

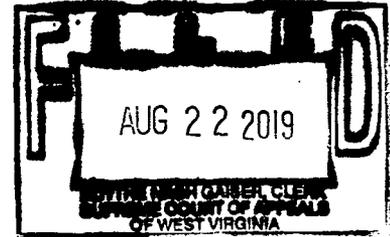
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IN THE SUPREME COURT OF APPEALS OF WEST VIRGINIA

Docket No. 19-0350

ADAM HOLLEY, acting commissioner
West Virginia Division of Motor Vehicles



Respondent Below, Petitioner,

v.

JOHN H. FOUCH, III,

Petitioner Below, Respondent.

BRIEF OF RESPONDENT JOHN H. FOUCH, III

Appeal from the Circuit Court of Kanawha County, West Virginia
Civil Action No.: 18-AA-223
Judge Jennifer Bailey

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Now comes John H. Fouch, III, by counsel, David Pence, and hereby submits his Brief of Respondent John H. Fouch, III pursuant to the Scheduling Order previously entered by this Court.

I. RESPONSE TO PETITIONER'S ASSIGNMENTS OF ERROR

- A. The circuit court did not err in determining that the admission of the Commissioner's file over counsel's objection was unlawful when its admission would result in the denial of a driver's Due Process right of confrontation.
- B. Petitioner's Due Process rights were violated by being denied an opportunity to confront and cross-examine the Investigating Officer.
- C. Post 2010, the DMV is no longer the "agency" under the State Administrative Procedures Act and it may not admit documentary evidence without authenticating the documents pursuant to the West Virginia Rules of Evidence.

II. STATEMENT OF THE CASE

The administrative license revocation proceeding in his case was continued on four separate occasions over a three year period due to the investigating officer's failure to appear despite being lawfully subpoenaed. The only person that testified at the administrative license revocation proceeding was Mr. Fouch (hereinafter "Respondent"). Respondent's counsel was denied the opportunity to cross examine the author of the documents relied upon by the hearing examiner to sustain the previously entered Order of Revocation.

On April 15, 2013, Respondent, drove his nephew to the store in Kenova, West Virginia. App. at 278. Before leaving his house, Respondent brushed his teeth, rinsed with Listerine, and took Albuterol. *Id.* Respondent elected to drive because his nephew had consumed alcohol, needed to go to the store and was unable to legally and safely drive. App. at 277-278. While driving, Respondent's nephew began pulling on the steering wheel causing the vehicle to swerve. While in the store,

Respondent's nephew became ill and vomited due to his severe intoxication. App. at 279. While Respondent's nephew was in the store, Officer M. Thompson (hereinafter "Investigating Officer") arrived and began questioning Respondent. Subsequently, Respondent was arrested for Driving Under the Influence of Alcohol (hereinafter "DUI").

On April 25, 2013, Respondent received an *Order of Revocation for his* and *Order of Disqualification* from the Commissioner of the DMV. App. at 95. Respondent timely challenged both orders by written objection received by the Office of Administrative Hearings (hereinafter "OAH") on May 16, 2013. App. at 88-93.

Prior to the administrative hearing, on June 17, 2013, the DMV, through counsel, moved to admit the Commissioner's file into evidence in advance of the hearing. App. at 119-128. In June of 2013, both the Commissioner and the Respondent issued a subpoena for the attendance of the Investigating Officer to ensure his attendance. Appx. at 82. The August 20, 2013 administrative hearing was continued *sue sponte* by the OAH because the hearing examiner had a family emergency. App. at 132.

An administrative hearing was rescheduled for March 5, 2014. Appx. at 135. A subpoena was issued by the OAH on February 24, 2014, for the Investigating Officer and delivered to same on February 25, 2014. App. at 82. On March 5, 2014, both the Petitioner and the Respondent moved to continue the administrative hearing. App. at 139. Counsel for the Petitioner was ill and the Investigating Officer failed to appear after being subpoenaed. *Id.*

The hearing was rescheduled for October 9, 2014. App. at 149. Respondent once again requested the appearance of the Investigating Officer through the OAH by which was issued to Respondent on July 15, 2014. Appx. 83. The October 9, 2014, hearing was continued upon motion

of the DMV for cause. Appx. at 165. Counsel for the DMV had received information that video evidence of the alleged incident may be available and sought time to secure the footage. *Id.*

