

STATE OF RHODE ISLAND & PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS
PROVIDENCE, Sc.
SIXTH DIVISION

DISTRICT COURT

Holly L. White

v.

Dept. of Labor & Training,
Board of Review

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A.A. No. 12 - 145

ORDER

This matter is before the Court pursuant to § 8-8-8.1 of the General Laws for review of the Findings & Recommendations of the Magistrate.

After a de novo review of the record, the Court finds that the Findings & Recommendations of the Magistrate are supported by the record, and are an appropriate disposition of the facts and the law applicable thereto. It is, therefore, ORDERED, ADJUDGED AND DECREED

that the Findings & Recommendations of the Magistrate are adopted by reference as the Decision of the Court and the decision of the Board of Review is hereby AFFIRMED.

Entered as an Order of this Court at Providence on this 20th day of September, 2012.

By Order:

_____/s/_____
Stephen C. Waluk
Chief Clerk

Enter:

_____/s/_____
Jeanne E. LaFazia
Chief Judge

STATE OF RHODE ISLAND & PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS
PROVIDENCE, Sc. DISTRICT COURT
SIXTH DIVISION

Holly White :
 :
v. : A.A. No. 12 - 145
 :
Department of Labor & Training, :
Board of Review :

FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Ippolito, M. In this case Ms. Holly White urges that the Board of Review of the Department of Labor and Training erred when it affirmed a referee's decision dismissing Ms. White's appeal from the Department's decision denying her unemployment benefits because it was filed late. Jurisdiction to hear and decide appeals from decisions made by the Board of Review is vested in the District Court by Gen. Laws 1956 § 28-44-52. This matter has been referred to me for the making of findings and recommendations pursuant to General Laws 1956 § 8-8-8.1. Because I conclude that the Board's decision is supported by substantial evidence of record and is not otherwise affected by error of law, I must recommend that the decision of the Board of Review affirming the dismissal of

her appeal be affirmed.

FACTS & TRAVEL OF THE CASE

The facts and travel of the case may be briefly stated: Ms. White, who was employed at Sakonnet Veterinary, was terminated on February 4, 2012 and filed a claim for unemployment benefits on February 23, 2012. On March 19, 2012 the Director issued a decision denying benefits to Ms. White pursuant to Gen. Laws 1956 § 28-44-18, which bars benefits to those workers who have been discharged for proved misconduct. Claimant's appeal was received by the Board of Review (for assignment to a referee) on April 4, 2012. After conducting a hearing on May 16, 2012, Referee Gunter A. Vukic issued a decision that same day in which he dismissed claimant's appeal because it had been filed after the expiration of the 15-day appeal period found in Gen. Laws 1956 § 28-44-39(b). On the late-appeal issue Referee Vukic made the following Findings of Fact:

The claimant filed for Employment Security benefits online February 23, 2012 and was adjudicated March 16, 2012. At the conclusion of the adjudication telephone call, the claimant was told to expect a written decision within a specific period of time and can be appealed by any party within 15 calendar days of the mailing date appearing on the decision. March 19, 2012, the subject Department of Labor and Training decision was mailed to the claimant. She received the decision in a timely manner, read and understood the decision as well as her right of appeal within 15 calendar days of the mailing date. Claimant filed a late appeal online Thursday, April 4, 2012. She was stressed and made a mistake on the dates.

Referee's Decision, May 16, 2012, at 1. Based on these findings, the Referee made

the following conclusions:

The 15-day appeal period provided for under the provisions of Section 28-44-39(b) can be extended if the individual who filed out of time had good cause for being late.

The claimant was aware of her appeal rights and there is no evidence that anything obstructed her from filing a timely appeal between the date of receipt and the final 15th day allowed under the appeal rights.

Referee's Decision, May 16, 2012, at 1-2. Accordingly, the claimant's appeal was dismissed.

Claimant sought review of this decision and on June 30, 2012 the Board of Review unanimously issued a brief decision affirming the Referee's dismissal of claimant's appeal and adopting the Decision of the Referee as its own. Thereafter, on July 25, 2012, claimant filed a pro-se complaint for judicial review in the Sixth Division District Court.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

The standard of review is provided by R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-35-15(g), a section of the state Administrative Procedures Act, which provides as follows:

42-35-15. Judicial review of contested cases.

* * *

(g) The court shall not substitute its judgment for that of the agency as to the weight of the evidence on questions of fact. The court may affirm the decision of the agency or remand the case for further proceedings, or it may reverse or modify the decision if substantial rights of the appellant have been prejudiced because the administrative findings, inferences, conclusions, or decisions are:

- (1) In violation of constitutional or statutory provisions;
- (2) In excess of the statutory authority of the agency;

- (3) Made upon unlawful procedure;
- (4) Affected by other error of law;
- (5) Clearly erroneous in view of the reliable, probative and substantial evidence on the whole record; or
- (6) Arbitrary or capricious or characterized by abuse of discretion or clearly unwarranted exercise of discretion.

Thus, on questions of fact, the District Court “* * * may not substitute its judgment for that of the agency and must affirm the decision of the agency unless its findings are ‘clearly erroneous.’”¹ The Court will not substitute its judgment for that of the Board as to the weight of the evidence on questions of fact.² Stated differently, the findings of the agency will be upheld even though a reasonable mind might have reached a contrary result.³

The Supreme Court of Rhode Island recognized in Harraka v. Board of Review of the Department of Employment Security, 98 R.I. 197, 200, 200 A.2d 595, 597 (1964) that a liberal interpretation shall be utilized in construing and applying the Employment Security Act:

* * * eligibility for benefits is to be determined in the light of the expressed legislative policy that “Chapters 42 to 44, inclusive, of this title shall be construed liberally in aid of their declared purpose which declared purpose is to lighten the burden which now falls

1 Guarino v. Department of Social Welfare, 122 R.I. 583, 584, 410 A.2d 425 (1980) citing R.I. GEN. LAWS § 42-35-15(g)(5).

