

Supreme Court of Florida

Case No. SC07-244

EMMA MURRAY,

Petitioner,

v.

MARINER HEALTH/ACE USA,

Respondent.

AMICUS CURIAE BRIEF OF SEMINOLE COUNTY
SCHOOL BOARD AND PREFERRED GOVERNMENTAL
CLAIMS SOLUTIONS, INC. IN SUPPORT OF RESPONDENT

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STATEMENT OF IDENTITY AND INTEREST OF AMICUS

The School Board of Seminole County and Preferred Governmental Claims Solutions, Inc. are the opposing parties to a *pre-petition for benefits* matter by David Singleton¹ regarding an advance request for approval of an attorney fee agreement exceeding the limitations of Section 440.34, Fla. Stat. (2003). Mr. Singleton's request was denied by the JCC on August 31, 2007. He appealed this denial to the First District Court of Appeal in Case No. 1D07-5349. In an Order dated October 24, 2007, the First District ruled that the only possibility of review is certiorari.

The School Board of Seminole County and Preferred Governmental Claims Solutions, Inc. have moved to dismiss this matter because it lacks an essential element to certiorari review, i.e. irreparable harm - Mr. Singleton has yet to file a petition for benefits, much less have benefits denied by a Judge of Compensation Claims. That Motion is still pending before the First District Court of Appeal.

The School Board of Seminole County and Preferred Governmental Claims Solutions, Inc., as an employer and workers' compensation insurer,

¹Mr. Singleton attempts to interject facts and issues that are not before this Court. The impropriety of his actions are addressed in the argument section of this Brief.

oppose the position of the Petitioner, Emma Murray, and support the position of the Respondent, Mariner Health/Ace American Insurance Company.

SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT

The role of the amicus is to assist the Court with the case at hand. An amicus is not permitted to bring another case before the Court for review. But that is exactly what Amicus Singleton attempts. This Court's review is confined to the facts and issues of the Emma Murray case. David Singleton must not be allowed to intervene as a party in this matter under the guise of an "*amicus*".

Emma Murray claims a due process right to have her attorney fees paid by another. There is no such due process right. Rather, she confuses cases dealing with a criminal defendant's 6th amendment right to counsel with her own. Ms. Murray, as a civil claimant, has no such constitutional right. The payment of attorney fees by another only exists where the parties have contractually agreed or the legislature has provided.

Ordinary scrutiny is applied to most constitutional challenges to legislation and that is the correct test for this challenge. Worker's compensation claimants are not a suspect class. In addition, Florida Statute §440.34 does not impinge so greatly on a constitutional right that strict scrutiny should be applied.

Amicus Singleton contends that this Court should be guided by the New Mexico case of *Wagner v. AGW Consultants*, 114 P. 3d 1050 (N.M.

2005) in applying strict scrutiny to this case. *Wagner* did not apply strict scrutiny to the New Mexico law under review, or even discuss that standard. Rather, it applied the rational basis standard. In dicta, the New Mexico court suggested that an intermediate level of scrutiny might be triggered if the evidence showed that the party had been completely denied an appeal. But that was not the evidence in *Wagner* and that is not the evidence here. Emma Murray had her day in court. And as for David Singleton, his case is not before this Court, but even if it was, his matter is a *pre-petition for benefits* matter, that is not ripe for review by any court.

In support of the equal protection challenge to Florida Statutes §440.34 Amicus Singleton turns again to New Mexico and the decision of *Corn v. New Mexico Educators Federal Credit Union*, 889 P. 2d 234 (N.M. App. 1994); overruled on other grounds, *Trujillo v. City of Albuquerque*, 965 P. 2d 305 (N.M. 1998). Again, New Mexico offers no help to Florida. The New Mexico worker's compensation system is unique and totally different from the Florida system. Moreover, the *Corn* court applied the second of a four-tiered level of scrutiny that has been abandoned by New Mexico.

As demonstrated by the Respondent and all the other supporting amici whose positions we adopt, Emma Murray has failed to establish the validity

of any of her challenges to Florida Statutes §440.34. Therefore, her challenges must be rejected.

ARGUMENT

I. THE 2003 AMENDMENT TO FLORIDA STATUTES §440.34 DOES NOT VIOLATE THE DUE PROCESS CLAUSES OF THE FLORIDA AND UNITED STATES CONSTITUTIONS.

