United States Department of Labor Employees' Compensation Appeals Board

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T.B., Appellant)
and) Docket No. 07-1473) Issued: May 19, 2008
U.S. POSTAL SERVICE, POST OFFICE, Pembroke Pines, FL, Employer)
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Appearances: Dean T. Albrecht, for the appellant Office of Solicitor, for the Director	Case Submitted on the Record

DECISION AND ORDER

Before:
ALEC J. KOROMILAS, Chief Judge
DAVID S. GERSON, Judge
JAMES A. HAYNES, Alternate Judge

JURISDICTION

On April 20, 2007 appellant filed a timely appeal from Office of Workers' Compensation Programs' merit decisions dated June 20 and November 8, 2006 and April 11, 2007. Under 20 C.F.R. §§ 501.2(c) and 501.3, the Board has jurisdiction over the merits of this case.

ISSUE

The issue is whether appellant met his burden of proof to establish that he sustained an emotional condition in the performance of duty.

FACTUAL HISTORY

Appellant, a 51-year-old postal supervisor, filed a Form CA-2 claim for benefits based on an emotional condition on December 1, 2005. He stated that his supervisor subjected him to a pattern of harassment, unreasonable expectations, unfair working conditions and discriminatory

treatment; this led to his being hospitalized with chest pains, major depression and a generalized anxiety disorder.¹

The Office controverted appellant's claim and submitted a December 9, 2005 statement from Sam Ezem, appellant's supervisor, who stated:

"On July 29, 2005 I met with [appellant] and went over his job responsibilities. I advised him that his responsibility is to supervise and hold his employees accountable. That he is also responsible [for] clearing his operation on time.

"On October 4, 2005 at 3:45 p.m. [appellant] called me and stated that he [would be] late to work that day. I asked [him] how late? [Appellant] replied [he] would be in around 6:00 p.m. I said okay.

"That same day at 6:35 p.m., I received a call from [appellant], again he informed me that he would be out for six weeks. I asked [him] if everything was all right with him? [Appellant] replied 'my doctor put me out for six weeks.' I then advised [him] that I need[ed] medical documentation from him when he returns back to work.

"On December 8, 2005 I received a CA-2 from [appellant] alleging depression and anxiety disorder because I gave him unreasonable expectations. Whereas, I met with [him] on July 29, 2005 and he called in on October 4, 2005, [stating] that he [would] be out for six weeks. [Appellant] did not file a Form CA-2 since July 29, 2005 when I met with him to evaluate his job performance until December 8, 2005. He also was aware that he had this disease or illness since March 5, 1997.

"The evidence is clear that this claim is bogus and should be dismissed. Management has the right to direct employees of [the employing establishment] in the performance of official duties."

On January 9, 2006 appellant filed a second Form CA-2 claim for benefits based on an emotional condition. He stated that he was having a conflict with Mr. Ezem, his supervisor and the unit manager, which led to chest pain and emergency treatment. Appellant asserted that he had recently been required to clear dispatches before ending his tour. He also alleged that Mr. Ezem made errors in composing the holiday schedule which affected him and his employees. In addition, appellant stated that Mr. Ezem pressured him to organize his staff for the weekend, which Mr. Ezem also mishandled, thereby creating additional managerial difficulties for appellant. He asserted that he showed Mr. Ezem another manager's guidelines for arranging schedules, but Mr. Ezem claimed that he did not see them. Appellant stated that the schedule he prepared for a Friday during December 2003 was questioned in an investigative interview pertaining to his duties on Monday, December 19, 2005. He stated that in 2000 while inputting data he became confused and hesitant at the computer and had to leave work. Appellant indicated that he submitted leave for this period. He further indicated that, due to his latest

¹ The Office previously accepted a claim by appellant for depression on October 15, 1997.

episode of his chronic, recurring emotional condition he had been out of work since December 23, 2005.

In a January 13, 2006 statement, Mr. Ezem rebutted appellant's allegations. He stated:

"On Monday, December 19, 2005, at approximately [4:45 p.m.,] the [d]istrict [m]anager, Jordan Small [a]nd [the] [m]anager, [p]lant operations Paul Sands, [a]pproached the [manager of district operations,] Don Shandor, and informed him that [appellant] [was] in the union cage drinking coffee. When [Mr. Shandor] approached him, he asked [appellant] if he was on break. [Appellant] responded 'no.' [Mr. Shandor] also asked him if he was discussing any labor issues with the union. [Appellant] responded 'no.' [Mr. Shandor] then instructed [appellant] to go back to his operation.

