

211 Conn. App. 167

MARCH, 2022

167

Seder v. Errato

LAUREN T. SEDER *v.* ROBERT M. ERRATO
(AC 43379)

Cradle, Alexander and Eveleigh, Js.

Syllabus

The defendant appealed from the judgment of the trial court dissolving his marriage to the plaintiff. During the dissolution proceedings, the defendant claimed that the parties had entered into a prenuptial agreement but that the agreement was missing. The court held an evidentiary hearing to permit the defendant to attempt to prove the existence and terms of that agreement by offering collateral evidence as to its contents. The defendant attempted to introduce as a proposed exhibit a boilerplate prenuptial agreement that had been downloaded from an online publisher of legal documents in order to prove the content of the parties' alleged agreement. The document had several areas that were not populated and there were no financial disclosures attached. The plaintiff testified that she had signed a prenuptial agreement but that the defendant had not signed it, and she had no clear recollection as to what the terms might have been or what the defendant's financial disclosures may have included. The court found that, although there was a premarital agreement that was signed prior to the date of the marriage, there was a lack of evidence as to the terms of the agreement, and concluded that the proposed exhibit would not be allowed into evidence. Following a trial, the court ordered the defendant to contribute to the plaintiff's legal fees and costs. On the defendant's appeal to this court, *held*:

1. The trial court did not err in failing to enforce the alleged prenuptial agreement, the evidence having amply supported the court's finding that the defendant did not sufficiently establish the contents of the agreement: although the defendant presented some evidence to prove the contents of the alleged missing agreement, including the proposed exhibit, the court found that no specific date of the agreement had been proven and there was a conflict with the nature and depth of the financial

168

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 167

Seder v. Errato

- disclosures; moreover, contrary to the defendant's claim, the court did not impermissibly favor the plaintiff's lack of memory of the terms of the alleged agreement or completely overlook the evidence the defendant proffered, the defendant having failed to appreciate that it was within the province of the court, when sitting as the fact finder, to weigh the evidence presented and determine its credibility and effect, and the court found the plaintiff's testimony generally credible throughout the trial and significant portions of the defendant's testimony to be not credible; accordingly, this court, deferring to the trial court's assessments concerning credibility, determined that the trial court did not abuse its discretion in excluding the defendant's proposed exhibit.
2. There was no merit to the defendant's claim that the trial court erred in awarding attorney's fees to the plaintiff: the court methodically analyzed the plaintiff's purported justifications for entitlement to attorney's fees and determined that an award of attorney's fees was warranted pursuant to the applicable statute (§ 46b-62 (a)) for payment of attorney's fees in dissolution proceedings; moreover, there was no support in the record for the defendant's claim that the court abused its discretion in awarding attorney's fees in the amount of \$280,000.

Argued January 5—officially released March 15, 2022

Procedural History

Action for the dissolution of a marriage, and for other relief, brought to the Superior Court in the judicial district of Hartford where the defendant filed a counterclaim; thereafter, the matter was tried to the court, *Hon. Gerard I. Adelman*, judge trial referee; judgment dissolving the marriage and granting certain other relief, from which the defendant appealed to this court; subsequently, the court, *Hon. Gerard I. Adelman*, judge trial referee, granted the plaintiff's motion for attorney's fees, and the defendant filed an amended appeal. *Affirmed.*

Daniel J. Krisch, for the appellant (defendant).

Michael S. Taylor, with whom were *Brendon P. Levesque*, and, on the brief, *Scott T. Garosshen*, for the appellee (plaintiff).

211 Conn. App. 167

MARCH, 2022

169

Seder v. Errato

Opinion

EVELEIGH, J. In this dissolution of marriage action, the defendant, Robert M. Errato, appeals from the judgment of the trial court dissolving his marriage to the plaintiff, Lauren T. Seder, and challenges the trial court's financial orders and award of attorney's fees. On appeal, the defendant claims that the court improperly (1) refused to enforce the parties' prenuptial agreement and (2) ordered the defendant to pay \$280,000 in attorney's fees. We affirm the judgment of the trial court.

The following facts and procedural history are relevant to this appeal. The parties first met in October, 1998, at the Oakdale Theater in Wallingford, which was operated by the defendant. On October 10, 2003, the parties were married in Fort Meyers, Florida. This was each party's third marriage. Their marriage was good for the first few years, but a breakdown of the relationship began around 2007 or 2008. By the spring of 2014, the plaintiff came to believe that the marriage was beyond saving. The parties discussed and negotiated their separation in 2014, but that process was not successful. Collaboration eventually gave way to litigation.

The present dissolution action was filed by the plaintiff on May 12, 2015. The parties continued to discuss amicable terms to resolve the divorce and took no action to further their respective cases until the fall of 2015. On October 2, 2015, the plaintiff filed a motion for alimony pendente lite, which was later granted by the court. The dissolution trial was then held over nineteen days between May 1, 2017, and June 26, 2019. There was also a multiday hearing on the defendant's motion to modify alimony pendente lite in the middle of trial, which resulted in testimony and other legal proceedings covering a total of twenty-three days.

170

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 167

Seder v. Errato

In a memorandum of decision dated August 29, 2019, the court dissolved the parties' marriage and ordered the defendant, among other things, to pay the plaintiff periodic monthly alimony in the amount of \$2500 and a lump sum alimony payment in the amount of \$450,000. The court also ordered the defendant to contribute to the plaintiff's legal fees and costs in the amount of \$250,000. This appeal followed.

The plaintiff subsequently moved for an award of appellate attorney's fees. On December 4, 2019, the defendant filed his opposition thereto. On December 16, 2019, the trial court ordered the defendant to contribute an additional \$30,000 to the plaintiff's legal fees for her defense of this appeal, finding that the plaintiff lacked access to liquid funds to pay for her own legal fees. Thereafter, the defendant filed an amended appeal. Additional facts and procedural history will be set forth as necessary.

I

The defendant first claims that the trial court improperly refused to enforce the parties' prenuptial agreement and argues that undisputed testimony and documents established the terms of that agreement. The plaintiff, on the other hand, takes exception to the characterization of the defendant's claim. She argues that although the defendant suggests that the trial court erred in refusing to enforce the alleged prenuptial agreement, the court never reached enforcement because the court properly concluded that there were no terms of an agreement or any associated financial disclosures that it could construe, much less enforce. We agree with the plaintiff.¹

¹ The plaintiff also argues that the appeal is moot with respect to the alleged prenuptial agreement because the defendant fails to challenge the trial court's striking of count one of his counterclaim, which pleaded the existence of a prenuptial agreement, and that his briefing on appeal is inadequate. We disagree. Although the defendant does not explicitly state that he is challenging the court's motion to strike, it is clear that in challenging

211 Conn. App. 167

MARCH, 2022

171

Seder v. Errato

In its memorandum of decision, the court set forth the following factual background: “The parties both testified that they agreed to have a prenuptial agreement. The defendant testified that the couple started discussing a prenuptial agreement as early as August of 2003. He claims that it was the plaintiff’s idea to have such an agreement and that they both agreed that they would not marry without one. The defendant testified that at the time of the marriage, in the fall of 2003, he had assets in excess of ten million dollars Surprisingly, despite the defendant’s wealth and dealings with many lawyers through his different business ventures, he testified that he downloaded a generic prenuptial agreement from the Internet and filled it out himself. The evidence is somewhat contradictory on this issue. At one point, the defendant claimed that the plaintiff did the first draft of the agreement, but now testified that he did it as a proactive move. Regardless, by early October of 2003, there was an agreement in draft.

“The plaintiff testified that she prepared a financial disclosure as part of the process and gave the one . . . page form to the defendant. She agreed that the defendant did some type of financial disclosure as well, and it might have been on the same one . . . page form that she had used. When questioned by the plaintiff’s counsel about the nature of the defendant’s financial

the judgment of dissolution and financial orders generally, he specifically takes exception to the court’s finding that a valid prenuptial agreement did not exist. That is precisely the basis on which the motion to strike was granted, and the defendant briefs all three independent bases on which the court’s decision is predicated. See *Leonova v. Leonov*, 201 Conn. App. 285, 314–15, 242 A.3d 713 (2000) (“although precedent establishes that an appeal or claim of error can be rendered moot if the appellant neglects to challenge every independent ground on which the challenged ruling may be sustained, the defendant here has challenged both findings on which the finding of contempt was predicated”), cert. denied, 336 Conn. 906, 244 A.3d 146 (2021). The defendant provides adequate analysis, legal support, and relevant citations to the record for our review of his claim on the merits. Accordingly, we conclude that the defendant’s claim is neither moot nor inadequately briefed.

172

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 167

Seder v. Errato

disclosures to the plaintiff, the defendant was rather unsure of what was specifically included in his disclosure. He did admit that he had not updated the value of those assets prior to the agreement being finalized. The defendant did state that his ten million dollars . . . was more like ten million, four hundred thousand, to ten million, five hundred thousand dollars . . . by the first few days of October of 2003. He could not, with any assurance, recall if he had disclosed all of his various bank accounts and their balances, or if he had disclosed his capital gains income or not. The defendant likewise could not offer an opinion as to whether or not such a disclosure was of value and should have been included on his financial disclosure to the plaintiff.

“The defendant did show a draft prenuptial agreement to Attorney Thomas Benneche who had done work for the defendant on some of the Oakdale Theater issues and other business matters throughout the 1990s. Attorney Benneche, who practiced primarily real estate law, testified that he had met with his client on another matter, and at the end of the meeting, the defendant asked him to look over the agreement. Benneche obliged his client. He made a copy of the draft to use for the discussion. He told the defendant that there were no disclosures attached to the draft and that was a problem. He also suggested to him that he should make some other changes. Benneche testified that he never saw an executed agreement, never saw a revised draft of the agreement, never saw any of the financial disclosures and never spoke to the plaintiff about the agreement again until this litigation commenced. The attorney also admitted that he had no knowledge of the financial disclosure that had been made by the defendant including any of the defendant’s pending lawsuits and any estimated value of any recovery as a result of such lawsuits. Benneche also testified that he did not take anyone’s acknowledgement on the prenuptial

211 Conn. App. 167

MARCH, 2022

173

Seder v. Errato

agreement and that he cannot find the copy he made when the defendant was in his office in 2003 some sixteen . . . years earlier.

“The plaintiff testified that she signed the agreement, but at that time the defendant had not signed it. She claims that she gave duplicate originals to the defendant, but after that, she never saw an executed copy, nor did she ever receive an executed agreement or copy. It was only years later, once marital difficulties had arisen, that she asked the defendant for a copy of the agreement. She testified that she has no clear recollection as to what the terms might have been or what the defendant’s financial disclosures might have included. It was her testimony that although they were living together informally prior to the marriage and she had some idea of the defendant’s business ventures from general conversation, he was a very private person about his affairs. She knew he had a lot of money, more than she had, and that they were living well. The defendant also testified that he did not have a copy of a signed agreement.” Therefore, no signed agreement was ever presented to the court.