Thus, the hearing was rescheduled for July 28, 2015. App. at 168. The OAH issued a new subpoena to secure the appearance of the Investigating Officer. App. at 171. On July 28, 2015, the DMV moved to continue the hearing due to the failure of the Investigating Officer to appear after being lawfully subpoenaed. App. at 182. The request was granted over the objection of Petitioner's counsel. *Id.*

The hearing was then rescheduled for February 17, 2016. App. at 185. Once again, Patrolman M. Thompson failed to appear despite being under lawful subpoena. On February 17, 2016, the DMV moved to continue the hearing due to the failure of the Investigating Officer to appear. App. at 194. The Petitioner's motion was granted. *Id.*

Yet again, the hearing was rescheduled and set for June 15, 2016. App. at 197. A subpoena was issued on February 22, 2016 to ensure the Investigating Officer's attendance at the upcoming hearing. App. at 83.

At the June 15, 2016 hearing the Investigating Officer once again failed to appear - this time for the fourth time! On this occasion, however, the DMV moved into evidence the documents prepared by the Investigating Officer absent any authentication and over the objection of Petitioner's counsel. App. at 270-272. The hearing examiner explained that she lacked authority to dismiss the revocation and moved the documentation into evidence despite the absence of Officer M. Thompson. She then inquired if Petitioner's counsel was moving to continue the hearing to allow the officer, an adverse witness, a fifth opportunity to appear. Petitioner declined to make said motion, explaining that he did not believe his client should suffer the additional expense. App. at 272.

Importantly, Petitioner's counsel did not waive his right to cross examine the Investigating Officer. Throughout this litigation, Petitioner has expressly exercised his Due Process right to confront his accusers, asking simply that he be permitted to question the author of the documents relied upon by the Petitioner to revoke his driver's license.

The only individual to testify at the June 15, 2016, hearing was Petitioner. Neither the Investigating Officer nor any witness for the DMV appeared at the hearing to testify. Despite there being no witness to authenticate and identify the reports offered by the DMV, the hearing examiner nonetheless allowed those documents into evidence and proceeded with the administrative hearing. There being no witness to cross examine, Petitioner was left with no means in which to challenge the written evidence introduced by the Respondent.

Stripped of his constitutional right to confront his accusers, the Petitioner took the stand and refuted the allegations contained in the Investigating Officer's reports. Unlike the Investigating Officer, Petitioner subjected himself to cross examination and allowed his testimony to be scrutinized. Counsel for Petitioner vouched the record about what he would have cross-examined the Investigating Officer about, including a towing bill that purports to show that the Investigating Officer called the towing company to tow Petitioner's vehicle a mere twelve (12) minutes prior to arresting Petitioner, among other things. App. at 285-286.

On June 26, 2018,¹ the OAH entered its Final order affirming the Commissioner's *Order of Revocation* and *Order of Disqualification*. App. at 218-223. Petitioner timely appealed that decision to the Circuit Court of Kanawha County on July 2, 2018. App. at 243-265. The Circuit Court of

¹ Petitioner's Brief states that the OAH's Final Order was entered June 26, 2017, but this is a typographical error first appearing in the OAH's Final Order. See footnote 1 of the Circuit Court of Kanawha County's Order Reversing Office of Administrative Hearings' Final Order. Appx. at 1.

Kanawha County entered its *Order Reversing Office of Administrative Hearings' Final Order* on March 6, 2019. App. at 1-27.

III. STANDARD OF REVIEW

Pursuant to West Virginia Code §29A-5-4(g) (2007) of the State Administrative Procedures Act the Appellate Court,

“ . . . shall reverse, vacate or modify the order or decision of the agency if the substantial rights of the petitioner or petitioners have been prejudiced because the administrative findings, inferences, conclusions, decision or order are:

- (1) In violation of constitutional or statutory provisions; or
- (2) In excess of the statutory authority or jurisdiction of the agency; or
- (3) Made upon unlawful procedures; or
- (4) Affected by other error of law; or
- (5) Clearly wrong in view of the reliable, probative and substantial evidence on the whole record; or
- (6) Arbitrary or capricious or characterized by abuse of discretion or clearly unwarranted exercise of discretion.

