;
- Psychology Services Inmate Questionnaire (PSIQ) reviews of Alex performed by certified psychologists at MDC for the years 2017 and 2018. One of the reviews specifically alludes to Alex's history of diagnosed Schizophrenia;
- Reports completed by psychologists at MDC of certain clinical interventions that Alex underwent since he was taken under custody from 2015 thru 2017. One of the interventions refers to a schizophrenia diagnosis provided to Alex on November 4, 2008;
- The Federal Bureau of Prisons' Psychology Data System entries for Alex from 2008 thru 2012;
- The reports, notes and reviews of all the clinical encounters that Alex has had while at MDC;

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<sup>4</sup> Although a Subpoena to obtain copy of Alex's medical records with MDC was requested by co-defendant, Marcia Vázquez-Rijos, and subsequently issued dated July 17, 2018, there is nothing on the record that suggests that the Subpoena was served upon MDC. See Docket No. 1079 and 1108. Yet, on July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018, the Court granted to the defendants access to Alex's medical records, and accordingly ordered MDC to produce Alex's medical records to all Defendants. See Docket No. 1161, included herein as **Exhibit I** for the reader's reference.

<sup>5</sup> On July 8, 2019, the Court ordered a psychological/psychiatric evaluation to be performed on Alex as to his competency to aid in his defense at the time. As part of the mental evaluation dated September 26, 2019, Jaime Jauregui, Ph.D. Forensic Psychologist reviewed Alex's medical records at MDC. Pursuant to his findings, Alex's last mental evaluation prior to Aurea, José and Marcia's Jury Trial was performed on July 2018, and is described as follows: "In July of 2018 after spending six consecutive months in SHU, [Alex] was seen for a more thorough interview. He told the psychologist that he felt 'good' not being on medication, and that when he endorsed psychotic symptoms in 2008 (presumably the auditory hallucinations), he was exaggerating his symptoms on purpose. He discussed some details about his legal case, but it was difficult to focus his attention. He requested to have colored pencils and said he spent his time drawing, coloring, writing songs, and writing a book." See Alex's Psychological Evaluation, **Exhibit II**. The Court encourages the parties to evaluate Alex's Mental Evaluation in its entirety. The evaluation clearly reflects that from July 2018 -3 months before the Jury Trial- until July 2019 no issues arose that could reflect a setback in Alex's schizophrenia treatment. Alex testified at trial on September 17 and 18, 2018.

- A report titled “Health Problems” completed by the Bureau of Prisons that shows Alex’s history with “chronic undifferentiated schizophrenia” including period of times when the disease has been deemed “resolved” and when the patient has suffered “remissions”; and
- An entire summary of the medications Alex has taken from 2015 thru 2016.

In sum, the legal department of MDC produced almost five hundred (500) pages of Alex’s medical record to Aurea’s attorney at least two (2) months before the jury trial began. Subsequently, a month before trial commenced, the Court issued another order requiring the Warden of MDC Guaynabo to provide Alex’s medical record to all Defendants. See Docket No. 1161. In said Order, the Court at the time stressed and recognized that “Defendants are entitled to the medical records at MDC of witness Alex Pabon-Colon. . . [as] the Court underst[ood] the psychiatric information of a witness is relevant at trial.” Id. Accordingly, the Court granted all Defendants access to the information contained in Alex’s medical records at MDC before trial commenced.<sup>6</sup>

#### **b. Trial testimony**

##### **i. Alex Pabón Colón**

On September 17 and 18, 2018, Alex was called as a witness during the Government’s case in chief. See Transcript Days 14-09/17/2018, and 15-09/18/2018, Docket Nos. 1517 and 1540, respectively. During trial, Alex testified that on September 21, 2005, Aurea, José and Marcia hired him with the purpose of murdering Aurea’s husband named Adam Anhang. The conversation as to the murder first took place at the Pink Skirt in presence of all three (3) defendants, which was a restaurant located at Old San Juan, that was owned and operated by Aurea, and later they all traveled to a business

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<sup>6</sup> The Order was only available to the parties of the instant case, which included co-defendants, Marcia and José. See Docket No. 1161.

known as El Hamburger, also in the vicinity of Old San Juan. Transcript Trial Day 14, 09/17/2018, Docket No. 1517 at 32-44. Alex further testified that all four of them, composed of Aurea, José, Marcia and him, drove in Aurea's Porsche Cayenne to the business El Hamburger. Id. In the meeting at El Hamburger, Aurea requested Alex to murder her husband Adam Anhang in exchange for a payment of \$3 million dollars. Id. at 47-48.

Alex was on the witness stand for a day and a half, and each counsel for all three Defendants had an opportunity to individually cross examine the witness. Id. To illustrate, the official transcript shows that Alex's cross examination conducted by Aurea's attorney lasted three hours and fifteen minutes. Id. at 75 & 166. Similarly, co-defendant Marcia's attorney cross examined Alex for an hour and ten minutes, while José's attorney also conducted an extensive cross examination that yielded eighty-eight (88) pages worth of transcript. Transcript Trial Day 15, 09/18/2018, Docket No. 1540 at 36; 36-124.

Attorney for Aurea questioned Alex during cross examination about his history with mental illness. She further asked Alex about the specific unit at MDC Guaynabo in which he had been housed, to which the Government objected as to relevance, and the Court overruled the objection. The purpose of asking Alex about his housing unit was to inform the jury about Alex's history of using psychotic drugs as inmates that have such history are housed in separate specific units. Transcript Trial Day 14, 09/17/2018, Docket No. 1517 at 148-150. Alex was further inquired by Aurea's Attorney as to his request to be housed at MDC by himself due to his long history with mental illness and suffering from panic attacks. Id. at 162.

