



Citation: *CL v Canada Employment Insurance Commission*, 2022 SST 1790

**Social Security Tribunal of Canada
General Division – Employment Insurance Section**

Decision

Appellant: C. L.

Respondent: Canada Employment Insurance Commission

Decision under appeal: Canada Employment Insurance Commission reconsideration decision (466411) dated April 29, 2022 (issued by Service Canada)

Tribunal member: John Noonan

Type of hearing: In person

Hearing date: November 3, 2022

Hearing participants: Appellant

Decision date: November 12, 2022

File number: GE-22-1941

Decision

[1] The appeal is dismissed.

Overview

[2] The Appellant, C. L., was upon reconsideration by the Commission, notified that it was unable to pay her Employment Insurance benefits from September 27, 2021 because she was taking a training course on her own initiative and has not proven her availability for work if she were not sick. The Appellant maintains that she did not make any decisions before being advised by Service Canada staff, and she proceeded based on the assumption that she would receive EI benefits (GD3-34 to GD3-40). The Tribunal must decide if the Appellant has proven her availability pursuant to sections 18 of the Employment Insurance Act (the Act).

Issue

[3] Issue # 1: If not for her illness, was the Appellant available for work?

Analysis

[4] The relevant legislative provisions are reproduced at GD4.

[5] **Paragraph 18(1)(b) of the Act stipulates that to be entitled to sickness benefits, the claimant must establish that she is unable to work and if it were not for her illness, she would have been available for work.**

[6] There is a presumption that a person enrolled in a course of full-time study is not available for work. This presumption of fact is rebuttable by proof of exceptional circumstances (**Cyrenne 2010 FCA 349**)

[7] This presumption applies to an individual is not available for work when she is taking a full-time course on her own initiative. To rebut this presumption, the Appellant must demonstrate that her main intention is to immediately accept suitable employment as evidenced by job search efforts, that she is prepared to make whatever arrangements may be required, or that she is prepared to abandon the

course. She must demonstrate by her actions that the course is of secondary importance and does not constitute an obstacle to seeking and accepting suitable employment.

[8] A person who attends a full-time course without being referred by an authority designated by the Commission must demonstrate that she is capable of and available for work and unable to obtain suitable employment, and must meet the availability requirements of all claimants who are requesting regular employment insurance benefits. She must continue to seek employment and must show that course requirements have not placed restrictions on her availability which greatly reduce chances of finding employment.

[9] The following factors may be relevant to the determination regarding availability for work:

- (a) the attendance requirements of the course;
- (b) the claimant's willingness to give up her studies to accept employment;
- (c) whether or not the claimant has a history of being employed at irregular hours;
- (d) the existence of "exceptional circumstances" that would enable the claimant to work while taking courses;
- (e) the financial cost of taking the course.

[10] In order to be found available for work, a claimant shall: 1. Have a desire to return to the labour market as soon as suitable employment is offered, 2. Express that desire through efforts to find a suitable employment and 3. Not set personal conditions that might unduly limit their chances of returning to the labour market. All three factors shall be considered in making a decision. **(Faucher A-56-96 & Faucher A-57-96)**

Issue 1: If not for her illness, was the Appellant available for work?

[11] No.

[12] In this case, by the Appellant's statements and submissions, she was attending a full time program of studies.

[13] She was not approved by a designated authority to attend this program.

[14] The Appellant stated and confirmed at her hearing that she started full-time training X on September 1 of 2021.

[15] She attends class Monday through Friday, mornings and afternoons and she does not control the hours which coincide with her normal work hours.

[16] The Appellant asserts that:

- She left her job due to illness.

- she made the decision to take a year off work to focus on her health in consultation with her doctor and therapist. For the first three months, she was paid by her employer using her remaining sick days. Then, in June, she applied for employment insurance benefits (GD3-37).

- She only made the decision to return to school after consulting with Service Canada.

- She said though she contacted the Commission many times for guidance and the information she was provided incomplete, incorrect and misleading information. She said that as a result of incompetence within the department, she is now suffering financial strain, sickness and distress. She said if not for the information she received, she would not have taken out a loan and gone to school (GD3-39).

- She is now working one substitute shift per week, any more would interfere with her studies.

