

Issues: Group II Written Notice (failure to follow policy), and Termination (due to accumulation); Hearing Date: 07/09/14; Decision Issued: 07/10/14; Agency: DBHDS; AHO: Cecil H. Creasey, Jr., Esq.; Case No. 10390; Outcome: No Relief – Agency Upheld.

COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA
Department of Human Resource Management
Office of Employment Dispute Resolution

DIVISION OF HEARINGS

DECISION OF HEARING OFFICER

In the matter of: Case No. 10390

Hearing Date: July 9, 2014
Decision Issued: July 10, 2014

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Grievant was a respiratory therapist for the Department of Behavioral Health and Development Services (“the Agency”), with twelve years tenure. On May 8, 2014, the Grievant was issued a Group II Written Notice, for failure to comply with Agency Policy #703—the facility’s policy for calling in when absent for work. The offense date was April 16, 2014. The discipline for the offense was termination, based on the accumulated record of two active Group II Written Notices.

Grievant timely filed a grievance to challenge the Agency’s disciplinary action, and the grievance qualified for a hearing. On June 11, 2014, the Office of Employment Dispute Resolution, Department of Human Resource Management (“EDR”), appointed the Hearing Officer. During the pre-hearing conference, the grievance hearing was scheduled for July 9, 2014, on which date the grievance hearing was held, at the Agency’s facility.

Both the Agency and the Grievant submitted documents for exhibits that were accepted into the grievance record, and they will be referred to as Agency’s or Grievant’s exhibits, respectively. The hearing officer has carefully considered all evidence presented.

APPEARANCES

Grievant
Advocate for Agency
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?

Through her grievance filings, the Grievant requested rescission of the Group II Written Notice, reinstatement, and back pay, although the Grievant maintained during the grievance hearing that she was disabled and unable to return to work.

BURDEN OF PROOF

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, such as claims of retaliation and discrimination, the employee must present his evidence first and must prove his claim by a preponderance of the evidence. *In this disciplinary action, the burden of proof is on the Agency.* 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.

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).

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.

The Agency relied on the Standards of Conduct, promulgated by the Department of Human Resource Management, Policy 1.60, which defines Group II Offenses to include acts of misconduct of a more serious and/or repeat nature that require formal disciplinary action. This

level is appropriate for offenses that significantly impact business operations and/or constitute neglect of duty, insubordination, the abuse of state resources, violations of policies, procedures, or laws. The purpose of the policy is stated:

The purpose of this policy is to set forth the Commonwealth's Standards of Conduct and the disciplinary process that agencies must utilize to address unacceptable behavior, conduct, and related employment problems in the workplace, or outside the workplace when conduct impacts an employee's ability to do his/her job and/or influences the agency's overall effectiveness.

It is the intent of this policy that agencies follow a course of progressive discipline that fairly and consistently addresses employee behavior, conduct, or performance that is incompatible with the state's Standards of Conduct for employees and/or related agency policies. Disciplinary actions must be founded on the principles of due process and will employ a range of corrective and disciplinary actions that are applied based on the nature and history of the misconduct or unacceptable performance. Corrective and disciplinary actions must be administered through a prompt and fair process as described in this policy's Administrative Procedures. The ultimate goal of this policy and its procedures is to help employees become fully contributing members of the organization. Conversely, this policy is also designed to enable agencies to fairly and effectively discipline and/or terminate employees whose conduct and/or performance does not improve or where the misconduct and/or unacceptable performance is of such a serious nature that a first offense warrants termination.

Agency Exh. 6. In the policy's glossary, Progressive Discipline is defined:

A system of increasingly significant measures that are utilized to provide feedback to employees so that they can correct conduct or performance problems. It is most successful when provided in a way that helps an employee become a fully contributing member of the organization. Progressive discipline also enables agencies to fairly, and with reliable documentation, terminate an employee who is unable or unwilling to improve his/her workplace conduct and/or job performance.

The facility's Attendance Policy establishes that daily attendance of staff is critical to facility operations. It requires employees

to call in when they will not report to work as scheduled. The call-in deadline for all buildings/departments is at least two hours prior to the start of the shift/work day. Employees who fail to call in within the established time frames or who fail to call the proper person or telephone number as established by the building/department protocol may be subject to disciplinary action.