"On December 23, 2005 at approximately [7:50 p.m.,] I conducted an investigative interview with [appellant]. I asked him what he was doing in the union cage on Monday[,] [December] 19, 2005. He responded, 'I went to the general clerk to ask her for service talk.' I reminded him that the union cage has nothing to do with the general clerk office. I asked him did Mr. Shandor approach you on Monday, [December] 19, 2005 and asked him what he was doing in the union cage, he responded 'I went there to talk to [the general clerk] about [my] schedule.' He also stated that he did not recall [Mr.] Shandor asking him any question. I asked him did he recall [Mr. Shandor] instructing him to go back to his operation? He responded yes. After the investigative interview [appellant] left his operation and went home. Without informing me. He willfully abandons his operation and [went] AWOL [absent without leave].

"[Appellant has] not call[ed] me since he abandoned his operation. His action on December 23, 2005 cited above [has] demonstrated his inability to conduct himself in compliance with the [employing establishment] code of conduct. As a postal employee, he has the responsibility to discharge his assigned duties conscientiously and effectively. He is to conduct himself in a manner that reflects favorably upon [the employing establishment]. The evidence is clear that this claim is bogus and should be dismissed. Management has the right to direct employees of [the employing establishment] in the performance of official duties."

In a report dated January 6, 2005, Dr. Evelyn Lopez-Brignoni, appellant's treating psychiatrist, stated:

"[Appellant] has been under my care since March 10, 1997, for the treatment of major depression and general anxiety disorder. He is suffering from an episode of sever and debilitating depression, brought on by stress at work, and exacerbated by his supervisor, and has been unable to work since December 23, 2005. He is presently not a threat to himself or any other individual, including family members.

"[Appellant] continues to be monitored by me with medication management and individual therapy, and his status will be reevaluated at his next appointment of January 25, 2006."

By letter dated February 6, 2006, the Office advised appellant that he needed to submit additional information in support of his claim. The Office asked appellant to describe in detail the employment-related conditions or incidents which he believed contributed to his emotional condition, and to provide specific descriptions of all practices, incidents, etc., which he believed affected his condition.

In a February 14, 2006 report, Dr. Huberto Merayo, Board-certified in psychiatry and neurology, noted that appellant was hospitalized from February 8 to 14, 2006. He diagnosed recurrent major depression.

In a statement dated February 18, 2006, appellant stated:

"The first occasion of my emotional condition was a direct result with a supervisor occurred on March 5, 1997 and is well documented (062155980). Two years ago a supervisor intentionally bumped into me twice and almost a third time. It was a credible threat report with Mr. Shandor. Management began giving me extra work, longer hours and harassment. I was injured on October 5, 2005, December 23, 2005, and February 6, 2006 once again, requiring hospitalization, and for which I am still off from work.... I believe increased longer work hours, continued harassment from Mr. Ezem, and expectations of me that are discriminatory."

Appellant stated that the actions of Mr. Ezem and other supervisors cited above had been detrimental to his health.

In response to the Office's February 6, 2006 developmental letter/questionnaire, appellant submitted a March 10, 2006 statement which provided a chronology of the alleged incidents of harassment and other compensable acts on the part of management. The incidents related by appellant were:

October 5, 2005 -- Conflict with Mr. Ezem who became angry with appellant for asking him how to pay for his court leave. He claimed he was not allowed to leave early, that he was given overtime and was unable to leave early. Appellant claimed that Mr. Ezem gave him unreasonable expectations that he did not give to other supervisors, and having his dispatches cleared before going home. He claimed that Mr. Ezem asked him, "what are you going to do, party?";

December 23, 2005 -- Discussed in prior statement;

January 3, 2006 -- Mr. Ezem sent him a notice to report despite the fact that he had already informed [Ben] Jones that he would be out for 45 days on continuation of pay;

January 9, 2006 -- Conflict with Mr. Ezem pertaining to investigative interview regarding his duties on December 19, 2005 on December 23, 2005. He stated that he became confused and hesitant at his computer;

January 9, 2006 -- Appellant attempted to give a Form CA-2 to Mr. Ezem but he refused to take it, saying he was going home and never gave him a receipt;

January 19, 2006 -- Increased conflict at his job site led to acute exacerbation of his depression;

February 2, 2006 -- Appellant returned from illness. Mr. Ezem stated that no one knew where he was, that he did not turn in the proper paperwork to the proper people, therefore, he charged appellant with being AWOL for one week and stated that he had abandoned his position. Appellant felt confused, had heart palpitations, suicidal thoughts and major work-related depression.

