Alaska Workers' Compensation Appeals Commission ANNUAL REPORT FOR CALENDAR YEAR 2024

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Alaska Workers' Compensation Appeals Commission 3301 Eagle Street, Suite 305

Anchorage, AK 99503 Telephone: (907) 269-6738

E-mail: awcac.clerk@alaska.gov

Alaska Workers' Compensation Appeals Commission Annual Report for Calendar Year 2024

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INTRODUCTION

The Alaska Workers' Compensation Appeals Commission is charged with providing fair, prompt, and thoughtful adjudication of appeals from final decisions issued by the Alaska Workers' Compensation Board. An appeal to the Commission is a formal administrative appeal and the Commission's final decisions on the merits of appeals must be published as they set legal precedent in Alaska workers' compensation law unless reversed by the Alaska Supreme Court.

The Commission also adjudicates petitions for review of interlocutory or non-final decisions issued by the Board. A petition for review to the Commission is a request for a formal administrative review of a non-final order of the Board; however, the Commission's memorandum decisions on petitions for review do not set legal precedent in Alaska workers' compensation law.

The Commission is committed to ensuring that "hearings in workers' compensation cases shall be impartial and fair to all parties and that all parties shall be afforded due process and an opportunity to be heard and for their arguments and evidence to be fairly considered." AS 23.30.001(4).

The Commission Chair has certain duties prescribed by law. One of those duties is to make available to the public and file with the lieutenant governor's office by March 15th of each year a report of the Commission's activity for the prior calendar year. This report is filed to satisfy that duty.

Figure 1 shows the place of the Commission in the Department of Labor and Workforce Development's workers' compensation adjudication system.

Figure 1

The **Alaska Supreme Court** (Court) hears appeals from Commission decisions. The Court decides all questions of law, including constitutionality of statutes and the validity and constitutionality of regulations.

The Alaska Workers' Compensation Appeals Commission (Commission) hears appeals and petitions for review of Board decisions and is independent of the Division. There are five Commissioners: two represent employees, two represent employers, and the Chair, who is an attorney. Each case is heard by one employee Commissioner, one employer Commissioner, and the Chair. Commission final decisions bind the Commission itself and all Board panels to a uniform interpretation of Alaska workers' compensation law. The Commission must follow Court rulings. Appeals are decided on the Board record and the parties' arguments. Commissioners use their independent judgment on law and procedure, but do not reweigh facts. Petitions for review are granted only if the sound policy that an appeal be taken only from a final Board decision is outweighed by meeting specific criteria.

The Alaska Workers' Compensation Board (Board) hears claims and petitions by injured workers, employers, and Division investigators. The Board consists of nine industry members, nine labor members, and the Department of Labor Commissioner, who is the Chair. Board members are appointed to three-year terms. The Board hears cases in three-member panels (one labor member, one industry member, and one hearing officer), but may hear a case with a quorum of two (a representative member and a hearing officer). Each Board panel is independent, but must follow Commission and Court rulings. The Board approves regulations adopted by the Division.

The **Division of Workers' Compensation** (Division) has offices in Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau. Division staff assists parties, collects data, enforces reporting, reviews self-insurance certificates, and manages the Workers' Compensation Benefits Guaranty Fund, Second Injury Fund, and Fishermen's Fund. The Division provides administrative support to Division sections, the Board, and the Commission.

The hearing officers, pre-hearing officers, and clerks of the *Adjudications Section* assist the Board to hear, mediate, and decide cases.

The Special Investigations Unit investigates and prosecutes fraud and uninsured employers before the Board.

The Division *Director* may intervene in appeals.

COMMISSION MEMBERS

The Commission consists of two employee representatives, two employer representatives, and the Chair. Each representative must have at least eighteen months of experience as a Board member. The Chair must be an attorney who has engaged in the active practice of law for at least five years in Alaska, with experience in workers' compensation law in this state.

The Chief Administrative Law Judge in the Office of Administrative Hearings announces vacancies, reviews applications for vacancies, and forwards a list of qualified nominees to the Governor. The Alaska State Legislature must confirm appointees.

The Commissioners' five-year terms are staggered so a seat on the Commission falls vacant every year. Because every appeal is heard by a full panel and a member may not hear a case if there is a conflict of interest, avoiding vacancies is a concern.

