

**IOWA WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE APPEALS BUREAU**

LEOVA A GUSTAFSON
Claimant

APPEAL 21A-UI-16511-AD-T

**ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE
DECISION**

BURLINGTON COMMUNITY SCHOOL DIST
Employer

**OC: 05/02/21
Claimant: Respondent (2)**

Iowa Code § 96.5(1) – Voluntary Quitting
Iowa Code § 96.5(2)a – Discharge for Misconduct
Iowa Code § 96.3(7) – Recovery of Benefit Overpayment
Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.10 – Employer/Representative Participation Fact-finding Interview

STATEMENT OF THE CASE:

On July 28, 2021, Burlington Community School District (employer/respondent) filed an appeal from the July 19, 2021 (reference 01) unemployment insurance decision that allowed benefits based on a finding that claimant was dismissed from work on April 27, 2021 without a showing of misconduct.

A telephone hearing was set for September 17, 2021. The parties were properly notified of the hearing. Employer participated by HR Assistant Julia Dichraff. Superintendent Pat Coen participated as a witness for employer. Leova Gustafson (claimant/respondent) participated personally. Dale Gustafson, claimant's husband, participated as a witness for her.

Shortly before the hearing a subpoena was requested, issued, and responded to. The parties had also submitted numerous documents at different times. The hearing time was therefore used as a prehearing conference to clarify these matters and to allow the parties to properly submit proposed exhibits.

A rescheduled hearing was held October 8, 2021 at 8 a.m. The parties were properly notified of the hearing and the same participants appeared and participated at that time. Claimant's Exhibit 1 and Employer's Exhibits 1-9 were admitted. Official notice was taken of the administrative record.

ISSUE(S):

- I. Was the separation a layoff, discharge for misconduct, or voluntary quit without good cause?
- II. Was the claimant overpaid benefits? Should claimant repay benefits and/or charge employer due to employer participation in fact finding?
- III. Is the claimant eligible for Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation?

FINDINGS OF FACT:

Having reviewed all of the evidence in the record, the administrative law judge finds:

Claimant's first day of employment was September 20, 2017. Claimant worked for employer as a full-time teacher's associate. The last day claimant was present and performing work was April 27, 2021. Claimant was notified of her discharge at that time.

Claimant was discharged due to a long-term pattern of absenteeism. The vast majority of absences were due to illness and were properly reported to employer. However, claimant's absences on April 23 and 26, 2021 were not. Claimant chose to leave the state to visit family on those dates knowing full well that she did not have approval for doing so. Claimant believed it was important to visit family on those dates because she was having unidentified health issues which were causing her concern.

Claimant subsequently met with Coen and determined to resign in lieu of discharge. The school board accepted the resignation in its meeting on May 24, 2021.

The unemployment insurance system shows claimant has received weekly benefits in the amount of \$177.00 for a total of 22 weeks, from the benefit week ending May 8, 2021 and continuing through the benefit week ending October 2, 2021. The total amount of benefits paid to date is \$3,894.00.

The unemployment insurance system shows claimant has received Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC) benefits in the amount of \$300.00 for a total of six weeks, from the benefit week ending May 8, 2021 and continuing through the benefit week ending June 12, 2021. The total amount of FPUC benefits paid to date is \$1,800.00.

A fact-finding interview was set for July 15, 2021 at 9:45 a.m. Dichraff was unavailable at that time and notified the Department of the same. Dichraff did provide a written response to a subsequent request for further information from the Department.

REASONING AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW:

For the reasons set forth below, the July 19, 2021 (reference 01) unemployment insurance decision that allowed benefits based on a finding that claimant was dismissed from work on April 27, 2021 without a showing of misconduct is REVERSED.

- I. Was the separation a layoff, discharge for misconduct, or voluntary quit without good cause?

In this case, the claimant did not have the option of remaining employed nor did she express intent to terminate the employment relationship. She resigned in lieu of discharge when presented with that option. Where there is no expressed intention or act to sever the relationship, the case must be analyzed as a discharge from employment. *Peck v. Emp't Appeal Bd.*, 492 N.W.2d 438 (Iowa Ct. App. 1992).

Iowa Code section 96.5(2)a provides:

An individual shall be disqualified for benefits, regardless of the source of the individual's wage credits:

2. Discharge for misconduct. If the department finds that the individual has been discharged for misconduct in connection with the individual's employment:

a. The disqualification shall continue until the individual has worked in and has been paid wages for insured work equal to ten times the individual's weekly benefit amount, provided the individual is otherwise eligible.

Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.32 provides in relevant part:

Discharge for misconduct.