A. There is no due process absolute right to counsel in a worker's compensation proceeding.

Amicus Singleton improperly attempts to inject his case, and also an imaginary case, into the case of Emma Murray. This Court has made it clear that amici are not permitted to raise new issues. *Dade County v. Eastern Air Lines, Inc.*, 212 So. 2d 7, 8 (Fla. 1968); *Riechmann v. State*, 966 So. 2d 298, 304 fn 8 (Fla. 2007). Further, an appeal is always confined to the facts and issues developed in the record of the case under consideration. *Thornber v. City of Fort Walton Beach*, 534 So. 2d 754, 755 (Fla. 1st DCA 1988); *Willis v. Romano*, ___ So. 2d ___, 2008 WL 160972 (Fla. 5th DCA 2008). And, an amicus has no right to inject his case into another under the “amicus” mask. *Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners v. Public Employees Relations Commission*, 424 So. 2d 132, 134-135 (Fla. 1st DCA 1982). Yet, that is exactly what Amicus Singleton attempts to do.

He claims a due process right to counsel in a worker's compensation proceeding based upon *Goldberg v. Kelly*, 397 U.S. 254, 270-71, 90 S. Ct. 1011, 25 L.Ed. 2d 287 (1970). But, let's be honest, no reasonable claimant

wants to pay for counsel where the costs outweigh the benefits. Rather, Emma Murray wants this Honorable Court to make someone else pay for such representation. Thus, Emma Murray is not talking about a *Goldberg* due process right to have and pay counsel from her own pocket. Indeed, her Brief makes no mention of *Goldberg*. Rather, it focuses upon *Makemson v. Martin County*, 491 So. 2d 1109 (Fla. 1986).

Murray's focus on *Makemson* reveals the fault in her due process argument. *Makemson* is a *criminal* matter involving a *criminal* defendant's absolute right to counsel. As this Court stated in *Makemson*:

. . . we find that the statutory maximum fees, as inflexibly imposed in cases involving unusual or extraordinary circumstances, interfere with the defendant's sixth amendment right 'to have the assistance of counsel for his defense.'
491 So. 2d at 1112.

A worker's compensation claimant, like every other civil litigant involved in a case about money, has no absolute constitutional right to counsel. *McDermott v. Miami-Dade County*, 753 So. 2d 729 (Fla. 1st DCA 2000); *S.B. v. Department of Children and Families*, 851 So. 2d 689 (Fla. 2003). Thus, as this Court held in *Andrews v. Walton*, 428 So. 2d 663 (Fla. 1983) a person charged with criminal contempt has an absolute constitutional right to counsel, but a person charged with civil contempt has

no such right. The due process doctrine of fundamental fairness does not include the absolute right to counsel.

A constitutional right to counsel comes with the right to effective counsel, and the claims of ineffective assistance of counsel. *Strickland v. Washington*, 466 U.S. 668, 686, 104 S. Ct. 2052, 80 L. Ed 2d 674 (1984). Such claims do not belong in any civil case about money, including this workers' compensation matter, because there is no such constitutional right. *Mullins v. Department of Law Enforcement*, 942 So. 2d 998, 1000 (Fla. 5th DCA 2006); *Johnson v. Workman's Compensation Appeal Board*, 14 Pa. Cmwlth 220, 321 A. 2d 728, 730 (Pa. Cmwlth. 1974).

Amicus Singleton appears to argue that *U.S. Dept. of Labor v. Triplett*, 494 U.S. 715, 110 S. Ct. 1428, 108 L.Ed. 2d 701 (1990) holds that due process requires legal representation in adversarial matters. But, that is not true. Rather, the U.S. Supreme Court clearly announced that it did *not* reach this issue because the record was insufficient to support that issue's consideration. 494 U.S. at 722.

In addition, Mr. Singleton submits a lengthy list of "*minimum hurdles*" for a successful worker's compensation claimant. In so doing, he anticipates a worse case scenario, and is frankly speaking about a case where the benefits would be more than sufficient to secure legal representation.

And he completely ignores the legislative efforts to assist claimants. For example, the Ombudsman's office was created to assist a claimant in all matters, except to provide direct representation. Fla. Stat. §440.191. This office will assist an unrepresented claimant in preparing a petition, and moving forward. Moreover, the legislature has given the JCC the power to “. . . make such investigation or inquiry . . . to best ascertain the rights of the parties.” Fla. Stat. §440.29 (1). And the JCC also has the power to require the attendance of witnesses and compel the production of documents. Fla. Stat. §440.33.

