

KEYWORD: Financial; Personal Conduct

DIGEST: While Applicant's financial problems raised security concerns because of his delay in resolving debts to several creditors, he demonstrated his consistent, good-faith effort to resolve his federal and state tax debts as soon as he found stable employment in a new field. He resolved his tax debts in full and also resolved a debt to one creditor for office supplies. His debts stem from a business failure and not from an extravagant lifestyle. He has reduced his overall debt substantially and intends in the future to resolve the remaining debts even though under the state statute of limitations he has no legal obligation to do so as those creditors did not file timely claims. He has demonstrated he is now financial responsible and has a stable job. He rebutted personal conduct concerns and established he was not responsible for a creditor's difficulty in serving him with their complaint. Clearance is granted.

CASENO: 02-27133.h1

DATE: 09/30/2004

DATE: September 30, 2004

In Re:

SSN: -----

Applicant for Security Clearance

ISCR Case No. 02-27133

DECISION OF ADMINISTRATIVE JUDGE

KATHRYN MOEN BRAEMAN

APPEARANCES

FOR GOVERNMENT

FOR APPLICANT

Joseph R. Whaley, Esquire

SYNOPSIS

While Applicant's financial problems raised security concerns over his delay in resolving debts to several creditors, he demonstrated his consistent, good-faith efforts to resolve his federal and state tax debts as soon as he found stable employment in a new field. He resolved his tax debts in full and also resolved a debt to one creditor for office supplies. His debts stem from a business failure and not from an extravagant lifestyle. He has reduced his overall debt substantially and intends in the future to resolve the remaining debts even though under the statute of limitations he has no legal obligation to do so as those creditors did not file timely claims. He has demonstrated he is now financially responsible and has a stable job. He rebutted personal conduct concerns and established he was not responsible for a creditor's difficulty in serving him. Clearance is granted.

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

The Defense Office of Hearings and Appeals (DOHA) issued a Statement of Reasons (SOR) to the Applicant on October 20, 2003. The SOR detailed reasons why the Government could not make the preliminary positive finding that it is clearly consistent with the national interest to grant or continue a security clearance for the Applicant.⁽¹⁾ The SOR alleges specific concerns over finances (Guideline F) and personal conduct (Guideline E). Applicant received the SOR on October 27, 2003, and requested an extension and was granted until December 4, 2003, to submit his response. Again, he requested an extension on December 4, 2003, and was granted an extension until December 24, 2003. He responded to these SOR allegations in an undated, notarized Answer received on December 23, 2003. He requested a hearing.

After Department Counsel stated the case was ready to proceed, on February 13, 2004, the case was assigned to another administrative judge. It was reassigned to me on February 20, 2004. After a mutually convenient date for hearing was identified, a Notice of Hearing issued on March 9, 2004, set the matter for April 1, 2004, at a location near where Applicant works and lives. On March 18, 2004, Applicant's counsel entered his appearance.

At the hearing the Department Counsel introduced the Government's seven exhibits (Exhibits 1-7). I excluded Exhibit 6 after Applicant's counsel objected⁽²⁾ to it as hearsay. Exhibits 1-5 and 7 were admitted into evidence. Applicant testified

himself and offered ten exhibits, which were admitted into evidence (Exhibits A-J). His counsel offered for Official Notice a Memorandum on the Effect of the Running of the Statute of Limitations on Outstanding Claims. The transcript (TR) was received on April 14, 2004.

FINDINGS OF FACT

After a complete and thorough review of the evidence in the record, and upon due consideration of that evidence, I make the following findings of fact:

Applicant, 54 years old, has been employed as a senior network engineer by a defense contractor in State #1 since 1998. He completed a Security Clearance Application (SF86) in 2002. Previously, he was a lawyer in private practice in State #2 from 1992 to 1998. (Exhibit 1; TR 28-

29) Applicant received a J.D. degree in 1975 and was admitted to practice in 1975 in State #3 where he worked in a firm from 1975-1980 when he formed his own firm. He left the practice of law and did IT work for a federal agency from 1988 to 1992. (Exhibit 1; TR 29-30, 36-37) From June 1997 to December Applicant studied independently to become a Microsoft certified system engineer; he was certified in December 1997. (TR 36)

