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BLYSTONE v. HORN: THE THIRD CIRCUIT GUARDS AGAINST INADVERTENT WAIVER OF THE RIGHT TO PRESENT MITIGATING EVIDENCE DURING A CAPITAL CASE

DYLAN J. SCHER*

I. INTRODUCTION

The fundamental right to effective representation is a cornerstone of the criminal justice system, and at no time is that effective representation more crucial than during the investigation and presentation of mitigating evidence in a capital case.1 Because the death penalty is reserved for the most heinous of crimes, inextricably interwoven in a capital case is a defendant’s right to present mitigating evidence to demonstrate extenuating circumstances that may justify a departure from the death penalty.2

* J.D. Candidate, 2014, Villanova University School of Law. This Casebrief would not have been possible without the love and support of my friends and family. Additionally, I would like to thank the members of Volume 58 of the Villanova Law Review for their helpful feedback and comments.

1. See Dale E. Ho, Silent at Sentencing: Waiver Doctrine and a Capital Defendant’s Right to Present Mitigating Evidence After Schriro v. Landrigan, 62 FLA. L. REV. 721, 725, 735 (2010) (explaining that right to present mitigating evidence during capital case “is grounded firmly in the Court’s capital punishment jurisprudence, arising in response to . . . Eighth Amendment concerns”); Emily Hughes, Arbitrary Death: An Empirical Study of Mitigation, 89 WASH. U. L. REV. 581, 582 (2012) (“A capital jury’s opportunity to consider mitigating evidence is one of the critical procedures the Supreme Court has endorsed to alleviate arbitrariness in the jury’s decision of whether a defendant deserves to die.”). Proper investigation of mitigating evidence is an immense task. See Ursula Bentele & William J. Bowers, How Jurors Decide on Death: Guilt Is Overwhelming; Aggravation Requires Death; and Mitigation Is No Excuse, 66 BROOK. L. REV. 1011, 1055 (2001) (explaining challenges in developing mitigating evidence, calling it “an extraordinarily complicated and difficult task that requires the skillful blending of lay and expert testimony”).

2. See California v. Brown, 479 U.S. 538, 545 (1987) (O’Connor, J., concurring) (explaining that mitigating evidence, including defendant’s “disadvantaged background” or “emotional and mental problems,” is extremely significant to consider in capital cases because it may indicate that particular defendant is less culpable than others who lack this type of “excuse”). In the broadest sense, mitigating evidence is any type of factor that could cause a jury to issue anything less than the death penalty. See Craig M. Cooley, Mapping the Monster’s Mental Health and Social History: Why Capital Defense Attorneys and Public Defender Death Penalty Units Require the Services of Mitigation Specialists, 30 O.KLA. CIV U. L. REV. 23, 51–52 (2005) (explaining role mitigating evidence plays in sentencing phase of death penalty case). The Supreme Court has identified a non-exhaustive list of potential mitigating factors. See id. at 48 (“[M]itigating factors have included such things as family history; youthfulness; underdeveloped intellect and maturity; favorable prospects for rehabilitation; poverty; military service; cooperation with authorities; character; prior criminal history; mental capacity; age; and good behavior while awaiting trial.”) (footnotes omitted).
Therefore, the presentation of mitigating evidence is a critical juncture in a capital case. Put simply, if a defendant does not present any mitigating evidence during the trial or sentencing phase, the defendant faces a highly unfavorable outcome and decreases his or her chance of avoiding the death penalty.

Investigating and presenting mitigating evidence is not an easy task, as a surprising number of “uncooperative” defendants facing the death penalty hinder a defense counsel’s attempt to gather or present the evidence. Further, it is not uncommon for defendants in capital cases to be poorly represented. Inadequate representation, coupled with the complexities involved in investigating and presenting mitigating evidence, leads many defendants seeking post-sentencing relief to file claims for ineffective assistance of counsel regarding their representation at the sentencing phase of a capital case. Often, this type of claim hinges on whether the defendant waived the right to present mitigating evidence, which, under the current Supreme Court jurisprudence, procedurally bars a claim of ineffective assistance of counsel.

3. See Robin M. Maher, The ABA and the Supplementary Guidelines for the Mitigation Function of Defense Teams in Death Penalty Cases, 36 Hofstra L. Rev. 763, 771–72 (2008) (“Developing mitigation evidence and making a case for the life of their client is one of the most important tasks defense lawyers must handle.”); see also Ho, supra note 1, at 724 (explaining right to present mitigating evidence “represents a defendant’s last line of defense against the imposition of the death penalty”); Leading Cases, Sixth Amendment—Ineffective Assistance of Counsel: Schriro v. Landrigan, 121 Harv. L. Rev. 255, 263 (2007) [hereinafter Leading Cases] (“Mitigating evidence is one of the most important checks ensuring that the state imposes the death penalty only when it ‘has adequate assurance that the punishment is justified.’”) (citation omitted).

4. See Kamela Nelan, Restricting Waivers of the Presentation of Mitigating Evidence by Incompetent Death Penalty “Volunteers”, 27 Dev. Mental Health L. 24, 24 (2008) (“An equally significant means by which a defendant can achieve execution is to forgo presenting mitigating evidence during the sentencing phase of the trial, making the imposition of a death sentence a virtual certainty.”); see also Cooley, supra note 2, at 33 (“Typically, one’s life will only be spared when sufficient mitigating evidence is presented to outweigh the State’s aggravating evidence.”).

5. Leading Cases, supra note 3, at 255 (“Capital defendants are not always cooperative or repentant, even at sentencing hearings determinative of their fates. Some death penalty defendants may refuse to aid in investigation of mitigating evidence, or they may actively obstruct presentation of it during the sentencing phase.”).

6. See Cooley, supra note 2, at 24 (“[M]any capital defendants get no meaningful support at the sentencing phase . . . for this reason, claims of . . . ineffectiveness at the penalty phase are among the most common issues raised in habeas corpus petitions by inmates on death row.”) (alterations in original) (quoting Ira Mickenberg, Ineffective Counsel, Nat’l J., Aug. 4, 2003, at S9).

7. For a discussion regarding the history of the development of the ineffective assistance of counsel claim see infra notes 27–50 and the accompanying text.

8. See Ho, supra note 1, at 724 (explaining that once it is determined that defendant waived right to present mitigating evidence, claim for ineffective assistance of counsel is procedurally barred).
Recently, in *Schriro v. Landrigan,* the Supreme Court addressed the impact of an uncooperative defendant’s actions on the presentation of mitigating evidence during capital sentencing and alluded to what may constitute a defendant’s waiver of the right to present mitigating evidence. Numerous commentators have argued that the majority’s decision was a major setback for defendants’ rights because it implies that a defendant could waive the right to present mitigating evidence without fully knowing or understanding the consequences of the decision. *Schriro* left lower courts in a difficult position; they now must carefully navigate the determination of whether a defendant waived the right to present mitigating evidence while balancing the need to protect defendants’ rights in capital cases.

The United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit limited the potentially dangerous consequences of the Supreme Court’s precedent by narrowly interpreting *Schriro,* confining its applicability to its specific set of facts. The Third Circuit’s approach affords uncooperative defendants substantial leeway before finding a valid waiver of the right to present mitigating evidence. Further, the Third Circuit’s approach requires defense counsel to exercise heightened caution in deciding how to proceed in the sentencing phase of a capital case.

This Casebrief will not delve into the contentious issues surrounding the efficacy and morality of the death penalty, nor will it deal with the first
phase of a capital case, the guilt phase. Instead, through an analysis of
the recent case Blystone v. Horn, this brief will focus on the Third Cir-
cuit’s interpretation of the effect of a recalcitrant defendant during a capi-
tal case in two respects: the effect that uncooperative actions have on
waiving a defendant’s rights to present mitigating evidence, and the re-
sponsibilities of the defense counsel regarding mitigating evidence when
representing an uncooperative defendant.