The court explained that “[t]he defendant attempted to offer collateral evidence as to the content of the prenuptial agreement by way of a proposed defendant’s exhibit ‘C.’ The plaintiff filed a motion in limine to preclude such an exhibit The court ruled that it would hold an evidentiary hearing on the issue. That hearing took place on January 16, 2019. After the hearing, the court granted the plaintiff’s motion in limine and precluded the defendant’s proposed exhibit. The same was marked as the defendant’s exhibit ‘C,’ for identification only.”²

² The court explained: “As with other issues in this case, the matter of the alleged prenuptial agreement had been litigated more than once prior to the court’s ruling as to defendant’s exhibit ‘C,’ for identification only. Judge Albis granted a motion to strike regarding the alleged agreement on March 31, 2016 This court ordered the defendant not to ask questions

174

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 167

Seder v. Errato

The plaintiff's motion in limine to preclude the defendant's proposed exhibit, which was referenced by the court in its memorandum of decision, was filed on July 17, 2018. The plaintiff argued that the defendant's proposed exhibit K (later marked as exhibit C)³ was not an executed or enforceable prenuptial agreement, but rather appeared to be an attempt to "populate" a boilerplate prenuptial agreement document. She argued that proposed exhibit K—an unfinished, unsigned and undated document—should not be introduced into the trial as evidence because it was not relevant. At the preliminary hearing on the plaintiff's motion on July 19, 2018, the plaintiff's counsel argued that the defendant could not proceed on his claim for enforcement of a prenuptial agreement because no written, signed agreement existed. In an attempt to provide the defendant with "the fairest possible trial of all the issues," the court held an evidentiary hearing based on the defendant's claim that he could prove the existence and terms of the alleged missing premarital agreement with other collateral evidence.

At the conclusion of the evidentiary hearing on the motion to preclude the defendant's proposed exhibit, the court observed that "it's clear that the Connecticut law, both statutory and common law, allows a party to

about the alleged agreement in a deposition on September 8, 2016 Judge Simon refused to allow the defendant to plead the alleged agreement on October 12, 2016 . . . and Judge Nastri's orders regarding the plaintiff's motion to strike the defendant's special defenses regarding the prenuptial agreement issued on August 29, 2017 All the above referenced rulings prohibited the pleading of the prenuptial agreement except for the last ruling which allowed its pleading as a defense only to allegations of fraudulent conveyances by the defendant to his adult sons."

³ For clarification purposes, during the evidentiary hearing that was held regarding the alleged lost prenuptial agreement, defendant's proposed exhibit K was marked as exhibit C and admitted as a full exhibit for purposes of that hearing only. Following that hearing, the court reclassified and referred to that exhibit as exhibit C for identification only. Thus, proposed exhibit K and exhibit C are the same document.

211 Conn. App. 167

MARCH, 2022

175

Seder v. Errato

prove the existence and terms of a contract by parol evidence if that contract is lost, stolen or destroyed. Our Uniform Commercial Code provides for such a procedure. As has been introduced, our Connecticut Code of Evidence § 10-3 provides for it as well.” The court then found that, although “[t]here was a premarital agreement” that “was signed prior to the date of the marriage,” there was “a lack of evidence as to the terms of the agreement.” The court stated: “The defendant has offered several forms, which he testified he used, and the plaintiff agrees that she signed an agreement, but the court has heard no testimony from the plaintiff as to what those terms were.” The court then stated that “[t]he credibility of each parties’ testimony has been found wanting by the court. For two such people, one a very successful businessman and the other an attorney, to rely on an online form for such an important matter is really quite incredible. It appears to the court that neither party gave this agreement any serious consideration or thought. This is not the first marriage for either party. The defendant, by all accounts, was a wealthy person with children from a previous marriage to protect. The plaintiff also is a mother of children from a previous marriage. And yet neither sought any professional advice from an experienced matrimonial attorney. The plaintiff sought none at all, and the defendant asked a commercial and real estate lawyer for a quick look-see, done as a favor without a fee for their client.” The court found that “even addressing the facts in the best light to support the defendant, *[the court] cannot find by a preponderance of the evidence that it knows the terms of the agreement . . .*” (Emphasis added.)

In addition to concluding that the defendant failed sufficiently to prove the terms of the allegedly lost prenuptial agreement and, thus, that a valid prenuptial agreement did not exist, the court also found that a

176

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 167

Seder v. Errato

valid agreement did not exist because no specific date of the alleged agreement had been proven and because there was a “conflict as to the nature and depth of [financial] disclosures.” Accordingly, the court concluded that “[e]xhibit C, formerly known as K, will not be allowed into evidence. The defendant’s exhibits previously allowed in during the evidentiary hearing will now be reclassified as ID only to preserve the record.”

In the present appeal, the parties disagree as to the standard of review applicable to the defendant’s claim. The defendant argues that our standard of review in this case is plenary because the enforceability of a prenuptial agreement presents a mixed question of fact and law. The plaintiff disagrees and argues that an abuse of discretion standard of review is applicable here because a trial court’s ruling as to whether evidence is relevant and probative is subject to review for abuse of discretion. We agree with the plaintiff.

In reviewing the court’s findings and conclusions with respect to the alleged prenuptial agreement, the trial court never reached the question of, or conducted a hearing on, the enforceability of the purported agreement. This is because the trial court made clear that there existed no valid prenuptial agreement for which it knew the terms. To be sure, in addressing one of the defendant’s claims regarding the allocation of marital property, the court stated: “The court, ruling that there is no valid prenuptial agreement, eliminates such a claim by the defendant” As previously set forth, the court’s conclusion rested on three separate grounds: (1) there was “a lack of evidence as to the terms of the agreement,” (2) the defendant failed to prove a specific date of the alleged agreement, and (3) the defendant failed to prove the nature and depth of the financial disclosures. On those bases, the court precluded the defendant from introducing exhibit C (formerly exhibit K) into the dissolution proceedings.

211 Conn. App. 167

MARCH, 2022

177

Seder v. Errato

Because the court did not reach the question of enforcement, we interpret the defendant as challenging the bases for the court’s decision to exclude exhibit C—the unsigned, undated, and unfinished boilerplate prenuptial agreement document—from the dissolution proceedings. As is well known, “[t]he trial court’s ruling on the admissibility of evidence is entitled to great deference. . . . [T]he trial court has broad discretion in ruling on the admissibility . . . of evidence . . . [and its] ruling on evidentiary matters will be overturned only upon a showing of a clear abuse of the court’s discretion.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Brown v. Brown*, 130 Conn. App. 522, 531, 24 A.3d 1261 (2011).

With this standard in mind, we turn our attention to the court’s principal basis for excluding exhibit C from the general dissolution proceedings—namely, that the document presented was not relevant because the defendant failed to sufficiently prove the terms of the allegedly lost or missing prenuptial agreement. The defendant assigns error to this finding because, in his view, there was undisputed testimony and documents to establish the terms of the agreement. The defendant is arguing essentially that the court abused its discretion in excluding the proposed exhibit because the court’s finding that he did not sufficiently prove the contents of the alleged missing prenuptial agreement through secondary evidence is clearly erroneous. See, e.g., *Host America Corp. v. Ramsey*, 107 Conn. App. 849, 855, 947 A.2d 957 (“[t]he plaintiff first claims that the court abused its discretion in denying its application for injunctive relief because the court’s finding that the defendants proved the former existence, present unavailability and contents of the defendants’ employment agreements through secondary evidence is clearly erroneous”), cert. denied, 289 Conn. 904, 957 A.2d 870 (2008).

178

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 167

Seder v. Errato

“The factual findings of a trial court must stand . . . unless they are clearly erroneous or involve an abuse of discretion.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Hammel v. Hammel*, 158 Conn. App. 827, 832, 120 A.3d 1259 (2015). “A finding of fact is clearly erroneous when there is no evidence in the record to support it . . . or when although there is evidence to support it, the reviewing court on the entire evidence is left with the definite and firm conviction that a mistake has been committed. . . . Because it is the trial court’s function to weigh the evidence and determine credibility, we give great deference to its findings. . . . In reviewing factual findings, [w]e do not examine the record to determine whether the [court] could have reached a conclusion other than the one reached. . . . Instead, we make every reasonable presumption . . . in favor of the trial court’s ruling.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Id.*, 832–33.

Section 10-3 of the Connecticut Code of Evidence provides four instances in which secondary evidence may be introduced to establish the contents of a document: (1) when the originals are lost or destroyed, (2) when the originals are not obtainable by any reasonably available judicial process or procedure, (3) when the originals are in the possession or control of the opponent, or (4) when the contents relate to a collateral matter. Conn. Code Evid. § 10-3. “The cases and the commentaries are . . . in substantial agreement that a party must undertake a twofold burden in order to recover on a document that he cannot produce. Such a party must demonstrate both (a) the former existence and the present unavailability of the missing document, and (b) the contents of the missing document.” *Connecticut Bank & Trust Co. v. Wilcox*, 201 Conn. 570, 573, 518 A.2d 928 (1986).

Our careful review of the record reveals that the court did not err in finding that the defendant failed to prove

211 Conn. App. 167

MARCH, 2022

179

Seder v. Errato

the contents of the alleged missing prenuptial agreement. The defendant did, as he claims, present some testimony from himself and Benneche about the alleged prenuptial agreement and its terms. In particular, he introduced certain form prenuptial agreements, such as exhibit C, which he downloaded from U.S. Legal Forms, an online publisher of legal documents, in an attempt to prove the contents of the alleged agreement. He testified that he made only minor changes to the document prior to giving it to the plaintiff. He acknowledged, however, that the form had certain areas that were not populated. He thus testified to the areas he populated prior to giving the document to the plaintiff. He further acknowledged that exhibit C did not have financial disclosures attached to it but testified that the final agreement did have some type of asset distribution with the last version.⁴

Benneche also testified that he did review a draft of a prenuptial agreement with the defendant and had a recollection of some but not all of the pages of the presented form document. He testified, however, that he never saw the financial disclosures that allegedly accompanied the document or a copy of an executed prenuptial agreement between the parties. Benneche also indicated that he never witnessed the parties sign the document.

Although the defendant did present some evidence to prove the contents of the alleged missing agreement, we disagree with the defendant's contention that the court impermissibly favored the plaintiff's lack of memory of the terms of the alleged prenuptial agreement and completely overlooked the evidence he proffered of the contents of the alleged prenuptial agreement.

⁴ When asked whether the last version contained an asset distribution, the defendant responded in the affirmative but stated: "Well, not necessarily attached."

180

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 167

Seder v. Errato

The defendant fails to appreciate “that [i]t is within the province of the trial court, when sitting as the fact finder, to weigh the evidence presented and determine the credibility and effect to be given the evidence.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Ravetto v. Triton Thalassic Technologies, Inc.*, 285 Conn. 716, 728, 941 A.2d 309 (2008). In the court’s memorandum of decision, it found that the plaintiff’s testimony was “generally credible throughout the trial,” and explicitly stated that “[t]he court finds significant portions of the defendant’s testimony not to be credible, including but not limited to his description of the plaintiff’s behavior during his period of depression and his allegations of fraud raised against the plaintiff”

The court also explicitly stated at the conclusion of the evidentiary hearing on the motion in limine regarding the proposed exhibit that “[t]he credibility of each parties’ testimony [had] been found wanting by the court.” This includes the testimony of the defendant. The court further found incredible that the defendant, “a very successful businessman,” and the plaintiff, an attorney, would “rely on an online form for such an important matter” The court was permitted, in its role as fact finder, to determine what weight, if any, to give the testimony presented by the defendant. It is clear little weight was given. Deferring, as we must, to the trial court’s assessments concerning credibility, we have little difficulty concluding that the evidence amply supported the trial court’s finding that the defendant did not sufficiently establish the terms of the alleged missing prenuptial agreement. See *D. S. v. R. S.*, 199 Conn. App. 11, 18, 234 A.3d 1150 (2020) (“[a]n appellate court must defer to the trier of fact’s assessment of credibility because [i]t is the [fact finder] . . . [who has] an opportunity to observe the demeanor of the witnesses and the parties; thus [the fact finder] is best able to judge the credibility of the witnesses and to

211 Conn. App. 167

MARCH, 2022

181

Seder v. Errato

draw necessary inferences therefrom” (internal quotation marks omitted)). We therefore cannot conclude that the court abused its discretion in excluding the defendant’s proposed exhibit, and, consequently, did not err in failing to enforce the alleged prenuptial agreement.⁵

II

We turn next to the decision of the court ordering the defendant to contribute \$280,000 toward the plaintiff’s attorney’s fees. The American rule, followed by Connecticut, generally requires that each party compensate his or her own lawyers. See, e.g., *Mangiante v. Niemiec*, 98 Conn. App. 567, 570, 910 A.2d 235 (2006). This rule, like almost every general rule, admits of various exceptions. See, e.g., *Lederle v. Spivey*, 332 Conn. 837, 843–44, 213 A.3d 481 (2019); *Ramin v. Ramin*, 281 Conn. 324, 351, 915 A.2d 790 (2007).