IV. SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT

This case is about the denial of a private citizen’s Due Process right to confront his accusers in an administrative driver’s license proceeding. The Investigating Officer failed to appear to any of the several re-scheduled hearings despite being under subpoena from both parties. In response, the OAH and the DMV proceeded with a hearing and resolution on the matter thereby denying Petitioner his opportunity to confront his accusers over his objection.

Essentially, the Petitioner argues that it should prevail in a contested administrative hearing before the OAH without having to present any witness testimony, without having to present any legal argument, and without having to authenticate documents before admitting them into evidence as required under the West Virginia Rules of Evidence which are applicable to contested hearings

before the OAH under the State Administrative Procedures Act.

When the DMV is relieved of having to follow the West Virginia Rules of Evidence it forces licensees to cross-examine an empty chair and dispossesses them of any effective means to challenge the contents of the documents being submitted by the DMV to prove the DMV's case *in toto*. Moreover, the licensee is then forced to take the stand in an effort to rebut the documents, but as was the case herein, the OAH hearing examiner discredits such testimony from the licensee as self-serving. The burden has thus shifted to the licensee to prove his case in contravention of the statutory framework underlying license revocation hearings and upending a licensee's right to Due Process of law as guaranteed by the West Virginia Constitution through the State Administrative Procedures Act and several decisions of this Court.

Petitioner cites *Dale v. Odum v. Doyle*, 223 W.Va. 601, 760 S.E.2d 415 (2014) for the proposition that any document in the DMV's possession is *per se* admissible in administrative hearings before the OAH. However, in those cases the officer who completed the DUI Information Sheet *appeared and testified* before the OAH. Further, the investigating or arresting officers were subject to cross-examination and those same officers were able to authenticate the documents they prepared for admission into the record pursuant to the West Virginia Rules of Evidence to ensure the reliability of those reports.

V. STATEMENT REGARDING ORAL ARGUMENT AND DECISION

The Respondent believes oral argument is necessary under W.Va R. App. Pro. 18a as the decisional process would be significantly aided by oral argument. The Respondent requests oral argument pursuant to W.Va R. App. Pro. 20 (2010). Respondent respectfully submits that the case at bar is an unsettled question of law, namely, whether an administrative agency who is deemed a

party, and not the agency, for purposes of the State Administrative Procedures Act, can admit documentary evidence in its possession as a substitute for testimony when the opposing party objects and asserts his right to cross examine the author of those documents. Following briefing and argument, Respondent believes that the appropriate disposition of this case would be a signed opinion affirming the decision of the circuit court below.

VI. ARGUMENT

A. The circuit court did not err in determining that the admission of the Commissioner's file over counsel's objection was unlawful when its admission would result in the denial of a driver's Due Process right of confrontation.

The Petitioner is asking this Court to extend the holding of *Dale v. Odum v. Doyle* 223 W. Va 601, 760 S.E.2d 415 (2014) regarding the The Administrative Procedures Act to deprive a driver of his fundamental Due Process right to confront his accusers in an administrative license revocation proceeding. The Petitioner is arguing that investigating officers who ignore subpoenas can nonetheless have their subjective reports admitted into evidence as a substitute for live testimony. According to Petitioner's interpretation of the law, investigating officers may shield themselves from cross examination, thus leaving the accused in an unwinnable swearing match against the investigating officer's subjective reports which in practice have proven to be beyond reproach.

Moreover, at the time this Court decided *Dale v. Odum v. Doyle* 223 W. Va 601, 760 S.E.2d 415 (2014) (per curiam) a fundamental legislative change had occurred in contested license revocation hearings, namely the enactment of West Virginia Code §17C-5c-1 *et seq.* in 2010. The facts in *Dale v. Odum v. Doyle* are distinguishable from the facts in the case at bar for one significant reason – the complaining officers appeared in those cases. Thus, the officers were subjected to cross

examination, the contents of their documents were authenticated and the hearing examiner served as a gatekeeper for irrelevant or otherwise inadmissible evidence.

B. Petitioner's Due Process rights were violated by being denied an opportunity to confront and cross-examine the Investigating Officer.

The Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia has recognized that “[a] driver’s license is a property interest and such interest is entitled to protection under the Due Process Clause of the West Virginia Constitution.” Syl. Pt. 1, *Abshire v. Cline*, 193 W.Va. 180, 455 S.E.2d 549 (1995), *Straub v. Reed*, 239 W. Va. 844, 848, 806 S.E.2d 768, 772 (2017). Further, the Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia adopted certain procedural standards in driver’s license revocation proceedings. The Court stated,

“[w]e indicated the requirements of procedural due process may vary depending on the nature of the case. We stated ‘the more valuable the right sought to be deprived, the more safeguards will be interposed.’ Because of the substantial interests involved in *North*, we held the following due process procedures must be applicable ‘. . . a formal written notice of charges; sufficient opportunity to prepare to rebut the charges; opportunity to have retained counsel at any hearings on the charges, **to confront his accusers**, and to present evidence on his own behalf; an unbiased hearing tribunal; and an adequate record of the proceedings.’” (Emphasis added)

Jordan v. Roberts, 161 W. Va. 750, 755, 246 S.E.2d 259, 262 (1978) (quoting *North v. Board of Regents*, 160 W. Va. 248, 233 S.E.2d 411 (1977))(emphasis added). Further, “Every party shall have the *right* of cross-examination of witnesses who testify, and shall have the right to submit rebuttal evidence.” W. Va. Code § 29A-5-2(c) (1964)(emphasis added).

In *Meadows v. Reed* it took nearly four (4) years to conduct a hearing on a driver's license revocation. No. 14-0138, 2015 WL 1588462 (W. Va. Mar. 16, 2015) (Memorandum Decision). Unfortunately, in that amount of time the investigating officer passed away. Nevertheless, the licensee’s revocation was upheld “based upon faceless, voiceless documents containing written

statements of the arresting officer.” *Meadows v. Reed*, No. 14-0138, 2015 WL 1588462, at *4.

This Court found that the four (4) year delay in conducting a hearing actually and substantially prejudiced the licensee because during that delay he lost the ability to cross-examine the arresting officer and as such lost the “ability to defend against the arresting officer’s allegations was impaired by the Commissioner’s delay.” *Meadows*, No. 14-0138, 2015 WL 1588462, at *6. In that case, the Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia found that losing the ability to cross-examine the arresting officer constituted actual and substantial prejudice.

Here, Respondent was similarly prejudiced by being deprived of the very right to due process guaranteed under *Roberts* and West Virginia Code §29A-5-2(c) (1964). Make no mistake, there was no confrontation in this case, the Investigating Officer never appeared and his documents remained silent throughout the hearing, yet they were admitted without authentication and Respondent had no opportunity to rebut the accuracy of the documents that were submitted over his objection.

The Petitioner suggests that the right to confront one’s accusers is so hallow that it is satisfied by merely being afforded the opportunity to show up and tell one’s side of the story. However, the right of confrontation is much more broad.

For example, most cases involving driving while under the influence of alcohol include field sobriety tests. How can a driver challenge whether those tests were administered properly absent the testimony of the officer who administered those tests to establish the instructions that were provided? Also, how can a driver challenge the reliability of those field sobriety tests if he is denied the opportunity to question the officer about his training? The list goes on and on.

The above is consistent with this Court’s prior holding in Syl. Pt. 2, *White v. Miller*, 228, W.Va. 797, 724 S.E.2d 768 (2012) that:

“upon a challenge by the driver of a motor vehicle to the admission in evidence of the results of the horizontal gaze nystagmus test, the police officer who administered the test, if asked, should be prepared to give testimony concerning whether he or she was properly trained in conducting the test, and assessing the results, in accordance with the protocol sanctioned by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and whether, and in what manner, he or she complied with that training in administering the test to the driver.”

C. Post 2010, the DMV is no longer the “agency” under the State Administrative Procedures Act and it may not admit documentary evidence without authenticating the documents pursuant to the West Virginia Rules of Evidence.