In addition, Dr. Brignoni, appellant's treating psychiatrist, submitted a handwritten, annotated response to the Office's request for an explanation of how exposure or incidents in appellant's federal employment contributed to his condition. He stated:

"[Appellant] has been followed for nine years for management of major depression, which has been compounded by work situation.... Every major exacerbation has been precipitated by conflict at the job site. He has a rather rigid perfectionist personality that tends to react to criticism/review in a rather idiosyncratic manner[,] becoming profoundly depressed and self[-]destructive."

In a March 13, 2006 statement, appellant indicated that he had been on various forms of medication, continuously, since the first, accepted, work-related incident of March 5, 1997.

Appellant submitted a February 7, 2006 statement from his coworker, Rolando Beckford. He stated:

"I [a]m writing this statement on behalf of [appellant]. I recalled [that] on December 24, 2005 I was the general clerk on duty. [Appellant] called before 4:00 p.m. to talk to Mr. Jones who was the MDO. I [put the] call through to the MDO. I have no knowledge of what transpired.

"Also on ... Monday[,] December 26, [2005] [appellant] called to speak to the MDO, the MDO at the time was Mrs. Anderson. I do not exactly know what happened.... Mrs. Anderson refused the call. [Appellant told] me to let MDO Jones know that he was calling in [sick] for continuation of pay for 45 days. I notified the MDO when he came in."

Mr. Jones submitted a February 6, 2006 statement:

"This is to confirm that [appellant] called in the office and talked to me on Saturday, December 24, 2005. As I was MDO. He called to inform me that he is calling in continuation of pay for 45 days."

By decision dated June 30, 2006, the Office denied appellant's claim on the basis that he failed to establish any compensable factor of employment and thus fact of injury was not established.

On July 26, 2006 appellant requested a review of the written record.

In a statement dated July 26, 2006, appellant stated:

"The one compensable factor of employment of excessive and increased hours of overtime that I was required to perform is well documented in the form of my official pay stubs ... and clock rings for the missing pay stubs ... included from the years 2003 to 2006 inclusive. I have created a form ... that shows the overtime record for each pay period and each year. It is evident that this extra work increased dramatically after a work incident that occurred on April 15, 2004. As you can see, the form shows that the amount of overtime hours worked have more than doubled since the year 2003. The disparity in work hours had increased two fold since I agreed in protected activities in early 2004.

"MDO Ezem began having me work longer hours [15.46 hours on Saturday, August 6, 2005] than other supervisors at the SPBS clearing dispatches and restricting me from leaving the operation even though all other supervisors were permitted to move about as necessary.

"I filed a grievance ... on MDO Ezem ... for an AWOL ... charge. I won a grievance and received a pay adjustment ... on MDO Ezem for his erroneous ... and abusive charge of AWOL against me the week of Christmas. This was another example of the harassment and abusive treatment of retaliation against me."

* * *

"On June 20, 2005 Mr. Ezem began placing restrictions on me that prevented me from moving freely through the building and began increasing my job responsibilities. This action made it difficult for me to conduct my daily responsibilities. It became difficult to access the mail volumes that I was required to be aware of to adequately perform my job. It slowed down some forms of communications that were necessary between supervisors and/or employees which needed face to face transactions in order to iron out particular problems. Conversations of a private nature were necessary to protect an employees' confidentiality. I was tasked with identifying containers of mail that were coming to the platform from the stations. I was given the additional responsibility of dating and initialing each label.... This was extremely difficult because of the tremendous volume of containers that were coming in and at the high rate of entrance onto the entire length of the platform. I was the only platform supervisor tasked with this additional responsibility.