One such exception to the American rule is when the imposition of attorney’s fees is permitted by statute. For example, General Statutes § 46b-62 (a) authorizes a trial court to award attorney’s fees in a dissolution proceeding when appropriate in light of the “respective financial abilities” of the parties and the equitable factors listed in General Statutes § 46b-82. Our Supreme Court has set forth “three broad principles by which these statutory criteria are to be applied. First, such awards should not be made merely because the obligor has demonstrated an ability to pay. Second, where both parties are financially able to pay their own fees and expenses, they should be permitted to do so. Third, where, because of other orders, the potential obligee has ample liquid funds, an allowance of [attorney’s] fees is not justified.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.)

⁵ Because we conclude that exclusion of the defendant’s proposed exhibit was proper on this basis, we need not reach the other two independent bases the court set forth for exclusion of the document.

182 MARCH, 2022 211 Conn. App. 167

Seder v. Errato

Hornung v. Hornung, 323 Conn. 144, 169–70, 146 A.3d 912 (2016).

“A determination of what constitutes ample liquid funds . . . requires . . . an examination of the total assets of the parties at the time the award is made. . . . *Anderson v. Anderson*, 191 Conn. 46, 59, 463 A.2d 578 (1983). We have recognized, however, that [t]he availability of sufficient cash to pay one’s attorney’s fees is not an absolute litmus test [A] trial court’s discretion should be guided so that its decision regarding attorney’s fees does not undermine its purpose in making any other financial award. *Devino v. Devino*, 190 Conn. 36, 38–39, 458 A.2d 692 (1983); see also, e.g., *Grimm v. Grimm*, 276 Conn. 377, 398, 886 A.2d 391 (2005) (not awarding \$100,000 in attorney’s fees to wife would have necessarily eviscerate[d] any benefit she would have received from \$100,000 lump sum alimony award), cert. denied, 547 U.S. 1148, 126 S. Ct. 2296, 164 L. Ed. 2d 815 (2006).” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Hornung v. Hornung*, supra, 323 Conn. 170.

“Whether to allow counsel fees . . . and if so in what amount, calls for the exercise of judicial discretion. . . . An abuse of discretion in granting counsel fees will be found only if [an appellate court] determines that the trial court could not reasonably have concluded as it did.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Giordano v. Giordano*, 203 Conn. App. 652, 661, 249 A.3d 363 (2021).

In the present appeal, the defendant argues that the court improperly ordered him to pay the plaintiff \$280,000 toward her attorney’s fees. He claims that the court (1) abused its discretion in awarding the fees under § 46b-62 because the plaintiff has sufficient funds from which to pay her attorneys, (2) improperly ordered the attorney’s fees because the court awarded the fees for two acts of litigation misconduct despite finding

211 Conn. App. 167

MARCH, 2022

183

Seder v. Errato

that one of the two had a “colorable theory,” and (3) improperly “awarded \$250,000 for the plaintiff’s trial counsel fees despite it being certainly beyond the court’s ability to fully understand the amount of the preparation time expended by the plaintiff’s counsel in defending against the litigation misconduct.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) We disagree with the defendant. Because we conclude that the court’s award of attorney’s fees was proper in accordance with § 46b-62, we need not reach the defendant’s additional two claims that relate to the court’s second independent basis for awarding attorney’s fees, to wit, that the defendant engaged in litigation misconduct.

The following additional facts help inform our discussion. The plaintiff incurred nearly \$560,000 in legal fees related to all aspects of the trial court case. The retainer fee for the appeal added another \$40,000, bringing her total legal fees to nearly \$600,000. The plaintiff’s most recent financial affidavit dated May 2, 2019, showed total assets of \$552,110, of which more than 50 percent of those assets are in deferred income retirement funds. Only approximately \$151,732 is held in liquid assets. The defendant’s most recent financial affidavit discloses that he owns assets totaling \$973,258. The court found, however, that many of those assets are undervalued by the defendant. Nevertheless, the court stated that “looking only at his liquid, noncontroversial holdings, they total almost . . . \$850,000.”

In the court’s memorandum of decision, the court methodically went through the plaintiff’s purported justifications for entitlement to attorney’s fees, addressing the plaintiff’s arguments that counsel fees were appropriate pursuant to § 46b-62 (a), *Ramin v. Ramin*, supra, 281 Conn. 324, and *Maris v. McGrath*, 269 Conn. 834, 835, 850 A.2d 133 (2004). After a thorough analysis, the court concluded that an award of counsel fees based on discovery misconduct, as discussed in *Ramin*, was

184

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 167

Seder v. Errato

not appropriate. The court, however, determined that an award of legal fees was warranted under two separate, independent bases—pursuant to § 46b-62 (a) and because of the defendant’s litigation misconduct. Accordingly, the court ordered the defendant to contribute \$250,000 toward the plaintiff’s legal fees. After considering the plaintiff’s motion for appellate fees and the defendant’s opposition thereto, the court ordered the defendant to contribute an additional \$30,000 to the plaintiff’s legal fees for her defense of this appeal.

In the present case, we find no support in the record for the defendant’s claim that the court abused its discretion in making the award of counsel fees that it did. The defendant argues in a rather conclusory manner that “the plaintiff has the resources to pay her attorneys” and cites to various cases that are easily distinguishable from the present case. One such case is *Hornung v. Hornung*, supra, 323 Conn. 144. As this court observed: “In *Hornung*, the court awarded the plaintiff \$100,000 in trial attorney’s fees and \$40,000 in appellate attorney’s fees. . . . The defendant claimed on appeal that ‘the plaintiff received ample liquid funds from the trial court’s judgment with which to pay her attorney’s fees, and that the trial court’s conclusion that not awarding her attorney’s fees would undermine its other awards to her was unreasonable.’ . . . Our Supreme Court agreed with the defendant. It first considered that the trial attorney’s fees award ‘represent[ed] a very small portion of the liquid assets awarded to the plaintiff in the trial court’s judgment.’ . . . Specifically, [the] court noted that ‘the plaintiff [was to] receive liquid assets totaling \$2,577,000 within three months of the judgment’ and that the fee award ‘represent[ed] only 4 percent of this amount.’ . . . The plaintiff was to receive ‘\$2,082,000, the amount owed to her under the [parties’ prenuptial] agreement, within sixty days of the judgment; \$40,000 per month in periodic alimony and

211 Conn. App. 167

MARCH, 2022

185

Seder v. Errato

child support, starting twelve days from the judgment; and \$7.5 million in lump sum alimony, payable in biannual installments of \$375,000, starting two and one-half months from the judgment.’ . . . [Our] Supreme Court concluded that, ‘given the vast liquid assets awarded to the plaintiff, and the modest nature of the attorney’s fees when compared with those assets, the equitable factors in § 46b-82, as incorporated into § 46b-62, do not justify the award.’ ” (Citations omitted.) *Anketell v. Kulldorff*, 207 Conn. App. 807, 840–41, 263 A.3d 972, cert. denied, 340 Conn. 905, 263 A.3d 821 (2021).

This is not such a case. As the plaintiff correctly notes, \$280,000 is 185 percent of the plaintiff’s liquid assets. The defendant does not challenge the court’s liquid asset finding as clearly erroneous, but instead resorts to generalized arguments that “the plaintiff has sufficient assets to pay her attorneys.” Even if one were to add the \$450,000 lump sum alimony award (which the plaintiff did not have access to because the trial court denied her motion to lift the automatic stay) to the amount of the plaintiff’s liquid assets, the counsel fee award is still 47 percent of that total. See *Hornung v. Hornung*, supra, 323 Conn. 176 (“attorney’s fees awards reflecting a more significant portion of the payee’s lump sum alimony award, thereby potentially undermining that award, have been held proper, especially when equitable factors support the award”); see also *Costa v. Costa*, 11 Conn. App. 74, 75–78, 526 A.2d 4 (1987) (attorney’s fees award of \$6000, amounting to 30 percent of \$20,000 lump sum alimony award, not including periodic alimony award, was not abuse of discretion where husband had \$280,000 in assets, wife had \$170,000 in assets, and husband earned \$58,400 per year).

The claim of error raised by the defendant, that the trial court erred in awarding the plaintiff \$280,000 in attorney’s fees, is without merit. “An abuse of discretion

186 MARCH, 2022 211 Conn. App. 186

Newtown v. Gaydosh

in granting [attorney’s] fees will be found only if [an appellate court] determines that the trial court could not reasonably have concluded as it did.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Misthopoulos v. Misthopoulos*, 297 Conn. 358, 386, 999 A.2d 721 (2010). Having thoroughly examined the record, we cannot so hold.⁶

The judgment is affirmed.

In this opinion the other judges concurred.

TOWN OF NEWTOWN ET AL. v. GARY
GAYDOSH ET AL.
(AC 43209)

Elgo, Alexander and Suarez, Js.

Syllabus

The defendants appealed to this court from the judgment of the trial court granting the plaintiffs’ motion for contempt. The defendants owned property that was located in the plaintiff town. In 2009, the plaintiffs commenced the underlying action seeking injunctive relief to compel the defendants to comply with certain zoning regulations. The parties entered into a joint stipulation, which, inter alia, prohibited the defendants from selling or having taken from the property by truck, or in any way removing from the property any soil, sand, gravel, clay, rock, or other earth material, and the trial court rendered judgment in accordance with the stipulation. Thereafter, the plaintiffs filed several postjudgment motions for contempt alleging that the defendants had violated the terms of the stipulated judgment. The trial court granted the plaintiffs’ first motion, filed in 2011, and entered certain orders. Following the plaintiffs’ second motion for contempt, filed in 2013, the trial court ordered the

⁶ We note that, even if the plaintiff did have ample liquid funds to pay for her own counsel fees, the court’s award of counsel fees would still be justified because the record supports the conclusion that the failure to make such an award would undermine the court’s previous orders. See *Grimm v. Grimm*, supra, 276 Conn. 397 (“[A]n award of attorney’s fees is justified even where both parties are financially able to pay their own fees if the failure to make an award would undermine its prior financial orders The trial court need not make an express finding with respect to whether the fee award is necessary to avoid undermining the other financial orders, so long as the record supports that conclusion.” (Citations omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.)).

