

COMMONWEALTH COURT OF PENNSYLVANIA

Lewis Watkins v. Pennsylvania Parole Board

Watkins · No. 968 C.D. 2022 · Decided August 15, 2023

SUMMARY

The Pennsylvania Commonwealth Court affirmed the Pennsylvania Parole Board’s recommitment of Lewis Watkins as a technical parole violator after his unsuccessful discharge from a community corrections center. The court held that substantial evidence supported the Board’s finding that Watkins violated the center’s rules and that the Board’s credibility determinations were not reviewable on appeal. The court also rejected Watkins’ due process claim, concluding that he had notice and a meaningful opportunity to present evidence and was not entitled to reopen the record for a second hearing.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Commonwealth Court of Pennsylvania
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Lori A. Dumas; Renée Cohn Jubelirer, President Judge; Christine Fizzano Cannon, Judge; Lori A. Dumas, Judge
JURISDICTION	Pennsylvania
DECIDED	August 15, 2023
DOCKET	968 C.D. 2022
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Petition for review of a Pennsylvania Parole Board order affirming Watkins's recommitment as a technical parole violator.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The court reviewed whether constitutional rights were violated, an error of law was committed, or the Board's findings were supported by substantial evidence. The Board's credibility determinations and findings would not be disturbed if supported by substantial evidence.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Nonprecedential; opinion not reported
PARTIES	Lewis Watkins v. Pennsylvania Parole Board

TOPICS

judicial review of agency action

administrative law

standard of review

procedural due process

appellate procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

Administrative law

Parole

Constitutional law

Appellate procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether substantial evidence supported the Pennsylvania Parole Board's finding that Watkins violated the terms of his parole.
2. Whether the Board violated Watkins's procedural due process rights by failing to permit him to present additional exculpatory evidence after the violation hearing.

HOLDINGS

1. Substantial evidence supported the Board's finding that Watkins violated the rules of Create House and consequently violated the terms of his parole.
2. The Board did not violate Watkins's due process rights because he received notice of his rights and a meaningful opportunity to be heard, and due process did not guarantee a second hearing or reopening of the record to present additional evidence.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“The essential requisites of procedural due process are notice and a meaningful opportunity to be heard.” (5)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Watkins was released to Create House, a community corrections center, subject to a parole condition requiring him to abide by the center's rules and successfully complete the program. After receiving multiple infraction reports, including allegations that he absconded without authorization, violated the center's mask policy, and became aggressive with staff, Watkins was unsuccessfully discharged and arrested as a technical parole violator. At the violation hearing, Create House's director testified for the Board, while Watkins denied leaving without permission and threatening staff. The Board credited the director's testimony and documentary evidence and recommitted Watkins for up to six months.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The Pennsylvania Parole Board found Watkins in technical violation of his parole, revoked his parole, and recommitted him to serve up to six months of backtime. Watkins filed an administrative appeal, which an appeal panel denied. He then petitioned the Commonwealth Court of Pennsylvania for review, asserting insufficient evidence and a due process violation.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- *Hudak v. Pa. Bd. of Prob. & Parole*, 757 A.2d 439 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2000)

- Falasco v. Pa. Bd. of Prob. & Parole, 521 A.2d 991, 995 (Pa. Cmwlth. 1987)
- Gregory v. Pa. Bd. of Prob. & Parole, 530 A.2d 1048, 1050 (Pa. Cmwlth. 1987)
- Harper v. Pa. Bd. of Prob. & Parole, 520 A.2d 518, 523 (Pa. Cmwlth. 1987)
- McCauley v. Pa. Bd. of Prob. & Parole, 510 A.2d 877, 879 (Pa. Cmwlth. 1986)
- Price v. Pa. Bd. of Prob. & Parole, 863 A.2d 173, 175 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2004)
- Commonwealth v. Turner, 80 A.3d 754, 761 (Pa. 2013)

OPINION

PER CURIAM.

IN THE COMMONWEALTH COURT OF PENNSYLVANIA Lewis Watkins,; Petitioner: v.: No. 968 C.D. 2022: Submitted: May 5, 2023 Pennsylvania Parole Board,; Respondent: BEFORE: HONORABLE RENÉE COHN JUBELIRER, President Judge HONORABLE CHRISTINE FIZZANO CANNON, Judge HONORABLE LORI A. DUMAS, Judge OPINION NOT REPORTED MEMORANDUM OPINION BY JUDGE DUMAS FILED: August 15, 2023 Lewis Watkins (Watkins) has petitioned for review of the order entered by the Pennsylvania Parole Board (Board) on August 17, 2022, which affirmed Watkins' recommitment as a technical parole violator (TPV).