The members of the Commission during 2024 were:

Deirdre D. Ford, Chair, Anchorage, was appointed by Governor Bill Walker and took office on October 31, 2016, and was reappointed by Governor Mike Dunleavy to a five-year term in March 2020. Prior to her appointment, Ms. Ford had retired from the practice of law. From March 2009 to July 2012, Ms. Ford was a Hearing Officer with the Board in Anchorage. From June 1985 through February 2009, Ms. Ford practiced law with Delisio Moran Geraghty & Zobel with an emphasis in workers' compensation law, primarily representing employers. She received her J.D. cum laude from the University of San Francisco School of Law in 1984, her M.A. in Political Science from the University of Illinois Chicago in 1973, her M.L.S. in Library Science from the University of California Berkeley in 1966, and her B.A. in Political Science from Whittier College in 1963. Chair Ford's term expires on March 1, 2025.

S. T. Hagedorn, employer representative, Anchorage, retired from the Alaska Railroad Corporation in June 2009 after a thirty-four-year career, with the last twenty-four years as Corporate Risk Manager. He was appointed as a member for industry to the Board in 1991 by Governor Walter Hickel, reappointed twice by Governor Tony Knowles, and reappointed in 2006 by Governor Frank Murkowski (fifteen years of Board service). He has a B.A. in history from the University of Northern Iowa. He was appointed by Governor Sarah Palin to a five-year term as Commissioner in March 2007, reappointed by Governor Sean Parnell to another five-year term in 2012; reappointed by Governor Bill Walker to an additional five-year term in February 2017, and reappointed by Governor Mike Dunleavy to another five-year term in February 2022.

James N. Rhodes, employee representative, Ketchikan, is a thirty-year member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 1547. He served as a member for labor on the Board from August 2001 until March 2005. He was appointed by Governor Sean Parnell to a four-year term in February 2012, reappointed to a five-year term by Governor Bill Walker in 2016, and reappointed to an additional five-year term by Governor Mike Dunleavy in January 2021.

Amy M. Steele, employer representative, Anchorage, is the Senior Claims Coordinator at Chenega Corporation, where she has worked since 2009. Prior to her work with Chenega, she was a Senior Claims Examiner with Alaska National Insurance Company. Before moving to Alaska in 2002, she worked as a principal member of the risk management staff at Allegis Group, Inc., where she had worked since 1995. She graduated in 1995 from The New York State University at Oneonta with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Biology. She earned her Associate in Risk Management designation in 1999. She was appointed as a member for industry to the Board in 2011 by Governor Sean Parnell and reappointed by Governor Bill Walker until her term ended in March 2019. Ms. Steele was appointed to the Commission by Governor Mike Dunleavy in June 2019, and reappointed to a second term by Governor Dunleavy in March 2024.

Nancy Shaw, employee representative, Anchorage, received a bachelor's degree from the University of California at Berkeley and then graduated from the law school at UCLA. She was an attorney for the Alaska Public Defender Agency and for the Alaska Court System. She was the supervising attorney and then the Federal Defender for the District of Alaska. She retired after fifteen years as General Counsel for Alaska Teamsters Local 959. Ms. Shaw also served as a member for labor on the Board from 2017 until 2023. Ms. Shaw was appointed to the Commission by Governor Mike Dunleavy in September 2023 and reappointed to a five-year term by in March 2024.

COMMISSION CASES

New Cases Filed in 2024

The Commission docketed thirteen new cases in 2024, nine more than in 2023.

<u>Appeals</u>

Eight of the new cases filed in 2024 were appeals. Of those eight new appeals, one settled, the Commission affirmed the Board's decisions in three, one was dismissed on the appellant's request, one is in the briefing stage, one is awaiting a complete notice of appeal, and one is awaiting the record and transcripts.

Petitions for Review

Five of the new cases filed in 2024 were petitions for review. Four petitions for review were denied and one was dismissed on the petitioner's request. Figure 2 compares the numbers and types of cases filed in 2024 with those filed in 2023.

