

**SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK, APPELLATE DIVISION,
FOURTH DEPARTMENT**

Matter of Zembiec v County of Monroe

104 A.D.3d 1243 (4th Dep't 2013) · Decided March 15, 2013

SUMMARY

The court affirmed a judgment awarding a Monroe County Sheriff's Department employee General Municipal Law § 207-c disability benefits beginning December 4, 2009. It held that the employee's second claim, based on a later denial of benefits, was not barred by res judicata or collateral estoppel because it arose from a different administrative determination and involved issues not decided in the prior proceeding.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of the State of New York, Appellate Division, Fourth Department
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Smith, J.E.; Peradotto, J.; Garry, J.; Sconiers, J.; Whalen, J.
JURISDICTION	New York
DECIDED	March 15, 2013
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Respondents appealed from a judgment in a CPLR article 78 proceeding awarding petitioner General Municipal Law § 207-c disability benefits beginning December 4, 2009.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Whether the administrative determination was arbitrary and capricious under CPLR 7803(3), based on the facts and record before the agency; application of res judicata and collateral estoppel was reviewed as a legal question.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	published appellate decision
PARTIES	County of Monroe, Monroe County Sheriff's Department v. Zembiec

TOPICS

res judicata administrative procedure act judicial review of agency action municipal law
employee benefits

PRACTICE AREAS

civil procedure

administrative law

municipal law

employment law

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether petitioner's second claim for General Municipal Law § 207-c disability benefits was barred by res judicata because it involved the same transaction or series of transactions as the earlier proceeding.
2. Whether collateral estoppel barred litigation of petitioner's ability to return to work and eligibility for disability benefits in December 2009.
3. Whether Supreme Court properly affirmed the challenge to respondents' July 19, 2010 administrative determination and awarded benefits beginning December 4, 2009.

HOLDINGS

1. The second article 78 claim was not barred by res judicata because it arose from a different transaction—the July 19, 2010 denial of benefits—than the earlier claim arising from the June 15, 2009 denial.
2. Collateral estoppel did not bar the second claim because the prior proceeding did not decide petitioner's ability to return to work or eligibility for disability benefits in December 2009.
3. Supreme Court properly found the July 19, 2010 denial of benefits arbitrary and capricious and properly awarded petitioner General Municipal Law § 207-c benefits beginning December 4, 2009.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“It is well settled that the determination whether a “factual grouping constitutes a transaction or series of transactions depends on how the facts are related in time, space, origin, or motivation, whether they form a convenient trial unit, and whether . . . their treatment as a unit conforms to the parties’ expectations or business understanding or usage”” (104 A.D.3d at 1244)

“Although we determined that the court erred in awarding petitioner regular pay from June 15, 2009 through March 25, 2010, we did not foreclose the possibility that petitioner may, at some point after June 15, 2009, again become eligible for disability benefits.” (104 A.D.3d at 1245)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Petitioner, an employee of the Monroe County Sheriff's Department, sought disability benefits under General Municipal Law § 207-c. After an earlier denial of benefits effective June 15, 2009, petitioner sought benefits based on a December 2, 2009 status report from an MCSD physician stating that he was not fit to return to work. Respondents denied the second request on July 19, 2010, and Supreme Court found that denial arbitrary and capricious, awarding benefits beginning December 4, 2009.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Petitioner challenged respondents' July 19, 2010 determination denying his request for General Municipal Law § 207-c benefits. Supreme Court concluded that the determination was arbitrary and capricious and awarded benefits beginning December 4, 2009. Respondents argued on appeal that the claim was barred by res judicata

or, alternatively, collateral estoppel, based on an earlier article 78 proceeding involving a June 15, 2009 denial of benefits. The Appellate Division rejected both arguments and unanimously affirmed without costs.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Matter of Zembiec v County of Monroe [appeal No. 2], 87 A.D.3d 1358, 1359 (4th Dep't 2011)
- Matter of White v County of Cortland, 97 N.Y.2d 336, 340 (2002)
- Smith v Russell Sage Coll., 54 N.Y.2d 185, 192-193 (1981), rearg. denied, 55 N.Y.2d 878 (1982)
- Matter of Reilly v Reid, 45 N.Y.2d 24, 30 (1978)
- Matter of Kelly v Safir, 96 N.Y.2d 32, 39 (2001), rearg. denied, 96 N.Y.2d 854 (2001)
- Matter of Featherstone v Franco, 95 N.Y.2d 550, 554 (2000)
- Buechel v Bain, 97 N.Y.2d 295, 303-304 (2001), cert. denied, 535 U.S. 1096 (2002)

OPINION

PER CURIAM.

