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Supreme Court to decide if police can conduct health checks without a warrant

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The Supreme Court on Wednesday revisited the thorny issue of under what circumstances police can enter homes without a warrant, showing caution toward limiting law enforcement.

The case, the second of its kind the court has heard this year, comes amid increasing friction between police and many of the communities they are tasked with protecting.

It arose out of a 2015 domestic dispute between a Rhode Island married couple. Their argument spiraled out of control when the husband, Edward Caniglia, gave his wife, Kim, an unloaded gun and told her to put him out of his misery. Instead, she left the house, and later, fearing that he may commit suicide, called local police to check on him.

When police arrived at the house, they found Caniglia well but called an ambulance for him to be taken to the hospital for a mental health evaluation. Police then entered his house and confiscated his guns, on the grounds that the weapons posed a danger to himself, his wife, and his neighbors.

Caniglia soon sued, arguing that the police had violated his Fourth Amendment rights by entering his home without a warrant and unreasonably taking his guns. A district court sided against Caniglia. And when he brought the case to an appeals court, it decided against him as well — and extended the latitude given to police officers to search cars and homes under the so-called “community caretaking exception.”

When the Supreme Court heard more than two hours of arguments in the case on Wednesday, many of the justices focused on the community care exception. The prevailing opinion was that the ability of police to check in on people should be preserved.

“The two big circumstances where this issue is going to matter are older people who fall and suicide,” Justice Brett Kavanaugh said, pointing out that both situations are common and often involve police involvement.

“What I’m worried about is the longer you’re in the house, and no one can come to get you, you’re more likely to die from the fall,” Kavanaugh added. “The statistics are huge on older people dying from falls.”

Several other justices, including Stephen Breyer and Chief Justice John Roberts, presented hypotheticals attempting to find the line at which police cannot enter a home to check on a person’s health.

Prior to arguments, the Biden administration urged the Supreme Court to rule in favor of the police. In a brief filed to the court, the Justice Department argued that the Fourth Amendment hinges on a question of “reasonableness.”

“The ultimate question in this case is therefore not whether the respondent officers’ actions fit within some narrow warrant exception, but instead whether those actions were reasonable,” attorneys for the department wrote. “And under all of the circumstances here, they were.”

An ideologically diverse group of organizations, including the ACLU, the Cato Institute, and the American Conservative Union, opposed that position, writing that the community caretaking exception was being used “to justify warrantless invasion of the home.”

This is the second Fourth Amendment-related case the Supreme Court has heard this year. The first focused on whether police can enter the home of a misdemeanor suspect without a warrant.