

SUPREME COURT OF APPEALS OF WEST VIRGINIA

WVDHHR v. Virginia Prince

WVDHHR v. Prince · No. 17-1088 · Decided March 21, 2019

SUMMARY

The document is a concurring opinion addressing a negligence claim against the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources and two employees arising from the failure to notify a prospective guardian about a subsidized guardianship provision in an abuse and neglect order. The concurrence agrees that qualified immunity supports summary judgment for the defendants while emphasizing the importance of following through on court directives concerning children.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Hutchison, J.
JURISDICTION	West Virginia
DECIDED	March 21, 2019
DOCKET	17-1088
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	The West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources and two employees obtained summary judgment based on qualified immunity in a civil action alleging negligence in failing to pursue or notify the plaintiff about a subsidized guardianship opportunity.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Summary judgment is reviewed under the applicable qualified-immunity framework; the concurrence states that qualified immunity protects the DHHR and its employees from suit for negligent acts.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Unpublished or separately reported decision; precedential status is not stated in the provided text.

TOPICS

guardianships

summary judgment

negligence

family law procedure

civil procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

family law

civil procedure

torts

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the DHHR and its employees were entitled to qualified immunity from claims based on their alleged negligent failure to pursue or communicate a subsidized guardianship opportunity.
2. Whether summary judgment should be granted to the DHHR and its employees on the basis of qualified immunity.

HOLDINGS

1. The DHHR and its employees are protected by qualified immunity from suit for the alleged negligent acts at issue.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“This directive was mandatory—the DHHR “shall take whatever steps appropriate to pursue”—and was supported by a finding that subsidized guardianships would be in the best interests of the children.” (at 1)

“The majority has correctly recognized that the DHHR and its employees enjoy qualified immunity from suit for their negligent acts.” (at 2)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

In an October 2006 abuse and neglect final order, the circuit court directed the DHHR to pursue subsidized guardianships for two children and to seek a subsidized guardianship for a third child if Virginia Prince requested it. Prince, who was not a party to the abuse and neglect case, was never informed of that provision and therefore did not have the opportunity to request the guardianship. The concurrence characterized the failure to notify and follow through as negligence rather than intentional misconduct, noting that the order was not entirely clear.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

In an abuse and neglect proceeding, the circuit court directed the DHHR to pursue subsidized guardianships for three children, including one if requested by Virginia Prince. Prince was not informed of that provision and later brought suit alleging that the DHHR and related individuals negligently failed to pursue the guardianship. The circuit court granted summary judgment on qualified-immunity grounds, and the Supreme Court of Appeals agreed with that result.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Clark v. Dunn, 195 W. Va. 272, 465 S.E.2d 374 (1995)

OPINION

PER CURIAM.

FILED March 21, 2019 DHHR v. V.P., 17-1088 released at 3:00 p.m. EDYTHE NASH GAISER, CLERK SUPREME COURT OF APPEALS Hutchison, J., concurring: OF WEST VIRGINIA In its October 2006 Final Order in the abuse and neglect case, the circuit court directed the DHHR to pursue a subsidized guardianship for the three children: [T]he WVDHHR shall take whatever steps appropriate to pursue subsidized guardianship for the infant respondents, [J.T.] and [S.T.], and of [L.T.] is [sic] so requested by [V.P.].

Subsidized Guardianship is in the best interest of the infant respondents and is an appropriate final disposition of this matter. This directive was mandatory—the DHHR “shall take whatever steps appropriate to pursue”—and was supported by a finding that subsidized guardianships would be in the best interests of the children.

Although the circuit court narrowed its instructions regarding L.T., ordering that a subsidized guardianship shall be sought “if so requested by” V.P.,¹ nobody ever told V.P. about this provision in the order. As a non-party to the abuse and neglect case, V.P. had no access to this order and thus no way of knowing that the court had allowed her this opportunity.

It is obvious to me that the DHHR and the guardian ad litem failed to completely follow through on the circuit court’s order when they did not even ask V.P. whether she was interested in pursuing a subsidized guardianship of L.T.

Because V.P. was not timely notified of the contents of the order, the child lost the benefit of several years of support payments.¹ Clearly, the circuit court’s use of the word “is” in this sentence was a typographical error that should read “if.”¹ However, for purposes of this lawsuit, there is nothing to indicate that this failure was anything other than negligence in the exercise of the DHHR’s duties.

There is no indication of intentional misconduct, and, admittedly, the circuit court’s order was not a model of clarity. The majority has correctly recognized that the DHHR and its employees enjoy qualified immunity from suit for their negligent acts. See e.g., Syl. Pt. 6, in part, *Clark v. Dunn*, 195 W.Va. 272, 465 S.E.2d 374 (1995).

Accordingly, I concur in the majority’s conclusion that summary judgment on the basis of qualified immunity should be awarded to the DHHR and its two employees. I write separately to remind the DHHR and guardians ad litem of the importance of following through on all issues pertaining to children in abuse and neglect cases. If there is any question about a court’s directions, the DHHR and guardians ad litem must always err on the side of the children. “It ain’t over ‘til it’s over,”² should be the mantra for all parties in these ultra-sensitive cases.

For these reasons, I respectfully concur.² This slogan originated with Yogi Berra. Nate Scott, *The 50 Greatest Yogi Berra Quotes*, USA Today Sports (Sept. 23, 2015), <https://ftw.usatoday.com/2015/09/the-50-greatest-yogi-berra-quotes> (retrieved Mar. 13, 2019).²

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