

Issue: Group III Written Notice (participating in a collective work stoppage);
Hearing Date: 06/09/05; Decision Issued: 06/10/05; Agency: DJJ; AHO:
David J. Latham, Esq.; Case No. 8066



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA
Department of Employment Dispute Resolution

DIVISION OF HEARINGS

DECISION OF HEARING OFFICER

In re:

Case No: 8066

Hearing Date: June 9, 2005
Decision Issued: June 10, 2005

PROCEDURAL ISSUE

Grievant's request for a hearing was qualified at the same time as the request of one other grievant, who had participated in the same work stoppage at the same time as grievant. For administrative efficiency, it appeared that consolidation of the two grievances for the purpose of hearing the case would be appropriate. The Director of the Department of Employment Dispute Resolution ruled that the hearings should be consolidated, and the cases were heard together. However, separate decisions are being issued for each grievant in order to address the merits of each grievance individually.

APPEARANCES

Two Grievants
Representative for Agency
Four witnesses for Agency

ISSUES

Was the grievant's conduct such as to warrant disciplinary action under the Standards of Conduct? If so, what was the appropriate level of disciplinary action for the conduct at issue?

FINDINGS OF FACT

The grievant filed a timely grievance from a Group III Written Notice issued for participating in a collective work stoppage.¹ Following failure of the parties to resolve the grievance at the third resolution step, the agency head qualified the grievance for a hearing.²

The Department of Juvenile Justice (Hereinafter referred to as "agency") has employed grievant for four years. She is currently a juvenile correctional officer.³

The agency has designated as "essential personnel" certain groups of employees such as all security staff, including juvenile correctional officers. Essential personnel are designated to work in the event of an authorized closing. Juvenile detention centers are designed to detain juvenile offenders in a secure environment for the dual purposes of rehabilitation and the protection of public safety. Each facility has a security staff and is operated as a paramilitary organization. As such, security staff is required to obey all reasonable orders of superior officers and institution management. Because security posts must be staffed 24 hours per day, seven days per week, it is mandatory that at least one correctional officer be at each post at all times. When corrections officers report for work, they must report to their assigned posts at the start of their shift in order to assure that outgoing shift employees are relieved and that the security posts are properly staffed.

On October 25, 2004, during the day there had been three disturbances involving wards which resulted in injuries to some corrections officers. On October 26, 2004, grievant reported for her scheduled day shift – 6:45 a.m. to 7:15 p.m. During the morning debriefing, the night shift commander reported that some wards had been out of their rooms during the night and that he personally was scared by the occurrence. After hearing this, several corrections officers stated, "I'm not going to my post." At about 6:55 a.m., the day shift commander (a lieutenant) read post assignments to the 26 correctional officers and directed them to go to their posts.⁴ Grievant and the other officers refused to go to their posts. The shift commander directed the officers for a second time to report to their posts; they all refused. The shift commander then called the administrator

¹ Agency Exhibit 1. Group III Written Notice, issued November 18, 2004.

² Agency Exhibit 1. Grievance Form A, filed November 21, 2004.

³ Agency Exhibit 2. Employee Work Profile, September 23, 2004.

⁴ Agency Exhibit 3. Daily Assignment Sheet, October 26, 2004.

on call (assistant superintendent for operations) who directed the lieutenant to tell the officers to report to their posts. The lieutenant ordered the officers for a third time to report and again they refused. One officer asked when they could speak with the superintendent; the lieutenant responded, "Now is not the time." When the officers continued to refuse to go to their posts, the lieutenant said he was going to call the superintendent and left the briefing room.

By 7:15 a.m., it had become necessary to hold the night shift employees over to stay at their posts. This resulted in the employees working approximately nearly four hours longer than their scheduled 12-hour shift. Most had to be given compensatory time off because of the extra hours they were required to work. It also became necessary to call in several officers from five other institutions to help staff security posts; most of those officers arrived by about 10:00 a.m. Because of the work stoppage, meals for wards were delayed and school classes and counseling for wards were cancelled for the morning. The superintendent arrived at the facility sometime around 8:30 a.m., at which time the institution was placed on lockdown.⁵ The administrator on call arrived about 9:30 a.m. The superintendent and the administrator on call spoke with the recalcitrant officers from about 10:00 to 10:45 a.m.; grievant and the other officers reported to their posts shortly after that time.