Newtown v. Gaydosh

parties to conduct periodic meetings at the property to monitor the defendants' compliance with the judgment. When the town was satisfied that the defendants were in compliance with the judgment, the plaintiffs withdrew their motion. In 2018, the plaintiffs received several complaints about noise and excess truck traffic on the property. In response, the plaintiffs took aerial photographs of the property in January, 2019, which depicted construction equipment and stockpiles of construction materials on the property. The plaintiffs filed their third motion for contempt, the resolution of which served as the basis for the present appeal. The court found that the defendants had wilfully violated the judgment by using the property for commercial rock mining and construction related operations and they had concealed their noncompliance with the judgment. The court granted the motion and imposed sanctions against the defendants, including a \$13,800 fine, a conditional fine of \$100 per day until the defendants purged their contempt by restoring the property to its prior condition, and injunctive relief ordering, inter alia, that the defendants remove any improperly buried materials from the site. *Held:*

1. Contrary to the defendants' claim, the trial court's finding that the defendants had violated the terms of the stipulated judgment by engaging in commercial mining and construction related operations on the property was not clearly erroneous: the court's finding was supported by the evidence presented at the hearing on the motion for contempt, specifically, the photographs of the property that showed the use of certain construction equipment and stockpiles of construction materials, and testimony from the town's land use enforcement officer about the condition of the property; moreover, it was apparent from the court's decision that it doubted the defendants' credibility and, instead, chose to credit the evidence presented by the plaintiffs, which it was entitled to do as the trier of fact.
2. This court concluded that the trial court did not abuse its discretion in imposing sanctions related to its finding of contempt, this court having considered the defendants' wilful and continued violation of the judgment, the defendants' efforts to conceal their noncompliance with the judgment, and the purpose of the sanctions, which was to ensure the defendants' future compliance with the judgment.

Argued October 18, 2021—officially released March 15, 2022

Procedural History

Action seeking temporary and permanent injunctions ordering the defendants to comply with certain zoning regulations, and for other relief, brought to the Superior Court in the judicial district of Danbury, where the court, *Maronich, J.*, rendered judgment in accordance

188 MARCH, 2022 211 Conn. App. 186

Newtown v. Gaydosh

with the parties' stipulation; thereafter, the court, *Krumreich, J.*, granted the plaintiffs' motion for contempt, and the defendants appealed to this court. *Affirmed.*

David V. DeRosa, for the appellants (defendants).

Alexander Copp, with whom, on the brief, was *Joseph G. Walsh*, for the appellees (plaintiffs).

Opinion

SUAREZ, J. The defendants, Gary Gaydosh, Barbara Gaydosh, and Justin Gaydosh, appeal from the judgment of the trial court granting the motion for contempt filed by the plaintiffs, the town of Newtown (town) and its zoning enforcement officer, Gary Frenette,¹ for the defendants' alleged violation of a stipulated judgment entered into by the plaintiffs and the defendants and rendered by the court to remedy zoning violations on the defendants' property. On appeal, the defendants claim that (1) the court's finding that they had violated the terms of the judgment was not supported by the evidence and (2) the court abused its discretion with respect to the sanctions imposed as a result of its finding of contempt. We affirm the judgment of the trial court.

The following facts, which are ascertained from the record and the trial court's memorandum of decision, and procedural history are relevant to this appeal. At all relevant times, the defendants owned real property known as 90A Huntington Road in Newtown (property). In July, 2009, the plaintiffs brought a zoning enforcement action against the defendants, alleging that the defendants were committing various zoning violations on the property. The plaintiffs alleged that the defendants had violated §§ 8.08.210, 8.03.722, and 1.06.1000

¹ For clarity, in this opinion we refer to the town of Newtown and Frenette collectively as the plaintiffs and individually by name. We also refer to Gary Gaydosh, Barbara Gaydosh, and Justin Gaydosh collectively as the defendants and, when necessary, individually by name.

of the Newtown Zoning Regulations (regulations). Specifically, the plaintiffs alleged that the defendants had (1) “conducted, or allowed to [be] conducted, the excavation, processing, addition and removal of soil, rock, or other earth material on the property,” in violation of § 8.08.210;² (2) “caused or allowed dump trucks and other vehicles not permitted in the residential zone to be parked or stored on the property,” in violation of § 8.03.722;³ and (3) “caused or allowed the dissemination of noise or vibration beyond the property lot,” in violation of § 1.06.1000.⁴ The plaintiffs sought temporary and permanent injunctive relief to compel the defendants to comply with the relevant provisions of the regulations, as well as fines and attorney’s fees pursuant to General Statutes § 8-12.⁵

² Section 8.08.210 provides: “No excavation, removal, grading, or addition of soil, loam, sand, gravel, clay, rock, or any other earth material upon land or premises not in public use in the Town of Newtown shall be commenced or conducted, except in accordance with and subject to the provisions of these regulations.” Newtown Zoning Regs., § 8.08.210.

³ Section 8.03.722 provides: “Outside storage of any piece of construction equipment, dump truck, garbage truck or other heavy truck of a type not ordinarily used as a means of transportation for people is prohibited in all zones.” Newtown Zoning Regs., § 8.03.722.

⁴ Section 1.06 provides: “The following uses, buildings or structures are specifically prohibited throughout all zones, even if only an accessory use” Newtown Zoning Regs., § 1.06.

Section 1.06.1000 describes the prohibited uses under § 1.06 to include the following: “Dissemination of smoke, dust, observable gas or fumes, noise, odor, vibration, or light beyond the lot on which the use is being conducted. Violation of the specific performance standards established by Article VIII, Section 10 of these regulations for the Industrial Zones in which they apply shall automatically be considered a violation of this section. This section may also be found to be violated in any zone where the Zoning Enforcement Officer finds the existence of the items listed in the first sentence of this section without regard to said performance standards.” Newtown Zoning Regs., § 1.06.1000.

⁵ General Statutes § 8-12 provides in relevant part: “If any . . . land has been used, in violation of any provision . . . of any bylaw, ordinance, rule or regulation made under the authority conferred hereby, any official having jurisdiction, in addition to other remedies, may institute an action or proceeding to prevent such unlawful . . . use or to restrain, correct or abate such violation The owner or agent of any building or premises where a

190

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 186

Newtown v. Gaydosh

To resolve the complaint, the parties entered into a joint stipulation. The written stipulation prohibited the defendants from “bring[ing] onto [the] property from other locations, or hav[ing] or allow[ing] others to bring onto [the property] any soil, sand, gravel, clay, rock, or earth material” (Citation omitted.) It also prohibited the defendants from “bring[ing] or hav[ing] delivered any type of manure to [the] property unless used as fertilizer for new greenhouses or for growing crops.” Under the stipulation, the defendants also were not permitted to “sell or have taken from [the] property by truck, or in any way remove from [the property] any soil, sand, gravel, clay, rock, or other earth material” (Citation omitted.)

The stipulation, however, did permit the defendants to compost and sell material in accordance with a Department of Environmental Protection Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan. Such a plan subsequently was prepared in April, 2011, for the Department of Environmental Protection by Joseph E. Polulech.⁶ The stipulation also permitted the defendants to conduct farming activities, but it specifically prohibited “the processing, stockpiling, or sale of any materials not associated with farming other than composted waste produced directly as a byproduct of the housing of horses and livestock” on the property. The stipulation further prohibited “the mixing, screening, crushing,

violation of any provision of such regulations has been committed or exists . . . shall be fined not less than ten dollars or more than one hundred dollars for each day that such violation continues; but, if the offense is wilful, the person convicted thereof shall be fined not less than one hundred dollars or more than two hundred fifty dollars for each day that such violation continues If the court renders judgment for such municipality and finds that the violation was wilful, the court shall allow such municipality its costs, together with reasonable attorney’s fees to be taxed by the court. . . .”

⁶ Polulech is an engineer and the president of JEP Engineering Company, a private company that was hired to prepare the Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan for the Department of Environmental Protection, now the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection.

211 Conn. App. 186

MARCH, 2022

191

Newtown v. Gaydosh

blending, or combining of materials other than those allowed for composting operations in an approved Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan” Finally, with respect to vehicles and machinery, the stipulation provided that “[t]he storage or parking of any piece of construction equipment, dump truck and other heavy truck of a type not ordinarily used as a means of transportation for people is not permitted on . . . this property, in this residential zone The use of operable motor vehicles normally used on farms for farming activities is permitted The defendants will not store or park any piece of construction equipment, dump truck and other heavy truck of a type not ordinarily used as a means of transportation for people on . . . this property unless used on the farm for farming activities after April 15, 2011.” (Citations omitted.) On March 4, 2011, the court, *Maronich, J.*, rendered judgment in accordance with the parties’ stipulation.

On June 8, 2011, the plaintiffs filed a motion for contempt against the defendants, alleging that the defendants had violated the terms of the stipulated judgment. On March 2, 2012, following several days of hearings, the trial court, *Wenzel, J.*, issued a memorandum of decision granting the motion for contempt, in which it found that the defendants wilfully had violated the judgment. To remedy the violation, the court ordered the defendants to maintain a written record of the entry and departure of trucks from the property and to present the record to the town on a monthly basis. The court also awarded costs and attorney’s fees to the plaintiffs.

On December 3, 2013, the plaintiffs filed another motion for contempt, alleging that the defendants had continued to violate the judgment. Following a hearing, the trial court, *Roraback, J.*, ordered that the parties conduct periodic meetings at the property to monitor

192

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 186

Newtown v. Gaydosh

the defendants' compliance with the judgment. The parties held these meetings for eighteen months, during which time the town was satisfied that the defendants were in compliance with the judgment. On October 5, 2016, the plaintiffs withdrew the contempt motion.

In 2018, the plaintiffs became concerned that the defendants had resumed conducting prohibited activities on the property. In response to several neighbors' complaints about noise and excess truck traffic on the property, the plaintiffs flew a drone over the property to take aerial photographs on January 4, 2019. According to the plaintiffs, the photographs suggested that the defendants were once again using the property for commercial mining and construction operations in violation of the judgment.

Relying on the photographs, the plaintiffs filed another motion for contempt against the defendants on January 15, 2019, the resolution of which is the subject of the present appeal. In the motion, the plaintiffs specifically alleged that the defendants had violated the judgment by (1) conducting "[e]xtensive screening and processing of various materials"; (2) conducting "[e]xtensive stockpiling of wood, stumps, asphalt pieces and millings"; (3) engaging in "[n]umerous and extensive excavation creating ponds"; (4) stockpiling various materials associated with mining; (5) using the property as a landfill; and (6) storing construction equipment and heavy trucks on the property. The plaintiffs sought an order to correct the violations, as well as fines and attorney's fees.

On February 11, 2019, a hearing on the motion for contempt was held before the trial court, *Krumeich, J.* Although notice of the hearing was duly provided to the defendants, they did not appear at the hearing. During the hearing, the plaintiffs presented the testimony of Steve Maguire, a land use enforcement officer for the town. Maguire testified that, during the months that

211 Conn. App. 186

MARCH, 2022

193

Newtown v. Gaydosh

preceded the hearing, he had received multiple complaints concerning the property. Maguire further testified that, after receiving several complaints, he used a drone that was borrowed from the Newtown Police Department to take aerial photographs of the property to determine the nature of the activities that were being conducted on the property. The photographs were entered into evidence at the hearing.

On the basis of the photographs, Maguire determined that a large portion of the property was being used for a commercial mining operation. During his testimony, Maguire described the operation to include material processing, the sale and transport of gravel, sand, and soil, and the dumping and burying of material. Maguire explained that the photographs depict “large earth excavations” as well as areas where stumps and debris have been buried. He also noted that the photographs show “extensive sorting machines which process out stone, sand, [and] soil” and multiple excavators. He characterized the property as a “large scale commercial operation which is in no way a farming operation including composting of manure.” Maguire testified that the farming operation that he observed in previous inspections was too small to necessitate the equipment that was being used on the property in January, 2019, as depicted in the drone photographs. With respect to composting, Maguire testified that the windrows⁷ that were previously on the property had been replaced with the excavation and sorting area. The plaintiffs asked the court to find the defendants in contempt and to impose daily fines and issue an order requiring the defendants to submit to a physical inspection of the property.