Finances

Applicant's financial problems started in 1994 and worsened in the 1997 when his bankruptcy practice failed and he had instability in his income. From February 1997 to February 1998 he essentially had no income and "scraped by with just barely covering" his mortgage and car payment. Although he considered filing for personal bankruptcy himself, Applicant was reluctant to file when he was representing consumers with multi-year plans before the same bankruptcy court in State #2 as he did not want his personal financial situation to adversely affect his clients. Later, he concluded that he had no need to file for bankruptcy as the claims of the commercial creditors were largely barred by the statute of limitations and bankruptcy would not discharge his tax obligations he was already in the process of paying. Further he would have had to pay the bankruptcy court a 10% fee to administer the debt payments. Only two creditors filed collection lawsuits. He settled the first case in April 2000 with a credit card company. A second case was brought by Creditor #1 in 1998 for \$5,509; as he was traveling overseas on business, he was initially not properly served. Applicant himself noticed in 2000 that Creditor #1 had filed a lawsuit against him when he checked the Court #2 index when he settled this lawsuit with another creditor. (SOR 1.d.) (Exhibit 2; TR 30-32, 35-36, 40-41; 81, 93-94)

In addition, he and his partner in the law firm faced a \$75,000 judgment in 1995 which took a tremendous toll on him and the firm as the firm paid \$50,000 in legal fees and he personally paid \$19,000 in legal fees from 1998 to 2000; the judgment was reversed by a court of appeals in 1998. (Exhibit 2; Exhibits H, I; TR 32-35, 43, 61-62)

His financial problems developed from business, not personal, expenses as he used credit to "level-out the peaks and valleys that come with being in business." (TR 38) In March 1997 he stopped using any credit when he realized his income and law practice was "going to fall apart." (TR 38-39) Before he got his income from his corporate job in 1998, he borrowed \$1,000 from his brother to meet his living expenses. Even after he started earning a salary, he had little disposable income to pay his creditors. (TR 42-43)

In July 2002 his net income was \$4,400 per month; he had monthly expenses of \$2,270 and in addition was making a \$1,100 payment on his mortgage. After his federal tax problems developed he agreed in 1999 to pay the IRS a \$250 monthly payment to resolve a tax debt of \$2,750. (SOR 1.a.) He also made a \$621 monthly payment to State #1 to resolve \$7,750 in state taxes (SOR 1.b., 1.c.). He had assets of \$171,000, including his home worth approximately \$150,000; his mortgage balance was then \$114,000. His strategy was to first resolve the tax debts and then resolve the debt to Creditor #1. (SOR 1.d.) He then planned to resolve the other debts. (Exhibits 2, 4, 5, 7; Exhibits B, C, D, H, I; TR 38-40, 59-64) In 2002 he had only \$105 remaining on a monthly basis to resolve his debts. (SOR 1.1) In April 2004 Applicant testified he has a monthly surplus of \$1,000 per month as he has completed his back tax payment plans. (Exhibit 2; TR 64, 89-90)

Applicant acquired no new unsecured credit since 1997 except for a commitment at a health club; he purchased another car in February 2003. Both his car and mortgage payments have always been timely. (TR 78-79) In 2003 his income was approximately \$75,000. (TR 89)

SOR 1.a. His debt to the IRS is fully paid for tax year 1998 which was paid under a payment plan which began in 1999. His taxes from 1999-2002 were covered by withholding from his corporate position. The IRS documents a zero balance owing for tax years from 1994 to 2002. For 1994 he had an adjusted gross income of \$21,640 paid his taxes by monthly payments of \$250 from 1999 to 2000; in 1995 he had an adjusted gross income of \$19,047 and paid his taxes with his return; in 1996 he had an adjusted gross income of \$34,323 and paid his taxes by monthly payments of \$250 from 2000 to 2001; in 1997 he had an adjusted gross income of \$29,090 and paid his taxes by monthly payments of \$250 from 2001 to 2002; in 1998 he had an adjusted gross income of \$61,207 and paid his taxes by monthly payments of \$250 from 2002 to 2003; in 1999 he had an adjusted gross income of \$64,027 and timely paid his taxes with his return; in 2000 he had an adjusted gross income of \$67,349 and paid his taxes fully from his withholding; in 2001 he had an adjusted gross income of \$75,744 and timely paid his taxes with his return; in 2002 he had an adjusted gross income of \$75,885 and timely paid his taxes with his return. (Exhibit 5; Exhibit B; TR 46-50, 80, 87-89)

SOR 1.b., 1.c. In 2000 he developed a payment plan to pay his tax debts to State #2 by monthly payments of \$602 from 2001 to 2003; they were paid in full and the tax liens were released in January 2003 and September 2003. (Exhibits C, D; TR 51-54, 62, 80-81)

SOR 1.d. His debt to Creditor #1 for \$5,509 has been paid by a settlement amount of \$4,084; after he resolved his tax debts he turned to resolve this debt. The final payment was confirmed in January 2004; the case was dismissed by the

