OFFICE OF THE COURT ADMINISTRATOR, COMPLAINANT, VS. SHERYL S. MEDINA, UTILITY WORKER I, MUNICIPAL TRIAL COURT, ABUCAY, BATAAN, RESPONDENT.

A.M. No. P-25-273 [Formerly JIB FPI No. 23-292-P]. September 30, 2025

Ponente: DIMAAMPAO, J.

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DIMAAMPAO, J.:

This administrative controversy has its provenance in the financial audit conducted by the Fiscal Monitoring Division of the Court Management Office, Office of the Court Administrator on the books of account of the Municipal Trial Court of Abucay, Bataan.

Antecedents

A team from the Fiscal Monitoring Division (FMD) of the Court Management Office (CMO), Office of the Court Administrator (OCA) was tasked to conduct a financial audit of all records pertaining to the cashbooks, legal fees, and other collections of the Municipal Trial Court (MTC) of Abucay, Bataan.[1] The financial audit covered all the pertinent documents relative to the collection and deposit transactions of the court-maintained funds, particularly the Judiciary Development Fund, Special Allowance for the Judiciary Fund, General Fund-New and SC-OCA Mediation Fund; and the collection, deposit, and withdrawal transactions on the Fiduciary Fund and the Sheriffs Trust Fund.[2]

In the Memorandum (Re: Report on the Financial Audit Conducted on the Books of Account of the Municipal Trial Court (MTC), Abucay, Bataan),[3] the audit findings revealed an outstanding balance of PHP 1,184,500.00 as "Unwithdrawn FF." However, upon reconciliation with Land Bank of the Philippines (LBP) Savings Account No. 0441-0986-00 maintained with the LBP Balanga City Branch, a shortage of PHP 30,000.00 in the Fiduciary Fund and PHP 6,000.00 in the General Fund was discovered. This discrepancy was traced to undeposited collections made on May 2, 2023.[4]

The accountability for the undeposited amounts fell within the tenure of Court Interpreter I and accountable officer Angeli D. Federico (Federico). On May 2, 2023, Federico left work early due to an illness and was advised to take a leave of absence until May 5, 2023. That afternoon, respondent Sheryl S. Medina (Medina), Utility Worker I of the said court, informed Federico that there were collections for bail bonds and fines. Federico then instructed Medina, via text message, to direct the court's process server to deposit the collections promptly. However, despite several follow-ups made to Medina regarding the deposit of the said collections, the Fiduciary Fund collections were deposited only on June 1 and 5, 2023. Meanwhile, the General Fund collections representing the fines were deposited only on May 31 and June 6, 2023.[5]

Clerk II Nida D. Hernandez (Hernandez) corroborated this and attested that, in Federico's absence, she issued the official receipts for the bail bond and fine collections on May 2, 2023. As it happened, Medina received the actual cash, since Hernandez was tasked to replace Federico as interpreter for that day's hearing.[6]

For her part, Medina admitted receiving the collections on May 2, 2023 but failed to turn it over to the court's

process server as Hernandez acted as interpreter for the hearing scheduled that day. Instead, Medina kept the funds in an office drawer with the intention of handing them over to Federico upon her return. Later, Medina confessed that she used the funds for personal purposes, i.e., medical expenses of her daughter and payment of their electricity bill. She acknowledged Federico's persistent requests for the return of the funds and admitted remitting it only a month after.[7]

Based on these findings, the OCA financial audit team recommended that its report be docketed as a regular administrative matter, charging Medina with gross misconduct constituting violations of the Code of Conduct for Court Personnel under Section 14(a) of Administrative Matter No. 21-08-09-SC[8] and serious dishonesty under Section 14(c) of the same rule.[9]

In her Comment,[10] Medina denied the charges of gross misconduct and serious dishonesty. She asseverated that her actions were not motivated by bad faith, corruption, nor intent to violate the law, but stemmed from a desperate need to address pressing financial obligations. A single mother and sole breadwinner supporting her mother, son, a blind brother, and a niece, she pleaded for the Court's compassion and sought the appreciation of mitigating circumstances such as her seven years of government service, exemplary performance, the absence of any prior administrative offense, and humanitarian considerations.

