

STATE OF VERMONT

SUPERIOR COURT
Washington Unit

CIVIL DIVISION
No. 21-CV-2591

STEVEN CHAPIN,
Appellant,

v.

JAMES BAKER, COMMISSIONER,
VERMONT DEPT OF CORRECTIONS
Appellee.

RULING ON THE STATE'S MOTION TO DISMISS

Vermont prisoner and appellant Steven Chapin filed this action seeking Rule 74 review of a Department of Corrections case-staffing decision pursuant to 28 V.S.A. § 724, which permits limited review of certain decisions following a furlough violation. The State filed a motion to dismiss raising several issues, which the court denied. However, in its reply, the State for the first time argued that the case should be dismissed because the case-staffing arose from a nontechnical, rather than technical, violation of furlough. The court reserved on that issue, giving Mr. Chapin a fair opportunity to address it. Mr. Chapin now has briefed the matter.

Mr. Chapin does not dispute that his furlough was revoked for a nontechnical violation. Rather, he argues that § 724 review is available regardless whether the violation is technical or nontechnical.

Section 724, in its entirety, reads as follows:

(a) Authority of the Department. The Department shall identify in the terms and conditions of community supervision furlough those programs necessary to reduce the offender's risk of reoffense and to promote the offender's accountability for progress in the reintegration process. The Department shall make all determinations of violations of conditions of community supervision furlough pursuant to this subchapter and any resulting change in status or termination of community supervision furlough status.

(b) 90-day interruption or revocation. Any interruption of an offender's community supervision furlough after the Department has found a technical violation of furlough conditions shall trigger a Department Central Office case staffing review and Department notification to the Office of the Defender General if the interruption will be 90 days or longer.

(c) Appeal. An offender whose furlough status is revoked or interrupted for 90 days or longer shall have the right to appeal the Department's determination to the Civil Division of the Superior Court in accordance with Rule 74 of the Vermont Rules of Civil Procedure. The appeal shall be based on a de novo review of the record. The appellant may offer testimony, and, in its discretion for good cause shown, the court may accept additional evidence to supplement the record. The appellant shall have the burden of proving by a preponderance of the evidence that the Department abused its discretion in imposing a furlough revocation or interruption for 90 days or longer pursuant to subsection (d) of this section.

(d) Technical violations.

(1) As used in this section, "technical violation" means a violation of conditions of furlough that does not constitute a new crime.

(2) It shall be abuse of the Department's discretion to revoke furlough or interrupt furlough status for 90 days or longer for a technical violation, unless:

(A) the offender's risk to reoffend can no longer be adequately controlled in the community, and no other method to control noncompliance is suitable; or

(B) the violation or pattern of violations indicate the offender poses a danger to others or to the community or poses a threat to abscond or escape from furlough.

28 V.S.A. § 724. Mr. Chapin focuses exclusively on the first sentence of § 724(c) to argue that it expansively permits review in any case in which "furlough status is revoked or interrupted for 90 days or longer."

The sentence that Mr. Chapin focuses on has to be viewed in isolation to support his argument. "The words of a statute are not to be read in isolation, however, but rather in the context and structure of the statute as a whole." *In re Vermont Verde Antique Intern., Inc.*, 174 Vt. 208, 211–12 (2002). In context, review clearly is available only for "technical" violations, violations of furlough conditions that do not amount to new crimes.

Section 724(c) specifically says that, on appeal, the appellant has the burden of proving that the DOC "abused its discretion in imposing a furlough revocation or interruption for 90 days or longer pursuant to subsection (d) of this section." (Emphasis added.) Subsection (d), in turn, defines a technical violation, and it expresses the standards by which to measure abuses of discretion regarding technical violations. It is thus clear that, in appealing, the appellant has the burden of proving an abuse of discretion regarding a technical violation. There are no similar provisions applicable to nontechnical violations. With no statutory standards for measuring abuses of discretion regarding nontechnical violations, the court would have no way to meaningfully provide the review that § 724 contemplates. The review available under § 724(c) extends to technical violations only.

Section 724(b) also requires the DOC to notify the Office of the Defender General of any revocations or 90-day or greater interruptions following technical violations only. This presumably is intended to ensure that the Prisoners' Rights Office has notice of cases in

which review is available. If review also were available in the case of nontechnical violations, one would think notice to the Prisoners' Rights Office would be every bit as warranted. The court presumes that the legislature made this distinction for a reason, namely, that review is simply not available in the case of nontechnical violations.

Review is available under § 724 for case-staffings following statutorily defined technical violations only. Because this case stems from a nontechnical violation, the State is entitled to dismissal.

Order

For the foregoing reasons, the State's motion to dismiss is granted. The State shall submit a form of judgment. V.R.C.P. 58(d).

SO ORDERED this 6th day of December, 2021.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert A. Mello", is written over a horizontal line.

Robert A. Mello
Superior Judge