Figure 2

	2023	2024
New Appeals Filed	4	8
New Petitions for Review Filed	0	5
Total Number of New Cases Filed	4	13

Attorney Representation

Employees

Employees filed twelve of the thirteen new cases in 2024, with seven filed by unrepresented employees. In all cases filed by employees, all opposing parties were represented. Figure 3 compares unrepresented and represented employees. Employees filed eleven more cases in 2024 than in 2023. Compared with 2023, the number of cases filed by unrepresented employees increased by six, and the number of cases filed by represented employees increased by five.

Figure 3

	2023	2024
New Cases Filed by Unrepresented Employees	1	7
New Cases Filed by Represented Employees	1	6
Total Cases Filed by Employees	2	13

Employers

One represented employer filed a new case in 2024 in which the employee was represented. Figure 4 compares unrepresented and represented employers. When compared to 2023, the number of cases filed by unrepresented and represented employers remained the same.

Figure 4

	2023	2024
New Cases Filed by Unrepresented Employers	0	0
New Cases Filed by Represented Employers	1	1
Total Cases Filed by Employers	1	1

Indigent Participants

In 2024, two unrepresented employees filed motions to waive payment of both the filing fee and transcript costs. The Commission waived both the filing fee and transcript cost for one unrepresented employee, and the remaining motion was not decided as jurisdiction was returned to the Board prior to issuance of an order.

One unrepresented employee filed a motion to waive payment of the transcript costs which the Commission granted. In 2024, the Commission waived \$50.00 in filing fees and \$13,725.00 in transcript costs for indigent unrepresented employees.

2024 Commission Docket

Nineteen cases appeared on the 2024 docket, an increase of five cases from 2023. *See* Figure 5. In addition to the thirteen new cases filed in 2024, the Commission began 2024 with four cases on the docket, all filed in 2023. Of the 2023 cases on the docket at the beginning of 2024, one was in the briefing stage; two were awaiting transcripts and records on appeal, and one was filed in late December 2023.

One 2018 case and one 2021 case came back on the docket during 2024 for motions for attorney fees after the Court issued opinions on the appeals of Commission decisions. No cases came back on the docket due to Court remands.

Figure 5

	2023	2024
Cases on Docket at Start of Year	10	4
New Cases Filed	4	13
Back on Docket for Motion for Attorney Fees after Opinion	0	2
Total Number of Cases	14	19

At the end of 2024, the Commission had five cases on its docket. Two 2023 cases; one due to a stay of proceedings pending action by the Board, and the second as it was filed in late December 2023 and extensions of time were granted to both parties.

Of the three 2024 cases on the Commission's docket at the end of 2024, one is in the briefing stage, one is awaiting the Board record on appeal and transcript, and one is awaiting a complete notice of appeal. Figure 6 shows the number of open cases on the docket at the end of each month, the number of new cases filed, oral arguments and hearings held, published final decisions on the merits of appeals, published memorandum decisions, and unpublished orders issued during each month of 2024.

Figure 6

Month	Cases at End of Month	New Cases Filed	Oral Arguments and Hearings Held		Memorandum	Unpublished Orders
Jan.	7	3	0	0	0	2
Feb.	7	1	0	0	0	6
Mar.	9	2	0	0	0	9
Apr.	8	1	0	0	0	6
May	10	2	0	0	0	4
Jun.	8	0	0	0	1	6
Jul.	8	1	2	0	0	5
Aug.	8	0	1	1	0	4
Sep.	7	1	0	0	0	8
Oct.	5	0	0	2	0	5
Nov.	6	1	0	1	0	7
Dec.	5	1	0	0	0	7
Totals		13	3	4	1	69

Appendix A is the Commission's complete 2024 docket. For each case, the date received, type of case, attorney information, Commission action, and any Court action are listed. Included are cases from prior years that are on appeal or petition for review before the Court, and cases from prior years that were remanded for further action in 2024.

Oral Arguments and Hearings

The Commission held three oral arguments on the merits of appeals in 2024, two more than in 2023. Oral argument was not requested in some appeals and those were decided on the record and the parties' written briefs. No hearings were held on motions for stay. Figure 7 compares the number and types of hearings held by the Commission in 2024 with those held in 2023.