Moreover, Attorney for Aurea specifically asked Alex whether he battled with depression, experienced mental illness while at MDC, and whether he experienced auditory hallucinations in 2008. Id. at 152-53. Additionally, Aurea's Attorney asked Alex about medications —such as Risperdal, Sertraline and Remero— that had been prescribed to him to treat psychological conditions while at MDC. Id. at 154. Specifically, she inquired the following:

Q. One year after, 2009, you were still taking Risperdal and mirtazapine?

A. I don't know what medication that is. If you explain to me correctly, I can answer, because I don't know any of the medications by name.

Q. Okay. I am not a doctor, but I believe these are psychotropic medications.

...

THE WITNESS: They would give me medication, but I would not take it, sir. I have already said that several times.

Id. at 158-59.

Upon request of defense, the Court took judicial notice that the "FDA [U.S. Food and Drug Administration] has categorized Risperidone (marketed as Risperdal) as an 'atypical antipsychotic drug' used to treat mental illnesses including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and irritability associated with autistic disorder." Docket No. 1593 at 41. The judicial notice was included in the Jury Instructions provided to the jury during deliberation. As such, the jury was informed that Alex was prescribed a medication named Risperdal that is used to treat mental illnesses including schizophrenia.

## **ii. Corroboration Testimony**

On September 13, 2018, the Government called as witness Mr. Derick Osterman Kim (hereinafter, "Derick"). Derick was a longtime friend of Alex since they were children. Transcript Trial Day 12, 09/13/2018, Docket No. 1499 at 54. Derick testified that the night

Alex murdered Adam, Alex called and asked to meet him in Old San Juan. Id. at 81. When Derick arrived at Old San Juan, Alex boarded Derick's vehicle and told him that he had completed a job and killed somebody. Id. at 81-82. Alex then asked Derick to drive to the scene where the murder occurred because he wanted to make sure that the victim -Adam- was dead. Id. at 82; 83. Derick nervously complied with Alex's request, and drove to the corner of San Justo and Luna street, where they saw Adam's body lying on the floor. Some persons, including authorities, were surrounding the area of the body. Id. at 83-84. After Derick and Alex were able to confirm Adam was dead, Derick drove Alex to El Morro Castle. Id. at 85. At El Morro, Alex confessed to his longtime friend the following:

A. He told me that this is a job; that he was excited; that he was going to be rich. I was just, like, what happened here? He was going to be rich; that he was paid so that it would look like a robbery.

....

Q. Mr. Osterman, you were saying that at El Morro, Alex told you that it had to be -- to look like a robbery. Can you continue from there on, please.

A. That it had to look like a robbery, and that he was going to be rich; it was a very big contract; and that – he told me very excited that he was going to earn more money than, like, the movie, like in Assassin, and that everything was professional -- came out professional; and if the person died, he was going to be rich. He continued talking about money, like a business.

Id. at 85-86; 90.

Derick also testified that after the murder he helped Alex move from his home in *La Perla* ward because people in the streets suspected Alex committed the murder. Id. at 96-98. Alex stayed for some time at an apartment that belonged to Derick's mother located in Guayama Street, Hato Rey. Id. at 99. Additionally, Derick testified that Alex asked him to take some letters requesting payment for the job he completed to Aurea, Marcia and José. Id. at 102. He further testified about Alex's handwriting style and described it as unique, beautiful and that Alex liked to use stamps and different colors

throughout the pages of his letters. Id. at 102. Ultimately, Derick's testimony was that he refused to deliver the collection of money letters for the murder as requested by Alex, so another friend called Tito, "El Gallo" was the individual who ultimately delivered the letters to Aurea's sister, codefendant Marcia. Id. at 107.

### **c. Alex's Payment Demand Letters**

Alex explained during his direct examination that he wrote several letters to the Vázquez-Rijos family in an attempt to collect the money that was owed to him. Transcript Trial Day 14, 09/17/2018, Docket No. 1517 at 63-64. Alex ultimately requested a friend named Tito "El Gallo" to deliver the letters to the Vázquez-Rijos family at the Pink Skirt, the restaurant owned by Aurea. Id. at 63-64. Alex clarified that he wrote the letters in "code" to prevent people from deciphering the message. Id. at 67. The Government introduced into evidence a letter dated March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006 that Alex wrote to "Marcial," who Alex clarified referred to Marcia Vázquez-Rijos. Id. at 65. The letter written to Marcia demanded the agreed upon payment for the murder of Adam Anhang.<sup>7</sup> See Government Exhibit 35.

During Alex's cross-examination, Aurea's Attorney inquired about him about his habit of writing letters. Id. at 78. Aurea's Attorney emphasized that Alex enjoyed writing letters using different colored pens throughout the pages, using stamps, and sending letters to people he did not personally know. Id. at 78-80. Aurea's Attorney introduced into evidence a set of fifteen letters written by Alex to different individuals he didn't personally

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<sup>7</sup> The Court notes that subsequently, by March 29, 2006, Aurea Vázquez-Rijos filed a Complaint in State Court against Abraham and Barbara Anhang, parents of deceased Adam and members of the Estate, in request for liquidation of inheritance as to her participation. See Civil Case No. K AC2006-1885 (507) before the Puerto Rico Court of First Instance, San Juan Superior Part. Shortly thereafter, Aurea Vázquez-Rijos moved to Florence, Italy. See Transcript Trial Day 22, 09/28/2018, Docket No. 1541 at 31; see also Government Exhibit 58-1.

know. See Defense Exhibit O. Alex characterized these letters as a form of art. Id. at 87-88. Similarly, Marcia's Attorney asked Alex about his practice of writing letters, specifically to other friends asking for money as loans, to which Alex admitted doing. Transcript Trial Day 15, 09/18/2018, Docket No. 1540 at 32-33.