State #2 court in January 2004. The debt was for office supplies secured through a credit card at an office supply store. (Exhibit 7; Exhibits E, F, G; TR 54-58, 62, 81, 96-97)

SOR 1.e. In his SF 86, he disclosed his debt to Creditor #2 for \$7,355 was charged off as a bad debt in November 1996. It remained unresolved at the time of the hearing. Under the State #2 three year statute of limitations⁽³⁾ this debt is not enforceable as the creditor failed to file a claim against Applicant before 2000. (Exhibits 1, 3; TR 76-78; 82-83, 85, 90-91)

SOR 1.f. His debt to Creditor #3 for \$675 was charged off as a bad debt in December 1996. It remained unresolved at the time of the hearing. Under the State #2 three year statute of limitations this debt is not enforceable as the creditor failed to file a claim against Applicant before 2000. (Exhibit 3; TR 76-78, 82-85, 91)

SOR 1.g. His debt to Creditor # 4 for \$2,114 was placed for collection by a collection agency in February 1997. He is not sure who the creditor originally was. It remained unresolved at the time of the hearing. Under the State #2 three year statute of limitations this debt is not enforceable as the creditor failed to file a claim against Applicant before 2001. (Exhibit 3; TR 76-78; 83-84, 91)

SOR 1.h. His debt to Creditor #5 for \$5,500 was identical to the Creditor #1 debt and has been resolved as discussed above. (Exhibit 3; TR 76-78; 83-84, 91)

SOR 1.i. His debt to Creditor #6 was placed for collection for \$496 in July 1997. It remained unresolved at the time of the hearing. Under the State #2 three year statute of limitations this debt is not enforceable as the creditor failed to file a claim against Applicant. (Exhibit 3; TR 76-78; 83-84, 91)

SOR 1.j.. His debt to Creditor #7 for \$8,401 was placed for collection by a collection agency in January 1998. He does not remember the original creditor. It remained unresolved at the time of the hearing. Under the State #2 three year statute of limitations this debt is not enforceable as the creditor failed to file a claim against Applicant. (Exhibit 3; TR 76-78; 84, 91)

SOR 1.k.. His debt to Creditor #8 of \$98 was placed for collection in November 1998 for long distance service. It remained unresolved at the time of the hearing. Under the State #2 three year statute of limitations this debt is not enforceable as the creditor failed to file a claim against Applicant. (Exhibit 3; TR 76-78, 84, 91)

Although these unresolved debts are not now legally enforceable, he plans to accumulate \$10,000 that he would offer to

these creditors for whom he has unresolved debts and who have not pursued their legal remedies in a timely manner and give them a proportionate payment for a release. In essence he would approach it as if he might have done a Chapter 13 bankruptcy filing. (TR 92)

Personal Conduct

To rebut Applicant declared that another creditor successfully served him at his home in December 1998 or January 1999; and he settled that lawsuit. (TR 68) He had no knowledge that Creditor #1 was trying to serve him notice of their claim. Applicant credibly established that he did not deliberately evade service of process for this lawsuit filed by Creditor #1 although they attempted process⁽⁴⁾ from June 1998 to May 1999 at his law firm address and his home address. Indeed, Applicant himself noticed in 2000 that Creditor #1 had filed a lawsuit against him when he checked the Court #2 index when he settled a lawsuit with another creditor. (TR 81) He explained that his new corporate assignment which he began in February 1998 was at a different location; attempts at his home address were when he was on an overseas assignment or during a period when he was working late hours on another assignment. He was on an overseas⁽⁵⁾ assignment in his new corporate position from September to November 1998. When Applicant checked the court file he noted the Affidavit of Evasion (Exhibit 6) was never accepted and acted upon by the State #2 court as they determined the affidavit was insufficient. Until 1998 State #2 required service in person or by certified mail; if there were difficulties serving in that manner, the court would grant an order to service by leaving the complaint at an address. (SOR 2.a.) (Answer; Exhibit J; TR 65-68, 69-73)

References

Applicant received a favorable evaluation in 2003. He was given the highest rating ("exceeds expectations") in all of his performance elements. His supervisor in summary commented, Appellant "has established himself as a valued team member." "Ask him once and forget about it; the job will get done." (Exhibit A; TR 44-45)

POLICIES

Enclosure 2 of the Directive sets forth adjudicative guidelines to consider in evaluating an individual's security eligibility. They are divided into conditions that could raise a security concern and may be disqualifying and conditions that could mitigate security concerns in deciding whether to grant or continue an individual's access to classified information. But the mere presence or absence of any given adjudication policy condition is not decisive. Based on a consideration of the evidence as a whole in evaluating this case, I weighed relevant Adjudication Guidelines as set forth below:

Guideline F - Financial Considerations

An individual who is financially overextended is at risk of having to engage in illegal acts to generate funds. Unexplained affluence is often linked to proceeds from financially profitable criminal acts.

