



Carpal Tunnel Case Ruled on by the Supreme Court

The Supreme Court of the United States ruled on January 8, 2002 that workers with carpal tunnel syndrome who seek special treatment from their employers are required to show they are impaired not only for their job, but also in activities of daily living.

The Supreme Court's unanimous decision applies a high standard for what constitutes a disability. It limits the reach of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

This landmark 1980 law was intended by Congress to open opportunities to an estimated 43 million Americans with physical or mental disabilities.

The present ruling adds to the evidence a worker must show to win a claim against his employer based on the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The Court said that the plaintiff Ella Williams, a Toyota assembly line worker claiming that her carpal tunnel syndrome and tendinitis warranted a job transfer, needed to show that the impairment also interfered with her major life activities.

To be substantially limited in performing manual tasks and covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act, an individual must have an impairment that prevents activities that are of central importance to most people's daily lives.

The Supreme Court's decision reversed a lower court opinion favoring Williams in which the lower court said that Williams had only to show that she was unable to use her hands and arms to do a type of manual labor. Williams claims this was enough to qualify her for protection by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Justice O'Connor said that Congress did not intend for everyone with an impairment that barred the performance of some isolated or difficult manual task to be covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

People with industrial injuries are still covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act, but they have to show that their impairment substantially limits them.

The ruling could make it much more difficult for millions of people with a range of injuries to get relief under federal law.



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