(1) Definition.

a. "Misconduct" is defined as a deliberate act or omission by a worker which constitutes a material breach of the duties and obligations arising out of such worker's contract of employment. Misconduct as the term is used in the disqualification provision as being limited to conduct evincing such willful or wanton disregard of an employer's interest as is found in deliberate violation or disregard of standards of behavior which the employer has the right to expect of employees, or in carelessness or negligence of such degree of recurrence as to manifest equal culpability, wrongful intent or evil design, or to show an intentional and substantial disregard of the employer's interests or of the employee's duties and obligations to the employer. On the other hand mere inefficiency, unsatisfactory conduct, failure in good performance as the result of inability or incapacity, inadvertencies or ordinary negligence in isolated instances, or good faith errors in judgment or discretion are not to be deemed misconduct within the meaning of the statute.

This definition has been accepted by the Iowa Supreme Court as accurately reflecting the intent of the legislature. *Huntoon v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 275 N.W.2d 445, 448 (Iowa 1979).

Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.32(7) provides:

(7) Excessive unexcused absenteeism. Excessive unexcused absenteeism is an intentional disregard of the duty owed by the claimant to the employer and shall be considered misconduct except for illness or other reasonable grounds for which the employee was absent and that were properly reported to the employer.

The employer bears the burden of proving that a claimant is disqualified from receiving benefits because of substantial misconduct within the meaning of Iowa Code section 96.5(2). *Myers v. Emp't Appeal Bd.*, 462 N.W.2d 734, 737 (Iowa Ct. App. 1990). The issue is not whether the employer made a correct decision in separating claimant, but whether the claimant is entitled to unemployment insurance benefits. *Infante v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 364 N.W.2d 262 (Iowa Ct. App. 1984). What constitutes misconduct justifying termination of an employee and what misconduct warrants denial of unemployment insurance benefits are two separate decisions. *Pierce v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 425 N.W.2d 679 (Iowa Ct. App. 1988).

Misconduct serious enough to warrant discharge is not necessarily serious enough to warrant a denial of job insurance benefits. Such misconduct must be "substantial." *Newman v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 351 N.W.2d 806 (Iowa Ct. App. 1984). The focus is on deliberate, intentional, or culpable acts by the employee. When based on carelessness, the carelessness must actually indicate a "wrongful intent" to be disqualifying in nature. *Newman, Id.* In contrast, mere inefficiency, unsatisfactory conduct, failure in good performance as the result of inability or incapacity, inadvertencies or ordinary negligence in isolated instances, or good faith errors in

judgment or discretion are not to be deemed misconduct within the meaning of the statute. *Newman, Id.*

When reviewing an alleged act of misconduct, the finder of fact may consider past acts of misconduct to determine the magnitude of the current act. *Kelly v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 386 N.W.2d 552, 554 (Iowa Ct. App. 1986). However, conduct asserted to be disqualifying misconduct must be both specific and current. *West v. Emp't Appeal Bd.*, 489 N.W.2d 731 (Iowa 1992); *Greene v. Emp't Appeal Bd.*, 426 N.W.2d 659 (Iowa Ct. App. 1988).

Because our unemployment compensation law is designed to protect workers from financial hardships when they become unemployed through no fault of their own, we construe the provisions "liberally to carry out its humane and beneficial purpose." *Bridgestone/Firestone, Inc. v. Emp't Appeal Bd.*, 570 N.W.2d 85, 96 (Iowa 1997). "[C]ode provisions which operate to work a forfeiture of benefits are strongly construed in favor of the claimant." *Diggs v. Emp't Appeal Bd.*, 478 N.W.2d 432, 434 (Iowa Ct. App. 1991).

In order to show misconduct due to absenteeism, the employer must establish the claimant had excessive absences that were unexcused. Excessive absences are not considered misconduct unless unexcused. Absences due to properly reported illness or injury cannot constitute job misconduct since they are not volitional. *Cosper v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 321 N.W.2d 6 (Iowa 1982). A determination as to whether an absence is excused or unexcused does not rest solely on the interpretation or application of the employer's attendance policy. Absences due to properly reported illness cannot constitute work-connected misconduct since they are not volitional, even if the employer was fully within its rights to assess points or impose discipline up to or including discharge for the absence under its attendance policy. Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.32(7); *Cosper, supra*; *Gaborit v. Emp't Appeal Bd.*, 734 N.W.2d 554 (Iowa Ct. App. 2007).