Part II of this brief traces the history of the effective representation
requirement and the impact of a recalcitrant defendant on capital cases
through the related Supreme Court jurisprudence. Part III evaluates
and explains the decision in Blystone v. Horn and related Third Circuit
cases in light of the Supreme Court’s recent guidance. Part IV explains
the implications for a practitioner in the Third Circuit. Finally, Part V
argues that the Third Circuit’s approach to handling questions of waiver
and effective representation of counsel during the sentencing phase of a
capital case is necessary to protect defendants.

16. See Cooley, supra note 2, at 24–25 (discussing increased awareness of capi-
tal punishment by American public attributable to flaws in system). It should be
noted that there are two distinct phases in a capital case: the guilt phase and pen-
alty phase. See Nelan, supra note 4, at 28 (explaining that capital trials can be
broken down into two components: guilt phase, where defendant’s innocence or
guilt is determined, and penalty phase, where appropriate penalty is determined).
It is worth noting that capital punishment remains a prominent public issue with
commentators illustrating many of the problems associated with the death penalty
system. See, e.g., Steven F. Shatz, The Eighth Amendment, the Death Penalty, and Ordi-
nary Robbery-Burglary Murderers: A California Case Study, 59 FLA. L. REV. 719, 768
(2007) (“Overbroad definitions of death-eligibility can be seen as the root cause of
most of the problems with the death penalty.”).

17. 664 F.3d 425 (3d Cir. 2011).

18. For a discussion of the Third Circuit’s approach to waiving the right to
present mitigating evidence, see infra notes 95–117 and accompanying text. For a
discussion of the requirements of defense counsel during the mitigating phase of a
capital case in the Third Circuit, see infra notes 118–29 and accompanying text.

19. For a discussion of the development of the Supreme Court’s effective rep-
resentation and mitigating evidence jurisprudence, see infra notes 23–50 and ac-
companying text.

20. For an explanation and analysis of the Third Circuit’s decisions in Taylor,
Thomas, and Blystone, see infra notes 51–91 and accompanying text.

21. For a discussion of the practical ramifications for practitioners, including
an explanation of the requirements to satisfy the effective representation threshold
in the Third Circuit, see infra notes 92–129 and accompanying text.

22. For the argument that the Third Circuit applies a proper approach to
protect defendants’ rights during the sentencing phase, see infra notes 130–37 and
accompanying text. For a recommendation that the Third Circuit take a further
step in protecting defendants’ rights by adopting a “knowing and voluntary” re-
quirement to waive of mitigating evidence at capital sentencing, see infra notes
138–44 and accompanying text.
II. Background

This section provides a general overview of the development and subsequent implementation of the right to effective assistance of counsel. First, this section briefly reviews the establishment of the right to effective assistance of counsel. Second, this section examines the Supreme Court’s application of the right to effective assistance of counsel in the mitigating evidence phase. Finally, the focus of this section turns to a survey of the Supreme Court’s approach to the right of effective assistance of counsel when a defendant acts in an uncooperative manner.

A. Establishment of Right to Effective Assistance of Counsel

The Sixth Amendment guarantees the right to effective assistance of counsel. In 1984, the Supreme Court addressed the standard for evaluating ineffective representation claims in *Strickland v. Washington*. In *Strickland*, the respondent confessed to three murders and was sentenced to death. Following the sentence, the “respondent sought collateral relief,” claiming, among other grounds, that his counsel provided ineffective assistance during the sentencing phase.

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23. For a general overview of the right to effective assistance of counsel and the subsequent implications, see infra notes 27–50 and the accompanying text.

24. For a brief history of the establishment of the right to effective assistance of counsel, see infra notes 27–35 and the accompanying text.

25. For an overview of the Supreme Court’s application of the right to effective assistance of counsel in the mitigating evidence phase, see infra notes 36–39 and accompanying text.

26. For an overview of the Supreme Court’s approach to a recalcitrant defendant’s right to effective assistance of counsel, see infra notes 40–50 and accompanying text.

27. See Cooley, supra note 2, at 70 (explaining historical development and recognition of right to assistance of counsel under Sixth Amendment).

28. 466 U.S. 668, 683 (1984) (acknowledging that this case represents Supreme Court’s first review of attorney’s ineffective assistance of representation claim). The right to effective assistance of counsel assumes the constitutional right to counsel that has been established through a long line of Supreme Court cases dating back to 1932. *See*, e.g., Gideon v. Wainwright, 372 U.S. 335, 340–41 (1963) (explaining that right to counsel is afforded in state proceeding through incorporation of Sixth Amendment through Fourteenth Amendment); Johnson v. Zerbst, 304 U.S. 458, 467–69 (1938) (determining that only legitimate waiver of counsel can vitiate right to counsel); Powell v. Alabama, 287 U.S. 45, 71 (1932) (holding that trial judge must appoint counsel for defendants when they cannot employ counsel).

29. See *Strickland*, 466 U.S. at 671–75 (reviewing facts of case). As part of an overall strategy, respondent’s attorney chose not to look for certain evidentiary items and limited the evidence presented at sentencing to a plea colloquy between the respondent and the trial judge. *See id.* at 673 (reviewing facts of case).

30. See id. at 675 (explaining that respondent sought relief for ineffective assistance of counsel because his attorney “failed to move for a continuance to prepare for sentencing, to request a psychiatric report, to investigate and present character witnesses, to seek a presentence investigation report, to present meaningful arguments to the sentencing judge, and to investigate the medical examiner’s reports or cross-examine the medical experts”). The claim eventually made...
For the first time, the Supreme Court granted certiorari to address squarely the issue of ineffective assistance of counsel. The Court established a two-prong test to evaluate ineffective assistance of counsel claims: a defendant must prove (1) “deficient” performance by the attorney, and (2) that the deficient performance “prejudiced the defense.” A counsel’s performance is “deficient” when the attorney fails to represent a client in a reasonable manner. Even if an attorney’s representation is unreasonable, however, this will not warrant “setting aside the judgment of a criminal proceeding” unless the unreasonable representation also prejudiced the ultimate result. Therefore, once a defendant proves that the defense counsel did not satisfy the reasonableness standard in the first prong of the Strickland test, the defendant must then demonstrate “that there is a reasonable probability that, but for counsel’s unprofessional errors, the result of the proceeding would have been different.”

B. Supreme Court Applies Strickland Reasonableness Prong to Mitigating Evidence

Mitigating evidence serves a vital role in capital cases, theoretically ensuring that the death sentence is reserved for the absolute worst
In *Gregg v. Georgia*, the Supreme Court held that mitigating evidence is a foundational requirement for death penalty statutes to be constitutional. Since *Gregg*, the Supreme Court has provided guidance on a case-by-case basis regarding what constitutes a reasonable investigation and presentation of mitigating evidence.

**C. Schriro v. Landrigan: Effect of Recalcitrant Defendant on Attorney’s Duty to Investigate and Present Mitigating Evidence**

The *Strickland* standard is more difficult to apply when unpredictable variables, such as an uncooperative defendant, are added to a capital case. In the 2007 case *Schriro*, the Supreme Court revisited mitigating evidence in a capital case, and for the first time, the Court addressed the issue of an effective investigation and presentation of mitigating evidence when a client obstructs the investigation or advises defense counsel not to.

36. See *Ho*, supra note 1, at 725 (explaining that components of death penalty cases must be structured to reserve capital punishment for worst offenders); *Maher*, supra note 3, at 768 (“Mitigation evidence took center stage in death penalty cases as potentially the only way defense counsel could humanize their client and save his life.”); *Nelan*, supra note 4, at 49 (explaining vital role mitigating evidence serves in capital cases).