In an effort to justify the deprivation of Respondent’s Due Process right of confrontation, the Petitioner conflates the definition of “agency” and “party” in the West Virginia Administrative Procedures Act (APA) to reach the absurd result that the Petitioner is both the “agency” and the “party” to the litigation. Wearing both hats, the Petitioner is then able to both prosecute a case and move its file into evidence absent any testimony or compliance with the West Virginia Rules of Evidence.

West Virginia Code § 29A–5–2(b) (1964) states:

“All evidence, including papers, records, agency staff memoranda and documents in the possession of the agency, of which it desires to avail itself, shall be offered and made a part of the record in the case, and no other factual information or evidence shall be considered in the determination of the case. Documentary evidence may be received in the form of copies or excerpts or by incorporation by reference.”

Relying on the holding set forth in *Dale v. Odum/Doyle*, 233 W.Va. 601, 760 S.E.2d 415 (2014) and West Virginia Code 29A-5-2(b), the Petitioner advocates for the admission of his file into evidence absent compliance with the West Virginia Rules of Evidence or production of the author of those documents for cross-examination. However, in both *Odum* and *Doyle*, the officer who

completed the D.U.I. Information Sheet appeared at the administrative hearing, testified, and subjected himself to cross examination. The same is true for *Crouch v. W.Va. Div. of Motor Vehicles*, 219 W.Va. 70, 631 S.E.2d 628 (2006). In *Crouch*, the DMV was the agency and the arresting officer was the party during a time before the OAH was created in 2010. The *Crouch* decision allowed the DMV to move its entire file into evidence if it chose to do prior to the creation of the OAH. Again, however, the arresting officer appeared and testified in *Crouch*. Neither *Crouch*, *Odum* or *Doyle* contemplated the DMV proving its case via an empty chair.

Odum and *Doyle* are unique because it is the first set of cases after the OAH was created wherein the Court suggests that the agency file is admissible if it chooses to avail itself of the file. However, the Petitioner's interpretation of *Odum* and *Doyle* turns on the definition of "agency" and "party" in the State Administrative Procedures Act.

Looking closer at the West Virginia APA, the "agency" is defined as "any state board, commission, department, office or officer authorized by law to make rules or adjudicate contested cases, except those in the legislative or judicial branches." W. Va. Code § 29A-1-2(a) (2015). Historically, the West Virginia Division of Motor Vehicles was the "agency" in administrative license revocation proceedings. However, in 2010 the Legislature created the Office of Administrative Hearings as a separate operating agency within the Department of Transportation to make rules and adjudicate contested cases. W. Va. Code § 17C-5C-1(a) (2010).² Thus, after 2010,

²¹ West Virginia Code § 17C-5C-3 (2010) states, in full:

The Office of Administrative Hearings jurisdiction to hear and determine all:

- (1) Appeals from an order of the Commissioner of the Division of Motor Vehicles suspending a license pursuant to section eight, article two-B, chapter seventeen-B of this code;
- (2) Appeals from decisions or orders of the Commissioner of the Division of Motor Vehicles suspending

the “agency” for administrative license revocation proceedings is the Office of Administrative Hearings, not the Respondent.

Not long after the Legislature created the OAH in 2010, the Legislature approved the W.Va Code R. §105-1-1 to govern administrative license revocation hearings. Leaving no doubt, the West Virginia Code of State Rules defines “party” and “parties” as “the petitioner and the respondent.” W.Va. Code R. §105-1-3. Further, Petitioner is defined as “the person contesting an order or decision of the Commissioner” and the Respondent means “the Commissioner”. *Id.*

Thus, for purposes of the State Administrative Procedures Act, the OAH is the agency contemplated as hearing and determining contested cases between the DMV and licensee. Therefore, all references to the “agency” in Chapter 29A refer to the OAH and the OAH only. The DMV is a party to the contested case the same as the licensee. The DMV states that the Circuit Court of Kanawha County erred in failing to acknowledge that the “DMV is the agency in possession of the record and a party at the administrative hearing” *Petitioner’s Brief* at 16. At no point in time after the creation of the OAH does the DMV ever possess the record in an administrative license revocation hearing. The DMV cites no law for this broad statement.

or revoking a license pursuant to sections three-c, six and twelve, article three, chapter seventeen-B of this code;

(3) Appeals from orders of the Commissioner of the Division of Motor Vehicles pursuant to section two, article five-A, of this chapter, revoking or suspending a license under the provisions of section one of this article or section seven, article five of chapter;

(4) Appeals from decisions or orders of the Commissioner of the Division of Motor Vehicles denying, suspending, revoking, refusing to renew any license or imposing any civil money penalty for violating the provisions of any licensing law contained in chapters seventeen-B and seventeen-c that are administered by the Commissioner of the Division of Motor Vehicles; and

(5) Other matters which may be conferred on the office by statute or legislatively approved rules.