Figure 7

	2023	2024
Oral Arguments on Merits of Appeals	1	3
Hearings on Motions for Stay	1	0
Totals	2	3

Unpublished Orders

The Commission issues unpublished orders on motions for extensions of time to file appeals and petitions for review, stays of Board orders, dismissals, waivers of filing fees and/or transcript costs, attorney fees, reconsideration, clarification, and granting or denying petitions for review. The Chair issues unpublished orders on certain motions for extensions of time, stays of appeals, and notices of default and orders to comply. In 2024, the new regulations allowed the Clerk to issue unpublished orders on motions for routine or unopposed extensions of time filed prior to a filing deadline. In 2024, sixtynine unpublished orders were issued, an increase of thirty-five from 2023.

Time Period between Receipt and Decision on Merits of an Appeal

The Commission's target is to process cases within 360 days from initial receipt. Figure 8 below shows a timeline of approximately 255 days for an appeal if there is no cross-appeal, stay of appeal proceedings, or extension of time. Appeal proceedings may be stayed, or an extension of time may be granted for the parties to negotiate settlement.

Figure 8

Appeal Timeline
(No Cross-Appeals, Extensions, or Stays of Proceedings)

Appeal Steps	Days
Appeal received	
Board record and transcripts	45
Appellant's brief	30
Appellee's brief	30
Appellant's reply brief	20
Request oral argument	10
Schedule oral argument	30
Issue Final Decision	90
Total	255

Average Time Period for Cases Closed in 2024

All Cases Closed in 2024

Of the nineteen cases on the Commission's 2024 docket, fourteen were closed in 2024, a closure rate of 74% of the total number of cases that appeared on the 2024 docket. This is an increase of 3% from the 2023 closure rate. A case is closed on the date of 1) a decision on the merits of an appeal, 2) a dismissal, 3) an order on remand, 4) an order on clarification of a final decision on the merits of an appeal, or 5) an order on reconsideration of a final decision on the merits of an appeal. See Figure 9.

Figure 9

	2023	2024
Total Cases on Docket	14	19
Cases Closed	10	14
Closure Rate	71%	74%

The average time period from the date of receipt to the date of closure for those fourteen cases was 138 days, a decrease of 193 from the 2023 average, and well under the Commission's target of processing cases within 360 days. *See* Figure 10.

Figure 10

	2023	2024
Total Cases on Docket	14	19
Cases on Docket Closed	10	14
Average Number of Days from Receipt to Closing	331	138

All Cases Filed and Closed in 2024

Ten of the thirteen new cases filed in 2024 were also closed in 2024, a closure rate of 77% for cases both filed and closed in 2024. This is an increase of 77% from the 0% 2023 closure rate. A case is closed on the date of 1) a decision on the merits of an appeal, 2) a dismissal, 3) an order on remand, 4) an order on clarification of a final decision on the merits of an appeal, or 5) an order on reconsideration of a final decision on the merits of an appeal. See Figure 11.

Figure 11

	2023	2024
Total Cases Filed	4	13
Cases Filed and Closed in Same Year	0	10
Closure Rate	0%	77%

The average time period from the date of receipt to the date of closure for the ten cases that were both filed and closed in 2024 was 123 days, an increase of 123 days from the 2023 average of zero days as no cases were both filed and closed in 2023. This is well under the Commission's target of processing cases within 360 days. *See* Figure 12.

Figure 12

	2023	2024
Total Cases on Docket	14	19
Cases Both Filed and Closed in the Same Year	10	14
Average Number of Days from Receipt to Closing	0	123

Resolution of Cases in 2024

Of the fourteen cases on the 2024 docket that were closed, four resulted in published final decisions on the merits of appeals, one resulted in a published memorandum decision, two were dismissed on motions by the appealing party, two were settled, four petitions for review were denied, and one order was issued on a motion for attorney fees filed after a Court opinion was issued. *See* Appendix A.

COMMISSION DECISIONS

Published Decisions

In 2024, the Commission published four final decisions on the merits of appeals. Appendix B is the list of the Commission's 2024 published decisions, with notes on the number of days from receipt to the issuance of a final decision on the merits of an appeal, the number of days from oral argument or record closure to issuance of a final decision on the merits of an appeal, and whether the Commission's decision was appealed or petitioned for review to the Court.

For the four published final decisions on the merits of appeals issued in 2024, the average time from oral argument or record closure to the issuance of the final decision was sixty-five days, twenty-five days less than the statutory allowance of ninety days.