38. See id. at 193, 206–07 (emphasizing key role of mitigation in new death penalty statutes that Court found constitutional); see also *Hughes*, supra note 1, at 582 (“A capital jury’s opportunity to consider mitigating evidence is one of the critical procedures the Supreme Court has endorsed to alleviate arbitrariness in the jury’s decision of whether a defendant deserves to die.”). Interestingly, commentators have argued that mitigating evidence actually does little to rid capital cases of arbitrary results. See id. at 587 (explaining that because of the lack of uniformity in mitigating evidence investigation, arbitrariness remains in capital sentencing decisions); see also Jesse Cheng, *Frontloading Mitigation: The “Legal” and the “Human” in Death Penalty Defense*, 35 L. & Soc. Inquiry 39, 44 (2010) (“[A]nalysts have observed that for all the ado about proceduralizing the death penalty, the judiciary’s uneven regulation of capital punishment has done little to alter the reality of arbitrary decision making.”).

39. See, e.g., *Rompilla v. Beard*, 545 U.S. 374, 377 (2005) (holding that under reasonableness prong of *Strickland* test, defense counsel must not rely on defendant and defendant’s family’s claims that no mitigating evidence exists, and must conduct review of evidence that prosecutor is likely to use “as evidence of aggravation at the trial’s sentencing phase”); *Wiggins v. Smith*, 539 U.S. 510, 522–27 (2003) (finding ineffective assistance of counsel when counsel chose not to present mitigating evidence because that decision was unreasonable and could not have been strategic in light of counsel’s deficient investigation into available mitigating evidence); *Williams v. Taylor*, 529 U.S. 362, 395–96 (2000) (concluding that defense counsel’s failure to present evidence that defendant was “borderline mentally retarded,” and that defendant assisted law enforcement while in prison, and failure to use witnesses which would cast defendant in favorable terms, amounted to unreasonable conduct and ultimately did not meet *Strickland* standard of effective representation) (citation omitted).

present mitigating evidence at sentencing.\footnote{See id. (explaining that Supreme Court has never addressed case “in which a client interferes with counsel’s efforts to present mitigating evidence to a sentencing court”).} In \textit{Schriro}, the respondent escaped from prison, committed a homicide, and was convicted of first-degree murder.\footnote{See id. at 469–71 (reviewing facts of case).} At the respondent’s request, his ex-wife and birth mother did not testify during the sentencing phase, and the defense counsel did not present any other mitigating evidence.\footnote{See id. (reviewing facts of case and specifically recounting respondent’s actions at sentencing hearing).}

In a 5–4 decision, the Supreme Court focused primarily on the prejudice prong of the \textit{Strickland} test and held that any failure in the investigation by the defense attorney did not prejudice the respondent.\footnote{See id. at 473 (remanding case for evidentiary hearing regarding ineffective representation claim). Before the case reached the Supreme Court, the Ninth Circuit delivered an en banc decision concluding that the respondent produced a “colorable claim” that he was provided with ineffective assistance of counsel during the sentencing phase of his capital case. \textit{See id.} at 472 (reviewing procedural history of case).} The respondent’s specific requests to not have his birth mother or ex-wife testify and his colloquy with the trial judge made clear that he did not intend or want to present any mitigating evidence.\footnote{See id. at 469–70 (describing defendant’s refusal to allow his birth mother and ex-wife to testify, and recounting colloquy between trial judge and defendant regarding defendant’s wish not to present this type of mitigating evidence).} Thus, any failure by his attorney could not have prejudiced his case under the second \textit{Strickland} prong.\footnote{See id. at 480–81 (concluding that defendant “could not establish prejudice”).}

According to the dissent, however, it was uncontroversial that the defense counsel’s investigation into possible mitigating evidence was insufficient and failed the reasonableness prong of the \textit{Strickland} test.\footnote{See id. at 472 (Stevens, J., dissenting) (“Significant mitigating evidence—evidence that may well have explained respondent’s criminal conduct and unruly behavior at his capital sentencing hearing—was unknown at the time of sentencing.”).} Further, the dissenters focused on whether the respondent produced a “knowing, intelligent, and voluntary” waiver of his right to present mitigating evidence.\footnote{See id. at 484 (explaining that constitutional right can only be waived in the limited circumstances when defendant makes “knowing, intelligent, and voluntary” decision).} The dissent argued that this informed and knowing standard exists for a valid waiver of all constitutionally protected rights, even if the Court has not specifically and affirmatively applied the standard to the right to present mitigating evidence.\footnote{See id. at 486 (acknowledging Court had never specifically applied informed and knowing standard to defendant’s right to produce mitigating evidence).} Thus, because the defendant did not know that he was waiving his right to present mitigating evidence, he
did not forfeit his protections or claim for ineffective assistance of counsel.50

III. *Taylor v. Horn*,51 *Thomas v. Horn*,52 and *Blystone*: The Third Circuit Broadly Safeguards a Defendant’s Right to Present Mitigating Evidence

Since the 2007 Supreme Court ruling in *Schriro*, the Third Circuit has decided three cases involving the effect of a recalcitrant defendant who interferes with a defense counsel’s efforts to investigate and present mitigating evidence.53 Through an examination of these cases, this section tracks the development of the Third Circuit’s approach to the ability of recalcitrant clients to waive their right to present mitigating evidence.54 Although the Third Circuit could have interpreted *Schriro’s* holding broadly and significantly restricted the protection offered to defendants in capital cases, the court instead chose to limit *Schriro’s* application to cases where defendants undeniably waive their rights.55

A. Taylor and Thomas Establish Foundation for Third Circuit’s Approach

In 2007, the Third Circuit heard *Taylor v. Horn*, where the defendant pled guilty to murdering his wife, two children, mother-in-law, and his mother-in-law’s child.56 Pursuant to the defendant’s wishes, the defense attorney did not present any mitigating evidence beyond merely mentioning that the defendant had no prior criminal record.57 The defendant was sentenced to death, and after a lengthy appeals process, the case reached the Third Circuit.58

50. See id. at 486–87, 491–92 (concluding that defendant could not have waived his right to present mitigating evidence because he did not understand or know implications of his decisions).
51. 504 F.3d 416 (3d Cir. 2007).
52. 570 F.3d 105 (3d Cir. 2009).
53. See Blystone v. Horn, 664 F.3d 425, 425 (3d Cir. 2011) (representing most recent case since *Schriro* to examine effect of recalcitrant defendant on right to present mitigating evidence); *Thomas*, 570 F.3d at 105 (representing second case since *Schriro* to examine effect of recalcitrant defendant on right to present mitigating evidence); *Taylor*, 504 F.3d 416 (representing first case since *Schriro* to examine effect of recalcitrant defendant on right to present mitigating evidence).
54. For a discussion of the Third Circuit’s approach to the ability of recalcitrant clients to waive their right to present mitigating evidence, see infra notes 95–116 and accompanying text.
56. See *Taylor*, 504 F.3d at 420 (explaining facts of case).
57. See id. at 422 (detailing facts regarding defendant’s decisions during sentencing hearing).
58. See id. at 422–25 (outlining procedural history of case following trial judge’s imposition of death sentence).
Relying on Schriro, the court concluded that based on the defendant’s actions during sentencing, he had waived his right to present mitigating evidence, effectively barring his post-sentencing claim of ineffective assistance of counsel. In reaching this conclusion, the court highlighted that the defendant (1) wrote in a confession letter that he wanted “the maximum sentence,” (2) instructed his attorney “not to contact any witnesses or medical personnel” that he had spoken to, (3) affirmed that he understood that the likely result of not presenting mitigating evidence would be the “imposition of the death penalty,” and (4) declined to present any mitigating evidence at the sentencing hearing. Further, the court held that the defendant was informed and knowing when he waived his right to present mitigating evidence.

