

Issue: Group III Written Notice with Termination (fraternization); Hearing Date: 11/18/14; Decision Issued: 11/25/14; Agency: DOC; AHO: John V. Robinson, Esq.; Case No.10486; Outcome: No Relief - Agency Upheld.

COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA
Department of Employment Dispute Resolution

DIVISION OF HEARINGS

In the matter of: Case No. 10486

Hearing Officer Appointment: October 21, 2014

Hearing Date: November 18, 2014

Decision Issued: November 25, 2014

PROCEDURAL HISTORY, ISSUES
AND PURPOSE OF HEARING

The Grievant requested an administrative due process hearing to challenge termination of her employment effective September 8, 2014, pursuant to a written notice, issued September 8, 2014 by Management of Department of Corrections (the "Department" or "Agency"), as described in the Grievance Form A dated October 6, 2014.

The parties participated in a first pre-hearing conference call scheduled by the hearing officer on October 28, 2014. The Grievant confirmed she is seeking reinstatement, back-pay and restoration of all benefits.

Following the pre-hearing conference call, the hearing officer issued a Scheduling Order entered on October 28, 2014 (the "Scheduling Order"), which is incorporated herein by this reference.

At the hearing, the Grievant represented herself and the Agency was represented by its attorney. Both parties were given the opportunity to make opening and closing statements, to call witnesses and to cross-examine witnesses called by the other party. The hearing officer also received various documentary exhibits of the parties into evidence at the hearing¹.

No open issues concerning non-attendance of witnesses remained by the conclusion of the hearing.

In this proceeding, the Agency bears the burden of proof and must show by a preponderance of the evidence that the discipline was warranted and appropriate under the

¹ References to the agency's exhibits will be designated AE followed by the exhibit number. The Grievant did not offer any exhibits.

circumstances. Of course, the Grievant bears the burden of proof concerning any affirmative defenses.

APPEARANCES

Representative for Agency
Grievant
Witnesses

FINDINGS OF FACT

1. The Grievant was formerly employed as a Corrections Officer Senior ("C/O") by the Agency at a correctional facility (the "Facility") which incarcerates approximately 812 offenders.
2. Security and safety at the Facility of staff, offenders and the public are paramount. Fraternization is strictly prohibited because it can compromise the integrity of the institution and staff and can lead to other serious issues and problems for the Facility.
3. At the time of her termination, the Grievant had been employed as a C/O for about 8 years and had received significant training concerning the Agency's fraternization policy.
4. The Grievant met the subject parolee ("J") some years ago when J worked at the Facility, also as a correctional officer, from another facility. AE 5, at 15.
5. The Grievant was aware that subsequently J was incarcerated at another correctional facility. J was incarcerated in 2013 and was released on March 10, 2014 to active parole.
6. J had been released from prison for about a month when he made contact with the Grievant.
7. The Grievant admits that while J was on parole, she and J were friends and had a non-professional relationship. The Grievant visited J at his parents' house and also went out to eat. AE 5, at 15. The Grievant also admits that they had conversations about building houses and the type of houses each of them wanted. AE 5, at 15. The Grievant admits that the two did text and talk daily about jobs, money, music, houses, his kids and going to Court. AE 5, at 15.

8. On April 22, 2014, J stated in a Sex Offender Group Check - In Session to his Contract Sex Offender Treatment Provider, who facilitated the group session, that he was involved in a personal relationship with his "girlfriend", the Grievant.
9. The Treatment Provider informed J that she had a responsibility to notify J's probation officer because J admitted to being involved in a relationship with a Department employee. Accordingly, the Treatment Provider contacted J's Probation and Parole Officer, (the "P/O"), who then contacted J to question J about his relationship with the Grievant.
10. The P/O and J met at approximately 9:47 a.m. on May 2, 2014 at the P/O's office and J admitted to the personal relationship with the Grievant. The P/O contacted the Warden at the Facility, who initiated an investigation through the SIU Investigator.
11. The Grievant admitted J told her about his visit to the P/O's office on May 2, 2014. AE 5, at 2. The Grievant approached the Chief of Security in the Facility's parking lot on May 2, 2014 at approximately 4:00 p.m. to report the relationship with J.
12. The Grievant admits that she knew J both before and after his incarceration, that she knew J had been incarcerated and that she did not ask J how long.
13. The SIU Investigator conducted a methodical, thorough investigation. AE 5.
14. The testimony of the Agency witnesses was credible and the demeanor of such witnesses was open, frank and forthright.
15. When asked on cross-examination why the Grievant did not report the relationship immediately, the Grievant responded that she wasn't thinking at the time.