As shown in Appendix B, the average time period between the receipt of an appeal and the issuance of a final decision on the merits of the appeal for the four cases with issued final decisions on the merits in 2024 was 266 days, 94 days less than the Commission's target of issuing final decisions within 360 days from the filing of an appeal.

In 2024, the Commission also published one memorandum decision that denied a late-filed motion for attorney fees and costs. Published memorandum decisions do not count toward the average time period from receipt of an appeal to the issuance of a final decision on the merits, as memorandum decisions do not decide the merits of an appeal.

<u>Published Decisions – Case Resolutions</u>

The results of Commission decisions published in 2024 are summarized in Appendix B. Of the four published final decisions issued on the merits of appeals, three affirmed the Board's decision and one reversed the Board's decision.

The Commission also published 1 memorandum decision in 2024 denying a latefiled motion for attorney fees and costs.

ALASKA SUPREME COURT ACTION

One Commission final decision on the merits of an appeal and one Commission order issued in 2024 were appealed to the Court and are currently pending. A total of four Commission decisions and orders presently await Court rulings: two issued in 2023 (both are ripe for decision), and two issued in 2024. *See* Appendix A.

In 2024, the Court decided two appeals of Commission decisions. The opinions issued on appeals of Commission decisions, which created legal precedent, were:

Opinion No. 7698, May 3, 2024, in a 2021 case, *Jespersen v. Tri-City Air and Alaska Insurance Guaranty Association*, 547 P.3d 1042, which affirmed the Commission's decision.

Opinion No. 7709, July 26, 2024, in a 2021 case, *Amos v. Tidwell and State of Alaska, Workers' Compensation Benefits Guaranty Fund*, 552 P.3d 1060, which reversed the Commission's decision and remanded to the Commission to remand to the Board.

REGULATION CHANGES

Throughout most of 2023, the Commission worked on a regulations review project, and the Commission's updated regulations went into effect on February 4, 2024.

Appendix A: 2024 Appeals Commission Docket¹

Docket Number	Date Filed	Filed As	Case Title	Appellant Attorney	Appellee Attorney	Result/Status
17-001	1/19/17	Appeal	Rusch v. Southeast Alaska Reg'l Health Consortium and Alaska Nat'l Ins. Co.	YES	YES	Affirmed Board in 2018, appealed. Commission affirmed and reversed in part, remanded to Board in 2019. Extension to file fee motion, fee order issued in 2021, appealed. Commission reversed, vacated, remanded in 2022, remand order issued. Appealed in 2023; Commission vacated and remanded in January 2025. Awaiting return of jurisdiction.
17-002	1/19/17	Appeal	Dockter v. Southeast Alaska Reg'l Health Consortium and Alaska Nat'l Ins. Co.	YES	YES	Affirmed Board in 2018, appealed. Commission affirmed and reversed in part, remanded to Board in 2019. Extension to file fee motion, fee order issued in 2021, appealed. Commission reversed, vacated, remanded in 2022, remand order issued. Appealed in 2023; Commission vacated and remanded in January 2025. Awaiting return of jurisdiction.
21-006	5/17/21	Appeal	Jespersen v. Tri-City Air and Alaska Ins. Guar. Ass'n	YES	YES	Affirmed Board in 2022; appealed; Commission affirmed in 2024.
04.044	11/19/21	21 Appeal	Amos v. Tidwell, Plambeck, Plambeck Floor Customs, Inc. and Umialik Ins. Co.	YES	Tidwell: NO	Affirmed Board in 2023; appealed; Commission reversed, remanded to Commission to remand to Board in 2024.
21-014					Others: YES	
22-008	6/20/22	Appeal	Fletcher v. Pike's on the River, Inc. and Republic Indem. Co. of America	NO	YES	Affirmed Board in 2023; appealed; ripe for decision.
22-012	9/9/22	Appeal	Woodell v. Alaska Reg'l Hosp. and Indem. Ins. Co. of N. Am.	NO	YES	Affirmed Board in 2023; appealed; ripe for decision.
23-001	5/26/23	Appeal	Carlile Transp. and Arch Ins. Co. v. Wrice	YES	YES	Settled in 2024.

Also includes Commission cases from prior years that were appealed or petitioned for review to the Court, disposition of those cases if resolved in CY 2024, and a note if still pending before the Court.