Appeal from a judgment of the Supreme Court, Monroe County (Thomas M. Van Strydonck, J.), entered April 27, 2012 in a proceeding pursuant to CPLR article 78. The judgment awarded petitioner General Municipal Law § 207-c benefits beginning on December 4, 2009. It is hereby ordered that the judgment so appealed from is unanimously affirmed without costs. Memorandum: Petitioner, an employee of respondent Monroe County Sheriffs Department (MCSD), commenced this CPLR article 78 proceeding seeking, inter alia, to annul the July 19, 2010 determination that he is not entitled to General Municipal Law § 207-c benefits (disability benefits).

Supreme Court concluded that the determination was arbitrary and capricious, and issued the instant judgment awarding petitioner disability *1244benefits commencing on December 4, 2009, the date of petitioner's request for those benefits.

We affirm. We note as background that petitioner previously commenced a CPLR article 78 proceeding seeking to annul the June 15, 2009 determination denying petitioner's first request for disability benefits (prior proceeding).

In the prior proceeding, respondents appealed and petitioner cross-appealed from an amended judgment granting those parts of the petition seeking disability benefits from August 12, 2008 through June 15, 2009 as well as petitioner's regular pay from June 15, 2009 through March 25, 2010. This Court modified the amended judgment by denying that part of the petition seeking an award of regular pay from June 15, 2009 through March 25, 2010 on the ground that petitioner

was required to report to a modified duty assignment on June 15, 2009, but did not do so (*Matter of Zembiec v County of Monroe* [appeal No. 2], 87 AD3d 1358, 1359 [2011]).

Respondents contend that petitioner's claim in this proceeding is precluded by the doctrine of res judicata. We reject that contention. Petitioner's instant claim is based on a December 2, 2009 status report prepared by an MCSD physician, in which the physician determined that petitioner was not fit to return to work (status report). Petitioner submitted, inter alia, the status report in the prior proceeding to establish the requisite "direct causal relationship between job duties and the resulting illness or injury" (*Matter of White v County of Cortland*, 97 NY2d 336, 340 [2002]).

Contrary to respondents' contention, petitioner's submission of the status report in the prior proceeding does not establish that the claims asserted by petitioner in this proceeding and in the prior proceeding (collectively, proceedings) arose out of the same transaction or series of transactions. It is well settled that the determination whether a "factual grouping constitutes a transaction or series of transactions depends on how the facts are related in time, space, origin, or motivation, whether they form a convenient trial unit, and whether... their treatment as a unit conforms to the parties' expectations or business understanding or usage" (*Smith v Russell Sage Coll.*, 54 NY2d 185, 192-193 [1981], rearg denied 55 NY2d 878 [1982] [internal quotation marks omitted]).

Here, although the proceedings both involve claims concerning petitioner's entitlement to disability benefits and are arguably related in time inasmuch as certain events relevant to this appeal, i.e., the issuance of the status report and petitioner's second request for disability benefits, occurred while the prior proceeding was pending, the proceedings are based upon two different transactions— respondents' June 15, 2009 denial of benefits and respondents' *1245 July 19, 2010 denial of benefits (see generally *Matter of Reilly v Reid*, 45 NY2d 24, 30 [1978]).

Thus, in the prior proceeding, the court was concerned only with the issue whether respondents' June 15, 2009 determination was "arbitrary and capricious" (CPLR 7803 [3]). Indeed, the court stated in the amended judgment in the prior proceeding that petitioner's "current condition and ability to perform the modified assignment... [was] beyond the scope of the [prior] proceeding." Moreover, we note that the court's "review of [the] administrative determination [in the prior proceeding was] limited to the 'facts and record adduced before the agency' " (*Matter of Kelly v Safir*, 96 NY2d 32, 39 [2001], rearg denied 96 NY2d 854 [2001], quoting *Matter of Featherstone v Franco*, 95 NY2d 550, 554 [2000]), and the court therefore could not rely on post-determination submissions, such as the status report, in evaluating the determination.

We also reject respondents' alternative contention that petitioner's instant claim is barred by collateral estoppel. We conclude that the issues concerning petitioner's ability to return to work and his eligibility for disability benefits in December 2009 were not decided in the prior

proceeding (see generally *Buechel v Bain*, 97 NY2d 295, 303-304 [2001], cert denied 535 US 1096 [2002]).

Our decision in the prior appeal does not require a different result (see *Zembiec*, 87 AD3d at 1359). Although we determined that the court erred in awarding petitioner regular pay from June 15, 2009 through March 25, 2010, we did not foreclose the possibility that petitioner may, at some point after June 15, 2009, again become eligible for disability benefits.

Present — Smith, J.E, Peradotto, Gani, Sconiers and Whalen, JJ.