Following the hearing, but before the court reached a decision, the defendants moved to reargue and open

⁷ Maguire defined windrows as “basically long rows of material to be turned over throughout the year . . . to decompose and turn into essentially soil and compost.”

194 MARCH, 2022 211 Conn. App. 186

Newtown v. Gaydosh

the evidence on the ground that their counsel had mistakenly thought that the hearing was scheduled for a different date. On February 20, 2019, the court granted the motion and opened the evidence to permit the defendants to cross-examine Maguire and to present evidence. Accordingly, the court scheduled an additional hearing to occur on April 8, 2019.

Prior to that hearing, on February 28, 2019, the plaintiffs filed a motion to inspect the defendants' property. The court granted the motion on that same day, finding that there was probable cause to believe that there may be a zoning violation on the property. The defendants objected to the plaintiffs' request to inspect the property and asked the court to continue the hearing that was scheduled for April 8, 2019, but the court denied their requests. On Friday, April 5, 2019, Maguire was permitted to inspect the property.

At the hearing on April 8, 2019, the court permitted both the plaintiffs and the defendants to present evidence. Maguire testified on behalf of the plaintiffs concerning his April 5, 2019 inspection of the property. The plaintiffs also entered into evidence photographs of the property that were taken during the April 5, 2019 inspection. Maguire described the January 4, 2019 aerial photographs to show large piles of asphalt, concrete, and stumps, which are not consistent with composting. Maguire testified that it appeared that the property was being used as a construction and materials processing site. During his testimony, he also compared photographs taken in 2014, when the defendants' compliance with the judgment was being monitored, to the January 4, 2019 and the April 5, 2019 photographs. Maguire opined that the 2014 photographs depicted a legitimate composting operation, while the January 4, 2019 photographs depicted an excavation business and the April 5, 2019 photographs depicted only "some" composting

211 Conn. App. 186

MARCH, 2022

195

Newtown v. Gaydosh

operations with a couple of windrows that were “freshly . . . turned over.”

Gary Gaydosh also testified at the hearing. He testified that he was conducting only farming and composting operations on the property. He explained that the heavy machinery on the property was used to mix the windrows as part of the composting process. He further explained that the stone that Maguire observed “comes from when you scrape . . . the manure off the fields” When manure is scraped off the fields, “stones get mixed up with the hay . . . the compost, the shavings, the chips.” He testified that, because he is not permitted to sell the stones, he stockpiles the stones that get pulled up from the ground when manure is scraped off the fields.

On May 30, 2019, the court, in a detailed memorandum of decision, granted the plaintiffs’ January 15, 2019 motion for contempt. The court found in relevant part: “The aerial photographs taken on January 4, 2019, show a large scale nonfarming operation in violation of zoning laws and the judgment. These photographs confirmed the citizen complaints to the town that there was excessive noise and truck traffic to and from the site because of commercial operations not permitted under the judgment and contrary to the zoning law. The defendants offered no evidence to back their assertion the heavy truck traffic was from normal farming operations. The photographs show use of construction equipment on the site, including six different excavators, large sorting equipment, several dump trucks and payloaders, that are placed consistent with use of the site for commercial mining and construction related operations. The photographs and credible testimony show the property has been used for commercial rock mining, with a pool dug for cleaning rock quarried from the property. The credible evidence also indicates the site has been used in connection with defendant Justin Gaydosh’s JMB

196

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 186

Newtown v. Gaydosh

construction business for sorting, screening, and cleaning of materials from off-site and storage in stockpiles of construction materials including fill, wood, stumps, sand and gravel, storage of asphalt millings, including large pieces of asphalt, beyond the amount of asphalt millings that could be anticipated for patching and filling the farm roads. There is also credible evidence that there has been burial of materials imported into the site, including large logs, stumps and asphalt, which is consistent with use of the site as a transfer station. The January photographs do not show a large composting operation; the composting windrows . . . Maguire had observed on previous site visits in 2014–2015 were missing. The January, 2019 photographs show excavation of the site for commercial mining and construction, not a composting operation.

“The April 5, 2019 photographs produced by the town and April 7, 2019 photographs produced by the defendants show that the site has been materially changed by covering over the previous conditions with soil, wood chips, and composting materials. Subsurface holes shown on the January photo[graphs] have been filled in. Mounds of rock and other material dug from the earth that were shown in the January photographs have been flattened and covered with dirt. Logs and stumps that were stockpiled in January have been removed and covered over with soil. Other piles of asphalt in excess of that needed to maintain farm roads and stumps remained on-site. Windrows have been constructed where none were shown in January. Equipment that was there in January was moved off-site and other pieces of equipment were repositioned and placed to make it appear they were used for composting. The defendants’ clean-up efforts were obviously to recreate conditions that existed in 2014, when the town has last inspected the premises and the defendants’ composting operation. The cover-up activities were not good faith

211 Conn. App. 186

MARCH, 2022

197

Newtown v. Gaydosh

efforts to comply with the judgment or to purge contempt but were rather short-term measures designed to thwart the inspection ordered by the court and to deceive the court that the defendants' contumacious conduct had ceased.

"The credible evidence reveals that the defendants used the delay occasioned by their failure to appear at the February 11, 2019 [hearing] to cover over evidence of their violation of the zoning laws and judgment. The defendants' violation of the judgment and their conduct to cover up the violations were wilful violations of the judgment for which they are held in contempt. The court is convinced [that the] defendants will continue their violation of the judgment unless cited for contempt and compelled to purge their contempt by discontinuing nonpermitted operations and removal of construction materials and excess asphalt and wood piles from the site. In addition, the site shall be subject to periodic inspections to monitor compliance with zoning laws. Unless there is continued monitoring and consequences from noncompliance with the judgment the court is convinced the defendants will resume their pattern of noncompliance and dissembling. Further, the court is mindful that the town should not bear the financial burden of continued monitoring of the defendants' activities.

"The defendants' wilful violation of the judgment and their circumvention of prior inspection orders requires periodic inspections to ensure compliance with the zoning laws and judgment. The judgment had provided for the defendants to provide notice to [the town] when more than three trucks were expected to enter or exit the property and allowed [the town] to visually inspect any truck entering or exiting the property at any time. This judgment remains in effect. Judge Roraback's order for periodic inspections was entered in response

198

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 186

Newtown v. Gaydosh

to a motion for contempt and, although it held for eighteen months, was inadequate to ensure continued compliance after the inspections were discontinued.” (Footnotes omitted.)

After setting forth its findings, the court noted that, “[i]n light of the contumacious conduct described above, and the defendants’ resistance to reasonable inspection by zoning officials, a more rigorous inspection plan is required to ensure compliance with zoning laws and the judgment.” The court ordered the following measures: “The town is permitted to take aerial photographs of the portion of the property where the violations occurred, without prior notice to the defendants. Periodically, municipal agents are entitled to enter the property on any weekday during regular business hours to inspect for compliance with the above, without prior notice to the defendants. The defendants shall resume providing notice of truck activity as provided in the judgment and the monthly recording and reporting truck activity to the town as ordered by Judge Wenzel.

“The defendants are fined \$150 per day for the period [of] January 4, 2019, to April 5, 2019 . . . for a total fine of \$13,800 related to their wilful violation and cover-up of violations of the judgment. The defendants are fined \$100 per day from April 6, 2019, until they purge their contempt by removal of the excess asphalt, stumps and construction materials stored or buried on the site and the removal of equipment not used in permitted farming or composting activities. The defendants shall inform the town which vehicles on-site are used in such permitted operations on or before June 15, 2019. The defendants shall designate initially the piles of wood and asphalt the defendants assert is for farm use, and the parties shall confer as to any vehicles or excess material that shall be removed from the site. If the parties are unable to agree as to the vehicles and excess material to be removed, the court will decide the issue

211 Conn. App. 186

MARCH, 2022

199

Newtown v. Gaydosh

after a hearing. The defendants will dig test holes at their expense in the areas where the town suspects they have buried materials not permitted under the judgment and shall remove any improperly buried materials from the site. The town's agents shall be present when test holes are dug and for the removal of any prohibited material.

"On or before July 15, 2019, the defendants shall deposit \$10,000 in an account to be held in escrow by an agent designated by the town, which shall be used to defray the town's cost of continued inspections and enforcement of this order." This appeal followed.

I

The defendants first claim that the evidence did not support the court's finding that they had "engaged in mining, commercial sales of materials, or anything other than the sale of composted material" We do not agree.

We begin by setting forth the legal principles and standard of review relevant to this claim. "The court has an array of tools available to it to enforce its orders, the most prominent being its contempt power. . . . Our law recognizes two broad types of contempt: criminal and civil. . . . Civil contempt . . . is not punitive in nature but intended to coerce future compliance with a court order, and the contemnor should be able to obtain release from the sanction imposed by the court by compliance with the judicial decree. . . . A civil contempt finding thus permits the court to coerce compliance by imposing a conditional penalty, often in the form of a fine or period of imprisonment, to be lifted if the noncompliant party chooses to obey the court. . . .

"To impose contempt penalties . . . the trial court must make a contempt finding, and this requires the court to find that the offending party wilfully violated

200 MARCH, 2022 211 Conn. App. 186

Newtown v. Gaydosh

the court’s order; failure to comply with an order, alone, will not support a finding of contempt. . . .

“We review the court’s factual findings in the context of a motion for contempt to determine whether they are clearly erroneous. . . . A factual finding is clearly erroneous when it is not supported by any evidence in the record or when there is evidence to support it, but the reviewing court is left with the definite and firm conviction that a mistake has been made.” (Citations omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Wethersfield v. PR Arrow, LLC*, 187 Conn. App. 604, 652–53, 203 A.3d 645, cert. denied, 331 Conn. 907, 202 A.3d 1022 (2019).

The defendants argue that the evidence did not support a finding that they “engaged in mining, commercial sales of materials, or anything other than the sale of composted material” We disagree and conclude that the court’s findings with respect to the defendants’ activities on their property were not clearly erroneous.

At the hearing, Maguire testified about the conditions of the property on January 4, 2019, on the basis of the aerial drone photographs, and April 5, 2019, on the basis of his physical inspection. In concluding that the defendants had violated the judgment, the court found the observations and conclusions made by Maguire to be credible and reliable. The court began by finding that “the aerial photographs taken on January 4, 2019, show a large scale nonfarming operation in violation of zoning laws and the judgment.” The court explained that the photographs show the “use of construction equipment on the site, including six different excavators, large sorting equipment, several dump trucks and payloaders” The court noted that the use of this type of machinery is “consistent with use of the site for commercial mining and construction related operations.”

211 Conn. App. 186

MARCH, 2022

201

Newtown v. Gaydosh

The court referred explicitly to the credibility of the evidence presented by the plaintiffs. The court found that the “photographs and credible testimony show the property has been used for commercial rock mining” Further, the court found that the “credible evidence also indicates the site has been used in connection with defendant Justin Gaydosh’s . . . construction business for sorting, screening and cleaning of materials from off-site and storage in stockpiles of construction materials” There was also “credible evidence that there has been burial of materials imported into the site, including large logs, stumps and asphalt, which is consistent with the use of the site as a transfer station.” The court further found that the compost windrows that were previously observed during the property visits in 2014 and 2015 were gone, which indicated that the defendants were not engaged in a large composting operation.

Finally, on the basis of the April 5, 2019 photographs presented by the plaintiffs and the April 7, 2019 photographs presented by the defendants, the court found that the “credible evidence reveals that the defendants used the delay occasioned by their failure to appear at the February 11, 2019 [hearing] to cover over evidence of their violation of the zoning laws and judgment.” It is apparent from the court’s decision that the court doubted the defendants’ credibility and instead chose to credit the evidence presented by the plaintiffs, which it was entitled to do as the trier of fact.

