

Circuit Court for Prince George's County  
Case No. C-16-CR-23-000555

UNREPORTED\*

IN THE APPELLATE COURT

OF MARYLAND

No. 627

September Term, 2024

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RODNEY RONALDAN KNIGHT

v.

STATE OF MARYLAND

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Graeff,  
Tang,  
Eyler, James R.  
(Senior Judge, Specially Assigned),

JJ.

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Opinion by Tang, J.

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Filed: March 26, 2026

\*This is an unreported opinion. This opinion may not be cited as precedent within the rule of stare decisis. It may be cited for its persuasive value only if the citation conforms to Rule 1-104(a)(2)(B).

Following a four-day jury trial in the Circuit Court for Prince George’s County, the appellant, Rodney Knight, was convicted of armed robbery, first-degree assault, and use of a firearm in the commission of a crime of violence. The court sentenced him to an aggregate sentence of forty-five years’ incarceration, all but seventeen years suspended, followed by five years’ probation. On appeal, he presents a single issue: whether the circuit court abused its discretion by admitting the appellant’s buccal swab (State’s Exhibit 7).<sup>1</sup> For the reasons that follow, we shall affirm the convictions.

### **BACKGROUND**

Corporal Ashby Hoffman of the Prince George’s County Police Department (“PGPD”) was assigned to investigate a pair of robberies that occurred at two motels. He identified a Ford Fusion as a suspect vehicle associated with one robbery and obtained a warrant to search it. He and another PGPD officer, Corporal Jeremy Webb, executed the warrant and searched the vehicle.

During the search, Corporal Webb found a handgun in the driver’s door pocket. He recovered the gun and swabbed it for DNA. At trial, the defense did not object to the admission of these swabs.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The question presented in the appellant’s brief is “Did the trial court abuse its discretion in admitting testimony based on DNA evidence that lacked a proper chain of custody?” However, this question is broader than the appellant’s actual argument, which is limited to the court’s alleged error in admitting the buccal swabs. The brief’s discussion centers exclusively on the admissibility of the buccal swabs.

<sup>2</sup> These exhibits were identified as State’s Exhibits 5 (two swabs of the gun’s sights); 6 (two swabs from the trigger); and 8 (two swabs from the grip).

Detective Hoffman also obtained a warrant to collect the appellant’s DNA, which was executed by Corporal Ashavla Williams. At trial, Detective Hoffman testified that he stood next to Corporal Williams and “observed [her] take two cotton swabs and swab inside of the [appellant’s] mouth.” Detective Hoffman saw Corporal Williams package the buccal swabs and “seal[] it.” Corporal Williams then took custody of the swabs. Later, Detective Hoffman recovered the package with the buccal swabs from the “property warehouse” and “released it to the FBI.”

At trial, Detective Hoffman looked at the package that contained the buccal swabs (State’s Exhibit 7) and identified the packaging inside as being in the same or a substantially similar condition as it was when Corporal Williams packaged it and when he saw it “the last time,” i.e., before releasing it to the FBI. When the State moved to admit the exhibit, defense counsel objected:

In this case, the chain of custody has not been satisfied. There is another person that had it. [Detective Hoffman] doesn’t know where [Corporal Williams] went with it after that. Then the activity, who works up in Baltimore, we don’t know where she went with it. And we have all these different people. They’re not like minor people. . . . I would object because I don’t believe the chain of custody has been established.

Defense counsel added:

[T]he person who’s actually tested it is part of the chain of custody, and so the swabber and the analyzer are the two really significant people who have to be present in order to establish the chain of custody.

The court was not persuaded by the argument that the swabber (Corporal Williams) had to testify; the court found that Detective Hoffman’s testimony about seeing Corporal Williams swab, package, and seal the sample “negate[d] the possibility of any tampering.”

However, the court indicated that the DNA analyst had not yet testified. Accordingly, the court reserved ruling on the admission of Exhibit 7 until after hearing from this witness.

FBI Analyst Michelle Martin testified that she received a buccal swab to be tested in this case. She looked at Exhibit 7 and “recognize[d] th[e] envelope with the laboratory case number on it, as well as the evidence item number as received in the lab.” She indicated that other than having been ripped open, the packaging was in the same or similar condition as when she received it. Over the appellant’s objection, the court admitted Exhibit 7.