The Report and Recommendation of the
Acting Executive Director, JIB

In his Report and Recommendation,[11] the Acting Executive Director of the Judicial Integrity Board (JIB) found that Medina misappropriated PHP 30,000.00 representing Fiduciary Fund collections and PHP 6,000.00 as General Fund collections for personal use and only restituted the said amounts a month later. Her admitted misuse of judicial funds, despite her awareness of its illegality, reflected bad faith and corrupt intent which undermines public trust in the judiciary. Thus, he recommended that Medina be found guilty of gross misconduct and serious dishonesty and, accordingly, be dismissed from service with forfeiture of all retirement benefits and disqualification from reinstatement or appointment to any public office, including government-owned and controlled corporations. In recommending these penalties, the Acting Executive Director did not appreciate any mitigating circumstance in her favor.

The Resolution of the JIB

In its Resolution,[12] the JIB adopted all the findings and recommendations of the Acting Executive Director, finding them well-taken and in order.

The Issue

Discernibly, the pith of the issue lies in whether Medina should be held administratively liable for gross misconduct and serious dishonesty.

The Court's Ruling

Upon judicious rumination, the Court gives imprimatur to the findings and recommendation of the JIB, albeit with modification as to the prescribed penalty.

In no uncertain terms, the Constitution provides that "public office is a public trust," and "public officers and employees must at all times be accountable to the people, serve them with utmost responsibility, integrity, loyalty and efficiency."[13] This mandate applies to all public officers, including court employees.

In Office of the Court Administrator v. Isip, Sheriff IV, RTC, OCC, City of San Fernando, Pampanga,[14] the Court eruditely stressed the role, duty, and mission of court employees in this wise:

> It must be stressed that all court employees must exercise at all times a high degree of professionalism and

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> responsibility, as service in the Judiciary is not only a duty but also a mission. The Court has repeatedly emphasized that everyone in the judiciary, from the presiding judge to the clerk, must always be beyond reproach, free of any suspicion that may taint the judiciary. Public service requires utmost integrity and discipline. A public servant must exhibit at all times the highest sense of honesty and integrity, for no less than the Constitution mandates the principle that "a public office is a public trust and all public officers and employees must at all times be accountable to the people, serve them with utmost responsibility, integrity, loyalty and efficiency." As the administration of justice is a sacred task, the persons involved in it ought to live up to the strictest standards of honesty and integrity. Their conduct, at all times, must not only be characterized by propriety and decorum, but must also be above suspicion. Thus, every employee of the judiciary should be an example of integrity, uprightness, and honesty.[15] (Citations omitted)

Medina's conduct must be measured against these exacting standards. It bears stressing that the quantum of evidence required in administrative cases, such as the present case, is substantial evidence or such relevant evidence as a reasonable mind might accept as adequate to support a conclusion.[16] In Office of the Court Administrator v. Judge Reyes,[17] the Court expounded on this standard of proof as follows:

> One of the nuances of the law on judicial ethics is the significance of public perception. Compared to other proceedings, courts examine and weigh evidence not merely to determine actual culpability, but also consider the effects of the case to the public's perception of the judiciary. Thus, in disciplinary proceedings, the rigid evidentiary requirements in criminal cases do not apply. Only substantial evidence is required. Substantial evidence is defined as that amount of relevant evidence that a reasonable mind might accept as adequate to support a conclusion. The standard of substantial evidence is satisfied when there is reasonable ground to believe that respondent is responsible for the misconduct complained of, even if such evidence might not be overwhelming or even preponderant.[18]

In this case, records evince that on May 2, 2023, while Federico, the accountable officer, was on medical leave, Medina received the bail bond and fine collections totaling PHP 36,000.00, comprising PHP 30,000.00 in Fiduciary Fund collections and PHP 6,000.00 in General Fund collections. Despite instructions to Medina to ensure the prompt deposit of these public funds through their process server, she failed to do so. Instead, she admitted to having used the court funds to pay for personal expenses, including her daughter's medical treatment and electricity bills. The restitution of the amount was effected only on May 31 and June 1, 5, and 6, 2023, or nearly a month after the collection was made by Medina on May 2, 2023.