Conditions that could raise a security concern and may be disqualifying include:

1. A history of not meeting financial obligations;
3. Inability or unwillingness to satisfy debts;

Conditions that could mitigate security concerns include:

4. . . . there are clear indications that the problem is being resolved or is under control;
6. The individual initiated a good-faith effort to repay overdue creditors or otherwise resolve debts.

Guideline E - Personal Conduct

Conditions that could raise a security concern and may be disqualifying also include:

None

The responsibility for producing evidence initially falls on the Government to demonstrate that it is not clearly consistent with the national interest to grant or continue Applicant's access to classified information. Then the Applicant presents evidence to refute, explain, extenuate, or mitigate in order to overcome the doubts raised by the Government, and to demonstrate persuasively that it is clearly consistent with the national interest to grant or continue the clearance. Under the provisions of Executive Order 10865, as amended, and the Directive, a decision to grant or continue an applicant's security clearance may be made only after an affirmative finding that to do so is clearly consistent with the national interest. In reaching the fair and impartial overall common sense determination, the Administrative Judge may draw only those inferences and conclusions that have a reasonable and logical basis in the evidence of record.

CONCLUSIONS

Financial Considerations

During the 1996-1997 period when his law practice was foundering, Applicant developed (1) a history of financial problems and subsequently showed (3) an inability or unwillingness to satisfy all of his debts. At the time of the DSS investigation in July 2002 he had various debts that totaled approximately \$30,000 that were unresolved except for his plan to pay his federal and state tax debts. Notably these debts were acquired from his failing business, not from his overspending on consumer items. In addition, he had unusually large legal fees to resolve a matter that had been resolved against his firm, but which the firm was appealing.

When his law practice was failing, Appellant developed expertise in a new field and made the transition successfully to work as a senior network engineer for a defense contractor since February 1998. As he had more stable income, he made it a priority to resolve his federal and state tax debts by making consistent payments over several years. When those debts were resolved, he turned to the debt owed to Creditor #1; he resolved that debt in January 2004 and the litigation was dismissed.

Having been a bankruptcy lawyer, Applicant chose not to file for bankruptcy to resolve his financial problems as he determined he could manage and resolve his debts himself in a step by step fashion without resorting to the courts even though he surely could have discharged his business debts by that route. In part, he was reluctant to pursue his own personal bankruptcy before a court where he was representing his clients. Further, he knew the bankruptcy laws would not discharge tax debts. So he chose to reach agreements both with the federal and state tax authorities and then to implement them by consistent monthly payments over several years. These tax debts were ultimately resolved in full; he did not try to negotiate partial payments. Applicant has sufficiently demonstrated he is financially responsible as he has followed through on his payment plan to resolve all these tax debts and then resolved the debt to Creditor #1 in January 2004.

On the other hand, the remaining debts to creditors #2 through #8 remain unresolved. However, those creditors chose not to pursue any timely legal action against enforcing their claims against him and are now barred from doing so by the statute of limitations. Nevertheless, as his counsel points out, the DOHA Appeal Board⁽⁶⁾ has stated that even if debts are uncollectible, the judge should consider the facts and circumstances under which the debt was incurred and also decide whether the applicant took reasonable steps to address or otherwise resolve those debts before the statute of limitations expired. In this case, Appellant was knowledgeable about his legal options and made a reasonable choice to prioritize his tax debts in the light of his limited income and then to prioritize claims from creditors who pursued their legal claims against him. The only example of a questionable expenditure is his decision to add personal travel destinations to his overseas business travel. But that is an isolated example in his otherwise rational plan to resolve his debts.

Applicant has now mitigated⁽⁷⁾ these financial concerns. First, the behavior was not recent and originates only during an unstable period in his law practice which he concluded in 1997. Second, this inauspicious financial period was isolated to this period; he has not incurred any new debts and has been able to maintain timely mortgage and car payments. Third, the conditions that resulted in the behavior were largely beyond the person's control (e.g., a business downturn). The debts are business related and not the result of uncontrolled consumer spending. Fourth, there are clear indications that the problem is being resolved or is under control. Finally, Applicant initiated a good-faith effort to repay overdue creditors or otherwise resolve debts from his failing business. Indeed, he has credibly stated his intent to resolve even those debts to Creditors #2-#8 in the future by paying them a proportionate amount as if he had filed for Chapter 13. Applicant now has enough income to handle his current financial obligations, including the payments for his house and his car, with \$1,000 remainder to use to resolve these dated debts. He also stated he will develop a plan to resolve even though these creditors are now barred from collection by the statute of limitations.

