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IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

OCTOBER TERM 2025

QUIONTE CRAWFORD, Petitioner,

v.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, Respondent

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

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I. QUESTION PRESENTED

Whether a court of appeals may deny a certificate of appealability on a claim that counsel's grossly erroneous sentencing advice induced a guilty plea by issuing a conclusory order that recites the governing legal standard without explaining why the claim is not debatable among reasonable jurists.

II. PARTIES TO THE PROCEEDING

Mr. Quionte Crawford is the Petitioner. The United States of America is the Respondent in this matter.

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Federal Statutes:

28 U.S.C. § 1254	6
28 U.S.C. § 2253(c)	7,11,12,13
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Other:

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OPINIONS BELOW

The unpublished opinion by the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit, *United States v. Crawford*, No. 24-6926 (Dec. 2, 2025), is reproduced at Appendix A. The judgment of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit is reproduced at Appendix B. The final judgment order of the United States District Court for the Northern District of West Virginia is unreported and reproduced at Appendix C.

VI. JURISDICTION

This Petition seeks review of an unpublished opinion of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit, decided on December 2, 2025. This Court has jurisdiction under 28 U.S.C. § 1254(1). No petition for rehearing was filed, and this petition is timely under Supreme Court Rule 13.

VII. STATUTORY PROVISION INVOLVED

28 U.S.C. § 2253(c) which provides in relevant part:

(1) Unless a circuit justice or judge issues a certificate of appealability, an appeal may not be taken to the court of appeals from—

(A) the final order in a habeas corpus proceeding in which the detention complained of arises out of process issued by a State court; or

(B) the final order in a proceeding under section 2255.

(2) A certificate of appealability may issue under paragraph (1) only if the applicant has made a substantial showing of the denial of a constitutional right.

(3) The certificate of appealability under paragraph (1) shall indicate which specific issue or issues satisfy the showing required by paragraph (2).

VIII. STATEMENT OF THE CASE

A. Proceedings before the district court.

Crawford is now serving five life sentences at FCI Williamsburg, Salters, South Carolina. Crawford was arrested in West Virginia and charged with one count of sending obscene matter to a minor via computer. J.A. 217-218.¹

Crawford hired an attorney, Matthew Delligatti, of Fairmont, West Virginia. J.A. 217. In 2018, the case was referred for federal prosecution and AUSA David Perri contacted Delligatti, informing him that Crawford was under federal investigation.

AUSA Perri sent a plea agreement to Delligatti. Delligatti told Crawford he would receive the following recommendations from the government: a three-level reduction for timely acceptance of responsibility under U.S.S.G. § 3E1.1, and that any sentence of incarceration imposed be at the “low end” of the applicable Guidelines range. J.A. 101.

There was no dispute that Delligatti mistakenly advised Crawford about the plea agreement. J.A. 244. Delligatti miscalculated Crawford’s total offense level, telling Crawford it was “around 43” when in actual fact it was 51. J.A. 147-148. Delligatti incorrectly advised Crawford that the operation of a three-level reduction for acceptance of responsibility would result in an offense level of 40. J.A. 239-240. Delligatti incorrectly advised Crawford that at level 40 in a criminal history

¹ “J.A.” is a reference to the joint appendix of the parties submitted in connection with Crawford’s direct appeal.

category I, Crawford would face a range of imprisonment of 292-365 months under the advisory Federal Sentencing Guidelines. J.A. 239-240.

On May 23, 2019, Crawford executed the plea agreement. J.A. 231-237. Crawford entered pleas of guilty to the five-count Information. The United States Probation Office issued a Presentence Investigation Report calling for a minimum term of imprisonment, per count, of 10 years and a maximum term of life under the statute. J.A. 224. As for the guidelines, the PSR stated “[b]ased upon a total offense level of 43 and a criminal history category of I, the guideline imprisonment range is life.” J.A. 224.

Delligatti did not object to the PSR. J.A. 126. Rather, on the record, Delligatti candidly admitted legal errors he made in his assessment of the plea agreement, his misunderstanding of the Guidelines, and the adverse impact all of this had upon Crawford at sentencing. Delligatti asked for a downward variance sentence based upon the fact that Crawford entered his plea agreement upon incorrect advice from Delligatti. J.A. 239-240. The United States’ Response to the Defendant’s Sentencing Memorandum similarly recognized the errors and joined in the request for relief. J.A. 244.

At sentencing, the district court acknowledged Crawford’s sentencing memorandum and the Government’s response to the memorandum. J.A.127. When Delligatti and Crawford were given the opportunity to address the court, Delligatti stated that he made mistakes and argued in favor of a sentence of 292 months. J.A. 144-145. Delligatti explained the events leading up to Crawford accepting the plea

of guilty to the Information. Delligatti went through the Guidelines with Crawford and “informed him incorrectly” that if the Guidelines calculation would go above 43, as they did, Crawford would still receive the three-level reduction for acceptance of responsibility, which would reduce his offense level from 43 to 40. J.A. 144-145.