Thereafter, Ms. Martin testified that she compared the DNA profile from the appellant’s buccal swabs to the DNA profiles found on the handgun, which swabs were also analyzed. She concluded that there was “very strong support to include [the appellant] as a possible contributor” to the DNA from the firearm swabs.

On cross-examination, Ms. Martin testified that she would not have been the person to open the swabs’ packaging. One of the biologists would have received the package containing swabs and performed the collections and further steps in the laboratory. Then two other biologists would perform extraction and quantitation procedures with the swabs—three people in total in this case, none of whom testified. Only “at the end of that testing, [was there] electronic information that [Ms. Martin] reviewed on [her] computer to make interpretations and conclusions.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The cross-examination of Ms. Martin concerning others who worked with the swabs pertained to the firearm swabs. There was no specific testimony regarding

As mentioned, the jury found the appellant guilty of armed robbery, first-degree assault, and use of a firearm in a crime of violence. He noted this timely appeal.

### DISCUSSION

The appellant contends that the court abused its discretion in admitting the buccal swabs (State’s Exhibit 7) because of the significant breaks in the chain of custody. He argues that the State did not provide testimony from Corporal Williams, the person who collected and packaged the buccal swabs, or testimony from the person at the DNA lab who received the sealed package containing the swabs.

This Court reviews a circuit court’s determinations regarding the admissibility of evidence for abuse of discretion. *State v. Simms*, 420 Md. 705, 724–25 (2011). Maryland Rule 5-901 states that “[t]he requirement of authentication . . . as a condition precedent to admissibility is satisfied by evidence sufficient to support a finding that the matter in question is what its proponent claims.” Md. Rule 5-901(a).

In the case of physical evidence, “the law requires the offering party to establish the ‘chain of custody,’ *i.e.*, account for its handling from the time it was seized until it is offered in evidence.” *Johnson v. State*, 240 Md. App. 200, 211 (2019) (citation omitted). Most often, this is established through witness testimony negating the possibility of tampering or of a changed condition. *Easter v. State*, 223 Md. App. 65, 75 (2015).

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individuals who handled the buccal swabs (State’s Exhibit 7). Nevertheless, both parties appear to infer from Ms. Martin’s testimony that these procedures applied to all swabs, including the buccal swabs. For the purposes of this discussion, we will adopt the same assumption.

The State’s burden is not to establish the chain of custody beyond a reasonable doubt, but to prove that there is a “reasonable probability that no tampering occurred.” *Johnson*, 240 Md. App. at 211 (citation omitted). “What is necessary to negate the likelihood of tampering or of change of condition will vary from case to case.” *Easter*, 223 Md. App. at 75. Any gaps in the chain of custody typically do not require the circuit court to exclude evidence, but rather go to the weight of the evidence. *Id.*; see also *Wheeler v. State*, 459 Md. 555, 568–69 (2018).

We conclude that the court was within its discretion to admit the buccal swabs (State’s Exhibit 7). Detective Hoffman testified that Corporal Williams collected, packaged, and sealed the buccal swabs. Although Detective Hoffman did not observe Corporal Williams’s actions with the package afterward, he stated that he retrieved the buccal swabs from the “property warehouse” and that the package was in the same or substantially similar condition as when Corporal Williams sealed it.

Detective Hoffman’s testimony further established that he delivered the sealed package containing the buccal swabs to the FBI for testing. Although a biologist at the DNA lab may have opened the package and did not testify, this does not undermine the chain of custody. Ms. Martin’s testimony confirmed that the package was in the same or a substantially similar condition as when it was received; she specifically identified the envelope by its laboratory case number and evidence item number. Additionally, Detective Hoffman examined the package at trial after it had been handled by various biologists and

testified that it remained in the same or substantially similar condition as when he last saw it—when he retrieved it from the property warehouse and submitted it to the FBI.

For the reasons stated, the State presented enough evidence to “negate[] a reasonable probability of alteration or tampering.” *Wheeler*, 459 Md. at 569. Consequently, the court did not abuse its discretion by admitting the buccal swabs into evidence and allowing testimony on that evidence.

**JUDGMENTS OF THE CIRCUIT COURT  
FOR PRINCE GEORGE’S COUNTY  
AFFIRMED. COSTS TO BE PAID BY  
APPELLANT.**