**d. Alex's 2019 Letter to José's Attorney**

Almost nine months after Alex testified during trial, on June 24, 2019, José filed an *Urgent Motion Requesting Order* informing the Court that trial attorney Ovidio Zayas received in his private mail box a handwritten letter dated June 13, 2019 from Alex. See Docket No. 1821, The letter was attached to the motion. See Docket No. 1821, Exhibits A & B. In the letter, Alex requests Attorney Zayas to secretly visit him without telling others. Alex explains that during the visit he would tell Attorney Zayas important information that will help his client José during the appeals process. The letter requests Attorney Zayas to bring a voice recorder because the conversation could be long and will also benefit Aurea.

Upon receipt of Alex's letter, Attorney Zayas contacted Alex's Attorney, José Aguayo, to discuss the content of the letter. See Docket No. 1821 at 2. Alex's Attorney expressed that he did not authorize Attorney Zayas to visit Alex at the facility until he visited his client first. Id. In the motion, José requests permission to take Alex's deposition regarding the information he possesses that will help José in his appeal. Id. at 5.<sup>8</sup>

On June 24, 2019, counsel for Alex filed an *Ex-Parte Order for Mental Competency Evaluation*. See Docket No. 1820. Therein, Alex's Attorney requested a mental evaluation be performed pursuant to 18 U.S.C. §§ 4241(b) and (c). Id. at 2. On July 8, 2019, the

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<sup>8</sup> The Government opposed José's request. See Docket No. 1830.

Court ordered that Alex be transferred to a psychiatric medical facility for a psychological evaluation. Id. at 2. Subsequently, the Court held in abeyance José's request to depose Alex until the Court received the results of the psychological evaluation of Alex. See Docket No. 1834.

**e. Results of the Psychological Evaluation**

On September 26, 2019, the Court received the results of a *Forensic Evaluation* completed by the psychologist of the Federal Bureau of Prisons of Alex Pabon-Colon. See Docket No. 1854. The forensic psychologist diagnosed Alex with "schizophrenia, continuous". Id. at 12. The psychologist provided a medical opinion:

Mr. Pabon exhibits symptoms of Schizophrenia, including delusional beliefs and disorganized speech. He does not present with other features such as hallucinations, grossly disorganized behavior, or negative symptoms (diminished emotional expression, poverty of speech, lack of goal-directed activity) . . . Mr. Pabon exhibits delusional beliefs of both a persecutory and grandiose nature. Persecutory delusions revolve around the belief that one is being conspired against, spied on, followed, poisoned, drugged, or harassed. In Mr. Pabon's case, he believes that he is being constantly surveilled and monitored by multiple sources, including the FBI who planted people, hidden cameras, and audio devices within this institution. He also believes that he was drugged, intentionally infected with a disease, and possibly sexually assaulted . . . Mr. Pabon boasts about his connection to famous and powerful people and believes he himself is a prominent individual. This potentially exacerbates his belief that he is being targeted because he does believe himself to be very important. Mr. Pabon also exhibits ideas of reference, interpreting seemingly irrelevant or innocuous events or comments to having great importance or meaning to him specifically. He also exhibits magical thinking, and believes that his ideas, thoughts, and actions can influence the course of events in the real world.

Id. at 12.

Ultimately, the forensic psychologist concluded that "Mr. Pabon is experiencing symptoms of a psychotic disorder that do substantially impair his present ability to understand the nature and consequences of the court proceedings brought against him, and substantially impair his ability to properly assist counsel in a defense." Id. at 14.

(Emphasis ours). Thus, the Court is forced to conclude that Mr. Alex Pabón-Colón is currently unable to testify effectively.

**f. Pending Motions**

As a result of Alex's *Forensic Evaluation*, the Defendants filed the instant motions requesting the Court to issue indicative rulings. First, Marcia filed a *Motion for Indicative Ruling on Motion Requesting Appointment of Doctor José Franceschini as a Psychiatrist Expert*, requesting the Court to appoint an independent psychiatrist to conduct a mental health evaluation of co-defendant Alex. See Docket No. 1895. Marcia also filed a *Motion for an Indicative Ruling on Motion Requesting Production of Emails Sent by Pabon Colon, the Notes of his Interview and the More than Sixty (60) Drawings he Produced and his Medical File at MDC Guaynabo*, requesting the production of various documents that the BOP psychologist considered when redacting his forensic evaluation. See Docket No. 1897.

Second, all Defendants filed motions requesting indicative rulings on *Motions for New Trial*. See Docket Nos. 1899, 1900 & 1901. Marcia argued that the Government committed a material *Brady*<sup>9</sup> violation for failing to disclose Alex's medical record before trial. See Docket No. 1899 at 3. According to Marcia, the Government also violated *Giglio*<sup>10</sup> by informing the Court in an *ex parte* manner that Alex considered not cooperating before trial commenced. *Id.* at 6. Alternatively, Marcia argued she is entitled to a new trial under Fed. R. of Crim. P. 33 based on new evidence of Alex's diagnosis of

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<sup>9</sup> *Brady v. Maryland*, 373 U.S. 83 (1963).

<sup>10</sup> *Giglio v. United States*, 405 U.S. 150 (1972).

schizophrenia. Id. at 16. José filed a *Motion for Joinder* joining the arguments set forth by Marcia. See Docket No. 1900.

Similarly, Defendant Aurea argued in her motion that a new trial should be held in light of the forensic evaluation questioning Alex's competency to stand trial. Aurea requested the opportunity to question the psychologist who evaluated Alex and requested an order allowing the defense to hire an expert to interpret the psychologist's reports. See Docket No. 1901.

The Government filed an *Opposition* to all of Defendants' motions. See Docket No. 1906. Essentially, the Government argues that

" '[e]very person is competent to be a witness unless these rules provide otherwise.' Fed.R.Evid. 601. 'There is no provision in the [Federal Rules of Evidence] for the exclusion of testimony because a witness is mentally incompetent. The question goes to the issue of credibility, which is for the trier of fact.' United States v. Hyson, 721 F.2d 856, 865 (1<sup>st</sup> Cir. 1983). Put another way, 'a witness' mental state can be relevant to the issue of witness' credibility.' United States v. Gonzalez-Maldonado, 115 F.3d 9, 15 (1<sup>st</sup> Cir. 1997)."