Her admission of misappropriation, while invoking personal hardship and financial distress, does not exculpate her from administrative liability. Her actions constitute a blatant disregard of the standards required of those serving in the Judiciary.

In light of the foregoing, the Court finds no reason to deviate from the findings of the JIB which are well supported by substantial evidence. Consequently, the Court holds Medina administratively liable for gross misconduct and serious dishonesty, which are serious charges under Section 14(a) and (c) of Administrative Matter No. 21-08-09-SC, or Further Amendments to Rule 140 of the Rules of Court (Amendments to Rule 140).

In Judge Banzuela-Didulo v. Santizo,[19] the Court defined dishonesty and misconduct as follows:

> To be sure, "dishonesty is the disposition to lie, cheat, deceive or defraud; untrustworthiness; lack of integrity; lack of honesty, probity or integrity in principle; lack of fairness and straightforwardness; disposition to defraud, deceive or betray." Misconduct, on the other hand, is defined as the "transgression of some established and definite rule of action, more particularly, unlawful behavior or gross negligence by the public officer. To warrant dismissal from the service, the misconduct must be grave, serious, important, weighty, momentous, and not trifling. The misconduct must imply wrongful intention and not a mere error of judgment and must also have a direct relation to and be connected with the performance of the public officer's official duties

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> amounting either to maladministration or willful, intentional neglect, or failure to discharge the duties of the office. In order to differentiate gross misconduct from simple misconduct, the elements of corruption, clear intent to violate the law, or flagrant disregard of established rule, must be manifest in the former.[20] (Citations omitted)

Here, Medina's act of appropriating the collected bail bonds and fines for her personal use ineludibly violates Canon I, Section 5[21] of the Code of Conduct for Court Personnel[22] constituting grave misconduct:

> [A]n unlawful behavior which threatens the very existence of the system of administration of justice. Indeed, it court employees cannot be trusted to handle court funds properly, the ability of courts to function is in great peril. Not only does this deprive the court of funds needed for its operations, it also weakens public confidence in the judiciary. [Her] conduct also amounts to serious dishonesty as it clearly reveals [respondent's] propensity to lie, cheat, and defraud.[23] (Emphasis supplied)

In the case of Office of the Court Administrator v. Fortaleza,[24] the Court enumerated various acts constituting gross misconduct and serious dishonesty, including the misappropriation of judiciary funds, thus:

> In numerous cases, the Court has settled that the following acts constitute gross misconduct and serious dishonesty: stealing and encashing checks without authority; demanding and receiving money from a litigant in exchange for the dismissal of his or her case; the failure to update the court cashbook; the failure to explain missing collection records for the judiciary funds; shortage in cash collections; and misappropriation of judiciary funds.[25] (Emphasis supplied)

In determining the proper charge and corresponding penalty for erring court officers in administrative cases, the Court relies on the Amendments to Rule 140,[26] governing the discipline of members, officials, employees, and personnel of the Judiciary.

Gross misconduct and serious dishonesty are both categorized as serious charges under Section 14[27] of the Amendments to Rule 140. With regard to the applicable penalty, Section 17 provides:

> SECTION 17. Sanctions. —
>
> (1) If the respondent is guilty of a serious charge, any of the following sanctions shall be imposed:
>
> (a)
>
> Dismissal from service, forfeiture of all or part of the benefits as the Supreme Court may determine, and disqualification from reinstatement or appointment to any public office, including government-owned or-controlled corporation. Provided, however, that the forfeiture of benefits shall in no case include accrued leave credits;
>
> (b)
>
> Suspension from office without salary and other benefits for more than six (6) months but not exceeding one (1) year; or
>
> (c)
>
> A fine of more than [PHP] 100,000.00 but not exceeding [PHP] 200,000.00.

