

Issue: Qualification/misapplication; Ruling Date: September 27, 2004; Ruling #2004-880; Agency: Department of Corrections; Outcome: not qualified

COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA
Department of Employment Dispute Resolution

QUALIFICATION RULING OF DIRECTOR

In the matter of Department of Corrections
Ruling Number 2004-880
September 27, 2004

The grievant has requested a qualification ruling on whether her July 7, 2004 grievance with the Department of Corrections (DOC) qualifies for hearing. The grievant alleges that the agency misapplied and/or unfairly applied policy. For the reasons discussed below, this grievance does not qualify for hearing.

FACTS

The grievant is employed by DOC as a Corrections Officer. On May 15, 2004, the grievant was issued a counseling letter for unprofessional conduct after she hung up on her supervisor during a telephone conversation. The grievant subsequently initiated a grievance regarding this letter, asking that it be rescinded on the grounds it was "false."¹ On July 1, 2004, during the agency resolution steps for that grievance, DOC amended and reissued the counseling letter to clarify that it was based on the grievant's inappropriate conduct in hanging up the phone on a supervisor. The agency otherwise denied the grievant's request for relief.

On July 7, 2004, the grievant initiated the present grievance, alleging that by amending and reissuing the May 15th counseling letter, the agency unfairly applied policy and was "playing games with procedures." Specifically, the grievant complains that having "failed to write the counseling [letter] properly," the supervisor should not have been allowed "to start all over, on a fresh sheet of paper."

DISCUSSION

By statute and under the grievance procedure, management reserves the exclusive right to manage the affairs and operations of state government.² Therefore, claims relating to issues such as informal counseling generally do not qualify for hearing, unless the grievant presents evidence raising a sufficient question as to whether discrimination or retaliation may have improperly influenced management's decision, or whether agency

¹ In Ruling No. 2004-863, we ruled that this prior grievance does not qualify for hearing.

² Va. Code § 2.2-3004(B).

policy may have been misapplied or unfairly applied, resulting in an “adverse employment action.”³

An adverse employment action is defined as a “tangible employment act constituting a significant change in employment status, such as hiring, firing, failing to promote, reassignment with significantly different responsibilities, or a decision causing a significant change in benefits.”⁴ Thus, for a grievance to qualify for a hearing, the action taken against the grievant must result in an adverse effect on the terms, conditions, or benefits of one’s employment.⁵

In this case, the agency’s action of amending and reissuing the May 15, 2004 counseling letter did not constitute an adverse employment action. There is no evidence that this action resulted in a significant detrimental effect on the terms, conditions, or benefits of the grievant’s employment. To the contrary, the changes to the counseling letter were apparently intended to respond to the concerns raised by the grievant in her earlier grievance challenging the letter. Moreover, as this Department has previously ruled, the original counseling letter, in and of itself, also did not have a significant detrimental effect on the terms, conditions, or benefits of employment.⁶ Because the grievant has failed to show the existence of an adverse employment action, this grievance does not qualify for a hearing.

We note, however, that while informal counseling does not have an adverse impact on the grievant’s employment, it could be used later to support an adverse employment action against the grievant. According to DHRM Policy 1.60, Standards of Conduct, repeated misconduct may result in *formal* disciplinary action, which would have a detrimental effect on the grievant’s employment and automatically qualifies for a hearing under the grievance procedure.⁷ Moreover, according to DHRM Policy 1.40, Performance Planning and Evaluation, a supervisor may consider informal documentation of perceived performance problems when completing an employee’s performance evaluation.⁸ Therefore, should the informal counseling in this case later serve to support an adverse employment action against the grievant, such as a formal Written Notice or a “Below Contributor” annual performance rating, this ruling does not foreclose the grievant from attempting to contest the merits of the informal counseling through a subsequent grievance challenging the related adverse employment action.

³ Va. Code § 2.2-3004(A).

⁴ Burlington Industries, Inc. v. Ellerth, 118 S. Ct. 2257, 2268 (1998).

⁵ Von Gunten v. Maryland Department of the Environment, 243 F.3d 858, 866 (4th Cir 2001)(citing Munday v. Waste Management of North America, Inc., 126 F.3d 239, 243 (4th Cir. 1997)). See also EDR Ruling 2004-596, 2004-597.

⁶ See EDR Ruling 2003-863. See also Boone v. Golden, 178 F. 3d 253 (4th Cir. 1999).

⁷ See generally DHRM Policy 1.60, Standards of Conduct; see also *Grievance Procedure Manual* § 4.1(a).

⁸ DHRM Policy 1.40, Performance Planning and Evaluation, “Documentation During the Performance Cycle,” page 4 of 16.

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APPEAL RIGHTS AND OTHER INFORMATION

For information regarding the actions the grievant may take as a result of this ruling, please refer to the enclosed sheet. If the grievant wishes to appeal this determination to the circuit court, the grievant should notify the human resources office, in writing, within five workdays of receipt of this ruling. If the court should qualify this grievance, within five workdays of receipt of the court's decision, the agency will request the appointment of a hearing officer unless the grievant notifies the agency that she wishes to conclude the grievance.

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