Marcia thereafter filed a *Reply*. See Docket No. 1921. Aurea and José filed motions joining the arguments set forth by Marcia. See Docket Nos. 1923 and 1924.

### **III. STANDARD OF REVIEW FOR INDICATIVE RULING**

In *Griggs v. Provident Consumer Discount Co.*, 459 U.S. 56, 58 (1982), the Supreme Court established that "[t]he filing of a notice of appeal is an event of jurisdictional significance -- it confers jurisdiction on the court of appeals and divests the district court of its control over those aspects of the case involved in the appeal." In the instant case, Defendants all filed timely individual notices of appeal on March 18, 2019. See Docket Nos. 1781, 1782 and 1783.

In the year 2012, however, Congress adopted a new Federal Rule of Criminal Procedure 37 titled *Indicative Ruling on a Motion for Relief That Is Barred by a Pending Appeal*. The rule authorizes district courts to enter indicative rulings in criminal cases. Upon considering a timely motion for relief filed in the district court when an appeal is pending, the district court may contemplate three options: "(1) defer considering the motion; (2) deny the motion; or (3) state either that it would grant the motion if the court of appeals remands for that purpose or that the motion raises a substantial issue." See Fed. R. Crim. P. 37(a)(1), (2) & (3). The Advisory Committee anticipated that Fed. R. Crim. P. 37 will be used primarily for newly discovered evidence motions under Fed. R. Crim. P. 33(b)(1), reduced sentence motions under Fed. R. Crim. P. 35(b), and motions under Section 3582(c). See 2012 Advisory Committee Note to Rule 37. Reprinted in Appendix C in Vol. 3C.

#### **IV. DISCUSSION**

As a result of the post-trial psychological diagnosis contained in Alex's forensic evaluation<sup>11</sup>, Defendants challenge Alex's mental competency, and request a new trial based on the finding that Alex had a mental health history of schizophrenia that deemed him unfit to testify about the conspiracy to murder Adam. See Docket Nos. 1899, 1900 and 1901. However, the Court stresses that at least Aurea knew about Alex's schizophrenia condition before trial, and Alex's Medical Records at MDC were available to Marcia and José at least one (1) month before trial and two (2) months prior to Alex's testimony as ordered by the Court. See Docket Nos. 1161, 1517, 1540.

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<sup>11</sup> The psychological diagnosis was issued on September 26, 2019, approximately one (1) year after Mr. Pabon-Colon's testimony and "11" years after the Plea Agreement. As previously stated, Alex testified on September 17 and 18, 2018.

### A. Applicable Law

Rule 601 of the Federal Rules of Evidence provides the applicable standard when determining a witness' competency to stand trial. Said rule provides that "[e]very person is competent to be a witness unless these rules provide otherwise. Although the Federal Rules of Evidence do not define the term "competency", some "commentators have observed that '[c]ompetency under Rule 601 may be defined as the presence of those characteristics that qualify and the absence of those disabilities that disqualify a person from testifying." Coleman v. U.S., 912 F.3d 824, 831 (5th Cir. 2019) (*citing* 27 Charles Wright & Victor Gold, *Federal Practice & Procedure* § 6003 (2nd ed. 2007)). The Fourth Circuit has held that "[e]very witness is presumed competent to testify [] unless it can be shown that the witness does not have personal knowledge of the matters about which he is to testify, that he does not have the capacity to recall, or that he does not understand the duty to testify truthfully." U.S. v. Lightly, 677 F.2d 1027, 1028 (4th Cir. 1982). It has further stated that "[t]his rule applies to persons considered to be insane to the same extent that it applies to other persons." Id. (*citing* U.S. v. Lopez, 611 F.2d 44 (4th Cir. 1979); Shuler v. Wainwright, 491 F.2d 1213, 1223 (5th Cir. 1974)).

It must be noted that "competency" is a matter of status not ability." U.S. v. Ramirez, 871 F.2d 582, 584 (6th Cir. 1989). Therefore, "[t]he authority of the court to control the admissibility of the testimony of persons so impaired in some manner that they cannot give meaningful testimony is to be found outside of Rule 601." Id. The reason is that although a witness' competency to testify at trial is "a threshold question of law to be answered by the judge", U.S. v. Martino, 648 F.2d 367, 384 (5th Cir. 1981), it is the jury's duty to "assess the witness's credibility and the weight to be accorded his testimony." Id.

Thus, “[b]ecause a witness’s mental state during the period about which he proposes to testify is a matter which affects his credibility, it is a jury determination and thus not germane to competency to testify.” Id.<sup>12</sup> “Accordingly, an adjudication of feeble-mindedness does not render a witness incompetent, nor does having spent time in a mental institution.” 4 Michael H. Graham, *Handbook of Federal Evidence* § 601:2 (8th ed. 2019); See also Ramirez, 871 F.2d at 584 (“The credibility of a witness is a jury question but the competency of the witness to testify is for the judge to decide.”) (*citing U.S. v. Brown*, 770 F.2d 768, 770 (9th Cir. 1985)).

The Fourth Circuit, in U.S. v. Odom, summarized the competency rule in the following manner:

From the earliest days, the rule at common law has been that when mental competency or capacity is in issue, it is approved practice that the chancellor or the jury (dependent on which is to resolve the issue) should observe the person whose competency is in issue, to note his demeanor and his responses to questions, in reaching a decision.

Odom, 736 F.2d 104, 113 (4th Cir. 1984).