Agency Exh. 3. The policy provides for mitigating circumstances for unusual or emergency situations, and requires employees to provide adequate documentation to support their request for mitigation.

Va. Code § 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 § 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 determine independently whether the employee's alleged conduct, if otherwise properly before the hearing officer, justified the discipline. The Court of Appeals of Virginia in *Tatum v. Dept. of Agr. & Consumer Serv.*, 41 Va. App. 110, 123, 582 S.E. 2d 452, 458 (2003) (quoting Rules for Conducting Grievance Hearings, VI(B)), 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."

The Offense

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

The Agency employed Grievant as a respiratory therapist, with 12 years tenure. Prior to April 16, 2014, the Grievant had an active Group II Written Notice. Agency Exh. 7.

The current Written Notice charged:

Failure to comply with Agency Policy #703, *Attendance*. Specifically, on April 16, 2014, you failed to follow the "Calling in When Absent From Work" requirements. The call-in deadline for all buildings/departments is at least two hours prior to the start of the shift/workday. Your shift starts at 3:00 p.m. You called out at 2:30 p.m.

This Written Notice included job termination, and circumstances considered included an active Group II Written Notice and the Grievant's response to the 24 hour letter. Agency Exh. 1.

The Agency's witness, the director of nursing, testified that the Grievant was issued a Notice of Improvement Needed on April 4, 2014, regarding failure to comply with the call-in policy on March 27, 2014. The director also testified consistently with the charge in the Written Notice. She also testified to the resident population served, the policy rationale for the two-hour notice, and the impact on the facility operations when adequate notice of absence is not provided.

The Grievant testified that her medical condition on April 16, 2014, necessitated her inability to work, and she called in as soon as she could, even though it was only thirty minutes before her shift was to start. The Grievant testified that her right shoulder was numb and painful, and she could not use her arm. The Grievant stated she could not work without use of both arms.

The Grievant worked shifts following April 16, 2014, and has since sought medical disability and disability benefits. She provided doctor's slips indicating excuse from work starting April 23, 2014, for right shoulder pain, and her Social Security disability claim is pending. Grievant's Exh. 2. The Grievant's last annual evaluation was an overall contributor rating. Grievant's Exh. 1.

As previously stated, the agency's burden is to show upon a preponderance of evidence that the discipline of the Grievant was warranted and appropriate under the circumstances. The task of managing the affairs and operations of state government, including supervising and managing the Commonwealth's employees, belongs to agency management which has been charged by the legislature with that critical task. *See, e.g., Rules for Conducting Grievance Hearings*, § VI; *DeJarnette v. Corning*, 133 F.3d 293, 299 (4th Cir. 1988).

The grievance hearing is a *de novo* review of the evidence presented at the hearing, as stated above. The Agency has the burden to prove that the Grievant is guilty of the conduct charged in the written notice. I find that the conduct as described in the Written Notice occurred, and that the offense is properly considered Group II, as it is failure to comply with policy and the conduct significantly affects the Agency's business operations. Such decision falls within the discretion of the Agency so long as the discipline does not exceed the bounds of reasonableness. However, the Agency must act in accord with the purpose and procedures of the Standards of Conduct, which establish a progressive discipline plan. The Agency's issuance of the Notice of Improvement Needed, for the same conduct weeks earlier, shows that the Agency complied with the progressive discipline provided by the Standards of Conduct.

Mitigation

Regarding the level of discipline and termination, the Agency had leeway to impose discipline along the permitted continuum. The Grievant expressed the mitigating circumstance of her physical disability preventing her from reporting for work on April 16, 2014, but there was no actual medical attention sought that day to corroborate the Grievant's medical disability. The applicable policy requires that mitigating circumstances be documented, and there is no medical documentation indicating the Grievant was unable to comply with the call-in policy. In this case, it is reasonable for the Agency to require documentation of medical treatment to establish a level of mitigation for the offense. Given the nature of the Grievant's position with the Agency, and the Agency's unique needs to arrange for other staff members to work overtime to cover absences, the Grievant has an obligation to honor notification policy. The Agency has exercised progressive discipline regarding the Grievant's conduct. The Grievant asserts, reasonably, that her mitigating circumstances could have been used to reduce the Group II Written Notice or to issue no discipline at all. The level of discipline for the April 16, 2014, offense is fairly debatable. While the Hearing Officer may have reached a different level of discipline, he may not substitute his judgment for that of the Agency when the Agency's discipline falls within the limits of reasonableness.