APPLICABLE LAW, ANALYSIS AND DECISION

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).

Va. Code § 2.2-3000(A) 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. *Grievance Procedure Manual*, § 5.8.

To establish procedures on Standards of Conduct and Performances for employees of the Commonwealth of Virginia and pursuant to § 2.2-1201 of the *Code of Virginia*, the Department of Human Resource Management promulgated Standards of Conduct Policy No. 1.60. The operative Agency Standards of Conduct (the "SOC") are contained in Agency Operating Procedure 135.1 ("Policy No. 135.1"). AE 6. The SOC provide a set of rules governing the professional and personal conduct and acceptable standards for work performance of employees. The SOC 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.

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).

Pursuant to Policy No. 135.1, the Grievant's conduct could clearly constitute a terminable offense, as asserted by the Agency.

Policy No. 135.1 provides in part:

V (D). THIRD GROUP OFFENSES (GROUP III):

1. These offenses include acts and behavior of such a serious nature that a first occurrence normally should warrant removal.
2. *Group III* offenses include, but are not limited to:

.....

- (y) Violation of DOC Operating Procedure 130.1, *Rules of Conduct Governing Employees Relationships with Offenders*

.....

- (ee). fraternization or non-professional relationships with offenders who are within 180 days of the date following their discharge from Department custody or termination from supervision, whichever occurs last. Exceptions to this section must be reviewed and approved by the respective Regional Operations Chief on a case by case basis (*see Operating Procedure 130.1, Rules of Conduct Governing Employees Relationships with Offenders*).

AE 6.

Department Operating Procedure Number 130.1 (*Rules of Conduct Governing Employees' Relationships With Offenders*) provides in part as follows:

Fraternization - Employee association with offenders, or their family members, outside of employee job functions, that extends to unacceptable, unprofessional, and prohibited behavior. Examples include non-work related visits between offenders and employees, non-work related relationships with family members of offenders, discussing employee personal matters (marriage, children, work, etc.) with offenders, or engaging in romantic or sexual relationships with offenders.

Offender - An inmate, probationer, parolee or post release supervisee, or other person placed under the supervision or investigation of the Department of Corrections.

IV (B). Professional Conduct - Employees of the Department shall exercise a high level of professional conduct when dealing with offenders to ensure the security and integrity of the correctional process.

2. Vigilance - Employees are expected to be alert to detect and prevent escapes from custody or supervision, or violations of departmental operating procedures. Observed incidents or suspicions of planned

incidents shall be reported to the employee's supervisor or the appropriate officer in accordance with established procedures.

5. Interactions - While performing their job duties, employees are encouraged to interact with persons under DOC supervision on an individual and professional level maintaining appropriate boundaries to promote and accomplish DOC goals.

IV (C). Improprieties: Non-Professional Association

1. Fraternalization -

- a. Except for preexisting relationships (see below), fraternization or non-professional relationships between employees and offenders are prohibited, including when the offender is within 180 days of the date following discharge from DOC custody or termination from supervision, whichever occurs last.
 - i. This action may be treated as a Group III offense under Operating Procedure 135.1, *Standards of Conduct*.

2. Improprieties -

Associations between staff and offenders that may compromise security, or undermine the effectiveness to carry out employee's responsibilities may be treated as a Group III offense under Operating Procedures 135.1 *Standards of Conduct*.

D. Offender Abuse Prevention

3. Physical contact with offenders shall be conducted in a professional manner using the minimum amount of force necessary to provide appropriate apprehension, intervention, and control as needed to protect the offender, staff and the general public, and to maintain a safe and secure environment.

