

Issue: Group III Written Notice with Termination (client abuse); Hearing Date: 02/04/15; Decision Issued: 02/06/15; Agency: DBHDS; AHO: Carl Wilson Schmidt, Esq.; Case No. 10510; Outcome: No Relief – Agency Upheld.



# **COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA**

## ***Department of Human Resource Management***

### **OFFICE OF EMPLOYMENT DISPUTE RESOLUTION**

#### **DECISION OF HEARING OFFICER**

In re:

**Case Number: 10510**

Hearing Date: February 4, 2015  
Decision Issued: February 6, 2015

#### **PROCEDURAL HISTORY**

On October 15, 2014, Grievant was issued a Group III Written Notice of disciplinary action with removal for client abuse.

On October 20, 2014, Grievant timely filed a grievance to challenge the Agency's action. The matter proceeded to hearing. On December 1, 2014, the Office of Employment Dispute Resolution assigned this appeal to the Hearing Officer. On February 4, 2015, a hearing was held at the Agency's office.

#### **APPEARANCES**

Grievant  
Agency Party Designee  
Agency's 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 Behavioral Health and Developmental Services employed Grievant as a Forensic Mental Health Technician at one of its facilities. She was responsible for providing services to Agency clients. She received Therapeutic Options of Virginia training to enable her to properly control clients who posed a threat to themselves or others. She had been employed by the Agency for approximately 11 years. No evidence of prior active disciplinary action was introduced during the hearing.

The Client is a 31 year old male with a history of schizoaffective disorder.

On September 9, 2014, the Patient was engaging in disruptive behavior. Agency staff concluded that the Patient should be placed in four point restraints and placed inside a seclusion room for a period of time. Several employees including Grievant and Lieutenant S were involved in the attempt to place the Patient in the seclusion room. Staff placed four point restraints on the Patient. This meant that if he was standing and fell, he would not be able to extend his arm and hand to brace his impact with the floor. The Patient was combative and resistant to the process of placing him in restraints. Once staff finished placing the Patient in restraints and in the seclusion room, the Patient remained combative and charged the room door as staff were attempting to close the door. He was able to move into the hallway on three occasions. On the third attempt to flee the room, Grievant and Lieutenant S pushed the Patient in the front of his body and he moved backwards. The Patient fell backwards and hit his head on the concrete floor of the seclusion room.

The Patient complained to Agency managers and an investigation began. The Investigator looked at video of the incident and interviewed witnesses including Grievant. One frame of the video shows Grievant standing in the doorway with her arm fully extended after having pushed the Patient backwards. The force Grievant used was sufficient to push the Patient backwards and cause him to fall and hit the back of his head on the floor. On September 25, 2014, the Investigator interviewed Grievant and asked:

After his third attempt, it appears [Patient] was aggressively pushed back into the seclusion room, which resulted in him falling and striking his head. What justified this action by you and [Lieutenant S]?

Grievant responded:

[Patient] was still trying to get out of the room, he was kicking and spitting. I do not remember using that much force, but our actions were not justified.

The Investigator asked:

The physical force used by you and [Lieutenant S] were they approved TOVA techniques?

Grievant responded, "No."<sup>1</sup>

## **CONCLUSIONS OF POLICY**

The Agency has a duty to the public to provide its clients with a safe and secure environment. It has zero tolerance for acts of abuse or neglect and these acts are punished severely. Departmental Instruction ("DI") 201 defines<sup>2</sup> client abuse as:

Abuse means any act or failure to act by an employee or other person responsible for the care of an individual that was performed or was failed to be performed knowingly, recklessly or intentionally, and that caused or might have caused physical or psychological harm, injury or death to a person receiving care or treatment for mental illness, mental retardation or substance abuse. Examples of abuse include, but are not limited to, acts such as:

- Rape, sexual assault, or other criminal sexual behavior
- Assault or battery

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<sup>1</sup> Agency Exhibit 2.

<sup>2</sup> See, Va. Code § 37.1-1 and 12 VAC 35-115-30.

- Use of language that demeans, threatens, intimidates or humiliates the person;
- Misuse or misappropriation of the person's assets, goods or property
- Use of excessive force when placing a person in physical or mechanical restraint
- Use of physical or mechanical restraints on a person that is not in compliance with federal and state laws, regulations, and policies, professionally accepted standards of practice or the person's individual services plan; and
- Use of more restrictive or intensive services or denial of services to punish the person or that is not consistent with his individualized services plan.

For the Agency to meet its burden of proof in this case, it must show that (1) Grievant engaged in an act that she performed knowingly, recklessly, or intentionally and (2) Grievant's act caused or might have caused physical or psychological harm to the Client. It is not necessary for the Agency to show that Grievant intended to abuse a client – the Agency must only show that Grievant intended to take the action that caused the abuse. It is also not necessary for the Agency to prove a client has been injured by the employee's intentional act. All the Agency must show is that the Grievant might have caused physical or psychological harm to the client.

The Agency considers placing a patient into the seclusion room to be placing an individual in restraints. On September 9, 2014, Grievant placed the Patient in the seclusion room using excessive force. Grievant pushed the Patient too hard and caused him to fall backwards and hit his head on the concrete floor.<sup>3</sup> Her actions were contrary to DI 201 thereby justifying the issuance of a Group III offense. Upon the issuance of a Group III Written Notice, an agency may remove an employee. Accordingly, Grievant's removal must be upheld.

Grievant argued that she did not push the Patient. She presented evidence of witnesses claiming they did not see Grievant push the Patient. The video shows Grievant pushing the Patient and her admissions to the Investigator are consistent with someone who pushed the Patient.

*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 ...."<sup>4</sup> Under the *Rules for Conducting Grievance Hearings*, "[a] hearing

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<sup>3</sup> Although Grievant is not responsible for the actions of Lieutenant S, it appears that Grievant used greater force than did Lieutenant S. Grievant's arm was fully extended after the Patient's body moved backwards suggesting her push was forceful and with follow-through.

<sup>4</sup> Va. Code § 2.2-3005.

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**.

## 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 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> St., 12<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Richmond, VA 23219

or, send by fax to (804) 371-7401, or e-mail.

2. If you believe that the hearing decision does not comply with the grievance procedure or if you have new evidence that could not have been discovered before the hearing, you may request that EDR 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:

Office of Employment Dispute Resolution  
Department of Human Resource Management  
101 North 14<sup>th</sup> St., 12<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Richmond, VA 23219

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

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 provide a copy of all of your appeals to the other party, EDR, 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.

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.<sup>5</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].

*/s/ Carl Wilson Schmidt*

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Carl Wilson Schmidt, Esq.  
Hearing Officer

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<sup>5</sup> Agencies must request and receive prior approval from EDR before filing a notice of appeal.