Moreover, if a mitigating circumstance exists, it may be appreciated by the Court in the determination of the penalty to be imposed against a respondent in an administrative case. Section 19 is apropos:

> Section 19. Modifying Circumstances. — In determining the appropriate penalty to be imposed, the Court may, in its discretion, appreciate the following mitigating and aggravating circumstances:
>
> (1)
>
> Mitigating circumstances:
>
> (a)
>
> First offense;
>
> (b)
>
> Length of service of at least ten (10) years with no previous disciplinary record where respondent was meted with an administrative penalty;
>
> (c)
>
> Exemplary performance;
>
> (d)
>
> Humanitarian considerations; and
>
> (e)
>
> Other analogous circumstances.

Anent the manner of imposition of these mitigating circumstances the Rule provides:

> Section 20. Manner of Imposition. — If one (1) or more aggravating circumstances and no mitigating circumstances are present, the Supreme Court may impose the penalties of suspension or fine for a period or amount not exceeding double of the maximum prescribed under this Rule.
>
> If one (1) or more mitigating circumstances and no aggravating circumstances arc present, the Supreme Court may impose the penalties of suspension or fine for a period or amount not less than half of the minimum prescribed under this Rule.
>
> If there are both aggravating and mitigating circumstances present, the Supreme Court may offset each other.

Based on the foregoing, when one or more mitigating circumstance and no aggravating circumstances are present, the Court may impose, in lieu of dismissal from service, the penalties of suspension or fine for a period or amount not less than half of the minimum prescribed under such Rule. On the other hand, if no mitigating circumstance exists, the Court will simply impose a specific penalty within the range provided by Rule 140, as amended, taking into consideration the relevant incidents surrounding the administrative offense.[28]

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In the present case, the Court finds that several mitigating circumstances obtain in favor of Medina, warranting the imposition of a penalty less severe than dismissal. First, this is Medina's first administrative offense in her years of service in the Judiciary. Second, she has fully restituted the amount misappropriated, albeit belatedly, thereby demonstrating an effort to rectify her wrongdoing. Third, Medina has candidly acknowledged her infraction and expressed sincere remorse, showing an awareness of the gravity of her actions and a willingness to atone for them. Fourth and most compellingly, humanitarian considerations exist in the case at bench that the Court cannot simply brush aside. As a court utility worker occupying one of the lowest rungs of judicial personnel, Medina belongs to a vulnerable sector of the workforce who, more often than not, bear the brunt of economic hardship with limited means and opportunities. The records reveal that Medina is a single parent and the sole breadwinner of her family, supporting not only her child but also a blind sibling, a niece, and an elderly mother.[29] Her infractions, though inexcusable, were not driven by ill motive but by an urgent necessity to address her family's medical and subsistence needs. Indeed, it would be unjust and inequitable for the Court to completely turn a blind eye to the mitigating circumstances in Medina's favor.

Jurisprudence recognizes that the penalty of dismissal, while warranted in cases of gross misconduct and serious dishonesty, may be tempered where substantial mitigating circumstances exist. In Office of the Court Administrator v. Judge Chavez,[30] the Court cited instances where the penalty was reduced or modified due to the presence of mitigating circumstances, viz.:

> In Committee on Security and Safety, Court of Appeals v. Dianco, we identified the instances where we imposed lesser penalties in the presence of mitigating factors:
>
> In Judge Isidra A. Arganose-Maniego v. Rogelio T. Salinas, [the Court] suspended the respondent who was guilty of grave misconduct and dishonesty for a period of one (1) year without pay, taking into account the mitigating circumstances of: first offense, ten (10) years in government service, acknowledgment of infractions and feeling of remorse, and restitution of the amount involved.
>
> In Alibsar Adoma v. Romeo Gatcheco and Eugenio Taguba, [the Court] suspended one of the respondents for one (1) year without pay, after finding him guilty of grave misconduct, dishonesty, and conduct prejudicial to the best interests of the service. The respondent was a first-time offender.
>
> And, in Horacio B. Apuyan, Jr. and Alexander O. Eugenio v. Alfredo G. Sta. Isabel, [the Court] imposed the same penalty of one (1)-year suspension without pay to the respondent who was a first-time offender of the offenses of grave misconduct, dishonesty, and conduct grossly prejudicial to the best interests of the service.
>
> As regards judges, in Office of the Court Administrator v. Aguilar, [the Court] imposed the penalty of six months suspension instead of dismissal from service after taking into consideration the mitigating circumstances of dismissal of related criminal cases for lack of probable cause, good faith, respondent judge's strong credentials for appointment as judge, length of government service, first time offense, and remorse and promise to be more accurate and circumspect in future submissions before [the Court].
>
> In In Re: Petition for the Dismissal from Service and/or Disbarment of Judge Baltazar R. Dizon, [the Court] reconsidered [its] earlier Decision dismissing from service the respondent judge and lowered the penalty to suspension from February 23, 1988 until the date of promulgation of the Resolution on May 31, 1989 after considering the mitigating circumstances of length of government service, lack of corrupt motives, environmental difficulties such as overloaded docket, unceasing strain caused by hearings on complex cases and lack of libraries, decent courtrooms, office equipment, supplies and other facilities, and humble repentance.
>
> In Rubin v. [Judge] Corpus-Cabochan, [the Court] considered the mitigating circumstances of first offense in respondent judge's almost 23 years of government service, frail health, case load and candid admission of

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> infraction in determining that the appropriate penalty to be imposed on respondent judge who was found guilty of gross inefficiency was admonition.
>
> In Fernandez v. Vasquez, [the Court] appreciated the mitigating circumstances of unblemished judicial service and first offense in imposing the penalty of fine of [PHP 50,000.00] against respondent judge who was held guilty of dishonesty, an offense punishable with dismissal even on the first commission. The fine was imposed in lieu of suspension from office which can no longer be imposed due to respondent judge's retirement.
>
> In Perez v. Abiera, [the Court] imposed the penalty of fine equivalent to three-month salary of respondent judge, deductible from his retirement benefits, after appreciating the mitigating circumstances of length of service and poor health.
>
> Thus, [the Court] exercises the discretion granted by the [Revised Rules on Administrative Cases in the Civil Service] and prevailing jurisprudence in the imposition of penalty and reconsider the dismissal and forfeiture of Judge Chavez's retirement benefits in view of mitigating circumstances that were overlooked and not properly appreciated.[31]

A similar approach is merited in the case at bench. Thus, while the Court strongly reiterates its zero-tolerance policy against the misappropriation of judicial funds, it finds that, under the totality of the circumstances particularly the presence of strong mitigating factors grounded in humanitarian compassion, the penalty of suspension from service for six months and one day without pay is sufficient to uphold the integrity of the Judiciary without unduly disregarding the equitable considerations of this case.

ACCORDINGLY, Sheryl S. Medina, Utility Worker I of the Municipal Trial Court of Abucay, Bataan, is found GUILTY of the administrative offenses of gross misconduct and serious dishonesty. She is meted the penalty of SUSPENSION from service without pay, for a period of six months and one day. She is also STERNLY WARNED that a repetition of the same offense or similar acts shall be dealt with more severely.

Let a copy of this Decision be furnished to the Office of the Court Administrator to be attached to Medina's records.

SO ORDERED.

Leonen,[**] Acting C.J., Hernando, Lazaro-Javier, Inting, Zalameda, Gaerlan, Rosario, J. Lopez, Marquez, Kho, Jr., and Singh, JJ., concur.
Gesmundo,[*] C.J., on official leave.
Caguioa,[***] J., on official business.
Villanueva,[****] J., no part.