Grievant expressed a number of concerns during an interview after the incident.⁶

All classified employees who participated in the work stoppage were disciplined with a Group III Written Notice.⁷

APPLICABLE LAW AND OPINION

The General Assembly enacted the Virginia Personnel Act, Va. Code § 2.2-2900 et seq., establishing the procedures and policies applicable to employment within the Commonwealth. This comprehensive legislation includes procedures for hiring, promoting, compensating, discharging and training state employees. It also provides for a grievance procedure. The Act balances the need for orderly administration of state employment and personnel practices with the preservation of the employee's ability to protect his rights and to pursue legitimate grievances. These dual goals reflect a valid governmental interest in and responsibility to its employees and workplace. *Murray v. Stokes*, 237 Va. 653, 656 (1989).

⁵ Agency Exhibit 4. Serious Incident Report, October 26, 2004.

⁶ Agency Exhibit 6. Notes from grievant's interview, October 28, 2004.

⁷ Probationary employees are not subject to the disciplinary sanction of the Standards of Conduct; however, three probationary officers were reprimanded in writing and their probationary period was extended by one year.

Code § 2.2-3000 sets forth the Commonwealth's grievance procedure and provides, in pertinent part:

It shall be the policy of the Commonwealth, as an employer, to encourage the resolution of employee problems and complaints . . . To the extent that such concerns cannot be resolved informally, the grievance procedure shall afford an immediate and fair method for the resolution of employment disputes which may arise between state agencies and those employees who have access to the procedure under § 2.2-3001.

In disciplinary actions, the agency must show by a preponderance of evidence that the disciplinary action was warranted and appropriate under the circumstances. In all other actions, the employee must present her evidence first and must prove her claim by a preponderance of the evidence.⁸

To establish procedures on Standards of Conduct and Performance for employees of the Commonwealth of Virginia and pursuant to Va. Code § 2.2-1201, the Department of Human Resource Management promulgated Standards of Conduct Policy No. 1.60. The Standards of Conduct provide a set of rules governing the professional and personal conduct and acceptable standards for work performance of employees. The Standards serve to establish a fair and objective process for correcting or treating unacceptable conduct or work performance, to distinguish between less serious and more serious actions of misconduct and to provide appropriate corrective action. Section V.B.3 of the Commonwealth of Virginia's *Department of Personnel and Training Manual* Standards of Conduct Policy No. 1.60 provides that Group III offenses include acts and behavior of such a serious nature that a first occurrence normally should warrant removal from employment.⁹ Participating in any kind of work slowdown or similar concerted interference with state operations is a Group III offense.¹⁰ Grievant received training on the Standards of Conduct when she was hired and certified that the Standards had been reviewed with her.¹¹

As a paramilitary organization, the agency must require security staff to comply with all reasonable orders. If officers were allowed to choose when and where they work, a juvenile detention center simply could not function as it must. The General Assembly has recognized the need to assure that state government operations continue uninterrupted for the public benefit by passing legislation that prohibits work slowdowns and stoppages. State law provides that any employee of any agency of the Commonwealth who willfully refuses to perform the duties of his employment shall be deemed to have terminated his employment and is

⁸ § 5.8, Department of Employment Dispute Resolution, *Grievance Procedure Manual*, Effective July 1, 2001.

⁹ Agency Exhibit 10. Section V.B.3, DHRM Policy No. 1.60, *Standards of Conduct*, effective September 16, 1993.

¹⁰ Agency Exhibit 10. Section V.B.3.i, *Ibid*.

¹¹ Agency Exhibit 7. Employee Training packet, October 16, 2000. See also Agency Exhibit 10. Receipt and certification for Standards of Conduct, signed by grievant October 16, 2000.

thereafter ineligible for employment by the Commonwealth for any position for 12 months.¹² In the instant case, the agency cannot tolerate the anarchic type of behavior engaged in by grievant and the other officers.

Grievant had available multiple options to bring her concerns to the attention of agency management. First, grievant could have followed her chain of command until she reached a level at which someone had authority to correct the perceived problems.¹³ Grievant avers that she did bring some of her concerns to the attention of the superintendent but that the problems were not corrected. Second, grievant had access to agency management including the deputy director for institutions, or the agency director. Third, grievant could have brought her concerns to the attention of the human resources department. Fourth, grievant could have filed a complaint through the governor's hotline. Fifth, grievant could have utilized the grievance procedure to pursue her concerns.