Thus, he has effectively mitigated security concerns over his debts alleged in SOR 1.a. through 1.1. After considering the Adjudicative Process factors and the Adjudicative Guidelines, I rule for Applicant under SOR Paragraph 1; I conclude that he has mitigated the allegations in SOR subparagraphs 1.a. through 1.1.

Personal Conduct

Applicant rebutted security concerns over his personal conduct that were alleged based on an unsigned affidavit by a party to a lawsuit (Exhibit 6) that was not admitted into evidence because it constituted hearsay and was not a court record. Indeed, Applicant established that he did not deliberately evade service of process for a lawsuit filed by Creditor #1 although they attempted unsuccessfully to serve him multiple times at his former business address and his home address. He explained that his new corporate assignment which he began in February 1998 was at a different location; attempts at his home address were when he was on an overseas assignment or during a period when he was working late hours on another assignment. Applicant ultimately resolved this matter after he himself noticed in 2000 that Creditor #1 had filed a lawsuit against him when he checked the Court #2 index when he settled a lawsuit with another creditor. He has overall demonstrated trustworthy behavior. After looking at the whole person and considering the Adjudicative Process factors and the Adjudicative Guidelines, I rule for Applicant on subparagraph 2.a. under SOR Paragraph 2.

FORMAL FINDINGS

After reviewing the allegations of the SOR in the context of the Adjudicative Guidelines in Enclosure 2 and the factors set forth under the Adjudicative Process section, I make the following formal findings:

Paragraph 1. Guideline F: FOR APPLICANT

Subparagraph 1.a.: For Applicant

Subparagraph 1.b.: For Applicant

Subparagraph 1.c.: For Applicant

Subparagraph 1.d.: For Applicant

Subparagraph 1.e.: For Applicant

Subparagraph 1.f.: For Applicant

Subparagraph 1.g.: For Applicant

Subparagraph 1.h.: For Applicant

Subparagraph 1.i.: For Applicant

Subparagraph 1.j.: For Applicant

Subparagraph 1.k.: For Applicant

Subparagraph 1.l.: For Applicant

Paragraph 2. Guideline E: FOR APPLICANT

Subparagraph 2.a.: For Applicant

DECISION

In light of all the circumstances presented by the record in this case, it is clearly consistent with the national interest to grant or continue a security clearance for the Applicant. Clearance is granted.

Kathryn Moen Braeman

Administrative Judge

1. This procedure is required by Executive Order 10865, as amended, and Department of Defense Directive 5220.6, dated January 2, 1992 (Directive), as amended by Change 4, April 20, 1999.
2. Applicant's counsel argued against admitting Exhibit 6, an Affidavit of Evasion filed in May 1999 with the State #2 court; he stated it was hearsay and not a court document as it was submitted by a party in the lawsuit; further, it was a collective affidavit of a group of people and was unsigned. (TR 16-19, 21-22) The Government countered that under Appeal Board Decision in ISCR Case No. 96-0575, the document was acquired by the Defense Security Service (DSS) in the regular course of business and was a court record and fell within the public records exception. (TR 19-20, 22-23) I excluded Exhibit 6 after Applicant testified to the underlying facts; I was persuaded by Applicant's counsel's objections that the unsigned document was hearsay and not an official record of the court kept in the regular course of business. (70-76)
3. A State #2 statute requires that a civil action be filed within three years from the date of accrual. (TR 98; Memorandum on the Effect of the Running of the Statute of Limitations on Outstanding Claims)
4. Applicant testified that the addresses listed in Exhibit 6 were his former law firm address where he no longer worked except to complete cases at night and on weekends. (TR 69-70)
5. Applicant traveled to several countries on his corporate assignment and went to one additional country for personal travel. (TR 86-87)
6. See Appeal Board ISCR Case No. 01-06776 (July 24, 2003) cited in Applicant's Hearing memorandum on the Effect of the Running of the Statute of Limitations on an Outstanding Claim.
7. **Conditions that could mitigate security concerns include:** 1. The behavior was not recent; 2. It was an isolated incident; 3. The conditions that resulted in the behavior were largely beyond the person's control (e.g., loss of employment, a business downturn, unexpected medical emergency, or a death, divorce or separation); 4. The person has received or is receiving counseling for the problem and there are clear indications that the problem is being resolved or is under control; 5. The affluence resulted from a legal source; and 6. The individual initiated a good-faith effort to repay overdue creditors or otherwise resolve debts.