After thorough review, we affirm the Board's order. I. BACKGROUND Watkins was serving a 3-year to 10-year sentence for Stalking and Terroristic Threats.¹ Sentence Status Summ., 5/14/18, at 1-3. On January 19, 2021, Watkins was released to Create House, a community corrections center (CCC), and specifically agreed to abide by its rules and regulations as a special condition of his parole.

2 Special Conditions of Parole, 1/21/21. Watkins was unsuccessfully 1 See 18 Pa. C.S. §§ 2709.1, 2706(a)(3). 2 The special condition provided: You must abide by all the rules and regulations of the CCC. You are required to successfully complete the CCC as determined by Create House staff and/or Parole Supervision Staff. Any discharge, termination or separation discharged from Create House on February 16, 2021, and was arrested as a TPV the following day.

Supervision History, 3/29/21, at 1-3. At a hearing, Sylvia Zittle, Director of Create House, testified that Watkins received infraction reports for various incidents in January and February. Notes of Testimony (N.T.) Violation Hr'g, 4/22/21, at 17-19.

For example, according to Zittle, Watkins absconded from Create House without authorization and violated Create House's mask policy. Id. at 16-19. Zittle further testified that she called 911 after Watkins became aggressive when staff attempted to search him upon his return to the facility on February 12, 2021. Id. at 16.

The Board also presented additional evidence that Watkins incurred several infractions while residing at Create House. *Id.* at 17-19. For his part, Watkins testified that he did not leave the facility without authorization and that he informed Zittle and a member of the staff where he was going. *Id.* at 25. He also denied threatening Zittle or staff on February 12, 2021.

Id. at 26-27. Following the hearing, the Board found Watkins to be in technical violation of his parole, revoked his parole, and recommitted him to serve up to six months of backtime. *Bd. Action*, 4/28/21, at 1. Watkins timely filed an administrative appeal, asserting that the Board lacked substantial evidence to revoke his parole. *Admin. Remedies Form*, 5/17/21, at 1-5.

The appeal panel affirmed the Board's decision. Watkins then timely appealed to this Court. other than successfully discharged from CCC shall constitute a Violation of your parole. Supplement to *Bd. Action*, 1/19/21. 2 II. ISSUES Watkins presents two issues on appeal. Watkins contends that there was insufficient evidence that he violated the terms of his parole.

Pet'r's Br. at 5. He also asserts that his due process rights were violated in that he was not permitted to present exculpatory evidence. *Id.* III. DISCUSSION³ A. Sufficiency of Evidence Watkins asserts that the Board's finding that he violated the rules of Create House that resulted in his unsuccessful discharge is not supported by substantial evidence. Pet'r's Br. at 9.

In support of this assertion, Watkins suggests there must be evidence of a parolee's fault in committing the alleged technical violation. *Id.* at 10 (citing *Hudak v. Pa. Bd. of Prob. & Parole*, 757 A.2d 439 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2000)). According to Watkins, when he allegedly absconded on February 12, 2021, he was actually at the police station with concerns about Zittle.

Id. He also contends that Zittle targeted him or was not being truthful about the alleged violations when calling 911. *Id.* at 11. The Board serves as the fact-finder in parole violation proceedings and is entitled to make its own credibility determinations. *Falasco v. Pa. Bd. of Prob. & Parole*, 521 A.2d 991, 995 (Pa. Cmwlth. 1987); *Gregory v. Pa. Bd. of Prob. & Parole*, 3 We review the Board's decision to determine whether constitutional rights were violated, whether an error of law was committed, and whether the Board's findings of fact are supported by substantial evidence.

See Section 704 of the Administrative Agency Law, 2 Pa.C.S. § 704; *Miskovitch v. Pa. Bd. of Prob. & Parole*, 77 A.3d 66, 70 n.4 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2013). This Court has previously defined substantial evidence as "such relevant evidence as a reasonable mind might accept to support a conclusion, requiring something more than a scintilla creating a mere suspicion of the existence of the fact to be established." *McCauley v. Pa. Bd. of Prob. & Parole*, 510 A.2d 877, 879 (Pa.