Grievant argues that the work stoppage was merely a communications breakdown. She contends that she thought the lieutenant's statement that he was going to call the superintendent meant that they were going to meet with the superintendent at that time. However, the lieutenant had already told the group that then was not the time for such a meeting. He did not tell the officers that such a meeting would occur, nor could he have obligated the superintendent to meet with the group.

Grievant also avers that she did not *verbally* refuse to report to her post. However, several of her fellow officers stated that they were not going to report to their posts, and in fact, they did not report. Grievant stayed with the group of officers who verbally refused to take their post. Although she may have been silent, she acted in concert with those officers by acquiescing in their work stoppage. Grievant's decision not to report to her post impeded the operation of the agency in multiple ways by causing other officers to be held overtime, requiring officers to be brought from other facilities, delaying meals for wards, delaying medical treatment, and canceling classes and counseling for wards. The obvious purpose of this work stoppage was to force the superintendent to speak to the group at the time of the group's choosing rather than when such a meeting could be arranged without disruption.

¹² Agency Exhibit 13. Va. Code § 40.1-55. **Employee striking terminates, and becomes temporarily ineligible for public employment.** Any employee of the Commonwealth or of any county, city, town or other political subdivision thereof, or of any agency of any one of them, who, in concert with two or more other such employees, for the purpose of obstructing, impeding or suspending any activity or operation of his employing agency or any other governmental agency, strikes or willfully refuses to perform the duties of his employment shall, by such action, be deemed to have terminated his employment and shall thereafter be ineligible for employment in any position or capacity during the next twelve months by the Commonwealth, or any county, city, town or other political subdivision of the Commonwealth, or by any department or agency of any of them.

¹³ Agency Exhibit 8. Memorandum from superintendent to all employees, August 8, 2004.

The agency has shown by a preponderance of evidence, and grievant has acknowledged, that she participated in a work stoppage of nearly four hours duration on October 26, 2004. Employees in a paramilitary organization such as this agency cannot be allowed to stop work whenever they choose in order to force management to address their concerns. As discussed above, agency policy provides multiple *acceptable* avenues by which employees can pursue their concerns without totally disrupting agency operations. Pursuant to state law, grievant could have been removed from state employment. The agency instead chose to discipline grievant in writing. Given the circumstances in this case, the agency's disciplinary action was measured and reasonable.

DECISION

The disciplinary action of the agency is affirmed.

The Group III Written Notice issued on November 18, 2004 is hereby UPHELD.

APPEAL RIGHTS

You may file an administrative review request within **15 calendar days** from the date the decision was issued, if any of the following apply:

1. If you have new evidence that could not have been discovered before the hearing, or if you believe the decision contains an incorrect legal conclusion, you may request the hearing officer either to reopen the hearing or to reconsider the decision.

2. If you believe the hearing decision is inconsistent with state policy or agency policy, you may request the Director of the Department of Human Resource Management to review the decision. You must state the specific policy and explain why you believe the decision is inconsistent with that policy. Address your request to:

Director
Department of Human Resource Management
101 N 14th St, 12th floor
Richmond, VA 23219

3. If you believe the hearing decision does not comply with the grievance procedure, you may request the Director of EDR to review the decision. You must state the specific portion of the grievance procedure with which you believe the decision does not comply. Address your request to:

Director
Department of Employment Dispute Resolution

830 E Main St, Suite 400
Richmond, VA 23219

You may request more than one type of review. Your request must be in writing and must be **received** by the reviewer within 15 calendar days of the date the decision was issued. You must give a copy of your appeal to the other party. The hearing officer's **decision becomes final** when the 15-calendar day period has expired, or when administrative requests for review have been decided.

You may request a judicial review if you believe the decision is contradictory to law.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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

David J. Latham, Esq.
Hearing Officer

¹⁴ An appeal to circuit court may be made only on the basis that the decision was contradictory to law, and must identify the specific constitutional provision, statute, regulation or judicial decision that the hearing decision purportedly contradicts. *Virginia Department of State Police v. Barton*, 39 Va. App. 439, 573 S.E.2d 319 (2002).

¹⁵ Agencies must request and receive prior approval from the Director of EDR before filing a notice of appeal.