In 2009, the Third Circuit revisited the issue in Thomas v. Horn, and held that no valid waiver existed when the defendant exhibited a lower degree of recalcitrant behavior than the defendants in Taylor and Schriro. During trial, the defendant was found guilty of murder, rape, involuntary deviate sexual intercourse, and burglary. The defendant refused to present evidence in the form of witness testimony and refused to stipulate to uncontroverted facts such as his age. Unlike in Taylor, however, the court determined that the defendant did not waive his right to present mitigating evidence at sentencing and therefore was not procedurally barred from making a claim of ineffective assistance of counsel.

In Thomas, the court distinguished Taylor and Schriro based on the degree of the defendant’s recalcitrant behavior. In Thomas, the defen-
B. Blystone Solidifies Third Circuit’s Position on Defendant Waiver

The Third Circuit solidified its approach to handling an uncooperative defendant in Blystone v. Horn. The facts of Blystone represented the perfect storm—an inexperienced public defender and a defendant who was uncooperative during the sentencing phase of the capital case. A thorough analysis of Blystone reveals important facts and circumstances that illustrate the Third Circuit’s position on recalcitrant defendants and their right to waive mitigating evidence.

1. Background Facts and Procedure

In 1983, Scott Wayne Blystone picked up Smithburger, a hitchhiker, and asked him to contribute money for gas. When Smithburger told Blystone that he could only contribute a few dollars, Blystone told him to get out of the car and proceeded to shoot him six times. At trial, Blystone was found guilty of murder.

Blystone’s defense counsel performed a limited investigation into possible mitigating evidence, interviewing only four people. Blystone’s attorney interviewed Blystone, his parents, and one of his sisters. Blystone’s attorney did not intend to present any testimony elicited from Blystone’s family members even though the conversations described...
the defense counsel explained to the court that Blystone did not want to present any mitigating evidence.\textsuperscript{76} The judge conducted a colloquy with Blystone to ensure that Blystone understood the consequences of his decision not to bring in the mitigating evidence.\textsuperscript{77}

After the court sentenced Blystone to death, he filed a petition under the Pennsylvania Post-Conviction Relief Act (PCRA) claiming ineffective assistance of counsel.\textsuperscript{78} At the PCRA evidentiary hearing, Blystone presented significant evidence that could have served as mitigating evidence if Blystone had the benefit of an adequate investigation and effective assistance of counsel.\textsuperscript{79} However, the court held that Blystone’s defense counsel’s investigation was not deficient.\textsuperscript{80} The Pennsylvania Supreme Court affirmed the PCRA court’s decision and further concluded that Blystone waived his right to present mitigating evidence.\textsuperscript{81} Thus, the failures of his defense counsel at trial did not cause him prejudice.\textsuperscript{82}

extensive behavior abnormalities and substance abuse issues. See id. at 405–06 (describing family members’ description of Blystone’s troubled past).

76. See id. at 403 (recounting facts of case). Blystone’s attorney told the court that he and Blystone previously engaged in lengthy discussions regarding the consequences of not presenting any mitigating evidence at trial. See id. (noting defense attorney’s assertion that he and Blystone discussed “the benefits of presenting a mitigation case”). Furthermore, the defense counsel expressed a strong desire to put Blystone’s parents on the stand. See id. (describing facts from record).

77. See id. at 403–04 (explaining that following colloquy, judge determined that Blystone understood consequences of his decision). For a more detailed discussion of the colloquy between Blystone and the trial judge, and the significance of some of the specific questions asked in colloquies during the penalty phase of a capital case in the Third Circuit, see infra notes 102–10 and accompanying text.

78. See Blystone, 664 F.3d at 404 (explaining procedural history of case).

79. See id. at 404–08 (describing evidence presented by Blystone in attempt to prove ineffective assistance of counsel during PCRA evidentiary hearing).

80. See id. at 408–09 (noting PCRA court denied Blystone’s petition because sufficient evidence showed defense counsel conducted “sufficient investigation into mitigating circumstances by reviewing all of the available discovery materials”).

81. See id. at 409 (“‘The PCRA court determined that counsel conducted a proper investigation into all possible mitigating circumstances, and we find substantial support in the record to uphold [that] determination.’”) (citation omitted).

82. See id. at 408–09 (explaining Pennsylvania Supreme Court’s decision (citing Commonwealth v. Blystone, 725 A.2d 1197, 1206 (Pa. 1999))). Prior to the defendant seeking relief for ineffective assistance of counsel, the United States Supreme Court determined that the Pennsylvania statute mandating the death penalty where aggravating circumstances exist and no mitigating evidence is presented was constitutional and did not impermissibly limit the jury’s discretion in deciding the penalty. See id. (noting Blystone’s constitutional challenge to Pennsylvania statute (citing Blystone v. Pennsylvania, 494 U.S. 299, 305 (1990))). During the PCRA hearing, Blystone presented numerous pieces of evidence to show that “his life history was replete with potentially mitigating evidence, which [his attorney] could have uncovered through a more extensive investigation of his background.” See id. at 405 (discussing Blystone’s argument that further investigation by counsel would have revealed such evidence). Specifically, through a number of lay witnesses,
2. Analysis of Ineffective Representation Claim Under Strickland Test

On appeal, the Third Circuit delved into the Strickland analysis. The court worked through the two prongs of the Strickland test separately to develop the court’s stance on the interplay between effective assistance of counsel and the impact of a recalcitrant defendant on the right to present mitigating evidence. The court was able to harmonize prior decisions to reach its ultimate conclusion.

a. Strickland Reasonableness Prong

The Third Circuit quickly concluded that the investigation for mitigating circumstances failed the reasonableness prong of the Strickland test. In reaching its conclusion, the court specifically called attention to expert mental health testimony and institutional records, which were “readily available” to the defense counsel had he performed a proper investigation. Finally, the failure to conduct a thorough investigation was not part of a strategic choice that may otherwise have deserved greater deference under the Strickland standard.

b. Strickland Prejudice Prong

In analyzing the Strickland prejudice prong, the Third Circuit artfully distinguished Blystone from the Supreme Court ruling in Schriro. In so doing, the court was able to supply its own guidance on examining the interchange between an uncooperative defendant and the subsequent investigation.

Blystone presented evidence that he suffered from malnutrition as a child, abused alcohol, engaged in self-mutilation, suffered from untreated brain damage and psychiatric disorders, was abused by his father, and was discharged from the Navy for “[a]pathy and defective attitudes.” See id. at 405–07 (alteration in original) (detailing results from Blystone’s own investigation for potentially mitigating evidence).


84. For a discussion of the Third Circuit’s application of the Strickland analysis in Blystone, see infra notes 86–91 and accompanying text.

85. For a discussion regarding the Third Circuit’s decision in Blystone, see infra notes 86–91 and the accompanying text.

86. See Blystone, 665 F.3d at 420 (“We need not delve too deeply into the question of whether Whiteko’s investigation prior to sentencing was deficient because the Commonwealth’s brief all but concedes that it was.”).

87. See id. at 420–21 (demonstrating deficiencies in defense counsel’s investigation and noting PCRA court’s determination that such investigations were adequate was “objectively unreasonable in light of the evidence presented in the proceedings before it”).

88. See id. at 423 (acknowledging that strategic choices are to be treated deferentially, yet concluding that defense counsel employed no such strategy during investigation).

89. See id. at 426 (“Despite the Commonwealth’s extensive arguments to the contrary, the facts of this case are clearly distinguishable from Schriro.”).
pact on waiving mitigating evidence. The court reaffirmed *Thomas*, which established that in order for a defendant to waive all rights to present mitigating evidence, the defendant must unambiguously refuse to allow the defense attorney to present any mitigating evidence at sentencing.