The right to have one's attorney fees paid by another exists only when the parties to a contract have so agreed, or the legislature has so provided. *Stone v. Jeffres*, 208 So. 2d 827, 828-829 (Fla. 1968); *Florida Patient Compensation Fund v. Rowe*, 472 So. 2d 1145, 1149 (Fla. 1985). Such a right does not exist in the constitution.

B. Strict scrutiny does not apply to this case.

Florida reviews the constitutionality of a statute under three levels of scrutiny: 1) ordinary, 2) mid-level, or 3) strict. *North Florida Women's Health and Counseling Services, Inc. v. State*, 866 So. 2d 612, 625 (Fla. 2003). Most legislation is judged using ordinary scrutiny, i.e. the rational

basis standard. *North Florida* at 625; *Lane v. Chiles*, 698 So. 2d 260, 262 (Fla. 1997).

Strict scrutiny is only appropriate in the rare case involving a suspect class, or where the legislation impinges too greatly on a fundamental right. *De Ayala v. Florida Farm Bureau Casualty Insurance Co.*, 543 So. 2d 204 (Fla. 1989). Aliens are a suspect class – a group that has been a traditional target of unlawful discrimination. Therefore, in *De Ayala*, strict scrutiny was appropriate because the law under consideration involved aliens. But here, worker’s compensation claimants are not a suspect class, and strict scrutiny does not apply. *Acton v. Fort Lauderdale Hospital*, 440 So. 2d 1282, 1284 (Fla. 1983).

The mere mention of due process, equal protection or access to courts does not trigger entitlement to a strict scrutiny analysis. See eg. *Acton*, *supra*, *Winn Dixie v. Resnikoff*, 659 So. 2d 1297 (Fla. 1st DCA 1995); *Medina v. Gulf Coast Linen Services*, 825 So. 2d 1018 (Fla. 1st DCA 1002). Here, Amicus Singleton does not cite to any Florida case on this topic. Rather, he claims strict scrutiny applies based upon a decision of the New Mexico Supreme Court, *Wagner v. AGW Consultants*, 114 P. 3d 1050 (N.M. 2005).

At the time of *Wagner*, attorney fees for a worker's compensation claimant in the New Mexico system were capped at \$12,500. 114 P. 3d at 1052. The worker in *Wagner* challenged this cap as a violation of equal protection, due process, and access to courts. The claimant argued that the fee cap impacted her ability to secure *appellate* counsel because it discouraged lawyers from taking complex or time-consuming *appeals*. In addition, the worker contended that the *intermediate level of scrutiny* should be applied in reviewing the New Mexico system. The New Mexico Supreme Court found that the proper level of scrutiny was the rational basis test. And after employing that test, the Court found the attorney fee cap constitutional. In dicta, the New Mexico Court stated that the intermediate level of scrutiny would not be triggered because the evidence was insufficient to show that the fee limitation "*meaningfully impacts*" the claimants' appellate rights. 114 P. 3d at 1058.

Thus, *Wagner* did *not* apply strict scrutiny, it applied the rational basis test. Moreover, it did not even consider the application of strict scrutiny. Rather, it discussed in dicta what might trigger the application of an intermediate level of scrutiny. In addition, *Wagner* involved a complex or time-consuming *appeal* and bears no relation to the low benefit case at the trial level as presented by the Emma Murray case.

Amicus Singleton claims that this case has the evidence that would have enlisted the New Mexico court to apply strict scrutiny. First, as previously noted, *Wagner* did not apply or discuss the strict scrutiny test. Secondly, Singleton does not list or reference the “*evidence*” to which he refers. But, the situation in this case is no different than the situation in *Wagner*. Despite the fee limitations, the claimant in *Wagner*, as the claimant here – Emma Murray - had legal representation.

In any event, if Singleton is suggesting that this Court look beyond the *Murray* record, the words of the New Mexico Supreme Court are important to note. In *Wagner*, the Court stated:

[i]n seeking to elevate our review to intermediate scrutiny under the facts of this case, the dissent suggests a more ‘charitable’ approach, even to the extent of selectively considering anecdotal information not of record. . . . However, the facts and record of this case simply did not demonstrate how the fee limitation impacts the right to access courts and the right to an appeal. Worker was free to appeal her case from the worker’s compensation proceeding and did so. She continues to be represented by her counsel, whom we commend for her skilled and committed advocacy on behalf of her client Because this case fails to demonstrate that the fee limitation impacts important rights or sensitive classes, rational basis is the proper standard of review for reviewing the equal protection and due process challenges.

