

Issue: Group II Written Notice with Suspension (failure to follow policy); Hearing Date: 03/17/11; Decision Issued: 03/18/11; Agency: DOC; AHO: William S. Davidson, Esq.; Case No. 9520; Outcome: No Relief – Agency Upheld.

COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA  
DEPARTMENT OF EMPLOYMENT DISPUTE RESOLUTION  
DIVISION OF HEARINGS  
DECISION OF HEARING OFFICER  
In Re: Case No: 9520

Hearing Dates: March 17, 2011  
Decision Issued: March 18, 2011

**PROCEDURAL HISTORY**

The Grievant was issued a Group II Written Notice on October 29, 2010 for:

[Grievant] brought a bag onto her post in the Tower that contained her personal cell phone, cigarettes, lighter and a can of air freshener. She failed to notify supervision that she had these unauthorized items on post and that she needed to remove them. In addition, she did not remove them when given a break by her Sgt. A Group II with 3 days suspension for failure to follow policy is warranted because of the seriousness of the offense.<sup>1</sup>

Pursuant to the Group II Written Notice, the Grievant was suspended from work for 3 days.<sup>2</sup> On November 7, 2010, the Grievant timely filed a grievance to challenge the Agency's actions.<sup>3</sup> On February 16, 2011, the Department of Employment Dispute Resolution ("EDR") assigned this Appeal to a Hearing Officer. On March 17, 2011, a hearing was held at the Agency's location.

**APPEARANCES**

Advocate for the Agency  
Grievant  
Witnesses

**ISSUE**

1. Did the Grievant bring unauthorized items onto her work site?

**AUTHORITY OF HEARING OFFICER**

Code Section 2.2-3005 sets forth the powers and duties of a Hearing Officer who presides over a grievance hearing pursuant to the State Grievance Procedure. Code Section 2.2-3005.1 provides that the Hearing Officer may order appropriate remedies including alteration of the Agency's disciplinary action. Implicit in the Hearing Officer's statutory authority is the ability to

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<sup>1</sup> Agency Exhibit 1, Tab 1, Page 1

<sup>2</sup> Agency Exhibit 1, Tab 1, Page 1

<sup>3</sup> Agency Exhibit 1, Tab 2, Page 2

independently determine whether the employee's alleged conduct, if otherwise properly before the Hearing Officer, justified termination. The Court of Appeals of Virginia in Tatum v. VA Dept of Agriculture & Consumer Servs., 41VA. App. 110, 123, 582 S.E. 2d 452, 458 (2003) held in part as follows:

While the Hearing Officer is not a "super personnel officer" and shall give appropriate deference to actions in Agency management that are consistent with law and policy...the Hearing Officer reviews the facts de novo...as if no determinations had been made yet, to determine whether the cited actions occurred, whether they constituted misconduct, and whether there were mitigating circumstances to justify reduction or removal of the disciplinary action or aggravated circumstances to justify the disciplinary action. Thus the Hearing Officer may make a decision as to the appropriate sanction, independent of the Agency's decision.

### **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 sometimes characterized as requiring that facts to be established more probably than not occurred, or that they were more likely than not to have happened.<sup>4</sup> However, proof must go beyond conjecture.<sup>5</sup> In other words, there must be more than a possibility or a mere speculation.<sup>6</sup>

### **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 Agency provided the Hearing Officer with a notebook containing seven (7) tabbed sections and that notebook was accepted in its entirety as Agency Exhibit 1.

The Grievant did not introduce a documentary evidence notebook.

There was no dispute in the Findings of Fact in this matter. Agency witnesses and the Grievant testified that on October 11, 2010, the Grievant brought onto her work site a cell phone, cigarettes, lighter and an aerosol air freshener. The Grievant, in her testimony, acknowledged that she knew that these items were unauthorized or contraband. The Grievant also

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<sup>4</sup> Ross Laboratories v. Barbour, 13 Va. App. 373, 377, 412 S.E. 2d 205, 208 1991

<sup>5</sup> Southall, Adm'r v. Reams, Inc., 198 Va. 545, 95 S.E. 2d 145 (1956)

<sup>6</sup> Humphries v. N.N.S.B., Etc., Co., 183 Va. 466, 32 S.E. 2d 689 (1945)

acknowledged that these items were on the work site and that possession of them on the work site was a violation of the rules of this Agency.

The Agency deemed that this was a serious matter because of the particularities of this Agency and normally would have issued a Group III Written Notice with termination. However, because of the Grievant's excellent work record, this matter was mitigated to a Group II Written Notice with a 3 day suspension.

Acknowledging all of this, the Grievant felt that the punishment was still too harsh.

### **MITIGATION**

*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 Employment Dispute Resolution..."<sup>7</sup> 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, (3) the disciplinary action was free of improper motive, (4) the length of time that the Grievant has been employed by the Agency, and (5) whether or not the Grievant has been a valued employee during the time of his/her employment at the Agency.

The Agency has already mitigated what normally would be a Group III termination offense to a Group II offense with a 3 day suspension. The Grievant did not introduce any other reasons to justify a further mitigation in this matter and the Hearing Officer finds that the Agency has properly considered mitigation in this matter.

### **DECISION**

For reasons stated herein, the Hearing Officer finds that the Agency has borne its burden of proof regarding this matter and upholds the Agency's position to suspend the Grievant for 3 days.

### **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:

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<sup>7</sup>Va. Code § 2.2-3005

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. Please address your request to:

Director  
Department of Human Resource Management  
101 North 14<sup>th</sup> Street, 12<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Richmond, VA 23219

3. If you believe that 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. Please address your request to:

Director  
Department of Employment Dispute Resolution  
600 East Main Street, Suite 301  
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 and to the EDR Director. The Hearing Officer's **decision becomes final** when the 15-calendar day period has expired, or when administrative requests for a review have been decided.

You may request a judicial review if you believe the decision is contradictory to law.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

[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]

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William S. Davidson  
Hearing Officer

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<sup>8</sup>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).

<sup>9</sup>Agencies must request and receive prior approval from the Director of EDR before filing a notice of appeal.