Cmwlth. 1986); accord *Price v. Pa. Bd. of Prob. & Parole*, 863 A.2d 173, 175 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2004). 3 530 A.2d 1048, 1050 (Pa. Cmwlth. 1987). Also, the mere fact that there is conflicting evidence or testimony in the record does not mean the Board's findings are not supported by substantial evidence. *Harper v. Pa. Bd. of Prob. & Parole*, 520 A.2d 518, 523 (Pa. Cmwlth.

1987). This Court may not alter findings or credibility determinations by the Board provided they are supported by substantial evidence. *Falasco*, 521 A.2d at 995; *Gregory*, 530 A.2d at 1050. In the instant matter, the Board credited the documentary evidence presented by the Board and the testimony of Zittle over Watkins' self-serving testimony in its decision to recommit Watkins as a TPV.

Resp. to Remedies Form, 8/17/22. The evidence and testimony both support the finding that Watkins failed to successfully complete Create House because he was unsuccessfully discharged for violating the rules and regulations. *Id.* In contrast, Watkins offered lengthy testimony that he did not leave Create House without permission and he did not threaten any staff, but the Board did not find his testimony to be credible.

Id. In *Hudak*, this Court reversed the finding that *Hudak* was a TPV because the Board did not show that he was at fault for his discharge from the center, and thus, recommitment was an abuse of the Board's authority. *Hudak*, 757 A.2d at 439. *Hudak* is irrelevant here because there is sufficient evidence substantiating the alleged violations of Create House's policies and rules.

Like in *Harper*, it was within the Board's sole discretion to consider the credibility of the testimony. *Harper*, 520 A.2d at 523. Also, mere conflicting evidence does not serve as a basis upon which the Board's findings will be disturbed on appeal. *Id.* The fact that Watkins gave a conflicting statement regarding the alleged violations of Create House's rules, in which he stated he was given permission to leave, likewise does not deprive the Board's findings of substantial evidentiary support.

To the contrary, it is the province 4 of the Board to consider and weigh the testimony. As such, substantial evidence supports the Board's findings that Watkins violated the terms of his parole. See *McCauley*, 510 A.2d at 879; *Falasco*, 521 A.2d at 995; *Gregory*, 530 A.2d at 1050. B. Due Process In his second issue, Watkins asserts that the Board violated his constitutional rights to due process.

See Pet'r's Br. at 11-12. According to Watkins, he made several post-hearing requests for the Board to issue a subpoena or otherwise assist him in securing favorable evidence, and, at the very least, the Board should have remanded the matter for a second hearing. *Id.* at 11. Watkins concludes the Board failed to offer him an opportunity to present this evidence.

Id. at 12. The essential requisites of procedural due process are notice and a meaningful opportunity to be heard. *Commonwealth v. Turner*, 80 A.3d 754, 761 (Pa. 2013). The procedure for violation of parole conditions provides that, prior to a violation hearing, the parolee shall be notified of "the parolee's right to speak, to have voluntary witnesses appear[,] and to present documentary evidence." 37 Pa. Code § 71.2.

Here, Watkins was provided notice prior to the hearing that he had the right to call witnesses and present evidence on his behalf. Inmate Rights at Parole Bd. Hr'gs, 4/13/21. He was given the opportunity to present his case before the Board at the April 22, 2021 violation hearing.

However, at no time prior to the hearing or during the hearing itself did Watkins request an opportunity to present additional evidence. Watkins suggests that he was entitled to introduce post-hearing evidence, but due process does not guarantee a second hearing or an opportunity to reopen the record.

Here, Watkins was also given the opportunity to appeal the Board's decision through the administrative appeal process of which he took advantage. 37 Pa. Code 5 § 73.1; Admin. Remedies Form, 5/17/21, at 1-5. The Board's appeal panel considered Watkins' appeal but nonetheless affirmed the decision to recommit him as a TPV.

Accordingly, we discern no violation of Watkins' due process rights. Based on the foregoing discussion, the Board's order is affirmed. LORI A. DUMAS, Judge 6 IN THE COMMONWEALTH COURT OF PENNSYLVANIA Lewis Watkins,; Petitioner: v.: No. 968 C.D. 2022 Pennsylvania Parole Board,; Respondent: ORDER AND NOW, this 15th day of August, 2023, the order of Pennsylvania Parole Board, entered August 17, 2022, is AFFIRMED.

LORI A. DUMAS, Judge