

**BEFORE THE
EMPLOYMENT APPEAL BOARD
Lucas State Office Building
Fourth floor
Des Moines, Iowa 50319**

ESTEBAN VELOZ

Claimant

and

SMITHFIELD FARMLAND CORP

Employer

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HEARING NUMBER: 16B-UI-09823

**EMPLOYMENT APPEAL BOARD
DECISION**

NOTICE

THIS DECISION BECOMES FINAL unless (1) a **request for a REHEARING** is filed with the Employment Appeal Board within **20 days** of the date of the Board's decision or, (2) a **PETITION TO DISTRICT COURT** IS FILED WITHIN **30 days** of the date of the Board's decision.

A **REHEARING REQUEST** shall state the specific grounds and relief sought. If the rehearing request is denied, a petition may be filed in **DISTRICT COURT** within **30 days** of the date of the denial.

SECTION: 96.5-2-A

DECISION

UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS ARE ALLOWED IF OTHERWISE ELIGIBLE

The Claimant appealed this case to the Employment Appeal Board. The members of the Employment Appeal Board reviewed the entire record. A majority of the Appeal Board, one member dissenting, finds it cannot affirm the administrative law judge's decision. The majority of the Employment Appeal Board **REVERSES** as set forth below.

FINDINGS OF FACT:

Esteban Veloz (Claimant) worked for Smithfield Farmland (Employer) most recently as a full-time machine operator, from July 6, 2015, until he was fired on August 3, 2016.

The Claimant was absent from the afternoon of July 19 through August 1. Claimant was on medical leave at this time, and his doctor provided a note stating he needed to be off work to recover from surgery.

On August 2 the Claimant was due back at work. On August 2, 2016 the Claimant called the Employer and left a message stating that he needed 2-3 more days due to a family emergency. His minor daughter in California had attempted suicide. On August 3 the Claimant left another message asking for a couple more days off work. He spoke to the Employer that day and reported he needed time off for a family emergency. On August 4 the Claimant received a call from the Employer telling him he was terminated for amassing too many points.

REASONING AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW:

Iowa Code Section 96.5(2)(a) (2016) provides:

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

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

The Division of Job Service defines misconduct at 871 IAC 24.32(1)(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 the 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 is the meaning which has been given the term in other jurisdictions under similar statutes, and we believe it accurately reflects the intent of the legislature." *Huntoon v. Iowa Department of Job Service*, 275 N.W.2d, 445, 448 (Iowa 1979).

The employer has the burden to prove the claimant was discharged for work-connected misconduct as defined by the unemployment insurance law. *Cosper v. Iowa Department of Job Service*, 321 N.W.2d 6 (Iowa 1982). The propriety of a discharge is not at issue in an unemployment insurance case. An employer may be justified in discharging an employee, but the employee's conduct may not amount to misconduct precluding the payment of unemployment compensation. The law limits disqualifying misconduct to substantial and willful wrongdoing or repeated carelessness or negligence that equals willful misconduct in culpability. *Lee v. Employment Appeal Board*, 616 NW2d 661 (Iowa 2000). In the specific context of absenteeism the administrative code provides:

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.

871 IAC 24.32(7)(emphasis added); *See Higgins v. IDJS*, 350 N.W.2d 187, 190 n. 1 (Iowa 1984)(“rule [2]4.32(7)...accurately states the law”).

The requirements for a finding of misconduct based on absences are therefore twofold. First, the absences must be excessive. *Sallis v. Employment Appeal Bd*, 437 N.W.2d 895, 897 (Iowa 1989). The determination of whether unexcused absenteeism is excessive necessarily requires consideration of past acts and warnings. *Higgins v. IDJS*, 350 N.W.2d 187, 192 (Iowa 1984). Second the absences must be unexcused. *Cosper v. IDJS*, 321 N.W.2d 6, 10(Iowa 1982). The requirement of “unexcused” can be satisfied in two ways. An absence can be unexcused either because it was not for “reasonable grounds”, *Higgins v. IDJS*, 350 N.W.2d 187, 191 (Iowa 1984), or because it was not “properly reported”. *Cosper v. IDJS*, 321 N.W.2d 6, 10(Iowa 1982)(excused absences are those “with appropriate notice”). Absences related to issues of personal responsibility such as transportation, lack of childcare, and oversleeping are not considered excused for reasonable grounds. *Higgins v. IDJS*, 350 N.W.2d 187, 191 (Iowa 1984). The determination of whether an absence is unexcused because not based on reasonable grounds does not turn on requirements imposed by the employer. *Gaborit v. Employment Appeal Board*, 743 N.W.2d 554, 557-58 (Iowa App. 2007).