2 Cahoone v. Board of Review of the Dept. of Employment Security, 104 R.I. 503, 506, 246 A.2d 213, 215 (1968).

3 Cahoone v. Bd. of Review of Department of Employment Security, 104 R.I. 503, 506, 246 A.2d 213, 215 (1968). Also D'Ambra v. Bd. of Review, Dept of Employment Security, 517 A.2d 1039, 1041 (R.I. 1986).

upon the unemployed worker and his family.” G.L. 1956, § 28-42-73. The legislature having thus declared a policy of liberal construction, this court, in construing the act, must seek to give as broad an effect to its humanitarian purpose as it reasonably may in the circumstances. Of course, compliance with the legislative policy does not warrant an extension of eligibility by this court to any person or class of persons not intended by the legislature to share in the benefits of the act; but neither does it permit this court to enlarge the exclusionary effect of expressed restrictions on eligibility under the guise of construing such provisions of the act.

APPLICABLE LAW

The time limit for appeals from decisions of the Director is set by subsection (b) of Gen. Laws 1956 § 28-44-39, which provides

(b) Unless the claimant or any other interested party who is entitled to notice requests a hearing within fifteen (15) days after the notice of determination has been mailed by the director to the last known address of the claimant and of any other interested party, the determination shall be final. For good cause shown the fifteen (15) day period may be extended. The director, on his or her own motion, may at any time within one year from the date of the determination set forth in subdivision (a)(1) of this section reconsider the determination, if he or she finds that an error has occurred in connection with it, or that the determination was made as a result of a mistake, or the nondisclosure or misrepresentation of a material fact.

(Emphasis added)

Note that while subsection 39(b) includes a provision allowing the 15-day period to be extended (presumably by timely request), it does not specifically indicate that late appeals can be accepted, even for good cause. However, in many cases the Board of Review (or, upon review, the District Court) has permitted late appeals if good cause was shown.

ANALYSIS

The purpose of all tribunals — whether judicial or administrative — is to adjudicate cases on the merits. However, procedural parameters have to be established to avoid anarchy. The time limit for appeals from decisions of the Director to the Referee level is set in Gen. Laws 1956 § 28-44-39(b) to be 15 days. Accordingly, the issue in the case is whether the decision of the Referee (adopted by the Board of Review) that claimant had not shown good cause for her late appeal is supported by substantial evidence of record or whether it was clearly erroneous or affected by other error of law.

At the hearing before the Referee, claimant White testified concerning the reasons for her late appeal. Referee Hearing Transcript, at 8-10. As the Referee found, she acknowledged that the Department's adjudicator told her that if she received an adverse decision she could appeal within fifteen days. Referee Hearing Transcript, at 8-9. She stated that when she counted the days she did not include the weekends. Referee Hearing Transcript, at 9. However, she conceded that the notice said otherwise. Id.

While certainly understandable from a human point of view, this kind of subjective misapprehension regarding the manner in which the appeal period is calculated has repeatedly been deemed not to constitute good cause for lateness under § 28-44-46. See Butler v. Department of Employment & Training Board of

Review, A.A. No. 91-183, (Magistrate's Findings, 12/11/91) Adopted By Order (Dist.Ct. 2/7/92)(DeRobbio, C.J.)(Dismissal of appeal by Board affirmed where claimant's sole justification for lateness was a misunderstanding that the appeal period was ten business days, not calendar days); accord, Gregoire v. Department of Employment Security Board of Review, A.A. 88-33 (Dist.Ct. 8/25/88)(Moore, J.)(same misunderstanding led to same result under § 28-44-39, governing appeal from Director to Referee). As a result, the Board's finding (adopting the Referee's finding) that good cause was not shown for the lateness of claimant's appeal must be deemed supported by the record.

Pursuant to Gen. Laws 1956 § 42-35-15(g), the decision of the Board must be upheld unless it was, *inter alia*, contrary to law, clearly erroneous in light of the substantial evidence of record, or arbitrary or capricious. When applying this standard, the Court will not substitute its judgment for that of the Board as to the weight of the evidence on questions of fact, including the question of which witnesses to believe. Stated differently, the findings of the agency will be upheld even though a reasonable mind might have reached a contrary result. The Court, when reviewing a Board decision, does not have the authority to expand the record by receiving new evidence or testimony.

The scope of judicial review by the District Court is also limited by Gen. Laws 1956 § 28-44-54 which, in pertinent part, provides:

28-44-54. Scope of judicial review – Additional Evidence – Precedence of proceedings. – The jurisdiction of the reviewing court shall be confined to questions of law, and in the absence of fraud, the findings of fact by the board of review, if supported by substantial evidence regardless of statutory or common law rules, shall be conclusive.

Accordingly, I must conclude that the Referee’s decision (accepted and adopted by the Board) that claimant did not demonstrate good cause for her late appeal from the Decision of the Director is supported by substantial evidence of record and is not clearly erroneous.

CONCLUSION

Upon careful review of the record, I recommend that this Court find that the decision of the Board of Review was not affected by error of law. General Laws 1956 § 42-35-15(g)(3),(4). Further, it is not clearly erroneous in view of the reliable, probative and substantial evidence on the whole record or arbitrary or capricious. General Laws 1956 § 42-35-15(g)(5),(6).

Accordingly, I recommend that the decision of the Board be AFFIRMED.

_____/s/
Joseph P. Ippolito
MAGISTRATE

SEPTEMBER 20, 2012

