

SUMMARY STATEMENT

State v. Ramos

Docket No. 50470

This appeal concerned the denial of a motion to suppress. A police officer in Bingham County discovered an unattended car parked in the parking lot of a public boat launch. The car was unlocked, and its trunk and front windows were open. After relaying the license plate number to police dispatch, the officer was informed that the car was registered to April Ramos. Due to the officer's previous encounters with Ramos, he believed that the car likely contained illegal drugs. A canine was then deployed to conduct a drug sniff of the car; however, the dog did not alert during its sniff of the car's exterior. The officer then remarked that the car was illegally parked. Law enforcement subsequently impounded the car and then conducted an inventory search of it prior to having the car towed. During the inventory search, the officers found methamphetamine and drug paraphernalia.

Ramos was charged with possession of a controlled substance and possession of drug paraphernalia. She moved to suppress all evidence found during the inventory search of the car. The district court denied her motion. Ramos conditionally pleaded guilty to possession of a controlled substance but appealed the denial of her motion to suppress, arguing the search violated the Fourth Amendment. Her case was first assigned to the Idaho Court of Appeals, which affirmed the decision of the district court. Ramos subsequently petitioned this Court for review, which was granted.

On appeal, Ramos argued the officers improperly impounded her car and performed an inventory search as a pretext for their criminal investigation. This Court held that the district court erred in denying Ramos's motion to suppress. Specifically, this Court concluded that an officer's decision to impound a car violates the Fourth Amendment when the primary purpose behind that decision is to search the car for evidence of criminal activity. This case was then remanded for the district court to apply the "primary purpose" standard in determining whether the impoundment of Ramos's car was reasonable.

This Court provided the following guidance to the district court in evaluating the reasonableness of the impoundment: First, determining whether an officer's primary purpose in deciding to impound a car was an impermissible pretext will require the district court to consider evidence regarding the officer's subjective intent, rather than applying an objective standard. The State must prove an alternative to a pretextual search was the primary purpose for the search.

Second, even if the primary purpose behind the officer's decision to impound the car is not pretextual, the State must still prove that the decision to impound the car was reasonable under the circumstances.

******This summary constitutes no part of the Court's opinion. It has been prepared by court staff for the convenience of the public.******