

**IOWA WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE APPEALS**

CYNTHIA M ALVAREZ

Claimant

APPEAL 17A-UI-08245-DG

**ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE
DECISION**

THE EASTER SEAL SOCIETY OF IA INC

Employer

OC: 01/01/17

Claimant: Appellant (4)

Iowa Code § 96.5(2)a – Discharge/Misconduct
Iowa Code § 96.5(1)d – Voluntary Quitting/Illness or Injury
Iowa Code § 96.4(3) – Ability to and Availability for Work

STATEMENT OF THE CASE:

Claimant filed an appeal from a decision of a representative dated August 10, 2017, (reference 04) that held claimant ineligible for unemployment insurance benefits. After due notice, an in-person hearing was scheduled for and held on August 29, 2017 in Des Moines, Iowa. Claimant participated personally. Employer participated by Penny Swartwood, Assistant Director. Employer's Exhibit 1 was admitted into evidence.

ISSUES:

Did claimant voluntarily leave the employment with good cause attributable to employer or did employer discharge her for reasons related to job misconduct sufficient to warrant a denial of benefits?

Is the claimant able to and available for work effective July 30, 2017?

FINDINGS OF FACT:

Having heard the testimony and having reviewed the evidence in the record, the administrative law judge finds: Claimant began having complications with her pregnancy beginning in May, 2017. She began missing work at that time because of doctor's appointments, and restrictions placed on claimant by her physician.

Claimant began working for employer on February 20, 2017. Claimant requested and was granted a medical leave of absence on or about June 6, 2017. Claimant later gave birth on or about June 24, 2017. She was instructed by her physician that she should not return to work for Six weeks.

On July 28, 2017, claimant was contacted by employer. Claimant explained that she was not able to return to work until Six weeks after giving birth. Employer explained that her maternity leave was going to expire on August 1, 2017. Claimant indicated that she would not be able to return to work on that date. Claimant was informed that her employment was being terminated

at that time because she was not able to return to work on August 1, 2017. Claimant was not offered a medical leave without pay that time.

REASONING AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW:

For the reasons that follow, the administrative law judge concludes the claimant did not quit but was discharged for no disqualifying reason.

Iowa Code section 96.5(1)d provides:

An individual shall be disqualified for benefits:

1. *Voluntary quitting.* If the individual has left work voluntarily without good cause attributable to the individual's employer, if so found by the department. But the individual shall not be disqualified if the department finds that:

d. The individual left employment because of illness, injury or pregnancy upon the advice of a licensed and practicing physician, and upon knowledge of the necessity for absence immediately notified the employer, or the employer consented to the absence, and after recovering from the illness, injury or pregnancy, when recovery was certified by a licensed and practicing physician, the individual returned to the employer and offered to perform services and the individual's regular work or comparable suitable work was not available, if so found by the department, provided the individual is otherwise eligible.

Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.25(35) provides:

Voluntary quit without good cause. In general, a voluntary quit means discontinuing the employment because the employee no longer desires to remain in the relationship of an employee with the employer from whom the employee has separated. The employer has the burden of proving that the claimant is disqualified for benefits pursuant to Iowa Code section 96.5. However, the claimant has the initial burden to produce evidence that the claimant is not disqualified for benefits in cases involving Iowa Code section 96.5, subsection (1), paragraphs "a" through "i," and subsection 10. The following reasons for a voluntary quit shall be presumed to be without good cause attributable to the employer:

(35) The claimant left because of illness or injury which was not caused or aggravated by the employment or pregnancy and failed to:

- a. Obtain the advice of a licensed and practicing physician;
- b. Obtain certification of release for work from a licensed and practicing physician;
- c. Return to the employer and offer services upon recovery and certification for work by a licensed and practicing physician; or
- d. Fully recover so that the claimant could perform all of the duties of the job.

Disqualification from benefits pursuant to Iowa Code § 96.5(1) requires a finding that the quit was voluntary. *Geiken v. Lutheran Home for the Aged Ass'n*, 468 N.W.2d 223, 226 (Iowa 1991). An absence is not voluntary if returning to work would jeopardize the employee's health. A physician's work restriction is evidence an employee is not medically able to work. *Wilson Trailer Co. v. Iowa Emp't. Sec. Comm'n*, 168 N.W.2d 771, 775-6 (Iowa 1969).

Where an employee did not voluntarily quit but was terminated while absent under medical care, the employee is allowed benefits and is not required to return to the employer and offer services pursuant to the subsection d exception of Iowa Code section 96.5(1). *Prairie Ridge Addiction Treatment Servs. v. Jackson and Emp't Appeal Bd.*, 810 N.W.2d 532 (Iowa Ct. App. 2012).

