

US Supreme Court Rules in Favor of Civil Rights Enforcement in *Williams v. Reed* Case

News

February 25, 2025

In a 5-4 opinion by Justice Kavanaugh, joined by Chief Justice Roberts and Justices Sotomayor, Kagan, and Jackson, the Supreme Court reversed the Alabama Supreme Court's decision and established a significant precedent regarding the burden of entry to bring federal civil rights claims in state court.

This case presented complex questions about federalism, administrative law, and civil rights enforcement. Partner Adam Unikowsky successfully argued the case before SCOTUS in October 2024. For his work on this case, Adam was featured in *The American Lawyer's Litigator of the Week* shout outs.

Jenner represented 21 unemployed workers in Alabama who sought to challenge extreme delays in the processing of their unemployment benefits or denials of benefits without adequate notice. The Alabama Department of Labor had effectively created a bureaucratic black hole, where applicants' appeals languished without hearings or were rejected without explanation.

Alabama's courts had ruled that applicants could not sue over processing delays until they had exhausted the very administrative process that was not functioning well. The Court wrote that the unacceptable implication of the Alabama Supreme Court's opinion was "you can never challenge delays in the administrative process." The Court recognized this created an impermissible immunity shield for state officials against Section 1983 claims.

The implications of the SCOTUS decision extend far beyond unemployment benefits. It establishes an important principle that states cannot create procedural barriers that effectively immunize officials from accountability under federal civil rights laws.

In addition to Adam, the Jenner team included Associates Arjun Ramamurti and Emanuel Powell III. The team worked in partnership with the UChicago Supreme Court and Appellate Clinic.

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