"MDO Ezem also instructed me to remain physically on the platform from 4:00 p.m. until 5:00 p.m. He would not let me leave even two minutes early to set

up my SPBS operation, the computer, assignment of my employees or to even check on what the previous tour had done. Many times the tours' previous supervisor failed to clean house or complete dispatches before they left work after eight hours.... This would increase my workload and that of my employees. We became responsible for their work as well as our own. This in turn caused my overtime work hours to increase dramatically.... MDO Ezem's additional requirement of mandating me to stay until all dispatches were completed also contributed to the huge increase in my overtime work hours in 2004 and 2005.... These longer hours were taking their toll on my health and well being.

"MDO Ezem increased my work hours.... I frequently noticed that he was allowing other supervisors to leave their operations after having just worked eight hours.... This disparity of treatment just added to the burden of my work....

"On December 22, 2005 I was feeling very tired because of all the overtime that I had incurred as a result of MDO Ezem's instructions. Around 8:15 p.m., I became disoriented, and could not focus while trying to input my employees' information into the computer, a routine daily task....

"Extra workload and excessive overtime by the employing establishment have been proven. I have proven one compensable factor of employment of excessive and increased hours of overtime that I was required to work...."

In support of his request, appellant submitted payroll records, clock rings, timesheets and pay stubs from 2003 to 2005. He stated that he filed a grievance for being charged with being AWOL for 32 hours during pay period one for the year 2006 charge, which was approved, and received a pay adjustment.

By decision dated November 13, 2006, an Office hearing representative affirmed the June 30, 2006 decision.

In a report dated January 16, 2007, Dr. Brignoni stated:

"Between 2001 [and] mid 2004, [appellant] had no new complaints and apparently continued to function adequately at his post. He continued to pursue his EEOC [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission] case, but was working without major exacerbations of his anxiety or mood disturbance."

By letter dated January 25, 2007, appellant's representative, Dean T. Albrecht, requested reconsideration. He contended that appellant's being forced to work an excessive amount of overtime constituted a compensable factor of employment. Mr. Albrecht also argued that Dr. Brignoni's January 16, 2007 report indicates that the additional overtime he was forced to work directly resulted in the exacerbation of appellant's major depression condition.

By decision dated April 11, 2007, the Office denied modification of the June 20, 2006 decision.

LEGAL PRECEDENT

To establish that an emotional condition was sustained in the performance of duty there must be factual evidence identifying and corroborating employment factors or incidents alleged to have caused or contributed to the condition, medical evidence establishing that the employee has an emotional condition, and rationalized medical opinion establishing that compensable employment factors are causally related to the claimed emotional condition.² There must be evidence that implicated acts of harassment or discrimination did, in fact, occur supported by specific, substantive, reliable and probative evidence.³

The first issue to be addressed is whether appellant has established factors of employment that contributed to her alleged emotional condition or disability. Where the disability results from an emotional reaction to regular or specially assigned work duties or a requirement imposed by the employment, the disability comes within the coverage of the Federal Employees' Compensation Act.⁴ On the other hand, disability is not covered where it results from an employee's fear of a reduction-in-force, frustration from not being permitted to work in a particular environment or to hold a particular position, or to secure a promotion. Disabling conditions resulting from an employee's feeling of job insecurity or the desire for a different job do not constitute a personal injury sustained while in the performance of duty within the meaning of the Act.⁵

ANALYSIS

The Board finds that appellant has failed to submit sufficient evidence to establish his allegations that his supervisor engaged in a pattern of harassment, intimidation or discrimination. Appellant alleged that Mr. Ezem harassed him, but did not provide sufficient evidence to establish that he was harassed or treated in a discriminatory manner. Mere perceptions of harassment or discrimination are not compensable; a claimant must establish a basis in fact for the claim by supporting his allegations with probative and reliable evidence. Appellant alleged that Mr. Ezem gave him unreasonable restrictions and expectations that he did not impose on other supervisors, but failed to submit documentation to prove these allegations. Mr. Ezem

² See Debbie J. Hobbs, 43 ECAB 135 (1991).

³ See Ruth C. Borden, 43 ECAB 146 (1991).

⁴ Lillian Cutler, 28 ECAB 125 (1976).

⁵ *Id*.

⁶ See Joel Parker, Sr., 43 ECAB 220 (1991) (the Board held that a claimant must substantiate allegations of harassment or discrimination with probative and reliable evidence).