IV. Key Factors and Practical Implications for Third Circuit Practitioners Stemming from *Blystone*

This section explores several key points and practical implications for practitioners as a result of the Third Circuit’s recent decisions involving mitigating evidence. First, this section focuses on a defendant’s ability to waive the right to present mitigating evidence. Second, this section examines the effect of a recalcitrant defendant on the defense counsel’s obligation to investigate and present potentially mitigating evidence.

A. Effect of *Blystone* on Defendant’s Ability to Waive Right to Present Mitigating Evidence and Resulting Prejudice

Under *Strickland* Analysis

To limit the potentially perilous consequences of ambiguous waivers on defendants in capital cases, the Third Circuit demonstrated that it will limit *Schriro*’s application to those specific facts. For example, in *Thomas* the Pennsylvania Commonwealth argued that *Schriro* was controlling under the facts, the defendant’s actions constituted a waiver of his right to present mitigating evidence, and therefore, the prejudice prong of the *Strickland* test could not be established. Rather than accept the Commonwealth’s invitation to extend *Schriro* beyond its facts, the Third Circuit explained that unless a defendant’s actions clearly manifest a desire to

90. For a discussion of the Third Circuit’s guidance on waiving the presentation of mitigating evidence, see infra notes 95–117.

91. See *Blystone*, 664 F.3d at 425 ("[W]e could not conclude on the record before us that Thomas would have interfered with the presentation of all mitigating evidence.").

92. For a discussion of recent Third Circuit cases on presenting mitigating evidence, see supra notes 56–86 and accompanying text.

93. For a discussion of the effect of *Blystone* on a defendant’s waiver of the right to present mitigating evidence, see infra notes 95–117 and accompanying text.

94. For a discussion of the practical impact of the Third Circuit’s decision in *Blystone* on defense counsel’s investigation and presentation of mitigating evidence, see infra notes 118–129 and accompanying text.

95. See *Blystone*, 664 F.3d at 426 (limiting applicability of *Schriro* by highlighting language used in Supreme Court’s decision: "'[i]n the constellation of refusals to have mitigating evidence presented . . . [Schriro] is surely a bright star’") (alterations in original) (citation omitted).

96. See *Thomas v. Horn*, 570 F.3d 105, 126 (3d Cir. 2009) (explaining Commonwealth’s position that even if counsel’s investigation was unreasonable, no prejudice resulted because, like in *Schriro* and *Taylor*, defendant had completely relinquished his right to present mitigating evidence).
waive the right to present all mitigating evidence, no valid waiver exists that would bar a defendant from presenting such evidence during sentencing.97

Blystone further solidified this reasoning, holding that even when the record provides room for a reasonable interpretation that the defendant tried to issue a complete waiver of the right to present mitigating evidence, a plausible alternative explanation for the defendant’s actions may be sufficient to prevent the court from imputing a waiver to the defendant.98 For example, the Third Circuit may not impute a waiver if the defendant thought that the refusal to present mitigating evidence only extended to a specific type of evidence and not to all evidence.99 As a result, unless the defendant unequivocally relinquishes the right to present miti-

97. See id. at 128–29 (explaining that case does not resemble Schriro because defendant did not make “affirmative declaration against the presentation of all mitigating evidence”) (emphasis added).

98. See Blystone, 664 F.3d at 425–26 (citing Thomas while rejecting invitation to extend Schriro’s reasoning to facts that do not contain direct affirmation of waiver of right to present all mitigating evidence). In Thomas, the Third Circuit articulated the view that even if a defendant’s particular action or decision may lend credence to the argument that the defendant intended to waive the right to present mitigating evidence, if there is a plausible alternative argument that does not involve the intent to waive the right to present mitigating evidence, the Court will protect the defendant by crediting the alternative argument. See Thomas, 570 F.3d at 128–29 (explaining plausible, alternative explanations, other than intent to establish complete waiver of right to present mitigating evidence in regards to defendant’s refusal to put on specific type of mitigating evidence). Specifically, in Thomas the defendant refused the Commonwealth’s offer to stipulate his age and that he graduated from high school. See id. at 112 (describing facts of case). When the Third Circuit was asked to decide whether the defendant had a claim for ineffective assistance of counsel, one of the Commonwealth’s arguments that the defendant was not prejudiced was that the defendant’s refusal to stipulate to these harmless facts indicated that he intended to fully waive his right to present mitigating evidence. See id. at 127 (explaining Commonwealth’s argument). The Third Circuit acknowledged that the defendant’s actions were consistent with the Commonwealth’s argument but ultimately rejected the argument because other plausible explanations existed for the defendant’s actions:

Nor does Thomas’ refusal to stipulate to his age and education tip the scales in the Commonwealth’s favor. We agree with the Commonwealth that Thomas’ age and education are relatively innocuous facts, and Thomas’ decision not to stipulate to them is odd. We cannot agree, however, that this proves that Thomas was not prejudiced. While Thomas’ refusal to stipulate is consistent with the Commonwealth’s position, it is equally consistent with other scenarios that the record supports. . . . Thomas’ failure to stipulate could be viewed as a symptom of this fundamental misunderstanding, and not as an affirmative declaration against the presentation of all mitigating evidence.

Id. at 128–29.

99. See Thomas, F.3d at 128–29 (providing example of situation when refusing presentation of some evidence does not mean defendant refused to present any evidence).
gating evidence, the Third Circuit goes to great lengths to protect the defendant from facing an inadvertent waiver.\textsuperscript{100}

To clarify this analysis, the Third Circuit has flagged particular facts as insufficient to supply the basis for a waiver of presentation of mitigating evidence.\textsuperscript{101} For example, in both \textit{Thomas} and \textit{Blystone}, the trial judges engaged the defendants in a colloquy during the sentencing hearing to ensure that the defendant’s wishes regarding the presentation of mitigating evidence were satisfied.\textsuperscript{102} In \textit{Thomas}, during the judge’s colloquy with the defendant, the court posed a compound question: “And you already told [your counsel], I would like to repeat, but it’s your decision not to take the stand at this penalty stage of the hearing or even to present any evidence. Is that your independent and voluntary decision?”\textsuperscript{103} Although the defendant responded in the affirmative, the court dismissed the Commonwealth’s argument that this exchange provided sufficient grounds to support a complete waiver of the presentation of all mitigating evidence.\textsuperscript{104} Instead, the court demonstrated that practitioners must focus on the entire context in which the compound question was asked.\textsuperscript{105} Specifically, the inquiry should focus on whether it is plausible that the defen-
dant intended only to waive the right to testify and not to waive the right to present all other mitigating evidence.106

In Blystone, the trial judge asked the defendant a similar compound question, “Do you wish to testify yourself or to have your parents testify or to offer any other evidence in this case?”107 Because the defendant responded in the negative to this broader question concerning any other evidence in this case, the Third Circuit could have reasonably interpreted the response as the defendant’s intent to completely waive his right to present mitigating evidence.108 However, the court carefully unpacked the questions and determined that at most, the defendant intended to waive his right to “all lay witness testimony,” but not his complete right to present any mitigating information.109 Together, the colloquies in Thomas and Blystone demonstrate that if there is any reasonable alternative explanation, the Third Circuit will err on the side of caution and find that the defendant did not intend to expand the waiver beyond the most limited reasonable interpretation.110

Further, the Third Circuit acknowledges the Supreme Court’s position that no “informed and knowing” requirement exists to waive the right to present mitigating evidence.111 However, the Third Circuit makes it clear that an informed and knowing decision is still relevant to the inquiry.112 Specifically, the court has referenced a defense counsel’s responsibility to keep the defendant informed about decisions regarding the presentation of mitigating evidence.113

106. See id. (demonstrating court’s broad view of circumstances surrounding defendant’s purported waiver to determine scope of relinquishment of rights to present evidence).

