

IN THE COURT OF COMMON PLEAS OF LYCOMING COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA

COMMONWEALTH : No. CR-1428-2023
:
vs. : Decision re Omnibus Pre-Trial
: Motion (sever and habeas)
TYREN TEAGEUS-LANDIS, :
Defendant :

OPINION AND ORDER

This matter came before the court on Defendant’s Omnibus Pre-Trial Motion. In a separate order issued immediately after the hearing and argument, the court addressed the motion to compel discovery and the motion for advance notice of 404(b) evidence. Therefore, the only portions that remain are the motion for habeas corpus relief with respect to Count 4 and the motion to sever defendants. The Commonwealth requested an opportunity to brief the severance issue, which the court granted. Despite requesting and receiving this opportunity, the Commonwealth did not file a brief and simply sent an email to the court indicating it would leave this issue to the court’s judgment.

Tyren Teageus-Landis is charged with Count 1, Arson-Danger of Death or Bodily Injury, a felony of the first degree, in violation of 18 Pa. C.S.A. §3301(a)(1)(i); Count 2, Arson-Intent Collect Insurance, a felony of the second degree, in violation of 18 Pa. C.S.A. §3301(c)(3); Count 3, Criminal Conspiracy-Arson-Intent Collect Insurance, a felony of the second degree, in violation of 18 Pa. C.S.A. §903;¹ and Count 4, Criminal Attempt-Insurance Fraud-Knowingly Benefits From Proceeds, a felony of the third degree, in violation of 18 Pa. C.S.A. §901(a). These charges arise out of a fire that occurred at a home owned by Jimmie

¹There is a glitch in the communication between the DA’s system and CPCMS when generating Informations such that the language for a conspiracy charge is contained within the description of the offense, but the name of the computer lists the name of the charge as Criminal Attempt instead of Criminal Conspiracy. The court

and Alexandria Sheffield on Inverness Road in Loyalsock Township, Lycoming County. The Commonwealth alleges that Ms. Sheffield and Mr. Teageus-Landis conspired to set fire to the house so that Ms. Sheffield would receive insurance proceeds and Mr. Teageus-Landis would be paid from those proceeds. The fire occurred in the early morning hours of July 5, 2023. The fire investigator determined that there were four separate origin points and that each was intentionally set.

Severance

Teageus-Landis first asserts that any trial in his case should be severed from any trial of his alleged co-defendant, Alexandria Sheffield. He asserts that there were statements made by Ms. Sheffield that would not be admissible against him and that there is evidence that the Commonwealth will seek to admit against Ms. Sheffield that would not be admissible against him if a separate trial were ordered. He contends that admission of this evidence in a joint trial would be prejudicial to him. Therefore, his trial should be severed from Ms. Sheffield's trial.

The court may order separate trials of offenses or defendants, or provide other appropriate relief, if it appears that any party may be prejudiced by offenses or defendants being tried together.

Pa. R. Crim. P. 583. This issue may be moot. Ms. Sheffield's case is currently listed for a guilty plea hearing on March 21, 2025. Even if this issue is not moot, the court would grant the motion to sever as it appears that the Commonwealth is no longer opposed to the motion given its initial request to file a brief, its failure to do so, and its email that it leaves this issue up to the court.

will issue a separate order directing the Clerk of Courts to change Count 3 so that it appears as Criminal Conspiracy on the docket sheet.

Habeas Corpus

Teageus-Landis asserts that he is charged in Count 4 with Insurance Fraud-Knowingly Receives Benefits from Proceeds and that the charge must be dismissed because the Commonwealth failed to present any evidence that he received any insurance proceeds or any other benefit.