Our review of the record supports the court’s conclusion that the defendants engaged in commercial mining and construction related operations. The defendants do not dispute that activities of this nature were prohibited by the judgment. The record also supports the court’s conclusion that the defendants were not engaged in a permitted composting operation as they claimed to be. Because we determine that the evidence supports the

202 MARCH, 2022 211 Conn. App. 186

Newtown v. Gaydosh

court's findings, we conclude that the court's findings with respect to the defendants' activities on the property were not clearly erroneous.

II

The defendants next claim that the court abused its discretion with respect to the sanctions imposed as a result of its finding of contempt. That claim relates to the monetary sanction imposed for the defendants' contemptuous conduct occurring prior to April 6, 2019, the conditional sanction imposed upon them beginning on April 6, 2019, and the award of injunctive relief. We disagree that the court abused its discretion.

We first address the fine of \$13,800, equal to \$150 per day for the period of January 4, 2019, through April 5, 2019. With respect to this fine, the defendants appear to argue that the court abused its discretion in imposing the fine because the amount of the fine was excessive. The court explained that it imposed the sanction for the defendants' "wilful violation and cover-up of violations of the judgment." "The court has the power to fine one who has been found in contempt." *Friedlander v. Friedlander*, 191 Conn. 81, 86, 463 A.2d 587 (1983); see also *Tufano v. Tufano*, 18 Conn. App. 119, 125, 556 A.2d 1036 (1989). On appeal, orders imposing fines or sanctions related to a finding of contempt are reviewed under an abuse of discretion standard. See *Tufano v. Tufano*, supra, 125.

We note that, in *Friedlander*, the plaintiff filed five separate contempt motions in order to rectify the defendant's continued violation of a postdissolution order. *Friedlander v. Friedlander*, supra, 191 Conn. 86. Despite the court's imposition of fines and other relief in connection with prior contempt motions, the defendant continued to violate the order. *Id.*, 86–87. After granting the motion for contempt underlying the appeal in *Friedlander*, the trial court imposed a \$1000 fine on the

211 Conn. App. 186

MARCH, 2022

203

Newtown v. Gaydosh

defendant as a sanction for his continued violation of the court's order. *Id.*, 87. On appeal, the defendant argued that the fine was "arbitrary and capricious and excessive." *Id.*, 86. Our Supreme Court, noting the defendant's history of noncompliance, concluded that the sanction did not reflect an abuse of discretion. *Id.*, 86–87.

The rationale in *Friedlander* applies to the present claim. Here, when we consider the history of contempt motions filed by the plaintiffs and the history of violations found by the court, we are unable to conclude that the \$13,800 fine imposed on the defendants reflected an abuse of discretion. The court found not only that the defendants had wilfully violated the judgment but also that the defendants had attempted to cover up the violations in an attempt to circumvent the court's order. The court found that the defendants' "cover-up activities were not good faith efforts to comply with the judgment or to purge contempt but were rather short-term measures designed to thwart the inspection ordered by the court and to deceive the court that the defendants' contumacious conduct had ceased." In an effort to achieve the defendants' compliance with the judgment rendered in the plaintiffs' favor, the plaintiffs filed three separate motions for contempt over the course of several years. These efforts were the direct result of the defendants' wilful and continued violation of the judgment. Given these facts, and especially the defendants' purposeful circumvention of the judgment, we are not persuaded that the court abused its discretion in issuing the fine.

The court also imposed on the defendants a conditional fine of \$100 per day beginning on April 6, 2019, until they purged their contempt by restoring the property to its prior condition. "A civil contempt finding . . . permits the court to coerce compliance by imposing a conditional penalty, often in the form of a fine or period

204 MARCH, 2022 211 Conn. App. 186

Newtown v. Gaydosh

of imprisonment, to be lifted if the noncompliant party chooses to obey the court.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Wethersfield v. PR Arrow, LLC*, supra, 187 Conn. App. 652. As previously noted, on appeal, we review the propriety of the fines imposed for civil contempt pursuant to an abuse of discretion standard. See *Medeiros v. Medeiros*, 175 Conn. App. 174, 202, 167 A.3d 967 (2017). “The evaluation of civil contempt penalties depends to a great extent on whether the penalties are considered at the time they are first conditionally imposed for the purpose of coercing compliance or are considered after the contempt has been purged and the penalties are finalized. When the penalties are first imposed, the propriety of the court’s exercise of its discretion turns on the reasonableness of the amount of the coercion that the court deems necessary, keeping in mind the court’s ultimate power to reduce the penalties once the contempt has been purged.” *Papa v. New Haven Federation of Teachers*, 186 Conn. 725, 738, 444 A.2d 196 (1982).

Contrary to the defendants’ contentions, this fine was clearly within the court’s discretion. At the time that the conditional penalties were imposed, the contempt had not yet been purged. The purpose of the fine was to coerce compliance with the judgment. Considering the court’s finding concerning the defendants’ long history of noncompliance with the judgment and the defendants’ continued efforts to hide their noncompliance, we are unable to conclude that the fines imposed on the defendants constitute an unreasonable amount of coercion. Thus, the defendants have not demonstrated that an abuse of discretion occurred.

We next address the defendants’ challenge to the court’s order of injunctive relief. “[T]he trial court’s continuing jurisdiction to effectuate prior judgments . . . is not separate from, but, rather, derives from, its equitable authority to vindicate judgments. . . . [S]uch

211 Conn. App. 186

MARCH, 2022

205

Newtown v. Gaydosh

equitable authority does not derive from the trial court's contempt power, but, rather, from its inherent powers." (Emphasis omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Wethersfield v. PR Arrow, LLC*, supra, 187 Conn. App. 653–54. "The issuance of an injunction and the scope and quantum of injunctive relief rests in the sound discretion of the trier. . . . [T]he court's ruling can be reviewed only for the purpose of determining whether the decision was based on an erroneous statement of law or an abuse of discretion." (Citation omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *FirstLight Hydro Generating Co. v. Stewart*, 328 Conn. 668, 685, 182 A.3d 67 (2018). "In determining whether there has been an abuse of discretion, every reasonable presumption should be given in favor of the correctness of the court's ruling. . . . Reversal is required only [when] an abuse of discretion is manifest or [when] injustice appears to have been done." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Wethersfield v. PR Arrow, LLC*, supra, 645.

In the present case, the court ordered injunctive relief requiring, inter alia, that the town be permitted to "dig test holes at [the defendants'] expense in the areas where the town suspects they have buried materials not permitted under the judgment and [ordered the defendants to] remove any improperly buried materials from the site." It is clear from the memorandum of decision that the purpose of the order was to determine whether the defendants were complying with the judgment and to ensure their future compliance. Considering the defendants' history of noncompliance, their prior efforts to conceal their noncompliance, and the clear purpose of the order to ensure compliance with and to effectuate the court's judgment, we conclude that the court did not abuse its discretion in imposing sanctions in the present case.

The judgment is affirmed.

In this opinion the other judges concurred.

206 MARCH, 2022 211 Conn. App. 206

Gottesman v. Kratter

AMY B. GOTTESMAN v. MARK M. KRATTER
(AC 44297)AMY B. GOTTESMAN v. MARK M.
KRATTER ET AL.
(AC 44388)

Elgo, Alexander and Harper, Js.

Syllabus

In two separate actions, the plaintiff sought to recover damages from the defendant attorney, K, in the first action for, inter alia, legal malpractice and breach of contract, and from the defendant law firms K Co. and M Co. in the second action for, inter alia, legal malpractice and transferee liability, in connection with an underlying marital dissolution proceeding. In the first action, the trial court granted K's motion to strike the count of the complaint sounding in breach of contract and granted K's motion for summary judgment on, inter alia, the count sounding in legal malpractice. In the second action, the court granted K Co. and M Co.'s motions for summary judgment on, inter alia, the counts of the complaint sounding in legal malpractice and transferee liability. On the plaintiff's appeal to this court, *held*:

1. The trial court properly rendered summary judgment in favor of K, K Co. and M Co. as to the plaintiff's legal malpractice claims against them: the plaintiff, who did not dispute that an expert witness was required in order for her to prove her legal malpractice claims, failed to meet the deadline set place in the scheduling order in each action for the disclosure of an expert in support of her claims; moreover, even after the deadline had passed, the court never indicated that it would not consider the opinion of an expert submitted by the plaintiff in opposition to the defendants' motions for summary judgment; furthermore, although the plaintiff filed motions for permission for late disclosure of an expert witness, the motions did not identify any expert or the substance of opinions to be provided and the plaintiff never disclosed an expert before the court rendered judgment.
2. The trial court properly granted K's motion to strike the count of the plaintiff's complaint sounding in breach of contract; the count alleged a claim for legal malpractice rather than for breach of contract, as it was not a claim that K breached the retainer agreement with the plaintiff but rather a claim that K negligently performed professional services.
3. The trial court properly rendered summary judgment in favor of K Co. and M Co. as to the plaintiff's transferee liability claim against them; because the court found no liability on the part of K Co., the predecessor

211 Conn. App. 206 MARCH, 2022 207

Gottesman v. Kratter

law firm to M Co., there was no successor liability that could attach to M Co.

Argued November 8, 2021—officially released March 15, 2022

Procedural History

Action, in two cases, for, inter alia, legal malpractice, and for other relief, brought to the Superior Court in the judicial district of Stamford-Norwalk, where the court, *Hon. Kenneth B. Povodator*, judge trial referee, granted the defendant's motions to strike and for summary judgment in the first case and rendered judgment thereon, from which the plaintiff appealed to this court; thereafter, in the second case, the action was withdrawn as to the named defendant; subsequently, in the second case, the court, *Hon. Kenneth B. Povodator*, judge trial referee, granted the motions for summary judgment filed by the defendant Law Offices of Mark M. Kratter, LLC, et al. and rendered judgment thereon, from which the plaintiff appealed to this court. *Affirmed.*

Kenneth A. Votre, for the appellant in Docket Nos. AC 44297 and AC 44388 (plaintiff).

Raymond J. Plouffe, for the appellee in Docket No. AC 44297 (defendant).

Raymond J. Plouffe, for the appellees in Docket No. AC 44388 (defendant Law Offices of Mark M. Kratter, LLC, et al.).

Opinion

HARPER, J. These two appeals arise from actions brought by the plaintiff, Amy B. Gottesman, concerning an underlying marital dissolution action. In Docket No. AC 44297, the plaintiff appeals from the judgment of the trial court granting (1) the motion for summary judgment filed by the defendant, Mark M. Kratter, on the plaintiff's claim for legal malpractice against Kratter and (2) the motion to strike count two of the revised

208

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 206

Gottesman *v.* Kratter

complaint alleging breach of contract. Specifically, she claims that the court erred in granting summary judgment for failure to disclose an expert witness when she had not been precluded from disclosing an expert and because the time in which she was required to disclose had not yet expired. With respect to the motion to strike, she claims that the court erred in concluding that the allegations in the revised complaint failed to allege that the defendant breached an agreement to reach a specified result. In Docket No. AC 44388, the plaintiff appeals from the judgment of the trial court granting the motion for summary judgment filed by the defendant law firms, the Law Offices of Mark M. Kratter, LLC, and Kratter & Gustafson, LLC,¹ as to counts one and thirteen of the third revised complaint, which alleged claims against the law firms for legal malpractice and transferee liability, respectively. Specifically, she claims that the court improperly rendered summary judgment because the law firms failed to demonstrate the absence of a genuine issue of material fact and because the time in which she had to disclose an expert witness in support of her claim of legal malpractice against the law firms had not yet expired. Although the appeals have not been consolidated,² we write one opinion for purposes of judicial economy in which we assess the claims raised in both appeals. We affirm the judgments of the trial court.