107. See Blystone, 664 F.3d at 403 (examining colloquy between defendant and trial court during sentencing phase of case).

108. See id. (describing colloquy and specifically highlighting defendant’s response to questions from trial judge regarding extent of defendant’s desire not to present certain type of mitigating evidence).

109. See id. at 426 (“We believe it not only incorrect, but also unreasonable, to infer from the colloquy that Blystone would have prevented counsel from presenting any mitigating evidence, regardless of the form that it took.”).

110. See id. (explaining that colloquy must be interpreted in its complete context and exchange not expanded to mean more than is necessarily inferred).

111. See Thomas, 570 F.3d at 129 n.9 (“As a result, we offer no opinion on whether a waiver of the right to present mitigating evidence must be ‘informed and knowing.’”) (citation omitted).

112. See Blystone, 664 F.3d at 424 (explaining that Schriro and Taylor do not control in case at hand by highlighting that defendants in both cases made it obvious that they understood consequence of their decisions not to present mitigating evidence); Taylor v. Horn, 504 F.3d 416, 455–56 (3d Cir. 2007) (“We are also satisfied that Taylor’s decision not to present mitigating evidence was informed and knowing.”).

113. See Blystone, 664 F.3d at 422 n.21 (“After all, counsel also has a duty to provide advice upon which his client can make an informed decision not to present evidence in mitigation.”).
Finally, for a defendant to completely waive the right to present mitigating evidence, the Third Circuit requires an affirmative declaration indicating a complete waiver. As discussed above, if a defendant rejects the presentation of a particular piece of evidence, the court will not interpret that action to mean that the defendant has offered a complete waiver. The defendant’s statement in \textit{Taylor}, “I want the maximum sentence,” illustrates an affirmative declaration sufficient to constitute a complete waiver. Practitioners should assume that nothing short of this type of affirmative declaration is sufficient to establish a waiver.

\textbf{B. Effect of Possible Waiver on Counsel’s Investigatory Responsibility}

In the Third Circuit, the duty to conduct an \textit{investigation} for mitigating evidence exists independent of the duty to \textit{present} mitigating evidence. By distinguishing between the investigation into mitigating evidence and the eventual presentation of the evidence, the Third Circuit addressed an issue left open by the Supreme Court in \textit{Schriro}. As a re-

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{Note 114.} See id. at 424–26 (explaining that \textit{Schriro} and \textit{Taylor} were not controlling in \textit{Blystone} in part because defendants in those cases made clear affirmative declarations that they did not want to present any mitigating evidence and that they were willing to face capital punishment). Specifically, in \textit{Schriro} the defendant said, “I think if you want to give me the death penalty, just bring it right on. I’m ready for it.” \textit{Schriro v. Landrigan}, 550 U.S. 465, 470 (2007).
  \item \textit{Note 115.} See \textit{Blystone}, 664 F.3d at 426 (explaining that it would not be reasonable to extend defendant’s limited waiver into complete waiver of right to present mitigating evidence); \textit{Thomas}, 570 F.3d at 128 (“To us, the only thing that Thomas clearly disclaimed at his colloquy was a desire to testify on his own behalf.”).
  \item \textit{Note 116.} See \textit{Blystone}, 664 F.3d at 424 (explaining that defendant’s actions in \textit{Taylor} were sufficient and clear enough to determine that defendant intended to completely waive his right to present mitigating evidence).
  \item \textit{Note 117.} Compare \textit{Taylor}, 504 F.3d at 435 (determining that affirmative declaration that defendant wanted maximum sentence was enough for court to impute waiver), with \textit{Blystone}, 664 F.3d at 426 (indicating that defendant’s actions, specifically in regards to colloquy with judge, were not enough to constitute affirmative declaration of complete waiver of right to present mitigating evidence), and \textit{Thomas}, 570 F.3d at 128–29 (explaining that defendant’s colloquy rejecting certain type of mitigating evidence was not enough to serve as “an affirmative declaration against the presentation of all mitigating evidence”).
  \item \textit{Note 118.} See \textit{Blystone}, 664 F.3d at 420 (explaining that duty to perform investigation exists independently from duty to present mitigating evidence at sentencing hearing). The Third Circuit further explained that the duty to perform an investigation is necessary to consider what could or should be presented. See id. (“In fact, the former is a necessary predicate to the latter: if counsel has failed to conduct a reasonable investigation to \textit{prepare} for sentencing, then he cannot possibly be said to have made a reasonable decision as to what to \textit{present} at sentencing.”).
  \item \textit{Note 119.} See Nelan, supra note 4, at 34 (“The difference between the reasoning of the Court and the Ninth Circuit seemed to be that the Court treated the investigation and presentation of mitigating evidence as one right, whereas the Ninth Circuit saw them as two independent rights that could each give rise to a claim of ineffective assistance.”).
\end{itemize}
result of this policy, requests by the defendant will not affect the defense counsel’s duty to investigate mitigating evidence. 120

Although beyond the scope of this brief, it is helpful to note where practitioners may find the basic requirements for a reasonable investigation and presentation of mitigating evidence. 121 The American Bar Association (ABA) produced a set of guidelines for capital cases that shape the contours of what constitutes a reasonable investigation for mitigating evidence. 122 Notably, the Supreme Court has referred to the ABA Guidelines in multiple instances to illustrate the scope of a reasonable investigation. 123 Further, some commentators argue that the Guidelines have all but “taken on the force of law.” 124 Thus, the ABA Guidelines provide a comprehensive, practical guide to conducting a reasonable investigation for mitigating evidence, and as such, they should be the first reference point for defense teams in capital cases. 125

120. See MacLean, supra note 55, at 666 (“The duty to investigate exists regardless of the expressed desires of a client.”).

121. For an overview of general guidelines supplied by the American Bar Association regarding proper mitigating evidence investigation, see infra notes 122–25 and the accompanying text.

122. See Hughes, supra note 1, at 616 (“The [ABA] Guidelines and Supplementary [ABA] Guidelines have had a tremendous impact on developing norms for the profession of mitigation specialists in the short time since their publication.”).

123. See Cheng, supra note 38, at 49 (“Text from both the [ABA] rules and the commentary has been cited in US Supreme Court opinions.”).

124. See id. at 49–50 (examining Supreme Court’s adoption and approval of certain sections of ABA guidelines especially in Wiggins v. Smith, Florida v. Nixon, and Rompilla v. Beard). Perhaps the clearest example of the Supreme Court’s affirmation of the importance of abiding by the ABA guidelines came in Wiggins. See Wiggins v. Smith, 539 U.S. 510, 524 (2003) (“We long have referred [to the ABA Standards] as ‘guides to determining what is reasonable.’”) (citation omitted); see also John H. Blume & Stacey D. Neumann, “It’s Like Deja Vu All Over Again”: Williams v. Taylor, Wiggins v. Smith, Rompilla v. Beard and a (Partial) Return to the Guidelines Approach to the Effective Assistance of Counsel, 34 AM. J. CRIM. L. 127, 147 (2007) (“The jurisprudential shift is now evident and established. Lower courts must consider the ABA Guidelines and other national standards to determine the reasonableness of counsel’s behavior in light of prevailing professional norms as part of the ineffective assistance of counsel analysis.”).