⁷ Curtis Hall, 45 ECAB 316 (1994); Margaret S. Krzycki, 43 ECAB 496 (1992).

⁸ The Board notes that although appellant submitted voluminous records of his work hours and overtime hours in the form of pay stubs, clock rings and timesheets, he failed to provide similar records from other supervisors indicating that his work schedule was discriminatory, nor has appellant indicated that he was given additional work assignments and restrictions which created unreasonable responsibilities, over and above those of other supervisors, which constituted discriminatory treatment.

denied appellant's allegations that he was unfairly singled out or treated in a discriminatory manner. He stated that he counseled appellant about his attendance and leave, which was part of his managerial functions. Disciplinary matters consisting of counseling sessions, discussions or letters of warning for conduct pertain to actions taken in an administrative capacity, and are not compensable as factors of employment. Appellant alleged that his supervisors made statements and engaged in actions which he believed constituted harassment and discrimination, but he provided no corroborating evidence, such as witness statements, to establish that the statements actually were made or that the actions actually occurred. Ms. Ezem did acknowledge discussing with appellant the need to clarify requests for leave and the need to make them in a timely manner. He denied, however, that he harassed appellant regarding leave issues. Ms. Ezem indicated that he acted in his administrative capacity in counseling appellant about matters pertaining to leave and in monitoring his whereabouts because his attendance was unsatisfactory, because he took unauthorized breaks and because he frequently failed to submit the proper forms for requesting leave. He rejected appellant's allegation that he harassed appellant by arbitrarily denying his requests for leave.

The Office reviewed all of appellant's allegations of harassment, abuse and mistreatment, and found that they were not substantiated or corroborated. To that end, the Board finds that the Office properly found that the episodes of harassment cited by appellant did not factually occur as alleged by appellant, as he failed to provide any corroborating evidence for his allegations. As such, appellant's allegations constitute mere perceptions or generally stated assertions of dissatisfaction with a certain superior at work which do not support his claim for an emotional disability. For this reason, the Office properly determined that these incidents constituted mere perceptions and were not factually established. Appellant has not submitted evidence sufficient to establish that Mr. Ezem engaged in a pattern of harassment toward him or created a hostile workplace environment.

The Board finds the evidence of record does not establish that the administrative and personnel actions taken by management in this case were in error and are, therefore, not considered factors of employment. An employee's emotional reaction to an administrative or personnel matter is not covered under the Act, unless there is evidence that the employing establishment acted unreasonably. Appellant has not presented sufficient evidence that the employing establishment acted unreasonably or committed error with regard to the incidents of alleged unreasonable actions involving personnel matters on the part of the employing establishment.

Appellant alleged that he sustained stress in the performance of his duties as a supervisor due to the additional responsibilities and excessive overtime assigned to him by Mr. Ezem. The Board has held that emotional reactions to situations in which an employee is trying to meet his

⁹ Barbara E. Hamm, 45 ECAB 843 (1994); Barbara J. Nicholson, 45 ECAB 803 (1994).

¹⁰ See William P. George, 43 ECAB 1159, 1167 (1992).

¹¹ See Debbie J. Hobbs, supra note 2.

¹² See Alfred Arts, 45 ECAB 530, 543-44 (1994).

or her position requirements are compensable.¹³ However, appellant has submitted insufficient evidence to establish that the employing establishment acted unreasonably or committed error with regard to the incidents of alleged unreasonable actions involving administrative or personnel matters on the part of the employing establishment. An employee's emotional reaction to an administrative or personnel matter is not covered under the Act, unless there is evidence that the employing establishment acted unreasonably.¹⁴ Assignment of a work schedule is an administrative function, and not a work factor, and is not compensable absent a showing of error or abuse.

As part of the managerial function, a supervisor must assign work. Appellant did not submit any evidence to substantiate that any of his work assignments were in error or were abusive.

The Board has held that an employee's dissatisfaction with perceived poor management constitutes frustration from not being permitted to work in a particular environment or to hold a particular position and is not compensable under the Act. Appellant has not submitted sufficient evidence to support his allegations that Mr. Ezem gave him incorrect and contradictory scheduling instructions, imposed an unusually heavy workload and issued unreasonable deadlines. Appellant also has not established that the employing establishment subjected him to unreasonable demands in setting performance guidelines for his. Thus, these actions on the part of management did not constitute a factor of employment.