The Fifth Circuit, in *Roach*, similarly stated that, “under the new Federal Rules of Evidence it is doubtful that mental incompetence would even be grounds for disqualification of a prospective witness.” U.S. v. Roach, 590 F.2d 181, 185 (5th Cir. 1979). “Nowhere is mental competence mentioned as a possible exception.” Id. at 186. Therefore, “[i]f the court finds the witness otherwise properly qualified, the witness should

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<sup>12</sup> See also *United States v. Partin*, 493 F.2d 750, 762 (5th Cir. 1974), which stated that:

The readily apparent principle is that the jury should, within reason, be informed of all matters affecting a witness’s credibility to aid in their determination of the truth []. It is just as reasonable that a jury be informed of a witness’s mental incapacity at a time about which he proposes to testify as it would be for the jury to know that he then suffered an impairment of sight or hearing. *It all goes to the ability to comprehend, know, and correctly relate the truth.*

(emphasis added) (citations omitted).

be allowed to testify, and the defendant given ample opportunity to impeach his or her perceptions and recollections.” Id. The First Circuit has also upheld this standard. See, e.g. U.S. v. Hyson, 721 F.2d 856, 864 (1st Cir. 1983) (“There is no provision in the [Federal Rules of Evidence] for the exclusion of testimony because a witness is mentally incompetent. The question of competency goes to the issue of credibility, which is for the trier of fact.”) (*citing* Lightly, 677 F.2d at 1028; Roach, 590 F.2d at 185-89).<sup>13</sup>

Notwithstanding, there are certain occasions in which “the requirements of due process and fundamental fairness can require that a criminal defendant be allowed to have a witness against him independently examined by a psychiatrist or psychologist.” 27 Charles & Miller, *id.* at § 601:2. However, the Circuit Courts are adamant that this measure falls within the district court’s sound discretion and must be “exercised sparingly.” U.S. v. Gutman, 725 F.2d 417, 420 (7th Cir. 1984); *See also* U.S. v. Raineri, 670 F.2d 702, 709 (7th Cir. 1982) (“The district court has broad discretion in determining whether to compel a witness to undergo a psychiatric examination.”); U.S. v. Heinlein, 490 F.2d 725, 730 (D.C. Cir. 1973) (“[T]he decision as to whether a court should order a psychiatric examination in order to aid it in resolving the issue of competency ‘must be entrusted to the sound discretion of the trial judge in light of the particular facts.’”) (citation omitted); U.S. v. Russo, 442 F.2d 498, 503 (2nd Cir. 1971) (“[T]he determination of whether a witness should undergo a psychiatric examination is a matter ‘particularly within the discretion of the trial court.’”) (citation omitted); U.S. v. Riley, 657 F.2d 1377, 1387 (8th Cir. 1981) (“[T]he discretion to order [a psychiatric] examination [of the complainant-

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<sup>13</sup> *See also* Wright & Miller *supra*, at § 601:2 (“Although the witness had mental health problems and some delusional beliefs, the presumption of competency is not rebutted merely because a witness may be mentally ill.”) (*citing* State v. Keyes, 114 N.H. 487, 490-91 (1974)).

witness] is ‘entrusted to the sound discretion of the trial judge in light of the particular facts.’”) (citations omitted).

A trial judge must take various factors into account when considering whether to order a witness to undergo psychiatric evaluation, to note: (1) “the infringement on a witness’s privacy”; (2) “the opportunity for harassment”; and (3) the possibility that an examination will hamper law enforcement by deterring witnesses from coming forward.” Raineri, 670 F.2d at 709, citing U.S. v. Jackson, 576 F.2d 46, 49 (7th Cir. 1982); U.S. v. Butler, 481 F.2d 531, 534 (D.C. Cir. 1973). Moreover, “[t]he resultant presumption against ordering an examination must be overcome by a showing of need.” Butler, 481 F.2d at 534.

It is critical to note that “[t]he government’s witnesses in a criminal case are frequently not model citizens. . . .” Riley, 657 F.2d at 1387. “[H]owever, ‘[a]s long as the jury from its observation has the opportunity to appraise the credibility of the witness in the light of the facts impugning his [or her] veracity, this constitutes the constitutional safeguard of a defendant’s rights.’” Id. citing U.S. v. Russo, 442 F.2d 498, 502 (2d Cir. 1971). Furthermore, “[t]he rule allowing the insane to testify assumes that jurors are capable of evaluating a witness’s testimony in light of the fact the he is insane.” Gutman, 725 F.2d at 720. (citation omitted) In Gutman, regarding the defendant’s request to conduct a psychiatric examination on a witness that presented signs of serious mental illness, the Seventh Circuit made the following expressions:

It is unpleasant enough to have to testify in a public trial subject to cross-examination without also being asked to submit to a psychiatric examination the results of which will be spread on the record in open court to disqualify you, or at least to spice up your cross-examination. And while Howard Odom’s privacy may already have been hopelessly compromised by the government’s having turned over to the defense (pursuant to Odom’s guilty-

plea agreement) seven psychiatric reports on him, **with no restrictions placed on their use in cross-examination or in arguing to the jury, this also meant that the defense had plenty of psychiatric ammunition to use against Odom, and hence that Odom's mental condition was not concealed from the jury.** As a matter of fact, the reports were read *in toto* to the jury, which thus knew that Odom had a history of serious mental illness and that his latest hospitalization had occurred under bizarre circumstances nine months before the trial. **And that a mentally ill person may give testimony that is false (though he may believe it to be true) is a possibility that a jury should be capable of understanding and making appropriate allowances for.**

Id. (emphasis added).

These expressions further cement the Circuit Courts' contention that ordering a witness to undergo psychiatric evaluation is something that should be done only when absolutely necessary, and when a witness is "extensively cross-examined regarding their drug use and mental problems", Brown, 770 F.2d at 770, it is up to the jury to determine if said witness's testimony is credible. Hyson, 721 F.2d at 864. See also 27 Wright & Miller, *supra*, at § 6097 ("If evidence of mental illness is relevant to witness credibility it may be shown through extrinsic evidence as well as cross-examination of the witness in question.") (internal citations omitted). "Similarly, if there is other significant evidence concerning credibility, the need to develop additional evidence through a psychiatric examination is diminished." 27 Wright & Miller, *supra*.

