



U.S. EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY COMMISSION
Office of Federal Operations
P.O. Box 77960
Washington, DC 20013

[REDACTED]
Ranae L.,¹
Complainant,

v.

Lloyd J. Austin III,
Secretary,
Department of Defense
(Defense Health Agency),
Agency.

Appeal No. 2023004369

Agency No. DHANCR-21-0029

DECISION

Complainant filed a timely appeal with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC or Commission) claiming that that Agency was not in compliance with the terms of the settlement agreement into which the parties entered. See 29 C.F.R. § 1614.402; 29 C.F.R. § 1614.504(b); and 29 C.F.R. § 1614.405.

ISSUE PRESENTED

The issue presented is whether the Agency breached a settlement agreement it had with Complainant resolving a matter in the EEO complaint process.

BACKGROUND

At the time of events giving rise to this complaint, Complainant worked as a Nurse Specialist at the Agency's Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland.

Believing that the Agency subjected her to unlawful discrimination, Complainant contacted an Agency EEO counselor to initiate the EEO complaint process. On December 16, 2022, Complainant and the Agency entered into a settlement agreement to resolve the matter.

¹ This case has been randomly assigned a pseudonym which will replace Complainant's name when the decision is published to non-parties and the Commission's website.

The settlement agreement provided, in pertinent part, that:

4. The Agency agrees:

A. To pay [Complainant] \$1,500.

B. To reduce and amend [Complainant's] May 1, 2022 30-day suspension SF-50 to a 3-day suspension including restoration of pay.

C. Assistant Chief of Staff shall approve and reimburse [Complainant] for college-level nursing courses taken from March 2021 through October 2023.

D. College-level courses being sought by [Complainant] as part of any Individual Development Plan and/or graduate level studies taken between 01 November 2023 and 31 October 2024 shall be submitted to the Assistant Chief of Staff as the approval authority for tuition reimbursement consideration.

In her July 28, 2023 appeal statement, Complainant explained that the Agency was in breach of the settlement agreement and requested that the Agency implement its terms. Specifically, Complainant noted that:

On 27 March 2023, my representative reached out to the Agency requesting documentation of the applicable paragraphs of section 4. On 6 April 2023, after multiple requests from my representative, the Agency provided helpdesk printouts that confirmed that the provisions in section 4 have not been implemented by the Agency. On 13 April 2023, my representative contacted the Agency again, notifying them that we were in the expectation of a follow-up about the implementation of the settlement. On 20 May 2023, my representative notified the Agency of our intention to file an appeal for breach of settlement if the Agency does not follow through on their commitments. On 16 June 2023, after not receiving a response from the Agency, we filed a notice of breach of settlement with the Agency EEOC Director. While the EEOC Director acknowledged the request on 16 June 2023, the only response we have received from the Agency to date is that our notice was forwarded to the Office of General Counsel and a response is pending. To our knowledge, the Agency has not implemented the provisions of section 4 of the settlement and has provided no information, or schedule, for implementation of the relevant section. Our multiple inquiries to the Agency remain unanswered.

In its August 10, 2023 response to the appeal, the Agency's EEO Management Specialist attached an Agency e-mail noting that, "[t]his is a BREACH allegation for a global settlement and I found no compliance documents to provide showing agency's execution of its part of the settlement agreement."

STANDARD OF REVIEW

As this is an appeal from a decision issued without a hearing, pursuant to 29 C.F.R. § 1614.110(b), the Agency's decision is subject to de novo review by the Commission. 29 C.F.R. § 1614.405(a). See Equal Employment Opportunity Management Directive for 29 C.F.R. Part 1614, at Chapter 9, § VI.A. (Aug. 5, 2015) (explaining that the de novo standard of review "requires that the Commission examine the record without regard to the factual and legal determinations of the previous decision maker," and that EEOC "review the documents, statements, and testimony of record, including any timely and relevant submissions of the parties, and . . . issue its decision based on the Commission's own assessment of the record and its interpretation of the law").

