



JANET L. LAWSON  
DIRECTOR

**COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA**  
*Department Of Human Resource Management*  
*Office of Employment Dispute Resolution*

James Monroe Building  
101 N. 14<sup>th</sup> Street, 12<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Richmond, Virginia 23219

Tel: (804) 225-2131  
(TTY) 711

**ACCESS RULING**

In the matter of the Department of Corrections  
Ruling Number 2024-5700  
May 23, 2024

On or about April 15, 2024, the Office of Employment Dispute Resolution (EDR) at the Department of Human Resource Management (DHRM) received a dismissal grievance that challenged the grievant's separation from employment at the Department of Corrections (the "agency"). The agency subsequently requested a ruling from EDR on whether the grievant has access to the grievance procedure due to her resignation.

**FACTS**

On February 28, 2024, the agency issued to the grievant a due process notification of potential disciplinary action. After providing the grievant with an opportunity to respond, a "final outcome" meeting was held on March 22, 2024. According to the grievant, at this meeting agency management informed her that they intended to issue formal discipline with termination. The grievant claims she inquired about the possibility of resignation and was told her resignation would be accepted if offered effective immediately. She then provided a letter of resignation dated for the same day. The agency accepted her resignation and subsequently advised in writing that her separation would be documented as "resigned in lieu of termination."

On or about April 15, 2024, the grievant submitted a dismissal grievance challenging the reference to termination in the agency's separation records. The agency asserts that the grievant does not have access to the grievance procedure due to her voluntary resignation.

**DISCUSSION**

The General Assembly has provided that "[u]nless exempted by law, all nonprobationary state employees shall be covered by the grievance procedure . . . ."<sup>1</sup> Upon the effective date of a voluntary resignation from state service, a person is no longer a state employee. Thus, to have access to the grievance procedure, the employee "[m]ust not have voluntarily concluded their employment with the Commonwealth prior to initiating the grievance."<sup>2</sup> EDR has long held that

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<sup>1</sup> Va. Code § 2.2-3001(A).

<sup>2</sup> *Grievance Procedure Manual* § 2.3.

once an employee's voluntary resignation becomes effective, they are not covered by the grievance procedure and accordingly may not initiate a grievance.<sup>3</sup> In this case, the grievant has alleged that her resignation was tendered under duress and thus was not voluntary.

EDR is the finder of fact on questions of access.<sup>4</sup> The determination of whether a resignation is voluntary is based on an employee's ability to exercise a free and informed choice in making a decision to resign. Generally, the voluntariness of an employee's resignation is presumed.<sup>5</sup> A resignation may be viewed as involuntary only where it was (1) "obtained by the employer's misrepresentation or deception" or (2) "forced by the employer's duress or coercion."<sup>6</sup> In this case, the grievant has not alleged that her resignation was procured by misrepresentation or deception. As such, this ruling will address only the issue of duress or coercion.

A resignation can be viewed as forced by the employer's duress or coercion if "it appears that the employer's conduct . . . effectively deprived the employee of free choice in the matter."<sup>7</sup> Factors to consider are "(1) whether the employee was given some alternative to resignation; (2) whether the employee understood the nature of the choice [she] was given; (3) whether the employee was given a reasonable time in which to choose; and (4) whether [she] was permitted to select the effective date of resignation."<sup>8</sup>

Cases that ordinarily implicate this analysis involve situations where the employer presents the employee with the options that they can resign or be dismissed, which is what apparently occurred in this case. "[W]here an employee is faced merely with the unpleasant alternatives of resigning or being subject to removal for cause, such limited choices do not make the resulting resignation an involuntary act. On the other hand, inherent in that proposition is that the agency has reasonable grounds for threatening to take an adverse action. If an employee can show that the agency knew that the reason for the threatened removal could not be substantiated, the threatened action by the agency is purely coercive."<sup>9</sup> Here, although the grievant strongly disputes the agency's charges against her, this case does not appear to be one where the agency *knew* that its plan to terminate the grievant's employment could not be substantiated. There is evidence of some level of reasonably alleged misconduct and/or unsatisfactory performance through the appropriate process.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, considering the first *Stone* factor, the alternatives apparently available to the grievant in this case do not support her claim of duress.<sup>11</sup>

As to whether the grievant understood her choice and its consequences, had time to consider her options, or was permitted to select the effective date of her separation, EDR is not persuaded that the facts support a conclusion that her resignation was procured through duress or coercion. The evidence does suggest that the grievant was given a limited time to choose between resignation and termination and was not able to select the date of her separation. While it thus

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<sup>3</sup> *E.g.*, EDR Ruling No. 2005-1043.

<sup>4</sup> *See* Va. Code § 2.2-1202.1(5); *see also* *Grievance Procedure Manual* § 2.3.

<sup>5</sup> *See* *Rosario-Fabregas v. Merit Sys. Prot. Bd.*, 833 F.3d 1342, 1346 (Fed. Cir. 2016).

<sup>6</sup> *Stone v. Univ. of Md. Med. Sys. Corp.*, 855 F.2d 167, 174 (4th Cir. 1988).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> *Benjamin v. Sparks*, 986 F.3d 332, 349 (4th Cir. 2021) (citing *Stone*, 855 F.2d at 174) (noting that no single one of the four recognized factors is dispositive of voluntariness); *see, e.g.*, EDR Ruling No. 2013-3564.

<sup>9</sup> *Schultz v. U.S. Navy*, 810 F.2d 1133, 1136 (Fed. Cir. 1987).

<sup>10</sup> *See* DHRM Policy 1.60, *Standards of Conduct*.

<sup>11</sup> *See Stone*, 855 F.2d at 174.

appears that the grievant may have made a decision under time pressure, we cannot say that the totality of these facts undermine the presumption of voluntariness. The grievant had received notice on February 28, 2024, that the agency had significant concerns about her performance and, accordingly, she would have been aware going into a meeting with management on March 22 that termination of her employment was possible. There is no indication that the grievant sought and was denied additional time to make her decision. Further, the grievant has confirmed she is not seeking to rescind her resignation in favor of disciplinary termination.

Having considered the totality of the circumstances in this particular case, EDR finds that the evidence is insufficient to demonstrate that the agency procured the grievant's resignation by duress or coercion without her exercise of free choice. Thus, the facts presented do not support a finding of involuntariness in view of the general presumption of a voluntary resignation. Accordingly, we conclude that the grievant's separation from employment was based on a voluntary resignation, and thus she does not have access to the grievance procedure. The dismissal grievance will not proceed to hearing and EDR's file will be closed.

EDR's rulings on access are final and nonappealable.<sup>12</sup>

*Christopher M. Grab*  
Director  
Office of Employment Dispute Resolution

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<sup>12</sup> Va. Code § 2.2-1202.1(5).