At the preliminary hearing stage of a criminal prosecution, the Commonwealth need not prove a defendant's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt, but rather, must merely put forth sufficient evidence to establish a prima facie case of guilt. *Commonwealth v. McBride*, 595 A.2d 589, 591 (Pa. 1991). A prima facie case exists when the Commonwealth produces evidence of each of the material elements of the crime charged and establishes probable cause to warrant the belief that the accused likely committed the offense. *Id.* Furthermore, the evidence need only be such that, if presented at trial and accepted as true, the judge would be warranted in permitting the case to be decided by the jury. *Commonwealth v. Marti*, 779 A.2d 1177, 1180 (Pa. Super. 2001). To meet its burden, the Commonwealth may utilize the evidence presented at the preliminary hearing and also may submit additional proof. *Commonwealth v. Dantzler*, 135 A.3d 1109, 1112 (Pa. Super. 2016). The weight and credibility of the evidence may not be determined and are not at issue in a pretrial habeas proceeding. *Commonwealth v. Wojdak*, 466 A.2d 991, 997 (Pa. 1983); see also *Commonwealth v. Kohlie*, 811 A.2d 1010, 1014 (Pa. Super. 2002). Moreover, “inferences reasonably drawn from the evidence of record which would support a verdict of guilty are to be given effect, and the evidence must be read in the light most favorable to the Commonwealth's case.” *Commonwealth v. Huggins*, 836 A.2d 862, 866 (Pa. 2003).

The court first notes that Teageus-Landis is charged with Criminal Attempt to commit Insurance Fraud, and not actual underlying offense of Insurance Fraud. As such, the elements of the offense are different. “A person commits an attempt when, with intent to commit a specific crime, he does any act which constitutes a substantial step toward the commission of that crime.” 18 Pa. C.S.A. §901(a). There are two elements to the offense charged, an intent to commit insurance fraud (for the purpose of receiving proceeds from an insurance policy) and a substantial step towards the commission of the insurance fraud.

Trooper Nathan Birth, a fire investigator in the Fire Marshal Unit of the Pennsylvania State Police at the Montoursville barracks, testified that he investigated the fire at the Sheffield residence on Inverness Road. A neighbor had woken up sometime between 4:30 and 5:00 a.m. and when he took his dog outside, he smelled smoke or something burning. He thought it was something inside his garage but checked and did not find anything. When he returned outside, he could no longer smell smoke. He went to work. Around 7:00 a.m., the neighbor’s girlfriend called him and mentioned that she saw smoke coming from the chimney of the Sheffield residence. The neighbor returned home, saw the smoke and called 911. The Loyalsock Fire Department responded and put out the fire. Trooper Birth investigated the fire and determined that the fire “was incendiary as an act of arson.” He testified that fires were intentionally set at four different locations within the residence – (1) in the living room near the fireplace and a wall outlet; (2) in the dining room on a white plastic table with a power strip, some heat lamps and a space heater; (3) on top of the kitchen stove; and (4) in the crawl space in the basement within the floor joist channel, which was where the most damage was. The fire did not spread from one area to another, as there was no fire damage between the first three areas on the first floor; there were no flash over events.

Additionally, electrical areas were ruled out as possible causes of the fire.

Once Trooper Birth determined that the fire was intentionally set, he began to investigate who set the fire. He discovered that the residence was in the process of being sold. It was under contract for \$225,000, but the residence and contents were insured through State Farm for close to \$600,000 if it was a complete loss.

He testified that he spoke to Cody Kyle. Based on information provided by Mr. Kyle, Trooper Birth began to investigate Ms. Sheffield and Teagues-Landis, who Trooper Birth at that point only knew as T.Y or Ty. Trooper Birth obtained warrants for Ms. Sheffield's phone, phone records and her account information and electronic communications through Facebook and Google. As a result of the warrant, Trooper Birth discovered multiple communications between Sheffield, her daughter, and Teageus-Landis. There were communications starting around July 2 or July 3 about getting a lizard or a gecko out of the structure. The lizard or gecko was removed from the residence sometime on July 4. The lizard or gecko was taken to the residence of Shaq Taylor. The residence on Inverness Road was set on fire in the early morning hours of July 5.

Teageus-Landis' phone number was in Sheffield's phone and her daughter's phone. Trooper Birth then obtained a warrant for his phone number, his service provider and phone records. The service provider was T-Mobile, which also provided GPS coordinates/location information. The subscriber was Jennifer Teageus. There were phone calls from that phone with an Angela Shannon, who had been the subject of a traffic stop. Trooper Birth was able to review the MVR from that traffic stop and during that stop, Ms. Shannon identified the passenger in her vehicle as Tyren Landis, which was consistent with Mr. Kyle's statements regarding a T.Y. or Ty. This information led Trooper Birth to investigate Teageus-Landis.