The determination of whether unexcused absenteeism is excessive necessarily requires consideration of past acts and warnings. The term "absenteeism" also encompasses conduct that is more accurately referred to as "tardiness." An absence is an extended tardiness, and an incident of tardiness is a limited absence. Absences related to issues of personal responsibility such as transportation, lack of childcare, and oversleeping are not considered excused. *Higgins v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 350 N.W.2d 187 (Iowa 1984).

Thus, the first step in the analysis is to determine whether the absences were unexcused. The requirement of "unexcused" can be satisfied in two ways. An absence can be unexcused either because it was not for "reasonable grounds," *Higgins* at 191, or because it was not "properly reported," holding excused absences are those "with appropriate notice." *Cosper* at 10. Absences due to properly reported illness are excused, even if the employer was fully within its rights to assess points or impose discipline up to or including discharge for the absence under its attendance policy. Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.32(7); *Cosper, supra*; *Gaborit v. Emp't Appeal Bd.*, 734 N.W.2d 554 (Iowa Ct. App. 2007). Medical documentation is not essential to a determination that an absence due to illness should be treated as excused. *Gaborit, supra*. Absences related to issues of personal responsibility such as transportation, lack of childcare, and oversleeping are not considered excused. *Higgins, supra*. However, a good faith inability to obtain childcare for a sick infant may be excused. *McCourtney v. Imprimis Tech., Inc.*, 465 N.W.2d 721 (Minn. Ct. App. 1991).

The second step in the analysis is to determine whether the unexcused absences were excessive. Excessive absenteeism has been found when there have been seven unexcused absences in five months; five unexcused absences and three instances of tardiness in eight months; three unexcused absences over an eight-month period; three unexcused absences over seven months;

and missing three times after being warned. *Higgins*, 350 N.W.2d at 192 (Iowa 1984); *Infante v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 321 N.W.2d 262 (Iowa App. 1984); *Armel v. EAB*, 2007 WL 3376929*3 (Iowa App. Nov. 15, 2007); *Hiland v. EAB*, No. 12-2300 (Iowa App. July 10, 2013); and *Clark v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 317 N.W.2d 517 (Iowa App. 1982). Excessiveness by its definition implies an amount or degree too great to be reasonable or acceptable.

Employer has carried its burden of proving claimant is disqualified from receiving benefits because of a current act of substantial misconduct within the meaning of Iowa Code section 96.5(2). The vast majority of the absences were due to illness and were properly reported and are therefore considered excused for purposes of Iowa unemployment insurance law. However, the two most recent absences were not for reasonable grounds and were not properly reported and are therefore not excused. While the administrative law judge understands why claimant chose to take the trip, the resulting absences were not unavoidable or due to no fault of her own, such as is the case when a person is unable to work due to illness or emergency. Claimant made a conscious decision to be absent, despite knowing full well that she did not have permission to do so. The administrative law judge finds two consecutive absences under these circumstances is not reasonable or acceptable and rises to the level of disqualifying misconduct.

Because claimant is disqualified from benefits, the issue of whether she was able and available for work during the weeks filed need not be addressed.

- II. Was the claimant overpaid benefits? Should claimant repay benefits and/or charge employer due to employer participation in fact finding?

Iowa Code section 96.3(7) provides, in pertinent part:

7. Recovery of overpayment of benefits.

a. If an individual receives benefits for which the individual is subsequently determined to be ineligible, even though the individual acts in good faith and is not otherwise at fault, the benefits shall be recovered. The department in its discretion may recover the overpayment of benefits either by having a sum equal to the overpayment deducted from any future benefits payable to the individual or by having the individual pay to the department a sum equal to the overpayment.

b. (1) (a) If the department determines that an overpayment has been made, the charge for the overpayment against the employer's account shall be removed and the account shall be credited with an amount equal to the overpayment from the unemployment compensation trust fund and this credit shall include both contributory and reimbursable employers, notwithstanding section 96.8, subsection 5.

(b) However, provided the benefits were not received as the result of fraud or willful misrepresentation by the individual, benefits shall not be recovered from an individual if the employer did not participate in the initial determination to award benefits pursuant to section 96.6, subsection 2, and an overpayment occurred because of a subsequent reversal on appeal regarding the issue of the individual's separation from employment.

Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.10 provides:

Employer and employer representative participation in fact-finding interviews.