## **B. Analysis**

### **a. Alex was competent to testify during jury trial<sup>14</sup>**

About ten years before trial, the Court held a change of plea hearing for Alex and the Court understood he was competent to plead guilty. See Transcript of Change of Plea

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<sup>14</sup> Alex's Change of Plea Hearing Transcript has been available in the docket of the instant case since June 24, 2008. See Docket No. 36. In reference thereto, on July 14, 2016, Alex's change of plea hearing transcript was utilized by Aurea when requesting Alex's psychiatric records. See Docket No. 456.

Hearing, Docket No. 36. During the hearing, the Court inquired whether Alex was under any medication or narcotic drug, to which Alex responded, "none of that." Docket No. 36 at 6. Thereafter, the Court asked, "**so you're not taking any medication for your psychiatric treatment?**", to which Alex answered, "**I didn't take it today because I knew I was coming here.**" Id. (emphasis ours). Alex also stated that "**I was feeling [depressed]**" "**ever since I was a child, ever since I lost my loved ones.**" Id. He further testified that he has never hospitalized due to his psychiatric treatment. Id. All co-defendants had access to the change of plea hearing transcript, thus Defendants had notice that Alex took medications for psychiatric treatment since the year 2008. Nevertheless, none of the Defendants requested that Alex be examined by a mental health professional before trial. Although Alex was undergoing psychiatric treatment, his answers to the Court's questions were clear and lucid, thus the Court found him competent to plead guilty. Id. at 50.

Prior to trial, the Court had broad discretion to determine whether to order a psychiatric examination of Alex. Roach, 590 F.2d at 185. However, Alex's answers to the Court's questions during the change of plea hearing and his behavior for ten years thereafter did not raise suspicions about his competency. There is nothing on the record that suggests that during trial, Alex was incapable of understanding the oath, or incapable of expressing himself to be understood by a jury. Further, Alex clearly had personal knowledge about the matters which he testified. The testimony provided by Derick, Alex's childhood friend, corroborated the events that occurred the night Adam was murdered as confessed by Alex himself. Lastly, the record also shows that Alex was aware of his duty to testify truthfully. See Transcript Trial Day 14, 09/17/2018, Docket No. 1517 at 23; See

also Transcript of Change of Plea Hearing, Docket No. 36 at 50, (Court asking Alex whether he understood that his plea and cooperation agreement was conditioned on his testimony being truthful).

Further, case law establishes that a witness's mental state during the period which he/she will testify is a matter that affects his/her credibility, and thus a determination for the jury. U.S. v. Martino, 648 F.2d at 384. During the jury trial, each Defendant was given ample opportunity to impeach Alex's testimony. As previously stated, Alex was on the witness stand for a day and a half, and all counsel individually cross-examined him. The official transcript shows that Aurea's Attorney cross examined Alex for three hours and fifteen minutes. Transcript Trial Day 14, 09/17/2018, Docket No. 1517 at 75 & 166. Similarly, Marcia's attorney cross examined Alex for an hour and ten minutes, while José's attorney also conducted an extensive cross examination that yielded eighty-eight (88) pages worth of transcript. Transcript Trial Day 15, 09/18/2018, Docket No. 1540 at 36; 36-124.

Moreover, the jury in the instant case had all the facts necessary to assess Alex's credibility based on his mental health history. First, Aurea had access to Alex's medical record, which clearly showed Alex had been diagnosed with schizophrenia since November 4, 2008. Further, the Court entered an order prior to trial granting access to all Defendants of Alex's medical record at MDC. See Docket No. 1161. Aurea questioned Alex about his history experiencing mental illnesses, suffering from panic attacks, being prescribed psychotic drugs, experiencing depression, and experiencing auditory hallucinations. See supra 5-6; Transcript Trial Day 14, 09/17/2018, Docket No. 1517 at 148-50, 162, 152-53. More importantly, counsel for Aurea specifically asked Alex during

cross examination whether he was prescribed a medication with the name *Risperdal*, which the Court later took judicial notice was an “atypical antipsychotic drug used to treat mental illnesses including schizophrenia.” Id. at 158-59; Docket No. 1593 at 41. Hence, Defendants had the information and opportunity required to question Alex’s credibility before the trier of fact.

Therefore, the Court finds that Alex’s behavior before and during trial did not raise suspicions about his ability to understand the nature and consequences of the proceedings brought against him. For the reasons stated above, there was no reason to order a psychiatric examination or competency hearing before Alex testified during the jury trial. Alex’s mental state at the time he testified was relevant as to his credibility, and Defendants had the ability to question him about his mental health history and prescriptions of antipsychotic drugs. The jury, nonetheless, gave weight to Alex’s testimony and other corroborative testimony and evidence introduced at trial. The Court, thus, concludes that Alex was competent to testify during the jury trial, notwithstanding his mental condition. A new trial is not warranted.

**b. Alex’s mental health history is not considered *new evidence* for purposes of Fed. R. of Crim. P. 33**

Motions for a new trial may be based on newly discovered evidence. A defendant seeking a new trial on the ground of newly discovered evidence has a heavy burden. U.S. v. Garcia-Pastrana, 584 F.3d 351, 390 (1st Cir. 2009). To succeed in a new-trial motion alleging newly-discovered evidence, a defendant must show that the evidence (1) was either unknown or unavailable at time of trial; (2) could not have been discovered sooner with due diligence; (3) is material, not merely cumulative or impeaching; and (4) would probably lead to acquittal at a retrial — a heavy burden for any defendant. U.S. v. Wright,

625 F.2d 1017, 1019 (1st Cir. 1980). Defendants request the Court a new trial based on Alex's forensic evaluation diagnosing him with schizophrenia and rendering him mentally incompetent to the extent he is unable to understand the nature and consequences of the court proceedings against him. Docket No. 1854.