It is the duty of the Board as the ultimate trier of fact in this case, to determine the credibility of witnesses, weigh the evidence and decide the facts in issue. *Arndt v. City of LeClaire*, 728 N.W.2d 389, 394-395 (Iowa 2007). The Board, as the finder of fact, may believe all, part or none of any witness’s testimony. *State v. Holtz*, 548 N.W.2d 162, 163 (Iowa App. 1996). In assessing the credibility of witnesses, as well as the weight to give other evidence, a Board member should consider the evidence using his or her own observations, common sense and experience. *State v. Holtz*, 548 N.W.2d 162, 163 (Iowa App. 1996). In determining the facts, and deciding what evidence to believe, the fact finder may consider the following factors: whether the testimony is reasonable and consistent with other evidence the Board believes; whether a witness has made inconsistent statements; the witness’s conduct, age, intelligence, memory and knowledge of the facts; and the witness's interest in the trial, their motive, candor, bias and prejudice. *State v. Holtz*, 548 N.W.2d 162, 163 (Iowa App. 1996). The Board also gives weight to the opinion of the Administrative Law Judge concerning credibility and weight of evidence, particularly where the hearing is in-person, although the Board is not bound by that opinion. Iowa Code §17A.10(3); *Iowa State Fairgrounds Security v. Iowa Civil Rights Commission*, 322 N.W.2d 293, 294 (Iowa 1982). The findings of fact show how we have resolved the disputed factual issues in this case. We have carefully weighed the credibility of the witnesses and the reliability of the evidence considering the applicable factors listed above, and the Board’s collective common sense and experience. We have found credible the testimony from the Claimant about his calls to the Employer and his reasons for absence.

While a number of the past instances of absence appear to have been due to illness we do not need to address how many of those are excused under the law. It is clear that the final absences were excused. First, the nature of the family emergency was well beyond the sort of thing that comes up regularly in everyday life. It was a true emergency, and the Claimant asked for an appropriate amount of time. Second, we find that the Claimant sufficiently reported the absences. On the first two days he was absent he left messages and/or spoke to the Employer, and on the third he was fired. He perhaps could have theoretically done more to contact the Employer. But the attempts he did make were reasonable under the circumstances. Those included first that the emergency arose while the Claimant was already absent for excusable reasons. Second, the situation itself is urgent and imperative for the Claimant to deal with. This

leaves him somewhat less time, and frankly emotional focus, to deal with notifying the Employer in the most by-the-book fashion. Third, he needed to deal with the situation out of state and this further impaired his ability to devote full time and energy to notifying the Employer. Improperly or late reported absences will be deemed excused absences if the employee's failure to timely report the absence was due to incapacity or to the illness itself. *See Roberts v. Iowa Dept. of Job Services*, 356 N.W.2d 218 (Iowa 1984); *Floyd v. IDJS*, 338 N.W.2d 536 (Iowa App. 1983). Here the emergency itself explains and excuses any imperfections in the notification method. The bottom line is that the Employer did get notice which was reasonable under the circumstances and the final absences are thus excused under the law. *See Floyd v. Iowa Dept. of Job Service*, 338 N.W.2d 536, 538 (Iowa App., 1983) ("His employer knew that he was ill, and had fair warning that petitioner might be absent for an extended period of time due to that illness.").

Thus even assuming the Claimant's history of unexcused absences is excessive, the final incidents were excused, and thus the final absence cannot justify a disqualification. This is because the final absence has not been proven to be other than properly reported and for reasonable grounds, and thus the Employer has not proven that the termination was for a *current act* of misconduct. *Cosper v. Iowa Department of Job Service*, 321 N.W.2d 6 (Iowa 1982). In addition, where the precipitating cause of the discharge is an excused absence the discharge is not caused by misconduct and is therefore not disqualifying. *See generally, West v. Employment Appeal Board*, 489 N.W.2d 731, 734 (Iowa 1992) ("must be a direct causal relation between the misconduct and the discharge"); *Larson v. Employment Appeal Bd.*, 474 N.W.2d 570, 572 (Iowa 1991) (record revealed claimant was fired for incompetence; claim that she was fired for deceit was supplied by agency post hoc); *Lee v. Employment Appeal Board*, 616 N.W.2d 661, 669 (Iowa 2000) (incident occurring after decision to discharge is irrelevant). Even assuming the history of the Claimant's absences/tardiness is unexcused, the final incidents, without which no termination would have occurred, were not unexcused under the law and thus those final absences cannot support a disqualification. *See Gaborit v. Employment Appeal Board*, 743 N.W.2d 554, 557-58 (Iowa App. 2007); *Gimbel v. EAB*, 350 N.W.2d 192 (Iowa App. 1992); *Roberts v. Iowa Dept. of Job Services*, 356 N.W.2d 218 (Iowa 1984); *see generally Cosper v. IDJS*, 321 N.W.2d 6, 10 (Iowa 1982).

DECISION:

The administrative law judge's decision dated October 12, 2016 is **REVERSED**. The Employment Appeal Board concludes that the Claimant was discharged for no disqualifying reason. Accordingly, the Claimant is allowed benefits provided the Claimant is otherwise eligible.

Ashley R. Koopmans

James M. Strohman

DISSENTING OPINION OF KIM D SCHMETT:

I respectfully dissent from the majority decision of the Employment Appeal Board; I would affirm the decision of the administrative law judge in its entirety.

Kim D. Schmett

RRA/fnv