Under Virginia Code § 2.2-3005, the hearing officer has the duty to "receive and consider evidence in mitigation or aggravation of any offense charged by an agency in accordance with rules established by the Office of Employment Dispute Resolution." 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.

The agency has proved (i) the employee engaged in the behavior described in the written notice, (ii) the behavior constituted misconduct, and (iii) the discipline was consistent with law and policy. Thus, the discipline must be upheld absent evidence that the discipline exceeded the limits of reasonableness. *Rules for Conducting Grievance Hearings* ("Hearing Rules") § VI.B.1.

On the issue of mitigation, EDR has ruled:

Importantly, because reasonable persons may disagree over whether or to what extent discipline should be mitigated, a hearing officer may not simply substitute his or her judgment on that issue for that of agency management. Rather, mitigation by a hearing officer under the *Rules* requires that he or she, based on the record evidence, make findings of fact that clearly support the conclusion that the agency's discipline, though issued for founded misconduct described in the Written Notice, and though consistent with law and policy, nevertheless meets the *Rules* "exceeds the limits of reasonableness" standard. This is a high standard to meet, and has been described in analogous Merit System Protection Board case law as one prohibiting interference with management's discretion unless under the facts the discipline imposed is viewed as unconscionably disproportionate, abusive, or totally unwarranted.

EDR Ruling #2010-2483 (March 2, 2010) (citations omitted). EDR has further explained:

When an agency's decision on mitigation is fairly debatable, it is, by definition, within the bounds of reason, and thus not subject to reversal by the hearing officer. A hearing officer "will not freely substitute [his or her] judgment for that of the agency on the question of what is the best penalty, but will only 'assure that managerial judgment has been properly exercised within tolerable limits of reasonableness.'"

EDR Ruling 2010-2465 (March 4, 2010) (citations omitted).

As with all mitigating factors, the grievant has the burden to raise and establish any mitigating factors. *See e.g.*, EDR Rulings 2010-2473; 2010-2368; 2009-2157, 2009-2174. *See also* Bigham v. Dept. of Veterans Affairs, No. AT-0752-09-0671-I-1, 2009 MSPB LEXIS 5986, at *18 (Sept. 14, 2009) citing to *Kissner v. Office of Personnel Management*, 792 F.2d 133, 134-35 (Fed. Cir. 1986). (Once an agency has presented a prima facie case of proper penalty, the burden of going forward with evidence of mitigating factors shifts to the employee).

The hearing officer accepts, recognizes, and upholds the Agency's important role in serving its population and ensuring the facility is properly staffed, which includes employees reporting to work on time and providing required notice of absences. While the Grievant voiced

her opinion that the level of discipline had “personal” motivation, and the Agency engaged in disparate treatment, she provided no evidence of such mitigating factors.

There is no requirement for an Agency to exhaust all possible lesser sanctions or, alternatively, to show that the chosen discipline was its only option. While the Agency could have justified or exercised lesser discipline, I find no mitigating circumstances that render the Agency’s action of a Group II Written Notice outside the bounds of reasonableness. Accordingly, I find that the Agency’s action of imposing a Group II Written Notice for the April 16, 2014, offense is within the limits of reasonableness. The Hearing Officer, thus, lacks authority to reduce or rescind the disciplinary action.

DECISION

For the reasons stated herein, I uphold the Agency’s Group II discipline and termination for the April 16, 2014, offense.

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 14th St., 12th 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 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 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.¹

I hereby certify that a copy of this decision was sent to the parties and their advocates shown on the attached list.



Cecil H. Creasey, Jr.
Hearing Officer

¹ Agencies must request and receive prior approval from EDR before filing a notice of appeal.