E. Employee and Supervisory Reporting Responsibilities

1. Employee Responsibilities - In addition to complying with the above procedures, employees have a continuing affirmative duty to disclose to their supervisors or other management officials any conduct that violates

this procedure or behavior that is inappropriate or compromises safety of staff, offenders, or the community and any staff or offender boundary violations. (4-APPFS-3E-05)

2. Supervisory Responsibilities - Supervisors shall ensure that all reports of violation of this operating procedure are forwarded to management at the work unit for investigation.

In this instance, the Agency appropriately determined that the Grievant's violations of Agency policies concerning fraternization constituted a Group III Offense. The Grievant was also clearly required by policy to report the non-professional relationship with J while J was on parole.

The Grievant's reliance on Operating Procedure No. 130.1 IV(B)(6) is misplaced, as the Warden stressed, because this provision only applies to ex-offenders who are employed as counselors by the Department.

As previously stated, the Agency's burden is to show upon a preponderance of evidence that the discipline was warranted and appropriate under the circumstances. The hearing officer agrees with the Agency's advocate that the Grievant's disciplinary infractions justified the termination by Management. Accordingly, the Grievant's behavior constituted misconduct and the Agency's discipline is consistent with law and consistent with policy, being properly characterized as a terminable offense.

EDR's *Rules for Conducting Grievance Hearings* provide in part:

The *Standards of Conduct* allows agencies to reduce the disciplinary action if there are "mitigating circumstances" such as "conditions that would compel a reduction in the disciplinary action to promote the interests of fairness and objectivity; or . . . an employee's long service, or otherwise satisfactory work performance." 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. *Rules* § VI(B) (alteration in original).

If the Department does not consider mitigating factors, the hearing officer should not show any deference to the Department in his mitigation analysis. In this proceeding the Department did consider mitigating and aggravating factors in disciplining the Grievant.

The Grievant has specifically raised mitigation in the hearing and in her Form A and while the Grievant might not have specified for the hearing officer's mitigation analysis all of the

mitigating factors below, the hearing officer considered a number of factors including those specifically referenced herein, in the Written Notice and all of those listed below in his analysis:

1. the Grievant's long, exemplary service to the Agency for 8 years;
2. the often difficult and stressful circumstances of the Grievant's work environment;
3. the fact that the Grievant did ultimately disclose the relationship to the Chief of Security, albeit belatedly; and
4. the lack of prior discipline.

EDR has previously ruled that it will be an extraordinary case in which an employee's length of service and/or past work experience could adequately support a finding by a hearing officer that a disciplinary action exceeded the limits of reasonableness. EDR Ruling No. 2008-1903; EDR Ruling No. 2007-1518; and EDR Ruling 2010-2368. The weight of an employee's length of service and past work performance will depend largely on the facts of each case, and will be influenced greatly by the extent, nature, and quality of the employee's service, and how it relates and compares to the seriousness of the conduct charged. The more serious the charges, the less significant length of service and otherwise satisfactory work performance become. *Id.*

Here the offense was very serious. The hearing officer would not be acting responsibly or appropriately if he were to reduce the discipline under the circumstances of this proceeding.

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).

Pursuant to DHRM Policy 1.60, Standards of Conduct, and the SOC, management is given the specific power to take corrective action ranging from informal action such as counseling to formal disciplinary action to address employment problems such as unacceptable behavior. Accordingly, as long as representatives of agency management act in accordance with law and policy, they deserve latitude in managing the affairs and operations of state government and have a right to apply their professional judgment without being easily second-guessed by a hearing officer. In short, a hearing officer is not a "super-personnel officer" and must be careful not to succumb to the temptation to substitute his judgment for that of an agency's management concerning personnel matters absent some statutory, policy or other infraction by management. *Id.*

In this proceeding, the Agency's actions were consistent with law and policy and, accordingly, the exercise of such professional judgment and expertise warrants appropriate deference from the hearing officer.