(1) "Participate," as the term is used for employers in the context of the initial determination to award benefits pursuant to Iowa Code section 96.6, subsection 2, means submitting detailed factual information of the quantity and quality that if unrebutted would be sufficient to result in a decision favorable to the employer. The most effective means to participate is to provide live testimony at the interview from a witness with firsthand knowledge of the events leading to the separation. If no live testimony is provided, the employer must provide the name and telephone number of an employee with firsthand information who may be contacted, if necessary, for rebuttal. A party may also participate by providing detailed written statements or documents that provide detailed factual information of the events leading to separation. At a minimum, the information provided by the employer or the employer's representative must identify the dates and particular circumstances of the incident or incidents, including, in the case of discharge, the act or omissions of the claimant or, in the event of a voluntary separation, the stated reason for the quit. The specific rule or policy must be submitted if the claimant was discharged for violating such rule or policy. In the case of discharge for attendance violations, the information must include the circumstances of all incidents the employer or the employer's representative contends meet the definition of unexcused absences as set forth in 871—subrule 24.32(7). On the other hand, written or oral statements or general conclusions without supporting detailed factual information and information submitted after the fact-finding decision has been issued are not considered participation within the meaning of the statute.

The unemployment insurance system shows claimant has received weekly benefits in the amount of \$177.00 for a total of 22 weeks, from the benefit week ending May 8, 2021 and continuing through the benefit week ending October 2, 2021. The total amount of benefits paid to date is \$3,894.00. Because the administrative law judge now finds claimant disqualified from benefits, she has been overpaid in that amount.

Because employer did not participate in the fact-finding interview within the meaning of Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.10 and the overpayment occurred because of a subsequent reversal on appeal regarding the issue of the individual's separation from employment, benefits shall not be recovered from claimant. However, neither shall benefits be charged to employer. Employer took reasonable steps to provide further information requested by the Department. The charge for benefits shall instead be absorbed by the unemployment insurance compensation fund.

III. Is the claimant eligible for FPUC?

PL116-136, Sec. 2104 provides, in pertinent part:

(b) Provisions of Agreement

(1) Federal pandemic unemployment compensation. --Any agreement under this section shall provide that the State agency of the State will make payments of regular compensation to individuals in amounts and to the extent that they would be determined if the State law of the State were applied, with respect to any week for which the individual is (disregarding this section) otherwise entitled under the State law to receive regular compensation, as if such State law had been modified in a manner such that the amount of regular compensation (including dependents' allowances) payable for any week shall be equal to

(A) the amount determined under the State law (before the application of this paragraph), plus

(B) an additional amount of \$600 (in this section referred to as “Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation”).

....

(f) Fraud and Overpayments

(2) Repayment.--In the case of individuals who have received amounts of Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation to which they were not entitled, the State shall require such individuals to repay the amounts of such Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation to the State agency...

The FPUC program was subsequently extended to pay \$300.00 per week from the benefit week ending January 2, 2021 until Iowa discontinued its participation in the program effective June 12, 2021.

The unemployment insurance system shows claimant has received Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC) benefits in the amount of \$300.00 for a total of six weeks, from the benefit week ending May 8, 2021 and continuing through the benefit week ending June 12, 2021. The total amount of FPUC benefits paid to date is \$1,800.00.

Because the claimant is disqualified from receiving regular unemployment insurance (UI) benefits, she is ineligible for FPUC. Claimant has therefore been overpaid FPUC in the amount of \$1,800.00. That amount is subject to recovery.

DECISION:

The July 19, 2021 (reference 01) unemployment insurance decision that allowed benefits based on a finding that claimant was dismissed from work on April 27, 2021 without a showing of misconduct is REVERSED. The separation from employment was disqualifying. Benefits are denied from the date of separation and continuing until claimant earns wages for insured work equal to ten times her weekly benefit amount, provided she is not otherwise disqualified or ineligible at that time.

Claimant was overpaid unemployment insurance benefits in the amount of \$3,894.00. However, for the reasons set forth above, benefits shall not be recovered and employer shall not be charged. The overpayment shall be charged to the fund.

Claimant was overpaid FPUC in the amount of \$1,800.00. That amount is subject to recovery.



Andrew B. Duffelmeyer
Administrative Law Judge
Unemployment Insurance Appeals Bureau
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Des Moines, Iowa 50319-0209
Fax (515) 478-3528

October 12, 2021
Decision Dated and Mailed

abd/mh

Note to Claimant:

If you disagree with this decision, you may file an appeal with the Employment Appeal Board by following the instructions on the first page of this decision. If this decision denies benefits, you may be responsible for paying back benefits already received.

Individuals who are disqualified from or are otherwise ineligible for **regular** unemployment insurance benefits but who are unemployed for reasons related to COVID-19 may qualify for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA). **You will need to apply for PUA to determine your eligibility.** Additional information on how to apply for PUA can be found at <https://www.iowaworkforcedevelopment.gov/pua-information>.