The following facts, viewed in the light most favorable to the plaintiff, and procedural history are relevant to our resolution of these appeals. The plaintiff had retained Kratter,³ acting through his law firm Kratter & Gustafson, LLC,⁴ to represent her in a divorce action

¹ In this opinion, we refer to the defendant law firms individually by name where necessary and collectively as the law firms.

² The two appeals, although not consolidated, were heard together at oral argument before this court, pursuant to an order from this court.

³ Kratter, at all times relevant to this appeal, was an attorney employed by and acting through the law firms.

⁴ The plaintiff initially engaged the law firm of Kratter & Gustafson, LLC, to represent her in the underlying divorce action. Sometime after the plaintiff

211 Conn. App. 206

MARCH, 2022

209

Gottesman v. Kratter

against her former husband, Amir Sibboni. During the representation, Kratter prepared a settlement agreement that he recommended the plaintiff sign. The agreement provided for the division of assets, alimony, parental responsibilities, titles to vehicles and real estate, and interests in real and personal property. The four real properties that were subject to the agreement were located in Norwalk. The properties were subject to mortgages that the plaintiff argues were created, “by virtue of a scheme established by [Sibboni] and his business counsel to borrow [money] against the property and leave her with the debt.” The plaintiff alleges that Kratter, as her counsel in the marital dissolution matter, committed legal malpractice when he failed to address the issue of the fraudulent loans. The crux of her claim is that Kratter, acting on behalf of the law firms, negligently advised her to accept the settlement agreement.

The plaintiff claims that the settlement agreement had several shortcomings, including leaving her without sufficient funds to carry the mortgages on the four real properties subject to the agreement. In addition, the plaintiff claims that Kratter failed to put forth an adequate effort to secure for her other items of marital property, failed to obtain a fair division of personal property, and negligently advised her to take possession of the property located at 20 Woodbury Avenue despite the fact that the mortgages were secured fraudulently with her forged signature.

On April 10, 2017, the plaintiff commenced the first underlying action, which concerns the appeal in AC 44388, against five defendants: Kratter; the law firms; Sibboni; and Anthony E. Schwartz, doing business as the Law Offices of Anthony E. Schwartz, who had represented Sibboni in certain real estate transactions related

retained Kratter & Gustafson, LLC, that firm dissolved and became the Law Offices of Mark M. Kratter, LLC.

210

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 206

Gottesman *v.* Kratter

to the plaintiff's actions. On May 2, 2017, the action was withdrawn as against Kratter after Kratter had filed a bankruptcy action. The operative complaint, a third revised complaint dated February 9, 2018, alleges six counts as to the law firms, including count one sounding in legal malpractice, count two sounding in breach of contract, count six sounding in equitable tolling, count nine sounding in intentional misrepresentation, count ten sounding in negligent misrepresentation, and count thirteen sounding in transferee liability.⁵

After the court struck count two, the law firms filed a motion for summary judgment on December 17, 2019, as to the remaining counts against them, which was granted on July 20, 2020, as to counts one, six, nine and ten but denied as to count thirteen. On August 12, 2020, the law firms again filed a motion for summary judgment as to count thirteen, the final remaining count, which was granted on November 2, 2020. The appeal in AC 44388 concerns the summary judgment rendered in favor of the law firms as to counts one and thirteen of the third revised complaint.

The plaintiff commenced the second underlying action, which concerns the appeal in AC 44287, on June 6, 2017, against Kratter in his individual capacity. The operative complaint, dated February 9, 2018, alleges five counts sounding in legal malpractice, breach of contract, equitable tolling, intentional misrepresentation, and negligent misrepresentation, respectively. On May 7, 2018, Kratter moved to strike the second count of the operative complaint—the claim for breach of contract. On August 10, 2020, the court granted the motion to strike the second count of the revised complaint.

⁵ The complaint also alleges seven counts against Sibboni and four counts against Schwartz. None of the plaintiff's claims on appeal concerns Sibboni or Schwartz.

211 Conn. App. 206

MARCH, 2022

211

Gottesman v. Kratter

On January 30, 2019, the court ordered that the “scheduling order filed and accepted in docket number FST-CV-17-6031889-S [the first underlying action] is hereby adopted as the scheduling order for this case (the parties have agreed to such adoption in a telephonic status conference on January 30, 2019.)” The scheduling order states that the plaintiff’s deadline to disclose an expert witness was April 15, 2019.

Kratter filed a motion for summary judgment on December 17, 2019, as to counts one, three, four, and five of the revised complaint, arguing that there were no issues of material fact as to the claims alleged in those counts. The court granted the motion for summary judgment on July 20, 2020.⁶ Thereafter, the court, having previously granted Kratter’s motion to strike count two, granted Kratter’s motion for judgment as to count two and rendered judgment in his favor on that count. These appeals followed. Additional facts will be set forth as necessary.

I

AC 44297

In AC 44297, the plaintiff challenges the court’s granting of Kratter’s motion for summary judgment as to count one of the revised complaint due to the plaintiff’s failure to disclose an expert witness to support her claim for legal malpractice, as well as the court’s granting of the motion to strike count two of the revised complaint, which sounded in breach of contract. With regard to the motion for summary judgment, specifically, the plaintiff argues that the time within which to disclose an expert witness had, in fact, not expired, and as such, the court violated Practice Book § 13-4 (h) when it rendered summary judgment in favor of

⁶ Although both memoranda of decision are dated July 20, 2020, the court addressed each of the underlying cases in a separate memorandum of decision.

212

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 206

Gottesman *v.* Kratter

Kratter. With regard to the motion to strike count two of the revised complaint, the plaintiff argues that the complaint alleged a legally sufficient cause of action for breach of contract against Kratter. In response, Kratter contends that the judgment rendered was proper, as the plaintiff failed to introduce an expert witness to support her legal malpractice claim, and count two was properly stricken, as it set forth a claim for a breach of the professional standard of care rather than a breach of contract. We agree with Kratter.

A

We first review the plaintiff's claim that the court erred in granting the motion for summary judgment in favor of Kratter as to count one of the revised complaint.⁷ We begin by setting forth the applicable standard of review and relevant legal principles.

“Practice Book § [17-49] provides that summary judgment shall be rendered forthwith if the pleadings, affidavits and any other proof submitted show that there is no genuine issue as to any material fact and that the moving party is entitled to judgment as a matter of law. . . . The party seeking summary judgment has the burden of showing the absence of any genuine issue [of] material facts which, under applicable principles of substantive law, entitle him to a judgment as a matter of law. . . . Once the moving party has met its burden [of production] . . . the opposing party must present evidence that demonstrates the existence of some disputed factual issue. . . . [I]t [is] incumbent [on] the party opposing summary judgment to establish a factual predicate from which it can be determined, as a matter of law, that a genuine issue of material fact exists. . . . The presence . . . of an alleged adverse claim is not sufficient to defeat a motion for summary judgment.

⁷ The plaintiff has not challenged the summary judgment rendered in favor of Kratter as to counts three, four and five of the revised complaint.

211 Conn. App. 206

MARCH, 2022

213

Gottesman v. Kratter

. . . Our review of the decision to grant a motion for summary judgment is plenary. . . . We therefore must decide whether the court’s conclusions were legally and logically correct and find support in the record.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Rousseau v. Weinstein*, 204 Conn. App. 833, 839–40, 254 A.3d 984 (2021).

“Generally, a plaintiff alleging legal malpractice must prove all of the following elements: (1) the existence of an attorney-client relationship; (2) the attorney’s wrongful act or omission; (3) causation; and (4) damages. . . . To prevail, a plaintiff generally is obligated to furnish expert testimony to establish both (1) the standard of care against which the attorney’s conduct should be evaluated and (2) the element of causation. . . . Our decisional law is replete with cases in which motions for summary judgment have been granted on legal malpractice claims when the defendant failed to offer such testimony.” (Citations omitted; footnote omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Costello & McCormack, P.C. v. Manero*, 194 Conn. App. 417, 431, 221 A.3d 471 (2019).

In *Manero*, this court concluded that the trial court properly granted a motion for summary judgment when the cross claim plaintiff failed to disclose an expert witness. *Id.*, 432. “Absent such testimony, the finder of fact could not properly evaluate” the cross claim plaintiff’s claims. *Id.* “Because [the cross claim plaintiff] could not establish a prima facie case of legal malpractice without the introduction of expert testimony . . . [this court] conclude[d] that the trial court properly rendered judgment in favor of . . . [the cross claim] defendants.” *Id.*

In the present case, it is undisputed that the plaintiff did not disclose an expert in support of her legal malpractice claim, and the plaintiff does not dispute that

214

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 206

Gottesman v. Kratter

an expert witness is required in order for her to prove her legal malpractice claim. Nevertheless, the plaintiff claims that the court acted prematurely in granting summary judgment due to such nondisclosure because there was no scheduling order established by the court that set the time within which an expert witness had to be disclosed. She claims that she “did not violate a court order and the trial court acknowledged this” and that she “was still permitted to disclose an expert and no time limitation was in effect limiting disclosure.” Although the plaintiff claims that there was no scheduling order in place, our review of the record reveals that there was, in fact, a scheduling order in place that set a date—April 15, 2019—by which the plaintiff was required to disclose an expert witness.⁸ The order that was filed and appears in the electronic docket states that “[t]he scheduling order filed and accepted in FST-CV-17-6031889-S [the first underlying action] is hereby adopted as the scheduling order for this case (the parties having agreed to such adoption in a telephonic status conference on January 30, 2019.”

The scheduling order set a clear deadline by which the plaintiff had to disclose an expert witness, which the plaintiff did not meet. Despite the scheduling order, however, the plaintiff argues that she was not required to disclose an expert witness until reasonably close to trial. The plaintiff relies on *Girard v. Weiss*, 43 Conn. App. 397, 682 A.2d 1078, cert. denied, 239 Conn. 946, 686 A.2d 121 (1996), to support her claim. In *Girard*,

⁸ The court in its July 20, 2020 memorandum of decision found that there was no scheduling order for this matter. The plaintiff relies on that finding to support her repeated assertions that no deadline existed to disclose an expert witness. Our thorough review of the record demonstrates that the court, by order dated January 30, 2019, and with agreement from both parties, adopted the scheduling order of the companion case for the present case. Notwithstanding that misstatement, the record clearly and undisputedly shows that there *was* such a scheduling order in place that set a deadline of April 15, 2019, by which the plaintiff had failed to abide.

211 Conn. App. 206

MARCH, 2022

215

Gottesman v. Kratter

the plaintiff claimed that the trial court improperly precluded him from offering expert testimony because the summary judgment rendered in favor of the defendant was predicated on the trial court's improper order precluding the plaintiff from offering expert testimony at trial. *Id.*, 408. At the time that *Girard* was decided, the applicable rule of practice was § 220 (D), which set the time to disclose expert witnesses as sixty days before trial. See Practice Book (1978-97) § 220 (D). The current applicable rule of practice is § 13-4 (g), which provides in relevant part: "Unless otherwise ordered by the judicial authority, or otherwise agreed by the parties, the following schedule shall govern the expert discovery required under subsections (b), (c), (d) and (e) of this section. (1) Within 120 days after the return date of any civil action, or at such other time as the parties may agree or as the court may order, the parties shall submit to the court for its approval a proposed Schedule for Expert Discovery, which, upon approval by the court, shall govern the timing of expert discovery in the case. . . . If the parties are unable to agree on discovery deadlines, they shall so indicate on the proposed Schedule for Expert Discovery, in which event the court shall convene a scheduling conference to set those deadlines. . . ." Practice Book § 13-4 (g).

