

Issue: Group III Written Notice with Termination (falsifying records); Hearing Date: 07/25/17; Decision Issued: 07/26/17; Agency: DOC; AHO: Carl Wilson Schmidt, Esq.; Case No. 11015; Outcome: No Relief – Agency Upheld.



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

Department of Human Resource Management

OFFICE OF EQUAL EMPLOYMENT AND DISPUTE RESOLUTION

DECISION OF HEARING OFFICER

In re:

Case Number: 11015

Hearing Date: July 25, 2017

Decision Issued: July 26, 2017

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

On April 17, 2017, Grievant was issued a Group III Written Notice of disciplinary action for falsifying records.

On April 19, 2017, Grievant timely filed a grievance to challenge the Agency's action. The matter proceeded to hearing. On May 8, 2017, the Office of Equal Employment and Dispute Resolution assigned this appeal to the Hearing Officer. On July 25, 2017, a hearing was held at the Agency's office. Grievant was notified of the hearing date but did not appear at the hearing.

APPEARANCES

Agency Party Designee
Agency Representative
Witnesses

ISSUES

1. Whether Grievant engaged in the behavior described in the Written Notice?
2. Whether the behavior constituted misconduct?

3. Whether the Agency's discipline was consistent with law (e.g., free of unlawful discrimination) and policy (e.g., properly characterized as a Group I, II, or III offense)?
4. Whether there were mitigating circumstances justifying a reduction or removal of the disciplinary action, and if so, whether aggravating circumstances existed that would overcome the mitigating circumstances?

BURDEN OF PROOF

The burden of proof is on the Agency to show by a preponderance of the evidence that its disciplinary action against the Grievant was warranted and appropriate under the circumstances. Grievance Procedure Manual ("GPM") § 5.8. A preponderance of the evidence is evidence which shows that what is sought to be proved is more probable than not. GPM § 9.

FINDINGS OF FACT

After reviewing the evidence presented and observing the demeanor of each witness, the Hearing Officer makes the following findings of fact:

The Department of Corrections employed Grievant as a Security Officer III. No evidence of prior active disciplinary action was introduced during the hearing.

Grievant was scheduled to work at the Facility on Friday March 17, 2017 and Saturday March 18, 2017. She did not report to work. Grievant was asked to provide a doctor's excuse for her absences.

Grievant presented a letter supposedly signed by a Doctor excusing Grievant's absence from work because Grievant "was here along with other family members regarding the health issue with her mother, [name]. [Name] was brought to our faculty by emergency transportation with heart failure."¹

The Agency contacted the Doctor's office and learned: 1) the patient did not visit the Doctor's office on either day, 2) the Doctor's office was closed on March 18, 2017, 3) the Doctor always wrote notes on his letterhead unlike the note Grievant presented, 4) the Doctor did not sign the note, 5) the Doctor is an Orthopedic Surgeon and did not provide treatment for "heart failure," and 6) the note contained typographical errors.

When the Agency confronted Grievant with its findings, Grievant said she did not get the note from the Doctor but denied signing the note.

¹ Agency Exhibit 5.

CONCLUSIONS OF POLICY

Unacceptable behavior is divided into three groups, according to the severity of the behavior. Group I offenses “include types of behavior less severe in nature, but [which] require correction in the interest of maintaining a productive and well-managed work force.”² Group II offenses “include acts and behavior that are more severe in nature and are such that an accumulation of two Group II offenses normally should warrant removal.”³ Group III offenses “include acts and behavior of such a serious nature that a first occurrence normally should warrant removal.”⁴

“Falsifying any records ...” is a Group III offense.⁵ Grievant presented a note to the Agency to excuse her absences. She knew that the information contained in the note was false. The Agency has presented sufficient evidence to support the issuance of a Group III Written Notice. Upon the issuance of a Group III Written Notice, an agency may remove an employee. Accordingly, Grievant’s removal must be upheld.

Va. Code § 2.2-3005.1 authorizes Hearing Officers to order appropriate remedies including “mitigation or reduction of the agency disciplinary action.” Mitigation must be “in accordance with rules established by the Department of Human Resource Management”⁶ Under the *Rules for Conducting Grievance Hearings*, “[a] hearing officer must give deference to the agency’s consideration and assessment of any mitigating and aggravating circumstances. Thus, a hearing officer may mitigate the agency’s discipline only if, under the record evidence, the agency’s discipline exceeds the limits of reasonableness. If the hearing officer mitigates the agency’s discipline, the hearing officer shall state in the hearing decision the basis for mitigation.” A non-exclusive list of examples includes whether (1) the employee received adequate notice of the existence of the rule that the employee is accused of violating, (2) the agency has consistently applied disciplinary action among similarly situated employees, and (3) the disciplinary action was free of improper motive. In light of this standard, the Hearing Officer finds no mitigating circumstances exist to reduce the disciplinary action.

DECISION

For the reasons stated herein, the Agency’s issuance to the Grievant of a Group III Written Notice of disciplinary action with removal is **upheld**.

² Virginia Department of Corrections Operating Procedure 135.1(VI)(B).

³ Virginia Department of Corrections Operating Procedure 135.1(VI)(C).

⁴ Virginia Department of Corrections Operating Procedure 135.1(VI)(D).

⁵ Virginia Department of Corrections Operating Procedure 135.1(VI)(D)(2)(b).

⁶ *Va. Code § 2.2-3005*.

APPEAL RIGHTS

You may request an administrative review by EEDR within **15 calendar** days from the date the decision was issued. Your request must be in writing and must be **received** by EEDR within 15 calendar days of the date the decision was issued.

Please address your request to:

Office of Equal Employment and Dispute Resolution
Department of Human Resource Management
101 North 14th St., 12th Floor
Richmond, VA 23219

or, send by e-mail to EDR@dhrm.virginia.gov, or by fax to (804) 786-1606.

You must also provide a copy of your appeal to the other party and the hearing officer. The hearing officer's **decision becomes final** when the 15-calendar day period has expired, or when requests for administrative review have been decided.

A challenge that the hearing decision is inconsistent with state or agency policy must refer to a particular mandate in state or agency policy with which the hearing decision is not in compliance. A challenge that the hearing decision is not in compliance with the grievance procedure, or a request to present newly discovered evidence, must refer to a specific requirement of the grievance procedure with which the hearing decision is not in compliance.

You may request a judicial review if you believe the decision is contradictory to law. You must file a notice of appeal with the clerk of the circuit court in the jurisdiction in which the grievance arose within **30 days** of the date when the decision becomes final.^[1]

[See Sections 7.1 through 7.3 of the Grievance Procedure Manual for a more detailed explanation, or call EEDR's toll-free Advice Line at 888-232-3842 to learn more about appeal rights from an EEDR Consultant].

/s/ Carl Wilson Schmidt

Carl Wilson Schmidt, Esq.
Hearing Officer

^[1] Agencies must request and receive prior approval from EEDR before filing a notice of appeal.