

Chevron v. Echazabel

Question Presented to the Court

This is the third in the trio of major ADA cases to be heard in the Supreme Court's 2001-2002 term. The question presented to the Court was, "whether a person who is unable to carry out the essential functions of a job without incurring significant risks to his own health or life be considered an individual qualified for the job for the purposes of ADA?"

Case Summary

Mr. Echazabal has Hepatitis C, a liver condition that will worsen if he does not take appropriate health precautions. He had worked for an independent contractor at one of Chevron's oil refineries. He applied for a position at Chevron in the unit that extracts petroleum products from crude oil. Chevron turned down his application because it believed the job would be harmful to his health. Numerous medical opinions agreed that the job would be a serious health threat to Mr. Echazabal. He filed a complaint with the EEOC and subsequently filed suit in a state court alleging he had been discriminated against on the basis of a disability.

At the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals (Districts of Alaska, Arizona, California, Guam, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon and Washington) level, the panel ruled in Mr. Echazabal's favor, saying the "direct threat" defense available to employers under ADA does not apply to employees who pose a danger only to their own health. The Equal Employer Advisory Council (EEAC) filed a "friend of the court" brief supporting Chevron. An EEAC attorney said, "The ADA was never meant to prevent employers from using safety standards," further adding that "safety standards should be just as legitimate as qualification standards, if not more so."

Opinion of the Court

In a unanimous decision issued on June 10, 2002, the Supreme Court reasoned that employers do not have to hire individuals who are unable to carry out the essential functions of the job without incurring risk to their own health. The Supreme Court stated that ADA does not entitle individuals to jobs that might jeopardize their health. The EEOC in its regulations implementing ADA, states that an employer is able to deny employment to a disabled person when there is risk of harm to the health or safety of the individual that cannot be eliminated or reduced by reasonable accommodation.

The Supreme Court also noted that employers are justified in their decisions to want to avoid time loss due to sickness, workers' compensation claims, excessive turnover for medical retirement or death, and a threat of litigation under state law.