After the district court listened to the parties, it denied the motion for a downward variance. Crawford was sentenced to life in prison for each count to run concurrently. J.A. 160.

B. The section 2255 proceedings.

On August 23, 2021, Crawford brought an action to vacate his conviction and sentence pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2255 in the Northern District of West Virginia. Crawford filed a Supplement to the Petition on May 12, 2022. Crawford claimed ineffective assistance of counsel and expressly requested an evidentiary hearing to develop the record.

The Respondent filed a Response in Opposition on July 25, 2022. On September 7, 2022, U.S. Magistrate Judge Michael J. Aloï issued its Report and Recommendation recommending that Crawford’s § 2255 petition be denied. On September 5, 2024, Chief United States District Court Judge Thomas S. Kleeh issued an opinion and order denying § 2255 petition without a hearing and declined to issue a certificate of appealability.

C. Appeal before the Fourth Circuit.

On October 28, 2024, Crawford filed an informal brief to the Fourth Circuit and requested a certificate of appealability. He argued, once again, that his five life

sentences were the result of ineffective assistance of counsel in connection with his guilty pleas because (1) his plea counsel grossly miscalculated the total offense level, (2) misinformed him about reductions for acceptance of responsibility, and (3) incorrectly advised Crawford that his guidelines range was 292-365 months in prison.

Crawford argued that the district court erred in failing to hold an evidentiary hearing to consider the § 2255 claims. He requested an opportunity to demonstrate with sworn testimony that he would have rejected the plea agreement and proceeded to trial had he been given accurate legal advice about the sentence of life he would receive under the plea agreement.

In an unpublished opinion, on December 2, 2025, the Court of Appeals denied a certificate of appealability. The court recited the governing standard under 28 U.S.C. § 2253(c)(2), explaining that a certificate may issue only if the applicant makes a substantial showing of the denial of a constitutional right, and that this requires a showing that reasonable jurists could debate the district court's resolution of the claim. The court concluded that Crawford had not made the requisite showing and dismissed the appeal. The order did not further explain why Crawford's ineffective-assistance claim was not debatable among reasonable jurists. App A. at 2.

IX. REASONS FOR GRANTING THE WRIT

This case presents a straightforward question: whether a court of appeals may deny a certificate of appealability by reciting the governing standard but offering no explanation for its conclusion.

Congress did not enact 28 U.S.C. § 2253(c) to create a silent gatekeeping mechanism. A certificate of appealability may issue only if the applicant makes “a substantial showing of the denial of a constitutional right.” *Id.* This Court has explained what that means. A certificate should issue when reasonable jurists could debate the district court’s resolution of the constitutional claim. *Slack v. McDaniel*, 529 U.S. 473, 484 (2000). The inquiry is a threshold one. It does not ask whether the petitioner will ultimately prevail.

Here, the Fourth Circuit denied a certificate of appealability in an unpublished opinion. The court recited the standard. It then concluded that Crawford had not made the requisite showing. That was all.

There was no explanation of *why* this ineffective-assistance claim was not debatable among reasonable jurists. There was no explanation of *why* the district court’s refusal to hold an evidentiary hearing did not warrant further review. There were only conclusions.

Here, that matters especially because the *Strickland* claim is debatable. Crawford’s plea counsel admittedly miscalculated the offense level by eight levels. He misunderstood the operation of the Guidelines. He advised Crawford that his guideline range was 292–365 months when it was *life*. Crawford’s counsel and the

Government acknowledged the errors at sentencing. Making matters worse, the district court denied relief without an evidentiary hearing.

Whether a defendant who was told he faced roughly twenty years, but in fact faced life, can satisfy *Strickland*'s prejudice prong is not frivolous. Courts have reached different results in cases where plea agreements have gone badly due to gross sentencing miscalculations. At the very least, reasonable jurists *could debate* whether *Strickland* was met and whether this record required a hearing.

Written judicial decisions serve an indispensable purpose. They allow the parties and reviewing courts to understand why a result was reached. Without explanation, there is nothing to examine. A decision that merely recites a legal standard and announces a result does not demonstrate that the court meaningfully applied § 2253(c)'s "debatable among reasonable jurists" test. The Fourth Circuit's unpublished decision is an opinion *in name only*.

This Court has required sentencing courts to explain their reasoning so that appellate review is possible. *See Rita v. United States*, 551 U.S. 338, 356–57 (2007). The same principle applies here. The certificate-of-appealability determination is the statutory gateway to appellate review in habeas cases. If that gateway may be closed without explanation, the statutory standard becomes functionally unreviewable and, therefore, meaningless.

This Court should grant the petition and clarify that when a court of appeals denies a certificate of appealability, it must do more than recite the governing

standard. It must explain *why* the constitutional claim is not debatable among reasonable jurists.

X. CONCLUSION

For these reasons, Crawford respectfully requests that this Honorable Court grant a writ of certiorari and review the judgment of the Court of Appeals.

Respectfully submitted,

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By counsel,

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