Defendants failed to meet the burden of proving that Alex's diagnosis is considered new evidence under Fed. R. of Crim. P. 33. First, Alex's diagnosis of *schizophrenia* was known and available before trial to all Defendants, as the Court had entered an Order granting all Defendants access to Alex's medical records at MDC Guaynabo from 2008 until he testified at trial. See Exhibit I. The legal department of MDC produced almost five hundred (500) pages of Alex's medical record to Aurea's attorney at least two months before trial began. *Supra*, 2-3. The medical record showed that Alex had been diagnosed with schizophrenia since November 4, 2008 and was prescribed medications for the condition. The Court also ordered MDC Guaynabo to provide Alex's medical record to all Defendants in the case, including co-defendants, Marcia and José. See Exhibit I.<sup>15</sup> Marcia now claims the Alex's record was never provided to her before trial. Nonetheless, the evidence was *available* to Marcia, and the Court was never notified until now that MDC failed to deliver a copy of Alex's medical record to Marcia.

Second, Alex's medical record could have been discovered before trial with due diligence. During Alex's change of plea hearing, Alex disclosed under oath that he was receiving psychiatric treatment at MDC. See Docket No. 36 at 6. The Defendants had access to the change of plea hearing transcript and could have reasonably learned that

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<sup>15</sup> Said Order was only viewable amongst the parties of the instant case, including co-defendants, Marcia and José.

Alex was undergoing psychiatric treatment that required medication.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, almost (3) years elapsed after the extradition<sup>17</sup> of Aurea without any of the Defendants requesting a copy Alex's medical record. Thus, the Court finds the evidence could have been discovered sooner with due diligence.

Third, the Court finds that Alex's recent diagnosis is cumulative evidence. Aurea had the opportunity to cross-examine and cross-examined Alex about his history of hallucinations and with being prescribed drugs to treat schizophrenia. As such, the 2019 psychological evaluation simply reiterates that Alex relapsed on a condition diagnosed since 2008, and that Defendants could have easily learned about with due diligence.<sup>18</sup> Fourth, the Defendants did not meet the burden of showing the evidence could have probably lead to acquittal at a retrial, especially considering the jury learned about Alex's schizophrenia and the nature of the drugs prescribed to treat the condition during Aurea's cross-examination.

Therefore, the Court finds the conclusions set forth in Alex's forensic examination are not considered newly discovered evidence that warrant a new trial, as Alex during trial handled all his questions during his direct testimony coherently and thoroughly and was cross-examined by the defendants as to his mental competency.

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<sup>16</sup> As stated before, Alex was inquired by the Court during the Change of Plea Hearing whether he was "not taking any medication for [his] psychiatric treatment?" to which Alex replied that "I didn't take it today because I knew I was coming here." Transcript of Alex Pabon-Colon's Change of Plea Hearing 6/24/2008, Docket No. 36 at 6.

<sup>17</sup> Aurea was extradited from Spain and arrested upon her arrival to Puerto Rico on September 24, 2015. See Docket No. 314.

<sup>18</sup> Alex's medical records were made available to all Defendants before trial by Order of the Court, stating that "Defendants are entitled to the medical records at MDC Guaynabo of witness Alex Pabon-Colon. . ." Docket No. 1161.

**c. The Government did not violate *Brady* or *Giglio***

*Brady* provides that “the government offends due process if it causes prejudice to the defendant by ‘either willfully or inadvertently’ suppressing ‘exculpatory or impeaching’ evidence in its custody or control that is ‘favorable to the accused.’” U.S. v. Peake, 874 F.3d 65, 69 (1st Cir. 2017) (*citing U.S. v. Connolly*, 504 F.3d 206, 212 (1st Cir. 2007)). The *Brady* standard is often expressed in three prongs: (1) the evidence was either unknown or unavailable at time of trial, (2) the evidence could not have been discovered sooner with due diligence, and (3) “unitary requirement that the defendant ... demonstrate only a *reasonable probability* that, had the evidence been disclosed to the defense in a timely manner, the result of the proceeding would have been different.” U.S. v. Rivera-Carrasquillo, 933 F.3d 33, 53 (1st Cir. 2019) (*citing Peake*, 874 F.3d at 69). The prosecution has a duty to disclose exculpatory information including evidence useful for impeachment as long as it is material. McLaughlin v. Corsini, 577 F.3d 15, 20 (1st Cir. 2009).

Co-defendant, Marcia argues the Government violated *Brady* and *Giglio* for suppressing material evidence related to Alex’s diagnosis of schizophrenia. See Docket No. 1899 at 5. The Court understands the Government did not violate *Brady* or *Giglio* by suppressing exculpatory or impeaching evidence. Before Alex testified, his medical record at MDC was available to the Defendants. See Docket No. 1161. Furthermore, Defendant Aurea, thru Counsel, had possession of Alex’s entire medical record at MDC, as requested, and posed cross-examination questions during trial to impeach the witness’ credibility based as to his history with mental illness. The Court also notes that Marcia cross-examined Alex *after* Aurea, and thus she had the opportunity to hear questions

regarding Alex's mental health history before she had an opportunity to question Alex. Marcia, however, failed to bring forth to the Court's attention that she had not received copy of Alex's medical record at MDC in compliance with the Court's order. See Docket No. 1161. Accordingly, the Court finds that Marcia could have discovered Alex's medical record with due diligence prior to her opportunity to cross-examine him.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, Marcia has failed to demonstrate that if Alex's medical record would have been disclosed, the result of the proceeding would have been different. The Court considers that the jury was informed about Alex's history with schizophrenia. See supra at 5-6. Contrary to Marcia's assertion, Alex was not the only witness who testified that Marcia was a part of the conspiracy. See Docket No. 1899 at 5.