125. See Cheng, supra note 38, at 50 (“Leading defense advocates insist that the Constitution’s guarantee of competent counsel requires adherence to the minimum requirements established in the standards.”). As a result of the ABA Guidelines’ rise in significance, the importance of capital mitigation specialists has increased dramatically over the past decade. See Emily Hughes, Mitigating Death, 18 CORNELL J.L. & PUB. POL’Y 337, 339 (2009) (“In the past eight years, the United States Supreme Court has been vocal about the importance of capital mitigation specialists in death penalty defense.”). In fact, the ABA Guidelines require that a defense team retain mitigation specialists. See Maher, supra note 3, at 770 (“[The ABA Guidelines] made clear the absolute requirement that capital defenders retain the assistance of a mitigation specialist as an essential member of any defense team.”). Mitigation specialists are experts at investigating mitigating evidence. See Cooley, supra note 2, at 59 (“In general, mitigation specialists are those ‘qualified by knowledge, skill, experience, or training as a mental health or sociology professional to investigate, evaluate, and present psychosocial and other mitigating evi-
Additionally, practitioners must take care to distinguish between a defendant’s refusal to present all mitigating evidence versus refusal to present certain types of mitigating evidence. This distinction is critical because unlike a blanket refusal to present mitigating evidence, a partial refusal of certain types will not eliminate the possibility of an ineffective assistance of counsel claim. Based on the language and decision in Schriro, the Third Circuit’s interpretation in favor of protecting the right to present mitigating evidence in the face of a defendant’s seemingly contrary actions was not a clear or easy approach for an appellate court to adopt. In effect, the conclusions produced by Thomas and Blystone serve as reminders for practitioners that the duty to conduct a thorough investigation of mitigating evidence persists irrespective of a defendant’s wishes or actions with respect to the presentation of the evidence.

The ABA Guidelines require that a mitigation specialist be appointed to the defense team to help in the massive task of uncovering information from every facet of the defendant’s life, including potentially critical factors spanning the range of poverty and childhood abuse. See Hughes, supra note 1, at 591–601 (explaining requirement of mitigation specialist on defense team and type and scope of investigation in which mitigation specialists are expected to engage). Importantly, the ABA Guidelines note that the ultimate responsibility of any presentation of mitigating evidence rests on the defense counsel and not on the mitigation specialist. See Supplementary Guidelines for the Mitigation Function of Defense Teams in Death Penalty Cases, 36 Hofstra L. Rev. 677, 688 (2008) ("Counsel decides how mitigation will be presented.").

The fact that Blystone chose to forego the presentation of his own testimony and that of the two family members, which counsel was prepared to put on the stand, simply does not permit the inference that, had counsel competently investigated and developed expert mental health evidence and institutional records, Blystone would have also declined their presentation.

The fact that Blystone chose to forego the presentation of his own testimony and that of the two family members, which counsel was prepared to put on the stand, simply does not permit the inference that, had counsel competently investigated and developed expert mental health evidence and institutional records, Blystone would have also declined their presentation.

Id.; see also Thomas v. Horn, 570 F.3d 105, 128–29 (3d Cir. 2009) (explaining that defendant’s refusal to present some evidence does not justify Commonwealth’s argument that defendant would have refused to present all mitigating evidence).

127. See Thomas, 570 F.3d at 128–29 (explaining that defendant’s refusal to present some evidence does not negate the right to present other evidence); see also Blystone, 664 F.3d at 426 (parroting argument expressed by court in Thomas).

128. See Leading Cases, supra note 3, at 264. The article explains that because of likely appellate court interpretations of Schriro, which the Third Circuit rejected, defendants face powerful pressures to allow their counsel to present all possible mitigating evidence—including evidence they do not want presented in a public court such as sexual abuse by family members—lest they be deemed to have excused their counsel from any obligation to discover other potentially mitigating evidence.

129. See Blystone, 664 F.3d at 420 (“As such, ‘our principal concern in deciding whether [counsel] exercised “reasonable professional judgment” is not whether counsel should have presented a mitigation case. Rather, we focus on whether the investigation supporting counsel’s decision not to introduce mitigating evidence of [the defendant’s] background was itself reasonable.’”) (alterations in original) (citation omitted).
V. THE THIRD CIRCUIT’S APPROACH APPROPRIATELY PROTECTS CAPITAL DEFENDANTS’ RIGHTS

Not all circuits follow the Third Circuit in employing a significantly limited approach to the application of the Supreme Court’s decision in Schriro.\(^{130}\) Considering that a life hangs in the balance during the penalty phase of a capital case and that it has been shown that poor representation correlates with the imposition of the death penalty, the Third Circuit’s approach appropriately takes significant precautions to ensure that the defendant’s right to present mitigating evidence is vigorously protected.\(^{131}\) Still, the Third Circuit has the opportunity to expand these protections even further.\(^{132}\)

A. The Third Circuit Takes Step to Affirmatively Protect a Defendant’s Right to Present Mitigating Evidence

By employing a strong presumption against waiver, the Third Circuit properly protects defendants who may be inhibiting a defense counsel’s ability to investigate or present mitigating evidence because of the defendant’s particularly vulnerable position.\(^{133}\) Often defendants in capital cases suffer from mental illnesses that may affect their capability to advise

\(^{130}\). See Ho, supra note 1, at 751 (“Indeed, several lower courts have already cited [Schriro] for the proposition that, where a defendant interferes with counsel’s presentation of mitigating evidence in some way, that defendant has waived any subsequent claim to ineffective assistance based on deficient performance at sentencing.”); see also Newland v. Hall, 527 F.3d 1162, 1205, 1214 n.80 (11th Cir. 2008) (determining that client’s instruction to defense counsel not to reach out to family members as part of investigation for mitigating evidence was enough to bring case within scope of Schriro). In evaluating the client’s cooperation in the process of compiling mitigating evidence and whether the client’s actions eliminated an ineffective representation claim by nullifying the Strickland prejudice prong, the Eleventh Circuit focused on whether the client’s actions were passive or active, not on whether the client clearly rejected, or would have rejected, any and all mitigating evidence at sentencing. See id. at 1205 (“While petitioner’s conduct in this case is not as extreme as the defendant’s conduct in Schriro, we follow the Court in drawing a distinction between a defendant’s passive non-cooperation and his active instruction to counsel not to engage in certain conduct.”).

\(^{131}\). See Hughes, supra note 1, at 585 (explaining that based on study of thirty capital defense attorneys conducted by Welsh S. White, “the worse the attorney’s skills, the more certain a defendant will be sentenced to death”); see also Ho, supra note 1, at 751 (explaining that certain interpretation of Schriro “presents an intolerable risk that defendants will be sentenced to death based on an incomplete record”); Leading Cases, supra note 3, at 263 (“It is unreasonable for a court to allow a defendant to waive the right to present mitigating evidence unless the waiver expressly and unambiguously extends to all potential mitigating evidence.”).

\(^{132}\). For a discussion of the Third Circuit’s possible expansion of the protections afforded to defendants with respect to waiving their right to present mitigating evidence, see infra notes 158–44 and accompanying text.

\(^{133}\). See MacLean, supra note 55, at 670 (“Experienced capital defense attorneys commonly encounter clients who, at one point or another, object to the investigation or presentation of mitigation evidence.”).
their attorneys in a prudent manner. In other cases, a defendant’s judgment may be impaired from the debilitating effects of other underlying issues such as poverty and sexual abuse. It is worth now reiterating the importance of mitigating evidence because if no mitigating evidence is presented, administration of the death penalty is all but a foregone conclusion. Although the Third Circuit has properly implemented an approach in favor of protecting defendants’ rights, the court could take this protection even further while still remaining within the bounds of Supreme Court precedent.