ANALYSIS

Although the Agency failed to issue a determination decision on Complainant's breach allegation, we will treat the Agency's August 10, 2023 submission to the Commission as its final agency decision in the interest of judicial efficiency.

EEOC Regulation 29 C.F.R. § 1614.504(a) provides that any settlement agreement knowingly and voluntarily agreed to by the parties, reached at any stage of the complaint process, shall be binding on both parties. The Commission has held that a settlement agreement constitutes a contract between the employee and the Agency, to which ordinary rules of contract construction apply. See Herrington v. Dep't of Def., EEOC Request No. 05960032 (December 9, 1996). The Commission has further held that it is the intent of the parties as expressed in the contract, not some unexpressed intention, that controls the contract's construction. Eggleston v. Dep't of Veterans Affairs, EEOC Request No. 05900795 (August 23, 1990). In ascertaining the intent of the parties with regard to the terms of a settlement agreement, the Commission has generally relied on the plain meaning rule. See Hyon O v. U.S. Postal Serv., EEOC Request No. 05910787 (December 2, 1991). This rule states that if the writing appears to be plain and unambiguous on its face, its meaning must be determined from the four corners of the instrument without resort to extrinsic evidence of any nature. See Montgomery Elevator Co. v. Building Eng'g Servs. Co., 730 F.2d 377 (5th Cir. 1984).

In the instant case, we find the record contains no evidence that the Agency has complied with section 4 of the settlement agreement. Thus, we conclude the Agency has breached the settlement agreement. Accordingly, we REMAND this matter to the Agency for further processing in accordance with the Order below.

ORDER

Within thirty (30) calendar days from the date this decision is issued, the Agency is ordered to take the following actions:

1. The Agency will comply with its obligations as detailed above in section 4 (A-D) of the settlement agreement.
2. The Agency is further directed to submit documentation to the Commission that it has completed the ordered actions as set forth below in the section entitled "Implementation of the Commission's Decision."

ATTORNEY'S FEES (H0610)

If Complainant has been represented by an attorney (as defined by 29 C.F.R. § 1614.501(e)(1)(iii)), he/she is entitled to an award of reasonable attorney's fees incurred in the processing of the complaint. 29 C.F.R. § 1614.501(e). The award of attorney's fees shall be paid by the Agency. The attorney shall submit a verified statement of fees to the Agency -- **not** to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Office of Federal Operations -- within thirty (30) calendar days of this decision becoming final. The Agency shall then process the claim for attorney's fees in accordance with 29 C.F.R. § 1614.501.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COMMISSION'S DECISION (K0719)

Compliance with the Commission's corrective action is mandatory. The Agency shall submit its compliance report **within thirty (30) calendar days** of the completion of all ordered corrective action. The report shall be in the digital format required by the Commission, and submitted via the Federal Sector EEO Portal (FedSEP). See 29 C.F.R. § 1614.403(g). The Agency's report must contain supporting documentation, and the Agency must send a copy of all submissions to the Complainant. If the Agency does not comply with the Commission's order, the Complainant may petition the Commission for enforcement of the order. 29 C.F.R. § 1614.503(a). The Complainant also has the right to file a civil action to enforce compliance with the Commission's order prior to or following an administrative petition for enforcement. See 29 C.F.R. §§ 1614.407, 1614.408, and 29 C.F.R. § 1614.503(g). Alternatively, the Complainant has the right to file a civil action on the underlying complaint in accordance with the paragraph below entitled "Right to File a Civil Action." 29 C.F.R. §§ 1614.407 and 1614.408. A civil action for enforcement or a civil action on the underlying complaint is subject to the deadline stated in 42 U.S.C. 2000e-16(c) (1994 & Supp. IV 1999). **If the Complainant files a civil action, the administrative processing of the complaint, including any petition for enforcement, will be terminated.** See 29 C.F.R. § 1614.409.

Failure by an agency to either file a compliance report or implement any of the orders set forth in this decision, without good cause shown, may result in the referral of this matter to the Office of Special Counsel pursuant to 29 C.F.R. § 1614.503(f) for enforcement by that agency.