The claimant is not required to return to the employer to offer services after the medical recovery because she has already been involuntarily terminated from the employment while

under medical care. Although an employer is not obligated to provide light duty work for an employee whose illness or injury is not work related, unless reasonable accommodation can be offered, the involuntary termination from employment while under medical care was a discharge from employment. Thus, the burden of proof shifts to the employer.

Iowa Code section 96.5(2)a provides:

An individual shall be disqualified for benefits:

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 individual shall be disqualified for benefits 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(1)a provides:

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 has the burden of proof in establishing disqualifying job misconduct. *Cosper v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 321 N.W.2d 6 (Iowa 1982). 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). 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).

Although an employer is not obligated to provide light duty work for an employee whose illness or injury is not work related, unless reasonable accommodation can be made, the involuntary termination from employment while under medical care was a discharge from employment. In spite of the expiration of the leave period, since claimant was still under medical care and had not yet been released to return to work without restriction as of the date of separation, no disqualifying reason for the separation has been established. Benefits are allowed, provided claimant is otherwise eligible.

Iowa Code section 96.4(3) provides:

An unemployed individual shall be eligible to receive benefits with respect to any week only if the department finds that:

3. The individual is able to work, is available for work, and is earnestly and actively seeking work. This subsection is waived if the individual is deemed partially unemployed, while employed at the individual's regular job, as defined in section 96.19, subsection 38, paragraph "b", unnumbered paragraph (1), or temporarily unemployed as defined in section 96.19, subsection 38, paragraph "c". The work search requirements of this subsection and the disqualification requirement for failure to apply for, or to accept suitable work of section 96.5, subsection 3 are waived if the individual is not disqualified for benefits under section 96.5, subsection 1, paragraph "h".

Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.22(1)a provides:

Benefits eligibility conditions. For an individual to be eligible to receive benefits the department must find that the individual is able to work, available for work, and earnestly and actively seeking work. The individual bears the burden of establishing that the individual is able to work, available for work, and earnestly and actively seeking work.

(1) Able to work. An individual must be physically and mentally able to work in some gainful employment, not necessarily in the individual's customary occupation, but which is engaged in by others as a means of livelihood.

a. Illness, injury or pregnancy. Each case is decided upon an individual basis, recognizing that various work opportunities present different physical requirements. A statement from a medical practitioner is considered prima facie evidence of the physical ability of the individual to perform the work required. A pregnant individual must meet the same criteria for determining ableness as do all other individuals.

Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.23(35) provides:

Availability disqualifications. The following are reasons for a claimant being disqualified for being unavailable for work.

(35) Where the claimant is not able to work and is under the care of a medical practitioner and has not been released as being able to work.

To be able to work, "[a]n individual must be physically and mentally able to work in some gainful employment, not necessarily in the individual's customary occupation, but which is engaged in by others as a means of livelihood." *Sierra v. Emp't Appeal Bd.*, 508 N.W.2d 719, 721 (Iowa 1993); *Geiken v. Lutheran Home for the Aged*, 468 N.W.2d 223 (Iowa 1991); Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.22(1). "An evaluation of an individual's ability to work for the purposes of determining that individual's eligibility for unemployment benefits must necessarily take into consideration the economic and legal forces at work in the general labor market in which the individual resides." *Sierra* at 723. This means that when evaluating whether a person with a protected disability is able and available to work we must take into account the reasonable accommodation requirements imposed on employers under federal, state, and local laws. *Id.*

Iowa Code § 216.6 (previously 601A.6) requires employers to make “reasonable accommodations” for employees with disabilities. Reasonable accommodation is required only to the extent that refusal to provide some accommodation would be discrimination itself. Reasonableness is a flexible standard measured in terms of an employee’s needs and desires and by economic and other realities faced by the employer. *Sierra v. Emp’t Appeal Bd.*, 508 N.W.2d 719 (Iowa 1993). See also, *Foods, Inc. v. Iowa Civil Rights Comm’n*, 318 N.W.2d 162 (Iowa 1982) and *Cerro Gordo Care Facility v. Iowa Civil Rights Comm’n*, 401 N.W.2d 192 (Iowa 1987).

Inasmuch as the claimant was not medically released to work until August 6, 2017, she was not available for work after being discharged for the one week ending on August 5, 2017, benefits are withheld for that one week. Claimant is able and available for work beginning on August 6, 2017.

DECISION:

The August 10, 2017, (reference 04) unemployment insurance decision is modified in favor of the appellant. The claimant did not quit but was discharged for no disqualifying reason. Claimant is able to and available for work effective August 6, 2017. Benefits are allowed, provided she is otherwise eligible. Benefits are withheld for the one week ending August 5, 2017.

Duane L. Golden
Administrative Law Judge

Decision Dated and Mailed

dlg/scn