The above distinction is critical because the DMV and OAH's argument that the DMV's file is automatically admissible wholesale because the DMV is the "agency" is irreconcilable with the West Virginia APA for the reasons set forth above. The moment a licensee challenges an enforcement action by the DMV Commissioner, the matter becomes a contested case and the DMV is no longer the agency but rather becomes a party to the proceeding.

It is the above rationale which has resulted in private citizens being forced to litigate against an empty chair and being denied their constitutional right to confront their accusers. Thus, the OAH is not obligated to introduce all evidence contained in the Commissioner's file. It certainly can allow evidence into its file, but it is not obligated to do so according to its interpretation of *Crouch, Odum* and *Doyle*. In this case, admitting those documents is erroneous because they lack authentication and doing so would violate the Petitioner's right to Due Process of law.

The OAH has broad discretion to admit or deny evidence under the West Virginia Rules of Evidence. Nevertheless, the OAH is bound by the West Virginia Rules of Evidence when making a ruling on the relevance and admissibility of evidence presented by either side at revocation hearings. When either party to the revocation hearing presents evidence without establishing the proper foundation or authentication, that evidence should not be admitted by the hearing examiner. Assessing probative value of proffered evidence and weighing any factors counseling against admissibility, such as the danger of unfair prejudice, is a matter for the hearing examiner's sound judgment.

However, under Petitioner's interpretation of the law, the hearing examiner is robbed of that discretion when he is directed to both accept the documents in the DMV's possession and accept them as accurate without having them authenticated for reliability subject to cross examination.

There is no precedent for the admission of the Respondent's file over objection of counsel when absolutely *no* witnesses appears at the administrative hearing and the sole evidence against the driver was the "faceless, voiceless documents containing written statements of the arresting officer." *Meadows v. Reed*, No. 14-0138, 2015 WL 1588462, at *4. (Memorandum Decision)

Courts have a duty to avoid construing a statute that may lead to absurd, unjust, and unreasonable results. *See State v. Kerns*, 183 W.Va. 130, 135, 394 S.E.2d 532, 537 (1990) (recognizing "duty of this Court to avoid whenever possible a construction of a statute which leads to absurd, inconsistent, unjust or unreasonable results"); *State ex rel. Simpkins v. Harvey*, 172 W.Va. 312, 321, 305 S.E.2d 268, 277 (1983).

"Except as otherwise provided by this code or legislative rules, the Commissioner of Motor Vehicles has the burden of proof." W. Va. Code § 17C-5C-4 (2012). The DMV bears the burden of proof by a preponderance of evidence. The DMV should not be able to introduce documents as the sole evidence against a licensee without authenticating those documents under the West Virginia Rules of Evidence and meet their statutory burden of proof. If the DMV fails to produce the arresting officer at the OAH hearing when a driver asserts his right of confrontation, or at the very least an officer who may testify to DUI Information Sheet meets an exception to the Rules of Evidence prohibiting hearsay, then the licensee should prevail as the Petitioner has failed to meet their burden under the law. The licensee, who bears no burden under the law, should not be required to secure adverse witnesses who will testify against them.

Premature or post-hearing evidence may be excluded at the discretion of the OAH unless specifically permitted by order." W. Va. Code R. § 105-1-15.3 (2016). In this case, the circuit court was correct to conclude that the contents of the testimonial reports of the Investigating Officer may

not be admitted and used to satisfy the Commissioner's burden of proof when a driver asserts his right to confrontation unless the author of those documents subjects himself to cross examination.

VII. CONCLUSION

WHEREFORE, for the reasons set forth above, the Respondent respectfully requests that this Court affirmed the circuit court's order below in reversing the OAH's *Final Order*.

Respectfully Submitted,

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