STATEMENT OF RIGHTS - ON APPEAL
RECONSIDERATION (M0124.1)

The Commission may, in its discretion, reconsider this appellate decision if Complainant or the Agency submits a written request that contains arguments or evidence that tend to establish that:

1. The appellate decision involved a clearly erroneous interpretation of material fact or law; or
2. The appellate decision will have a substantial impact on the policies, practices, or operations of the agency.

Requests for reconsideration must be filed with EEOC's Office of Federal Operations (OFO) **within thirty (30) calendar days** of receipt of this decision. If the party requesting reconsideration elects to file a statement or brief in support of the request, **that statement or brief must be filed together with the request for reconsideration.** A party shall have **twenty (20) calendar days** from receipt of another party's request for reconsideration within which to submit a brief or statement in opposition. See 29 C.F.R. § 1614.405; Equal Employment Opportunity Management Directive for 29 C.F.R. Part 1614 (EEO MD-110), at Chap. 9 § VII.B (Aug. 5, 2015).

Complainant should submit their request for reconsideration, and any statement or brief in support of their request, via the EEOC Public Portal, which can be found at <https://publicportal.eeoc.gov/Portal/Login.aspx>

Alternatively, Complainant can submit their request and arguments to the Director, Office of Federal Operations, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, via regular mail addressed to P.O. Box 77960, Washington, DC 20013, or by certified mail addressed to 131 M Street, NE, Washington, DC 20507. In the absence of a legible postmark, a complainant's request to reconsider shall be deemed timely filed if OFO receives it by mail within five days of the expiration of the applicable filing period. See 29 C.F.R. § 1614.604.

An agency's request for reconsideration must be submitted in digital format via the EEOC's Federal Sector EEO Portal (FedSEP). See 29 C.F.R. § 1614.403(g). Either party's request and/or statement or brief in opposition must also include proof of service on the other party, unless Complainant files their request via the EEOC Public Portal, in which case no proof of service is required.

Failure to file within the 30-day time period will result in dismissal of the party's request for reconsideration as untimely, unless extenuating circumstances prevented the timely filing of the request. **Any supporting documentation must be submitted together with the request for reconsideration.** The Commission will consider requests for reconsideration filed after the deadline only in very limited circumstances. See 29 C.F.R. § 1614.604(f).

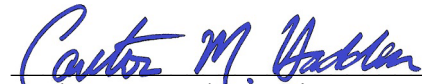
COMPLAINANT'S RIGHT TO FILE A CIVIL ACTION (R0124)

This is a decision requiring the Agency to continue its administrative processing of your complaint. However, if you wish to file a civil action, you have the right to file such action in an appropriate United States District Court **within ninety (90) calendar days** from the date that you receive this decision. In the alternative, you may file a civil action **after one hundred and eighty (180) calendar days** of the date you filed your complaint with the Agency, or filed your appeal with the Commission. If you file a civil action, you must name as the defendant in the complaint the person who is the official Agency head or department head, identifying that person by their full name and official title. Failure to do so may result in the dismissal of your case in court. "Agency" or "department" means the national organization, and not the local office, facility or department in which you work. **Filing a civil action will terminate the administrative processing of your complaint.**

RIGHT TO REQUEST COUNSEL (Z0815)

If you want to file a civil action but cannot pay the fees, costs, or security to do so, you may request permission from the court to proceed with the civil action without paying these fees or costs. Similarly, if you cannot afford an attorney to represent you in the civil action, you may request the court to appoint an attorney for you. **You must submit the requests for waiver of court costs or appointment of an attorney directly to the court, not the Commission.** The court has the sole discretion to grant or deny these types of requests. Such requests do not alter the time limits for filing a civil action (please read the paragraph titled Complainant's Right to File a Civil Action for the specific time limits).

FOR THE COMMISSION:



Carlton M. Hadden, Director
Office of Federal Operations

January 23, 2024

Date