Docket Number	Date Filed	Filed As	Case Title	Appellant Attorney	Appellee Attorney	Result/Status
23-002	11/15/23	Appeal	Shannon v. Nelson and State	NO	Nelson: NO State: YES	Appeal proceedings stayed for 4½ months for Board proceedings in 2024; briefing stage.
23-003	12/6/23	Appeal	Sierer v. Tri Star Inc. and Umialik Ins. Co.	YES	YES	Reversed in part and remanded to Board.
23-004	12/20/23	Appeal	McDonald v. Rock & Dirt Environmental, Inc. and Ins. Co. of the State of Pennsylvania	NO	YES	Briefing stage.
24-001	1/4/24	Appeal	Schoppenhorst v. Property Pros., Inc. and Pennsylvania Manufacturer's Ass'n	NO	YES	Affirmed Board in 2024; appealed; briefing stage.
24-002	1/11/24	Appeal	Quinonez v. Trident Seafoods Corp. and Liberty Ins. Corp.	NO	YES	Dismissed in 2024 so appellant could file new evidence with Board.
24-003	1/18/24	Appeal	Cache Camper Mfg. and Republic Indem. Co. of America (RIG) v. Thomas	YES	YES	Affirmed Board in 2024.
24-004	2/5/24	Petition for Review	Hernandez v. Ocean Beauty Seafoods, LLC and Liberty Ins. Corp.	NO	YES	Denied petition for review in 2024.
24-005	3/1/24	Petition for Review	Wood v. State	YES	YES	Denied petition for review in 2024.
24-006	3/18/24	Appeal	Pitka v. City of Fairbanks and Alaska Mun. League Joint Ins. Ass'n	NO	YES	Affirmed Board in 2024; motion for reconsideration denied.
24-007	4/22/24	Appeal	Mitchell v. United Parcel Serv. and Liberty Mut. Fire Ins. Co.	YES	YES	Briefing stage.
24-008	5/8/24	Petition for Review	Hernandez v. Ocean Beauty Seafoods and Liberty Ins. Corp.	NO	YES	Denied petition for review in 2024.
24-009	5/17/24	Appeal	Estate of Menke v. Peak Oilfield Serv. Co., LLC and American Zurich Ins. Co.	YES	YES	Settled in 2024.
24-010	7/10/24	Petition for Review	Toennis v. Crowley Holdings, Inc. and Old Republic Ins. Co.	NO	YES	Dismissed in 2024 so petitioner could file new evidence with Board.

Docket Number	Date Filed	Filed As	Case Title	Appellant Attorney	Appellee Attorney	Result/Status
24-011	9/3/24	Petition for Review	Phillips v. Vend, Inc. and Umialik Ins. Co.	YES	YES	Petition for review, motion for reconsideration denied in 2024; petitioned for review to the Court.
24-012	11/26/24	Appeal	Voight v. Alcan Elec. & Eng'g and Alaska Ins. Guar. Ass'n	NO	YES	Awaiting complete notice of appeal.
24-013	12/27/24	Appeal	Ridge v. City of Wasilla and Alaska Pub. Entity Ins.	YES	YES	Awaiting Board record and transcript.

Appendix B: Table of 2024 Published Decisions

DECISION No.	Appeal No.	TITLE OF APPEAL	DAYS FROM RECEIPT TO FINAL DECISION ON THE MERITS	DAYS FROM ORAL ARGUMENT / RECORD CLOSURE TO FINAL DECISION ON THE MERITS	DECISION/APPEALED
305	18-009	Mitchell v. United Parcel Serv. and Liberty Mut. Fire Ins. Co.	N/A	N/A	Published Memorandum Decision on a late-filed motion for attorney fees and costs
306	24-001	Schoppenhorst v. Property Pros, Inc. and Pennsylvania Mfrs. Ass'n	223	14	Affirmed Board decision.
307	23-003	Sierer v. Tri Star, Inc. and Umialik Ins. Co.	306	84	Reversed in part and remanded to Board.
308	24-006	Pitka v. City of Fairbanks and Alaska Mun. League Joint Ins. Ass'n	226	75	Affirmed Board decision.
309	24-003	Cache Camper Mfg. and Republic Indemn. Co. of America (RIG) v. Thomas	309	85	Affirmed Board decision.
		Average Number of Days:	266	65	