In EDR Case No. 8975 involving the University of Virginia ("UVA"), a grievant received a Group III Written Notice with removal for falsifying records on five (5) separate dates. Although the evidence supported only one of those instances, the hearing officer upheld the disciplinary action. The grievant appealed to EDR asserting that the disciplinary action was inappropriate in that the grievant did not engage in as much misconduct as alleged by UVA. The Director upheld the hearing officer's decision:

The grievant's arguments essentially contest the hearing officer's determinations of fact as they relate to the proper sanction for the misconduct. Such determinations are within the hearing officer's authority as the hearing officer considers the facts *de novo* to determine whether the disciplinary action was appropriate. In this case, while it appears that the hearing officer did find that the grievant did not engage in as much misconduct as alleged by the University, it was still determined that the grievant had falsified a state record with the requisite intent, generally a Group III offense under the Standards of Conduct. [footnote omitted] Upon review of the record, there is no indication that the hearing officer abused his discretion in making these findings or that the facts were not supported by the hearing record. Consequently, this Department has no basis to disturb the hearing decision.

EDR Ruling Number 2009-2192; February 6, 2009.

The hearing officer decides for the offense specified in the written notice (i) the Grievant engaged in the behavior described in the written notice; (ii) the behavior constituted serious misconduct; (iii) the Department's discipline was consistent with law and policy and that there are no mitigating circumstances justifying a further reduction or removal of the disciplinary action.

DECISION

The Agency has sustained its burden of proof in this proceeding and the action of the Agency in issuing the written notice and in terminating the Grievant's employment and concerning all issues grieved in this proceeding is affirmed as warranted and appropriate under the circumstances. Accordingly, the Agency's action concerning the Grievant is hereby upheld, having been shown by the Agency, by a preponderance of the evidence, to be warranted by the facts and consistent with law and policy.

APPEAL RIGHTS

As the *Grievance Procedure Manual* sets forth in more detail, this hearing decision is subject to administrative and judicial review. Once the administrative review phase has concluded, the hearing decision becomes final and is subject to judicial review.

Administrative Review: This decision is subject to two types of administrative review, depending upon the nature of the alleged defect of the decision:

1. **A challenge that the hearing decision is inconsistent with state or agency policy** is made to the Director of the Department of Human Resources Management. This request must refer to a particular mandate in state or agency policy. The Director's authority is limited to ordering the hearing officer to revise the decision to conform it to written policy. Requests should be sent to the Director of the Department of Human Resources Management, 101 N. 14th Street, 12th Floor, Richmond, Virginia 23219 or faxed to (804) 371-7401 or e-mailed.
2. **A challenge that the hearing decision does not comply with grievance procedure** as well as a request to present newly discovered evidence is made to EDR. This request must refer to a specific requirement of the grievance procedure with which the decision is not in compliance. EDR's authority is limited to ordering the hearing officer to revise the decision so that it complies with the grievance procedure. Requests should be sent to the Office of Employment Dispute Resolution, 101 N. 14th Street, 12th Floor, Richmond, Virginia 23219, faxed or e-mailed to EDR.

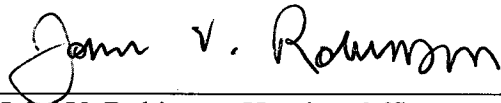
A party may make more than one type of request for review. All requests for review must be made in writing, and received by the administrative reviewer, within **15 calendar days** of the **date of original hearing decision**. (Note: the 15-day period, in which the appeal must occur, begins with the date of **issuance** of the decision, **not receipt** of the decision. However, the date the decision is rendered does not count as one of the 15 days; the day following the issuance of the decision is the first of the 15 days.) A copy of each appeal must be provided to the other party.

A hearing officer's original decision becomes a **final hearing decision**, with no further possibility of an administrative review, when:

1. The 15 calendar day period for filing requests for administrative review has expired and neither party has filed such a request; or
2. All timely requests for administrative review have been decided and, if ordered by EDR or DHRM, the hearing officer has issued a revised decision.

Judicial Review of Final Hearing Decision: Within thirty days of a final decision, a party may appeal on the grounds that the determination is contradictory to law by filing a notice of appeal with the clerk of the circuit court in the jurisdiction in which the grievance arose. The agency shall request and receive prior approval of EDR before filing a notice of appeal.

ENTER: 11 / 25 / 14



John V. Robinson, Hearing Officer

cc: Each of the persons on the Attached Distribution List (by U.S. Mail and e-mail transmission where possible and as appropriate, pursuant to *Grievance Procedure Manual*, § 5.9).