For example, the Government presented the testimony of Derick, Alex's childhood friend, who testified that Alex originally requested him to deliver a demand payment letters to Aurea, Marcia and José. Transcript Trial Day 12, 09/13/2018, Docket No. 1499 at 109. Also, the Government introduced into evidence one of the surviving demand payment letters for the murder written by Alex and specifically directed to "Marcial", who Alex explained referred to Marcia in "code". See Government Exhibit 35. The Government also called as a witness Isidoro Perez-Muñoz, the individual responsible for delivering Alex's letters, who testified that Marcia received one of Alex's demand payment letters at the Restaurant Pink Skirt. Transcript Trial Day 13, 09/14/2018, Docket No. 1446 at 24-27. Isidoro testified that upon receiving the letter, Marcia responded "[a]nd she told me that her sister Andrea or -- was sick, that she was depressed, and that --no to the money, and

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<sup>19</sup> The Court notes that José was in the same position as Marcia, has he had access to Alex's Medical Records at MDC, as ordered by the Court, and also heard Alex's cross-examination by Aurea's attorney wherein he was asked as to his medical condition and medication that he was taking. See Docket Nos. 1161, 1517, 1540.

that things are difficult. And she told me that the father of the decedent, of the Canadian, that he had cancelled Andrea's accounts and that they didn't have any money, that they were in crisis, that the business was going bad." Id. at 27.

Lastly, the Government introduced into evidence emails exchanged between Aurea and Marcia that contained incriminating statements. For example, Aurea wrote to Marcia on July 9, 2007 stating, "I'm sorry that you are like this... and I'm even more sorry that José is also like this, **but we're all in the same boat.**" See Government Exhibit No. 58-7(emphasis ours). Similarly, Marcia wrote an email to Aurea on March 12, 2012 in which Marcia responded to a statement made by their brother Charbel that she and José "**planned everything**", in the following manner: "I TOLD HIM ANIMAL MENTALLY RETARDED DEVIL LUCIFER DON'T YOU KNOW THAT THEY ARE RECORDING EVERYTHING AND EVERYTHING YOU SAY THEY WILL BELIEVE WE ARE GOING TO GET SCREWED BECAUSE OF YOU LUCIFER..." See Government Exhibit No. 58-38. Thus, the Government presented additional evidence that strongly corroborated Alex's testimony. Accordingly, Marcia failed to demonstrate a reasonable probability that had the evidence been disclosed to the defense in a timely manner, the result of the proceeding would have been different.

Marcia additionally argues that the Government violated *Giglio* material evidence for failing to disclose that during trial preparation Alex expressed to the Government "[i]n a very excited fashion that he did not want to cooperate, that he had had a plan all along that he was going to break the plea agreement in court, and that he was not wanting to cooperate any longer." Transcript Trial Day 13, 09/14/2018, Docket No. 1446 at 5. The Government informed the Court about Alex's *cold feet* during an ex parte sidebar

conversation. Id. Just as with Alex's medical record, Defendants knew about Alex's intention to retract from testifying while Alex was on the witness stand during cross examination. Although the Government did not inform Defendants about Alex's statement, the Defendants requested daily transcripts of all trial proceedings. Defendants received a copy of the transcript for the proceedings held on September 13, 2018 on September 18, 2018 at 10:38 AM. That is, Defendants had a copy of the transcript containing the Government's statement that Alex had *cold feet* at the time he was on the witness stand and Marcia was conducting cross examination. Transcript Trial Day 15, 09/18/2018. Furthermore, the Court notes that Marcia had two (2) counsel during trial, such that only one of them was posing questions to Alex during cross examination. Nonetheless, the Defendants did not pose questions to Alex about the event during cross-examination, nor did the Defendants request at a later time in trial to reopen cross-examination for Alex. The Court, thus, cannot consider the evidence was withheld from the Defendants in violation of *Giglio*.

The Court concludes there was no *Brady* or *Giglio* violations for failing to disclose Alex's medical health record at MDC or Alex's statement of potentially retracting from the cooperation agreement in his preparation for trial.

### **C. Additional Motions for Indicative Ruling Requesting Discovery**

In addition to Marcia's request for new trial, the Defendant filed a motion requesting appointment of Doctor José Franceschini as a psychiatrist expert. Docket No. 1895. The Court **DENIES** Defendant's request. Considering the Court's ruling Alex was competent at the time he testified, the Court finds Marcia's request is no longer relevant.

Similarly, the Court **DENIES** Marcia's request for production of Alex's emails, notes of his interview with the forensic psychologist and drawings included in his medical file.

See Docket No. 1897. Alex's competency during the time he testified is no longer at issue, and thus the Court does not see the relevance of such documents for the Defendant's case on appeal.

**V. CONCLUSION**

Defendants requested the Court to issue an indicative ruling as to whether the results of the psychological evaluation recently performed on Alex diagnosing him with continuous schizophrenia warrants a new trial. See Docket Nos. 1899 & 1901. Based on the foregoing, the Court concludes that Alex was competent to testify during the jury trial, and the jury assessed his credibility based on Aurea's cross examination questioning Alex about his mental health history and prescription of medications related to schizophrenia. Additionally, the Court finds the diagnosis and conclusions set forth in Alex's forensic evaluation are not considered newly discovered evidence that warrant a new trial under Fed. R. of Crim. P. 33. The Court notes that Alex's September 26, 2019 diagnosis finding him unfit to stand any type of proceedings comes approximately one (1) year after he testified at trial. There is no indication on the record that Alex was suffering a mental limitation when testifying at trial. Lastly, the Court finds the Government did not violate *Brady* or *Giglio* for failing to disclose impeachment evidence to the Defendants. Accordingly, under the authority vested upon the Court through Fed. R. of Crim. P. 37, the Court hereby **DENIES** Defendants' Motions requesting new trial. See Docket Nos. 1899 & 1901.

**IT IS SO ORDERED.**

In San Juan, Puerto Rico, this 21<sup>st</sup> day of February, 2020.

*s/Daniel R. Domínguez*  
Daniel R. Domínguez  
United States District Judge