

SUPREME COURT OF APPEALS OF WEST VIRGINIA

Koerner v. West Virginia Department of Military Affairs & Public Safety

217 W. Va. 231 (2005) · Decided July 5, 2005

SUMMARY

The Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia affirmed enforcement of a settlement agreement resolving claims arising from the appellant's employment and discharge. The court held that the West Virginia Human Rights Commission's 1992 waiver regulations applied only to claims pursued before the Commission, not to Human Rights Act claims brought in circuit court. The court also declined to reach the tender-back issue and did not consider an argument concerning the appellant's refusal to sign a separate release because it was not properly assigned as error.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Justice Benjamin
JURISDICTION	West Virginia
DECIDED	July 5, 2005
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Appeal from the denial of a Rule 59(e) motion to alter or amend a judgment entered after a jury verdict enforcing a settlement agreement and rejecting the appellant's claims.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Because the Rule 59(e) motion challenged the scope of the claims encompassed by the judgment and required interpretation of an administrative regulation, the court applied de novo review to the circuit court's interpretation of the regulation.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	published precedential opinion
PARTIES	Cara Hanna Koerner v. West Virginia Department of Military Affairs and Public Safety, Otis G. Cox, Jr., in his official capacity as Secretary of the Department

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QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the West Virginia Human Rights Commission's 1992 waiver rules, including the requirement that a waiver specifically refer to rights or claims under the West Virginia Human Rights Act, applied to a Human Rights Act claim pursued in circuit court rather than before the Commission.
2. Whether Koerner's settlement agreement constituted a valid waiver of her pre-August 12, 2002 Human Rights Act claims despite not expressly referencing the Act.
3. Whether the court should resolve the tender-back doctrine issue.
4. Whether Koerner could challenge the settlement agreement based on her refusal to sign the contemplated release when that issue was not assigned as error in the petition for appeal.

HOLDINGS

1. The Commission's 1992 legislative waiver rules applied only to claims pursued before the West Virginia Human Rights Commission and did not apply to Human Rights Act claims pursued in another forum, including a West Virginia circuit court.
2. Koerner's waiver of claims arising before August 12, 2002 was valid because the settlement agreement resolved all claims arising from her employment and discharge, the waiver was found to be knowing and voluntary, and the 1992 rules did not require an express reference to the Human Rights Act for a claim pursued in circuit court.
3. The court declined to decide the tender-back doctrine issue because its conclusion that the 1992 waiver rules did not apply to Koerner's civil action and its affirmance of the circuit court's disposition made resolution unnecessary.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"We therefore hold that the legislative rules of the West Virginia Human Rights Commission, which became effective on April 29, 1992 and which set forth criteria for regulating the voluntary release or waiver of an individual's right to pursue a claim, are limited to the pursuit of a claim "before the West Virginia Human Rights Commission" and expressly do not apply to the pursuit of a claim brought under the West Virginia Human Rights Act, W. Va.Code 5-11-1, et seq., in another forum." (217 W. Va. at 236-237)

"Accordingly, this Court holds that where a claim arising prior to August 12, 2002, under the West Virginia Human Rights Act is pursued in a forum other than before the West Virginia Human Rights Commission, a valid waiver need not expressly refer to specific rights or claims arising under the West Virginia Human Rights Act." (217 W. Va. at 237)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Koerner was discharged by the Department on July 14, 1998, and pursued a grievance. During the grievance proceeding, she and the appellees agreed to settle all claims arising from her employment and discharge; the

agreement provided for reinstatement, a \$5,000 payment, other benefits, and execution of a release of all such claims. The written settlement agreement did not specifically reference the West Virginia Human Rights Act, and Koerner later refused to sign the contemplated release. She nevertheless retained the settlement benefits and brought a circuit-court action asserting Human Rights Act and other wrongful-discharge claims.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Koerner filed a grievance concerning her discharge and entered into a settlement agreement resolving claims arising from her employment and discharge. She later filed a circuit-court action asserting breach of the settlement agreement and wrongful-discharge claims under the Family and Medical Leave Act, the West Virginia Human Rights Act, and common law. After bifurcation, the jury found that the appellees had not breached the settlement agreement; the circuit court entered judgment on January 2, 2003, and denied Koerner's Rule 59(e) motion on March 10, 2003. The Supreme Court of Appeals affirmed.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Wickland v. American Travellers Life Ins. Co., 204 W. Va. 430, 513 S.E.2d 657 (1998)
- Chrystal R.M. v. Charlie A. L., 194 W. Va. 138, 459 S.E.2d 415 (1995)
- Smith v. West Virginia Human Rights Comm'n, 216 W. Va. 2, 602 S.E.2d 445 (2004)
- State ex rel. McKenzie v. Smith, 212 W. Va. 288, 569 S.E.2d 809 (2002)
- State v. Elder, 152 W. Va. 571, 165 S.E.2d 108 (1968)
- Spradling v. Blackburn, 919 F. Supp. 969 (S.D.W. Va. 1996)
- Oubre v. Entergy Operations, 522 U.S. 422, 118 S. Ct. 838, 139 L. Ed. 2d 849 (1998)
- Buffum v. Peter Barceloux Co., 289 U.S. 227, 234, 53 S. Ct. 539, 77 L. Ed. 1140 (1933)
- Holmes v. Basham, 130 W. Va. 743, 45 S.E.2d 252 (1947)
- Tiernan v. Charleston Area Medical Center, Inc., 203 W. Va. 135, 506 S.E.2d 578 (1998)