Regarding appellant's allegation that he developed stress due to the uncertainty of his job duties and his insecurity about maintaining his position, the Board has previously held that a claimant's job insecurity is not a compensable factor of employment under the Act. ¹⁶ Accordingly, appellant has presented no evidence that the employing establishment acted unreasonably or committed error with regard to these incidents of administrative managerial functions. A reaction to such factors did not constitute an injury arising within the performance of duty; such personnel matters were not compensable factors of employment in the absence of agency error or abuse.

The Board notes that matters pertaining to use of leave are generally not covered under the Act as they pertain to administrative actions of the employing establishment and not to the regular or specially assigned duties the employee was hired to perform. However, error or abuse by the employing establishment in an administrative or personnel matter, or evidence that the employing establishment acted unreasonably in the administrative or personnel matter, may afford coverage. As appellant has failed to show that these actions demonstrated error or abuse

¹³ See Lillian Cutler, supra note 4.

¹⁴ See Alfred Arts, supra note 12.

¹⁵ See Michael Thomas Plante, 44 ECAB 510, 515 (1993).

¹⁶ See Artice Dotson, 42 ECAB 754, 758 (1990); Allen C. Godfrey, 37 ECAB 334, 337-38 (1986).

¹⁷ Elizabeth Pinero, 46 ECAB 123 (1994).

¹⁸ Margreate Lublin, 44 ECAB 945 (1993).

on the part of management, they are not compensable.¹⁹ The Board further finds that management did not commit administrative abuse or error by monitoring appellant's leave and his whereabouts at the worksite. The Board notes that disciplinary action is an administrative function and therefore any reaction to such is not considered to be in the performance of duty. Appellant failed to demonstrate that Mr. Ezem was doing anything more than discharging his supervisory duties by monitoring and checking on his employees or that he engaged in improper conduct which exceeded his administrative responsibilities.

The Board has held that investigations, which are an administrative function of the employing establishment, that do not involve an employee's regularly or specially assigned employment duties are not considered to be employment factors.²⁰ However, the Board has also found that an administrative or personnel matter will be considered to be an employment factor where the evidence discloses error or abuse on the part of the employing establishment. In determining whether the employing establishment erred or acted abusively, the Board has examined whether the employing establishment acted reasonably.²¹ Although appellant has made allegations that the employing establishment erred and acted abusively in conducting its investigative interview, appellant has not provided sufficient evidence to support such a claim. A review of the evidence indicates that appellant has not shown that the employing establishment's actions in connection with its investigation of him were unreasonable. Appellant alleged that his supervisor made abusive statements during the course of the investigation of him, but he provided no corroborating evidence, such as witness statements, to establish that the statements were actually made.²² Thus, appellant has not established a compensable employment factor under the Act in this respect.

The Board finds that appellant has not established a compensable work factor. For this reason, the medical evidence will not be considered. The Board will affirm the June 20 and November 8, 2006 and April 11, 2007 decisions denying compensation for an alleged emotional condition.

CONCLUSION

The Board finds that appellant failed to meet his burden of proof to establish that he sustained an emotional condition in the performance of duty.

¹⁹ The Board notes that the case file contains a document indicating that appellant received a pay adjustment after being charged with being AWOL for 32 hours in December 2005 and January 2006. However, the mere fact that personnel actions were later modified or rescinded, does not in and of itself, establish error or abuse. *See Michael Thomas Plante, supra* note 15.

²⁰ Jimmy B. Copeland, 43 ECAB 339, 345 (1991).

²¹ See Richard J. Dube, 42 ECAB 916, 920 (1991).

²² See Larry J. Thomas, 44 ECAB 291, 300 (1992).

²³ See Margaret S. Krzycki, supra note 7.

<u>ORDER</u>

IT IS HEREBY ORDERED THAT the April 11, 2007 and November 8 and June 20, 2006 decisions of the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs be affirmed.

Issued: May 19, 2008 Washington, DC

> Alec J. Koromilas, Chief Judge Employees' Compensation Appeals Board

> David S. Gerson, Judge Employees' Compensation Appeals Board

> James A. Haynes, Alternate Judge Employees' Compensation Appeals Board