- She would be available for work and capable of working upon her recovery but planned to complete her course of studies first. GD3-11-14

[17] The Appellant asserts that she was honest in her application and the approval of benefits by the Commission was not her error. She should not be held liable for the Commissions error if benefits were paid when they should not have been.

[18] The Appellant planned on attending her course of studies at least three months prior to its start date as shpwn on her application.

[19] This process is causing great stress and financial hardship.

[20] All that being said, for the period in question there is no evidence the Appellant was carrying out a comprehensive job search in an attempt to obtain full time employment. The Appellant states she is not able to take a full time job because school is too busy. She found work, working one shift per week so as not to interfere with her studies. She was not willing to quit school for a full time job.

[21] While I accept that she had the implied approval of the Commission one is expected to carry out a comprehensive job search even if doing so seems futile.

[22] I find that these actions, or lack of, on the part of the Appellant do not show, throughout the entire period in question, a sincere desire to return to the labour market as soon as suitable employment is offered.

Issue 2: Was she making reasonable and customary efforts to obtain work?

[23] No.

[24] Again, there is no evidence the Appellant was carrying out a comprehensive job search.

[25] While she maintains that she was available, she is still, in order to be eligible to receive benefits, required to carry out a reasonable job search.

[26] The Appellant's job search activity during the periods in question cannot be considered a reasonable and customary job search as per section 9.001 of the Regulations.

[27] I find that the Appellant has, throughout the entire period of this process, not shown that she was making reasonable and customary efforts to obtain suitable employment.

Issue 3: Did she set personal conditions that might unduly limit her chances of returning to the labour market?

[28] Yes.

[29] The Appellant stated that her intention was to complete her course, and not to return to the workforce as soon as possible and based on her lack of reasonable job search activity and the fact she has invested \$5,500 into her program of studies and obtained a student loan, I find this to be consistent with the facts before me.

[30] She confirmed she would not leave her training to accept full-time employment if it conflicted with her training schedule

[31] The Appellant has failed to rebut the presumption of non-availability while in a college program as she stated her focus was on her studies rather than being available for work. She stated she was not available for full time work.

[32] I find that the Appellant in this case while not following a course of instruction approved by an authority designated by the Commission, by spending 25 plus hours per week on her program of studies and not choosing to carry out a reasonable job search, did set personal conditions that might unduly limit her chances of returning to the labour market.

[33] Furthermore, the Federal Court of Appeal has confirmed that a claimant who restricts her availability and is only available for employment outside of her course schedule has not proven availability for work within the meaning of the EIA. **Duquet v. Canada (AG), 2008 FCA 313; Canada (AG) v. Gauthier, 2006 FCA 40**

[34] By itself, a mere statement of availability by the claimant is not enough to discharge the burden of proof. **CUBs 18828 and 33717**

[35] While this Member supports the Appellant's efforts to complete her education and find suitable employment as a result, I find that she has failed to present evidence of "exceptional circumstances" that would rebut the presumption of non-availability while attending a full time course.

[36] I agree with the Commission when it concluded that the Appellant was not able to establish that, if it were not for her illness, she would have been available for work.

[37] Her availability was impaired by her attendance at college, not by her illness.

[38] She is therefore not eligible to receive benefits from September 27, 2021.

[39] Neither the Tribunal or the Commission have any discretion or authority to override clear statutory provisions and conditions imposed by the Act or the Regulations on the basis of fairness, compassion, financial or extenuating circumstances.

[40] The Commission acknowledges that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some requirements related to availability for work while attending training programs have been relaxed until September 2021. Prior to 27 September 2020, a claimant's availability for work would have been reviewed by a Commission representative when the claimant indicated he (or she) was involved in a non-referred course of training or instruction. As of 27 September 2020, availability is no longer automatically reviewed when a claimant submits an application for benefits, or a bi-weekly claimant report, and reports that he (or she) is attending non-referred training but is still available for work as required. Rather than being reviewed by an agent, the training is automatically allowed. However, the Commission still has the authority to review a claimant's availability, and impose a retroactive or current disentitlement, if it is determined that his (or her) availability for work, as required by the legislation and established jurisprudence, has not been proven. If a claimant makes a statement or provides information that brings his (or her) availability while attending a non-referred course of instruction into question, the Commission can, pursuant to subsection 50(8) of the Act, "require the claimant to prove

that the claimant is making reasonable and customary efforts to obtain suitable employment.”