There were Facebook communications between Sheffield and a Facebook account under the name of “Cashmire Gates.” When Trooper Birth investigated that Facebook account, it exhibited photographs consistent with Teageus-Landis, which Birth compared to Teageus-Landis’ driver’s license photo from PennDOT. Based on this comparison, he believed “Cashmire Gates” and Teageus-Landis were the same person. Trooper Birth found communications between Sheffield and Teageus-Landis in Teageus-Landis’ Facebook account that had been removed and deleted from Ms. Sheffield’s account. There was a text communication on July 20 where Teageus-Landis requested \$800 from Sheffield, but the communication did not reference what the money was for.

Trooper Birth also spoke to Teageus-Landis. He could not remember where he was at approximately 5:00 a.m. on July 5th. They also talked about July 4th. Although he couldn’t provide exact details, Teageus-Landis provided a ride or drove Ms. Sheffield’s daughter to or from the fireworks on July 5th. He also acknowledged that he knew Ms. Sheffield.

Cody Kyle also testified at the preliminary hearing. He indicated that while he was in the county jail, he read about the fire in the newspaper. On July 8, after he was released from jail, he went to the Pennsylvania State Police barracks in Montoursville to tell them what he knew about the fire. Mr. Kyle testified that he was at a party at the residence and they were coming up with a plan to set the house on fire. Mr. Kyle was going to be one of the people to set it, but he and Ms. Sheffield had a falling out. Ms. Sheffield, Teageus-Landis, Ms. Sheffield’s daughter, one of the daughter’s friends and Mr. Kyle were at the party. Mr. Kyle identified Teageus-Landis as Ty. Ms. Sheffield, Teageus-Landis and Mr. Kyle had a conversation planning out the fire. Ms. Sheffield was going to go out of town to Arkansas.

Teageus-Landis and Kyle were going to park at the church on Warrensville Road, walk to the residence, break in and start the fire. When asked what was in it for him, Mr. Kyle answered, “the insurance money.” Mr. Kyle was in jail from July 3 to July 8. He testified that when he got out of jail, he contacted the police to give them information about the fire and his reason for telling the police was “to get back at her [Sheffield]”. He also testified that their falling out was about drugs; more specifically, he owed her money for drugs. When the planning was being made, Mr. Kyle and Ms. Sheffield were using cocaine and Teageus-Landis was smoking marijuana. They also were drinking alcohol. There was talk about using cheese puffs to start the fire as well as possible points of origin, including in the attic and behind the dresser in the master bedroom.

From the evidence presented and the reasonable inferences that can be drawn from that evidence, the Commonwealth showed that Teageus-Landis planned with Kyle and Sheffield to set her residence on fire for the purpose of collecting the proceeds from the insurance policy on the residence. In other words, all three had the intent to commit Insurance Fraud-Knowingly Receive Benefits from Proceeds. Teageus-Landis and Sheffield’s daughter were involved with removing the lizard or gecko from the residence on July 4, which was shortly before the fire was started around 5:00 a.m. on July 5. Furthermore, a substantial step was taken to commit the intended crime as the residence was intentionally set on fire. Kyle did not set the fire; he was incarcerated in the Lycoming County Prison. Sheffield did not start the fire; she was in Arkansas as was discussed in the plan. The family pet lizard or gecko was removed from the residence on July 4, shortly before the fire was started during the early morning hours of July 5. The fire was intentionally set. The only conspirator who was in Pennsylvania and able to set the fire was

Teageus-Landis. Approximately two weeks after the fire, Teageus-Landis was asking Sheffield for \$800.

The intended crime was not successful because Trooper Birth and the insurance company's fire investigator determined that the fire was intentionally set and Ms. Sheffield was involved. It is of no moment, however, that insurance proceeds from the fire were never actually received because Teageus-Landis is only charged with Criminal Attempt and not the underlying crime. An attempt only requires a substantial step; it does not require the completion of the underlying crime. Certainly, intentionally setting the house on fire was a substantial step.

For the forgoing reasons, the court will deny Defendant's request for habeas corpus relief with respect to Count 4.

ORDER

AND NOW, this 27TH day of February 2025, the court GRANTS Defendant's motion to sever his case from Alexandria Sheffield's. The court DENIES Defendant's request for habeas corpus relief with respect to Count 4.

By The Court,

Nancy L. Butts, President Judge

cc: Martin L. Wade, Esquire (ADA)
Donald F. Martino, Esquire
Jerri Rook