114 P. 3d at 1058.

A full investigation into the Singleton issues and record² must wait until another day when it is properly before a court for resolution.

²The *Singleton* affidavits are subject to the same “*self-interested in motivation*” criticism leveled by the Supreme Court in *Triplett*. 494 U.S. at 725; *Cornelious v. District of Columbia Employees’ Compensation Appeals Board*, 704 A. 2d 853, 854 (D.C. App. 1997).

II. THE 2003 AMENDMENT TO FLORIDA STATUTES §440.34 DOES NOT VIOLATE THE EQUAL PROTECTION CLAUSES OF THE FLORIDA AND UNITED STATES CONSTITUTIONS.

Amicus Singleton engages in the fantasy that Emma Murray wanted to spend her own money for legal representation and was prevented from doing so. Those are not the facts of *Murray*, but are rather a new issue based on a non-existent situation. He also argues that worker's compensation claimants are treated differently from other tort claimants without rational basis. Again, this is an issue not presented by Emma Murray.

Singleton turns again to New Mexico for support, citing *Corn v. New Mexico Educators Federal Credit Union*, 889 P. 2d 234 (N.M. App. 1994); overruled on other grounds, *Trujillo v. City of Albuquerque*, 965 P. 2d 305 (N.M. 1998), to support his argument that Florida Statutes §440.34 violates equal protection. It should first be recognized that New Mexico worker's compensation system is distinctly different from Florida's system. For example, in New Mexico, at the time of the *Corn* decision, a worker's compensation claimant had to pay one-quarter of his own attorney fees. NMSA §52-1-54(H) (effective until January 1, 1991). *Corn* at 241.³ In

³Now, a New Mexico claimant's share of his own attorney fees has been increased to one-half. NMSA §52.1-54(J) (WestLaw 2008).

addition, at that time, fees for a claimant were capped at \$12,500.⁴ Moreover, as noted by the New Mexico Supreme Court in *Corn*, the worker’s compensation laws had undergone a “*massive overhaul*” and these changes had resulted:

*. . . in a more complicated classification than we had, as well as a scheme that is **unique to New Mexico**. See 4 Arthur Larson, *The Law of Workmen’s Compensation*, Table 18B, App. B-18 B-1 to 3 (1994). 889 p. 2d at 241 (emphasis supplied)*

Further, the decision in *Corn* was reached using the second of a four-tiered scrutiny system that was abandoned by the New Mexico Supreme Court in *Trujillo v. City of Albuquerque*, 965 P. 2d 305 (N.M. 1998). See also *Mieras v. Dyncorp.*, 925 P. 2d 518, 525 (C.A. N.M. 1996) using the rational basis test to find the current New Mexico fee cap constitutional.

The heightened scrutiny test used in *Corn* was unique to New Mexico and has now been abandoned. It was applied to a worker’s compensation law unique to New Mexico. *Corn* offers no assistance to Florida. As previously discussed in this Brief, Florida law dictates that the rational basis test is the proper level of scrutiny.

⁴The cap has now been increased to \$16,500 and applies to both workers and employers. NMSA §52-1-54(I) (J) (WestLaw 2008).

Emma Murray and other amici have discussed in detail the reasonable basis for this legislation, and there is no need to repeat it here. Florida Statutes §440.34 passes this test.

Amicus, School Board of Seminole County and Preferred Governmental Claims Solutions, Inc., adopt all arguments made by the Respondent and other amici supporting Respondent's position.

CONCLUSION

For the reasons expressed in this brief, Amici, the School Board of Seminole County and Preferred Governmental Claims Solutions, Inc., respectfully request this Honorable Court to reject Emma Murray's attack upon the constitutionality of Florida Statutes §440.34, and affirm the decision of the First District Court of Appeal.

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED this 1st day of February, 2008.

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CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I **HEREBY CERTIFY** that a true and correct copy of the Amicus Curiae Brief of Seminole County School Board and Preferred Governmental Claims Solutions, Inc. in Support of Respondent has been furnished by U.S. Mail this 1st day of February, 2008 to counsel on the attached list.

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CERTIFICATE OF FONT COMPLIANCE

I **HEREBY CERTIFY** that this brief has been prepared using Times New Roman 14 in compliance with Fla. R. App. P. 9.210(2).

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