[41] In other words, the Commission chose to review the Appellant’s availability after approving her claim and is now denying benefits based on the same, honest information given by the Appellant with her application. The Commission relies on subsection 50(8) of the Act, to give it the authority to do so.

[42] Regarding the Appellant’s request that the overpayment be waived, this is a decision that can only be made by the Commission, the Tribunal has no jurisdiction in this matter.

[43] However, the Tribunal can comment on the circumstances that led to the overpayment.

[44] ***The common characteristics found in the situations and circumstances leading to an overpayment write off, are that the claimant cannot be held directly responsible for the events which led to the overpayment. In other words, the claimant did not play a role in or have any real control over the events except to request and receive the benefits in good faith.***

[45] In this case the Commission approved benefits with the same information it is now using to deny and recoup those benefits. The Appellant here played no role in the approval process as she had honestly and correctly responded to all questions asked of her.

[46] ***It is important to prevent situations where a claimant is required to pay for delays or errors caused by the Commission, when the situation is completely out of the claimant’s control.***

[47] Whether an error or adherence to the above policy of the Commission, the decisions regarding the approval of benefits were out of her control and were completely in the hands of the Commission,

[48] Overpayments that occur when the Commission does not make a decision on a claim within a reasonable period of time may result in a portion of the overpayment being written off. This refers to situations where a claimant provided information, and before the Commission processed the information, benefits were incorrectly paid. The portion of the overpayment that would not have occurred, had there been no delay, can be written off. A Commission error occurs when benefits are wrongly paid because the Commission did not action the claim appropriately (Digest 17.2.0). This may occur when there is information on file which the Commission ignores, or when errors in the calculation of one or more elements of the claim occur (EI Regulation 56(2)(b)(i)).

[49] The Appellant here started her course of instruction with the full knowledge and implied consent of the Commission. The Commission paid benefits based on that knowledge and consent then waited eight months after the application was submitted, February 21, 2022, to rescind approval and request the Appellant repay the overpayment incurred. The entire amount of the overpayment was paid due to the Commission's delay in auctioning the information before it as submitted on numerous occasions by the Appellant.

[50] It is the Commission who holds the authority to reduce or write-off an overpayment but this is not automatic, application must be made to the Commission. One must outline the details that having such a debt would have and is having on the claimant's finances, stress related to the debt and what caused the debt.

[51] The Commission's decision regarding same is not appealable to the Tribunal. Only the Commission decision that caused the overpayment is subject to the reconsideration under section 112 of the Employment Insurance Act (the Act). The claimant's responsibility to repay an overpayment and the interest charged on an overpayment is not subject to reconsideration because these are not decisions of the Commission, and the claimant's liability is as a "debtor" as opposed to a "claimant". The claimant's recourse regarding these issues is to seek judicial review with the Federal Court of Canada.

[52] **This process must be initiated by the Appellant, she must apply to the Commission to have the debt written off.**

[53] I do not have the authority to reduce or write off the overpayment. The Tribunal does not have the jurisdiction to decide on matters relating to debt reduction or write off.

[54] The Appellant requests that the overpayment be erased. I agree with the stated position of the Commission and I note that the law states that their decision regarding writing off an amount owed can't be appealed to the Social Security Tribunal. This means that I cannot determine matters relating to a request for a write-off or reduction of an overpayment.

[55] The Federal Court of Canada has the jurisdiction to hear an appeal relating to a write-off issue. This means that if the Claimant wishes to pursue an appeal regarding her request to write off the overpayment, she needs to do so through the Federal Court of Canada.

[56] As a final matter, I cannot see any evidence in the file that the Commission advised the Appellant about the debt forgiveness program through Canada Revenue Agency (CRA). If immediate repayment of the overpayment pursuant to section 44 of the EI Act will cause her financial hardship, she can call the Debt Management Call Centre of CRA at 1-866-864-5823. She may be able to make alternative repayment arrangements based on her individual financial circumstances.

Conclusion

[57] I find that, having given due consideration to all of the circumstances, the Appellant has not successfully rebutted the assertion that, if not for her illness, she was not available for work from September 27, 2021 and as such the appeal regarding availability is dismissed.

John Noonan
Member, General Division – Employment Insurance Section