IOWA WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE APPEALS BUREAU

KATHLEEN DELEU Claimant **GENESIS HEALTH SYSTEM** Employer	**APPEAL 19A-UI-09819-AD-T** **ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE DECISION** **OC: 11/17/19** **Claimant: Appellant (2)**

Iowa Code § 96.5(2)a – Discharge for Misconduct
Iowa Code § 96.5(1) – Voluntary Quitting

STATEMENT OF THE CASE:

On December 12, 2019, Kathleen DeLeu (claimant) filed an appeal from the December 6, 2019 (reference 01) unemployment insurance decision that found claimant was not eligible for benefits.

A telephone hearing was held on January 9, 2020. The parties were properly notified of the hearing. The claimant participated personally. Genesis Health System (employer) participated by HR Coordinator Nicki Lear, HR Assistant Amber Heppner, and Manager Dawn Burke.

Claimant's Exhibit 1 was admitted.

ISSUE:

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

FINDINGS OF FACT:

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

Claimant worked for employer as a full-time payroll technician. Claimant's first day of employment was June 18, 2018. The last day claimant worked on the job was August 28, 2019. Claimant's immediate supervisor was Burke. Claimant's schedule was set. Claimant separated from employment on October 29, 2019. Claimant was discharged on that date for not properly reporting absences.

Claimant informed Burke via text message on August 29, 2019, that she would not be in the following day for medical reasons. She sent similar messages on August 30, September 3, and throughout the month. Burke recommended claimant apply for FMLA leave, which she did. She was approved for continuous leave through September 30 and then for intermittent leave through October 31. Intermittent leave allowed for at most four absences per month. Claimant also applied

for continuous leave through October but was discharged before that leave was approved. Claimant was under the care of a physician during this time. See Exhibit 1.

The most recent communication Burke received from claimant was on October 11, when she stated she more than likely would not be able to return to work until October 31. Burke did not communicate with claimant after that point. Around this same time, claimant began communicating with Kaitlin Jackson in HR about her requests for leave. Claimant reasonably believed based on her communications with Jackson that she was in good standing, employer was aware of her past and future absences and the reasons therefore, and that those absences were or would be excused. Employer has no logs of these contacts but acknowledges that it would not have logs of telephone communications. Employer also acknowledges it was aware that claimant would not return to work until October 31 at the earliest.

Employer's policy states an employee must call in to report an absence each day they are scheduled to work but will be absent. However, this policy was not strictly followed in this instance. This is clear based on claimant's contacts with Burke and Jackson. Claimant had prior warnings for unscheduled absences in March and May 2019. However, those absences were properly reported. Claimant never contacted employer and indicated she was quitting.

REASONING AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW:

For the reasons set forth below, the December 6, 2019 (reference 01) unemployment insurance decision that found claimant was not eligible for benefits is REVERSED. Claimant is eligible for benefits, so long as she meets all other eligibility requirements.

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).

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). Medical documentation is not essential to a determination that an absence due to illness should be treated as excused. *Gaborit*, *supra*. Where an employer is aware of the nature of the claimant's illness and has fair warning that he may be absent for an extended period of time due to that illness, failure of the employee to contact the employer is not misconduct as the absences are excused.

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).

In order to show misconduct due to absenteeism, the employer must establish the claimant had excessive absences that were unexcused. 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 has 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 not 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).

While claimant was not in strict compliance with employer's policies for reporting absences and her communication with employer regarding her status could have certainly been better, that is not determinative of whether the absences were unexcused. Employer clearly knew claimant would be absent through the end of October and the reason for that absence. The touchstone in analyzing whether an absence is "excused" for purposes of determining whether misconduct has occurred is whether the absence was reasonable and properly reported. Claimant's absences after August 28, 2019 were for medical reasons and she took reasonable steps to ensure employer was aware of when she would be absent for those medical reasons. As such, the

administrative law judge finds claimant's absences were reasonable and properly reported and did not constitute misconduct.

Finally, the administrative law judge notes claimant's prior warnings for attendance were for absences that were properly reported. As such, those absences do not constitute prior instances of misconduct of the same or similar nature.

DECISION:

The December 6, 2019 (reference 01) unemployment insurance decision is REVERSED. Claimant is eligible for benefits, so long as she meets all other eligibility requirements.

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Andrew B. Duffelmeyer
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Decision Dated and Mailed

abd/scn