

**IOWA WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE APPEALS**

68-0157 (9-06) - 3091078 - EI

SHERRY L CHRISTENSEN
Claimant

APPEAL NO. 12A-UI-04141-H2T

**ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE
DECISION**

**PRAIRE MEADOWS
RACETRACK & CASINO**
Employer

OC: 03-04-12
Claimant: Respondent (2-R)

Iowa Code § 96.5(2)a – Discharge/Misconduct
Iowa Code § 96.3(7) – Recovery of Benefit Overpayment

STATEMENT OF THE CASE:

The employer filed a timely appeal from the April 5, 2012, reference 01, decision that allowed benefits. After due notice was issued, a hearing was held on May 2, 2012. The claimant did participate. The employer did participate through Pam Anderson, human resources generalist.

ISSUES:

Was the claimant discharged due to job-connected misconduct?

Has the claimant been overpaid any unemployment insurance benefits?

FINDINGS OF FACT:

Having reviewed all of the evidence in the record, the administrative law judge finds: The claimant was employed as a housekeeper, full-time, beginning May 23, 2005, through March 8, 2012, when she was discharged. The claimant was discharged for spreading rumors that two of her coworkers, Allison and Sam, were having an affair and that Sam was the father of Allison's newly born baby. The claimant made these comments, as well as racial slurs, to two of her coworkers. Each of her coworkers complained about her comments to management who investigated. Both coworkers confirmed that the claimant was speculating and commenting about the relationship between the two coworkers that was none of her business. The claimant had been given a copy of the employer's handbook, which should have put her on notice that she was to treat and speak about her coworkers in a respectful manner. In January 2011 the claimant was warned for similar behavior regarding spreading rumors and speculating about the personal lives of her coworkers. She was warned at that time that any further violation of the employer's mutual respect policies could lead to her discharge. She was disciplined in March 2010 also for spreading rumors and gossiping about coworkers.

The claimant has received unemployment benefits after the separation on a claim with an effective date of March 4, 2012.

REASONING AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW:

For the reasons that follow, the administrative law judge concludes the claimant was discharged from employment due to job-related misconduct.

Iowa Code § 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.

871 IAC 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.

Generally, continued refusal to follow reasonable instructions constitutes misconduct. *Gilliam v. Atlantic Bottling Company*, 453 N.W.2d 230 (Iowa App. 1990). The claimant has a long history of discipline for spreading rumors and gossiping about her coworkers. She was disciplined in 2010 and 2011 about the same issues, that is failing to follow the employer's mutual respect policies. The Administrative Law Judge is persuaded that the claimant was gossiping about the relationship between Allison and Sam and did make comments about who was the father of Allison's baby. She had no business making such comments to coworkers. In light of her previous discipline for the same or similar conduct, the claimant was discharged due to job-connected misconduct sufficient to disqualify her from receipt of an employment insurance benefits.

Iowa Code § 96.3-7, as amended in 2008, provides:

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) 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. 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. The employer shall not be charged with the benefits.

(2) An accounting firm, agent, unemployment insurance accounting firm, or other entity that represents an employer in unemployment claim matters and demonstrates a continuous pattern of failing to participate in the initial determinations to award benefits, as determined and defined by rule by the department, shall be denied permission by the department to represent any employers in unemployment insurance matters. This subparagraph does not apply to attorneys or counselors admitted to practice in the courts of this state pursuant to section 602.10101.

Because the claimant's separation was disqualifying, benefits were paid to which the claimant was not entitled. The unemployment insurance law provides that benefits must be recovered from a claimant who receives benefits and is later determined to be ineligible for benefits, even though the claimant acted in good faith and was not otherwise at fault. However, the overpayment will not be recovered when it is based on a reversal on appeal of an initial determination to award benefits on an issue regarding the claimant's employment separation if: (1) the benefits were not received due to any fraud or willful misrepresentation by the claimant and (2) the employer did not participate in the initial proceeding to award benefits. The employer will not be charged for benefits whether or not the overpayment is recovered. Iowa Code § 96.3(7). In this case, the claimant has received benefits but was not eligible for those benefits.

DECISION:

The April 5, 2012 (reference 01) decision is reversed. The claimant was discharged from employment due to job-related misconduct. Benefits are withheld until such time as she has worked in and been paid wages for insured work equal to ten times her weekly benefit amount, provided she is otherwise eligible.

REMAND:

The matter of determining the amount of the potential overpayment and whether the overpayment should be recovered under Iowa Code § 96.3(7)b is remanded to the Agency.

Teresa K. Hillary
Administrative Law Judge

Decision Dated and Mailed

tkh/kjw