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[*] On official leave.

[**] Per Special Order No. 3223 dated September 15, 2025.

[***] On official business.

[****] No part.

[1] Rollo, pp. 23-24, OCA Memorandum dated May 10, 2023 (Travel Authority).

[2] Id. at 6, OCA Memorandum dated August 3, 2023 (Re: Report on the Financial Audit Conducted on the Books of Account of the Municipal Trial Court (MTC), Abucay, Bataan).

[3] Id. at 5-22. Dated August 3, 2023.

[4] Id. at 8-9. See also rollo, p. 79, Report and Recommendation of Acting Executive Director Eduardo C. Tolentino, Judicial and Integrity Board.

[5] Id. at 9, OCA Memorandum dated August 3, 2023.

[6] Id. at 54, Salaysay of Clerk II Nida Hernandez.

[7] Id. at 10, OCA Memorandum dated August 3, 2023.

[8] Further Amendments to Rule 140 of the Rules of Court, February 22, 2022.

[9] Id. at 18, OCA Memorandum dated August 3, 2023.

[10] Id. at 72-76.

[11] Id. at 77-83.

[12] Id. at 84. Dated June 20, 2025.

[13] CONST. (1987), art. XI, sec. 1.

[14] 613 Phil. 32 (2009) [Per J. Carpio, First Division].

[15] Id. at 38-39.

[16] See Office of the Court Administrator v. Clerk of Court VI Sarabia, Jr., 925 Phil. 595, 608 (2022) [Per Curiam, En Banc].

[17] 948 Phil. 100 (2023) [Per Curiam, En Banc].

[18] Id. at 125-126, citing Anonymous Complaint Against Judge Edmundo P. Pintac, 886 Phil. 1, 14 (2020) [Per Curiam, En Banc].

[19] 935 Phil. 496 (2023) [Per J. Kho, Jr., En Banc].

[20] Id. at 510-511.

[21] SC Administrative Matter No. 03-06-13-SC, May 15, 2004:

> SECTION 5. Court personnel shall use the resources, property and funds under their official custody in a judicious manner and solely in accordance with the prescribed statutory and regulatory guidelines or procedures.

[22] SC Administrative Matter No. 03-06-13-SC, May 15, 2004.

[23] See Office of the Court Administrator v. Fortaleza, 932 Phil. 733, 747 (2023) [Per Curiam, En Banc].

[24] 932 Phil. 733 (2023) [Per Curiam, En Banc].

[25] Id. at 744-745.

[26] RULES OF COURT, Rule 140, as amended by A.M. No. 21-08-09-SC, February 22, 2022.

[27] SECTION 14. Serious Charges. — Serious charges include:

> (a)
>
> Gross misconduct constituting violations of the Code of Judicial Conduct or of the Code of Conduct for Court

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Personnel;

(b)

Bribery, direct and indirect, and violations of the Anti-Graft and Corrupt Practices Act (Republic Act No. 3019);

(c)

Serious dishonesty;

(d)

Gross neglect of duty in the performance or non-performance of official functions;

(e)

Knowingly rendering an unjust judgment or order;

(f)

Commission of a crime involving moral turpitude;

(g)

Falsification of official documents, including making untruthful statements in the certificates of service;

(h)

Borrowing money or property from lawyers and/or litigants in a case pending before the court;

(i)

Gross immorality;

(j)

Gross ignorance of the law or procedure;

(k)

Partisan political activities;

(l)

Grave abuse of authority, and/or prejudicial conduct that gravely besmirches or taints the reputation of the service;

(m)

Sexual harassment;

(n)

Gross insubordination; and

(o)

Possession and/or use of illegal drugs or substances.

[28] See Office of the Court Administrator v. Atty. Toledo, 870 Phil. 160 (2020) [Per Curiam, En Banc].

[29] Rollo, p. 75, Comment.

[30] 815 Phil. 41 (2017) [Per Curiam, En Banc].

[31] Id. at 46-49.

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