B. The Third Circuit Should Take the Next Step to Protect a Defendant’s Right to Present Mitigating Evidence

At least one commentator disagrees with the majority’s ruling in Schriro because it failed to adhere to the well-established convention that a waiver of many constitutionally protected rights must be “knowing and voluntary.” The Third Circuit uses the knowing and voluntary standard as a factor in evaluating whether recalcitrant defendants have waived their right to present mitigating evidence; however, the court of appeals has refrained from establishing an official position on whether the knowing and voluntary standard is required for a valid waiver. Although the Supreme Court ruling in Schriro noted that the knowing and voluntary standard has never been used in the context of waiving the right to present mitigating evidence, the decision did not foreclose lower courts from

134. See Nelan, supra note 4, at 28 (“[T]he evidence seems relatively clear that the thinking of many death row volunteers and in particular defendants who are waiving their right to present mitigating evidence at a capital sentencing hearing is influenced by a mental disorder and these individuals may be incompetent to make such a decision.”); Leading Cases, supra note 3, at 256–62 (highlighting that defendants facing death penalty may exhibit abnormal behavior attributable to mental health condition).

135. See Leading Cases, supra note 3, at 261 (explaining that large percentage of defendants are poor and many have suffered from physical and sexual abuse).

136. See Nelan, supra note 4, at 24 (explaining that defendants who choose not to present mitigating evidence will, in all likelihood, face death sentence).

137. For a discussion of how the Third Circuit can take their current line of reasoning to the next logical level, see infra notes 138–44 and accompanying text.

138. See Schriro v. Landrigan, 550 U.S. 465, 484 (2007) (Stevens, J., dissenting) (“It is well established that a citizen’s waiver of a constitutional right must be knowing, intelligent, and voluntary.”); Ho, supra note 1, at 792 (explaining that Supreme Court has consistently ruled that defendant’s waiver of certain constitutionally protected trial rights such as right to a jury trial is invalid unless decision was made knowingly and voluntarily).

139. See Thomas v. Horn, 570 F.3d 105, 129 n.9 (3d Cir. 2009) (acknowledging Supreme Court has not affirmatively declared whether waiver of mitigating evidence must be knowing and voluntary and, “as a result, we offer no opinion on whether a waiver of the right to present mitigating evidence must be ‘informed and knowing’.”).
adopting the standard as a prerequisite to a valid waiver.\textsuperscript{140} It is well-set-
tled that when waiving other constitutional rights, defendants are afforded
the protection of the knowing and voluntary standard.\textsuperscript{141}

Since the decision in \textit{Schriro}, lower courts have been hesitant to em-
brace the knowing and voluntary standard as a requirement to waive the
right to present mitigating evidence.\textsuperscript{142} However, given the Supreme
Court’s jurisprudence requiring the knowing and voluntary standard to
waive other constitutional rights, and considering \textit{Schriro’s} open-ended
language permitting such an interpretation, the Third Circuit should use
its discretionary power to establish the knowing and voluntary standard as
a mandatory requirement for a defendant to waive the right to present
mitigating evidence.\textsuperscript{143} Finally, it should be noted that the “knowing, in-
telligent, and voluntary” standard would not be unfamiliar in the Third
Circuit because prior to \textit{Schriro}, courts within the Third Circuit employed
this very standard in this context.\textsuperscript{144}

VI. CONCLUSION

In sum, the Third Circuit correctly rejected the Supreme Court’s invi-
tation to significantly expand the scope of a defendant’s waiver of the
right to present mitigating evidence.\textsuperscript{145} One of the Supreme Court’s pri-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{140} See \textit{Ho}, supra note 1, at 732 (explaining that decision did not bar lower
courts from creating knowing and voluntary standard when addressing validity of
waivers of right to present mitigating evidence).
\item \textsuperscript{141} See \textit{Schriro}, 550 U.S. at 484 (Stevens, J., dissenting) (noting that “knowing,
intelligent, and voluntary” standard are staples in Supreme Court’s waiver jurispru-
dence). “As far back as \textit{Johnson v. Zerbst}, we held that courts must ‘indulge every
reasonable presumption against waiver’ of fundamental constitutional rights.” \textit{Id.};
see also \textit{Ho}, supra note 1, at 732–33 (listing examples of constitutional rights that
defendants may waive but emphasizing that this type of “waiver is permitted only if
it is knowing, intelligent, and voluntary”).
\item \textsuperscript{142} See \textit{Ho}, supra note 1, at 721–22 (“Given the confusion amongst the lower
courts on this issue, the establishment of a knowing and voluntary requirement in
this context makes sense not only from a perspective of judicial economy, but also
to minimize the number of capital defendants sentenced to death without present-
ing a case in mitigation . . . .”).
\item \textsuperscript{143} See \textit{id.} at 760–62 (arguing that Supreme Court should affirmatively adopt
“knowing and voluntary” standard for waivers of right to present mitigating
evidence, but until Supreme Court issues this ruling, lower courts should take it upon
themselves to adopt such standard).
\item \textsuperscript{144} See, e.g., \textit{Commonwealth v. Davido}, 868 A.2d 431, 443 (Pa. 2005)
(“Rather, in Pennsylvania, a capital defendant may waive the right to present
mitigating evidence, so long as the waiver was knowing, intelligent, and voluntary.”);\
ant may waive the right to present mitigating evidence, so long as the waiver was
knowing, intelligent, and voluntary.”) (citation omitted).
\item \textsuperscript{145} See \textit{Leading Cases, supra note 3}, at 255 (“Courts should not expand a lim-
ited refusal to present only some mitigating evidence into a complete refusal to
present any mitigating evidence, nor should they allow recalcitrant behavior at
sentencing to justify eradication of a defendant’s constitutional right to effective
assistance of counsel.”). The Third Circuit’s decision to limit \textit{Schriro’s} application
fits within the Supreme Court guidance because \textit{Schriro} left the requirements of
mary concerns in the 1970s when deciding the constitutionality of the
death penalty statutes was whether the death penalty would be adminis-
tered in an arbitrary manner. Because of the many variables affecting a
defendant during the sentencing phase (e.g., mental illness, prior abuse,
and poverty), the Third Circuit recognized that expanding a defendant’s
limited rejection to presenting certain evidence into a complete waiver
would add to the arbitrariness that commentators argue already plagues
the system.

lower courts open-ended, allowing discretion in deciding when a defendant com-
pletely waives a right to present mitigating evidence. See id. at 262–63 (explan-
ning that court left open issue of whether waiver needs to be knowing and informed:
“The majority thus sidestepped the well-established principle that courts are sup-
posed to ‘indulge every reasonable presumption against waiver’ of fundamental
constitutional rights.”) (citation omitted).

146. See Furman v. Georgia, 408 U.S. 238, 274 (1972) (“[T]he State must not
arbitrarily inflict a severe punishment.”). Prior to Gregg, the Supreme Court invali-
dated death penalty statutes for a failure to control unbridled discretion that al-
lowed for arbitrary uses of capital punishment, as the arbitrary nature of the
penalty ran afoul of the Eighth Amendment’s prohibition of cruel and unusual
punishment. See id. at 241–44 (explaining that historical underpinnings of Eighth
Amendment such as English Bill of Rights of 1689 were focused on disallowing
“arbitrary and discriminatory penalties of a severe nature”).

147. See Leading Cases, supra note 3, at 261–62.

Defendants in capital cases commonly suffer from a variety of mental vul-
nerabilities. Many defendants are poor and a large percentage are vic-
tims of physical and sexual abuse. Capital defendants who opt to forego
appeals or not to present mitigating evidence are especially likely to suf-
fer from severe mental illness. These death penalty “volunteers” often
change their minds about their course of action. As a consequence,
courts must be extremely careful to consider the context of a defendant’s
recalcitrant or obstructive behavior or apparent willingness to be put to
death before deciding that it constitutes an informed and competent de-
cision to waive the right to present mitigating evidence.

Id.