In the present case, the plaintiff argues that the court effectively precluded her from disclosing an expert in violation of Practice Book § 13-4 (h),⁹ which applies to orders precluding the testimony of an expert witness. Section 13-4 (h) of the Practice Book, however, clearly

⁹ Practice Book § 13-4 (h) provides: "A judicial authority may, after a hearing, impose sanctions on a party for failure to comply with the requirements of this section. An order precluding the testimony of an expert witness may be entered only upon a finding that: (1) the sanction of preclusion, including any consequence thereof on the sanctioned party's ability to prosecute or to defend the case, is proportional to the noncompliance at issue, and (2) the noncompliance at issue cannot adequately be addressed by a less severe sanction or combination of sanctions."

216

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 206

Gottesman v. Kratter

does not apply to the present case, as the court never sanctioned the plaintiff or issued an order that precluded the testimony of an expert witness. The plaintiff, nevertheless, attempts to draw an analogy between the court's granting of Kratter's motion for summary judgment as to count one and a hypothetical sanction order precluding expert witnesses, by arguing that the court's granting of the motion for summary judgment in favor of Kratter, in effect, acted as an order precluding the plaintiff from disclosing an expert witness. This analogy fails because the granting of a motion for summary judgment is not equivalent to ordering sanctions against a party simply because a summary judgment order is a final judgment that ends the case before a party disclosed an expert witness. Although the court in *Girard* prematurely cut short the plaintiff's time to disclose an expert witness, the court in the present case did not cut short the plaintiff's time to disclose an expert witness, as the April 15, 2019 deadline already had passed. Furthermore, even after the deadline passed, the court never indicated that it would not consider the opinion of an expert submitted by the plaintiff in opposition to the defendant's motion for summary judgment. The fact is that the plaintiff just never submitted to the court such an opinion.

Here, the deadline for disclosure of an expert witness was April 15, 2019. The defendant's motion for summary judgment was filed on December 17, 2019, more than seven months after the deadline had passed. The plaintiff filed an opposition to the motion for summary judgment on February 3, 2020, as well as a motion for permission for a late disclosure of an expert witness. The motion did not identify any expert or any substance of opinions to be provided, and, although it was filed, it was not pursued by the plaintiff. The plaintiff was clearly on notice that her disclosure of an expert witness was overdue. The court did not grant the defendant's motion for summary judgment until July 20, 2020,

211 Conn. App. 206

MARCH, 2022

217

Gottesman v. Kratter

more than one year after the disclosure deadline and more than five months after the plaintiff filed her motion for late disclosure of an expert. Still, the plaintiff never disclosed an expert opinion before the court rendered judgment. Thus, the judgment in this case was not the result of the court's preclusion of the plaintiff's expert's opinion but, rather, it was the result of the plaintiff's failure to produce an expert notwithstanding her acknowledgment that her claim requires one. The law is clear that, in the absence of an expert, she cannot prevail. See *Costello & McCormack, P.C. v. Manero*, supra, 194 Conn. App. 431.

As discussed previously in this opinion, a plaintiff alleging a claim of legal malpractice is generally required to offer expert testimony in order to prove both the standard of care and causation. See *id.* Following adequate time for discovery, "a plaintiff may properly be called upon at the summary judgment stage to demonstrate that he possesses sufficient counterevidence to raise a genuine issue of material fact as to any, or even all, of the essential elements of his cause of action." *Stuart v. Freiberg*, 316 Conn. 809, 823, 116 A.3d 1195 (2015). "The exception to the need for expert testimony is limited to situations in which the defendant attorney essentially has done nothing whatsoever to represent his or her client's interests, resulting in such an obvious and gross want of care and skill that the neglect would be clear even to a layperson." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Byrne v. Grasso*, 118 Conn. App. 444, 449, 985 A.2d 1064 (2009), cert. denied, 294 Conn. 934, 987 A.2d 1028 (2010).

In *Dixon v. Bromson & Reiner*, 95 Conn. App. 294, 296, 898 A.2d 193 (2006), the plaintiff did not offer any expert testimony to support her claim for legal malpractice. This court concluded that the trial court "properly determined that the testimony of an expert witness on the legal standard of care and causation was

218

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 206

Gottesman v. Kratter

needed Accordingly, the court properly granted the defendant’s motion for summary judgment.” *Id.*, 300. As in *Dixon*, it is clear that the plaintiff in the present case was required to proffer testimony of an expert witness to establish her claim for legal malpractice. The plaintiff had ample time to do so and was on notice that an expert disclosure was required. Although she states in her principal brief that she is “prepared” to offer expert testimony, she has never identified any such expert or any proposed opinion.

After the moving party has established the absence of a genuine issue of material fact, the burden shifts to the opposing party to demonstrate the existence of “sufficient counterevidence to raise a genuine issue of material fact as to any, or even all, of the essential elements of his [or her] cause of action.” *Stuart v. Freiberg*, *supra*, 316 Conn. 823. In the present case, the plaintiff does not dispute that expert testimony was required, but she simply failed to disclose any despite the fact that it was pivotal to the court’s determination on the motion.¹⁰ Therefore, we conclude that the trial court properly granted Kratter’s motion for summary judgment as to the legal malpractice claim against him.

B

We next consider the plaintiff’s claim that the court erred in granting Kratter’s motion to strike count two of the operative complaint. We begin by setting forth the standard of review and applicable legal principles. “[A]ppellate review of a trial court’s decision to grant a motion to strike is plenary. . . . This is because a motion to strike challenges the legal sufficiency of a pleading . . . and, consequently, requires no factual

¹⁰ As noted previously in this opinion, the plaintiff’s counsel filed a motion for permission to permit disclosure of an expert witness but failed to disclose an expert, did not specify a time frame for disclosure, and failed to seek adjudication of the motion.

211 Conn. App. 206

MARCH, 2022

219

Gottesman v. Kratter

findings by the trial court” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *HSBC Bank USA, National Assn. v. Nathan*, 195 Conn. App. 179, 193, 224 A.3d 1173 (2020). “When a defendant’s liability to a plaintiff is premised . . . on principles of tort law . . . the plaintiff may not convert that liability into one sounding in contract merely by talismanically invoking contract language in his complaint . . . and consequently a reviewing court may pierce the pleading veil to ensure that such is not the case. . . . Thus, in doing so, we look beyond the language used in the complaint to determine the true basis of the claim.” (Citations omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Pelletier v. Galske*, 105 Conn. App. 77, 81, 936 A.2d 689 (2007), cert. denied, 285 Conn. 921, 943 A.2d 1100 (2008).

“Whether [a] plaintiff’s cause of action is one for malpractice [or contract] depends upon the definition of [those terms] and the allegations of the complaint. . . . Malpractice is commonly defined as the failure of one rendering professional services to exercise that degree of skill and learning commonly applied under all the circumstances in the community by the average prudent reputable member of the profession with the result of injury, loss, or damage to the recipient of those services. . . . The elements of a breach of contract claim are the formation of an agreement, performance by one party, breach of the agreement by the other party, and damages.” (Citations omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Meyers v. Livingston, Adler, Pulda, Meiklejohn & Kelly, P.C.*, 311 Conn. 282, 291, 87 A.3d 534 (2014).

The plaintiff argues that count two alleges a legally sufficient breach of contract claim. Kratter responds that the second count, instead, alleges a breach of the professional standard of care. In the present case, paragraphs 21 through 24 of the revised complaint assert the following allegations: “The legal relationship and

220

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 206

Gottesman v. Kratter

agreement between the plaintiff and [Kratter] constituted a contract. . . . Part of that contract was to achieve a specific result, namely, pursuing the fraudulent loans so that the plaintiff would not be liable under them. . . . The plaintiff paid for [Kratter's] legal representation and agreed to provide any information or documentation necessary [Kratter's] failure to pursue the fraudulent loans in any meaningful fashion constituted a breach of the contract in existence between the plaintiff and [Kratter]." The court, in striking count two, concluded that the plaintiff's claim that Kratter failed to pursue the fraudulent loans "is a qualitative assessment implicating negligence/legal malpractice—adequacy of performance—rather than a breach of contract predicated on a failure to obtain a specific result (and pursuing a course of action more accurately seems to be characterized as a process, not a promised result), or a failure to perform a contractual obligation at all." We agree.

In *Pelletier v. Galske*, supra, 105 Conn. App. 82, this court agreed with the trial court's conclusion that the plaintiff's complaint in that case sounded in tort only and did not state a legally sufficient claim for breach of contract. This court explained that, "[w]here the plaintiff alleges that the defendant negligently performed legal services . . . the complaint sounds in negligence, even though he also alleges that he retained him or engaged his services." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Id.*, 83. Likewise, in the present case, the second count of the plaintiff's revised complaint alleges a claim for legal malpractice rather than for breach of contract. The plaintiff's claim, which is based on the allegation that Kratter did not pursue the alleged fraudulent loans in any "meaningful fashion," is not a claim that Kratter breached the retainer agreement between the parties; rather, it is for "the failure of one rendering professional services" (Internal quotation marks

211 Conn. App. 206

MARCH, 2022

221

Gottesman v. Kratter

omitted.) *Pelletier v. Galske*, supra, 81. Accordingly, we conclude that the court properly granted Kratter's motion to strike count two of the revised complaint.

II

AC 44388

In AC 44388, the plaintiff challenges the court's rendering of summary judgment in favor of the law firms with respect to the plaintiff's claims for legal malpractice in count one and transferee liability in count thirteen of the third revised complaint. On appeal, the plaintiff claims that the court erred because (1) she still had time to disclose an expert witness to support her claim for legal malpractice at the time the motion for summary judgment was granted and (2) because the court's judgment as to count one was erroneous, the judgment as to count thirteen, sounding in transferee liability, also has to be reversed. The law firms contend that (1) the motion for summary judgment properly was granted as to count one because the plaintiff did not offer expert testimony in support of her claim for legal malpractice and (2) the court properly granted their motion for summary judgment as to count thirteen.¹¹ We agree with the law firms.

A

With respect to AC 44388, the plaintiff first claims that the court erred in rendering summary judgment in favor of the law firms with respect to the plaintiff's claims for legal malpractice in count one because she still had time to disclose an expert witness to support her claim for legal malpractice at the time the motion for summary judgment was granted. We disagree.

¹¹ Because we conclude that the plaintiff failed to disclose an expert witness, which is fatal to her claim, and that, consequently, the court properly granted judgment in favor of the defendants on count thirteen, we need not address the plaintiff's claim that the law firms failed to satisfy their burden on the motion for summary judgment.

222

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 206

Gottesman v. Kratter

We previously set forth in this opinion the standard of review applicable when reviewing a trial court's decision to grant a motion for summary judgment. "Our review of the decision to grant a motion for summary judgment is plenary. . . . We therefore must decide whether the court's conclusions were legally and logically correct and find support in the record." (Internal quotation marks omitted). *Rousseau v. Weinstein*, supra, 204 Conn. App. 840.

The plaintiff's claim relating to count one in this appeal is identical to the one she raised in her appeal in AC 44297, namely, that the court erred in granting the law firms' motion for summary judgment because she still had time to disclose an expert witness. We thoroughly addressed this issue in part I A of this opinion relating to Kratter's motion for summary judgment. For the reasons set forth therein, we conclude that the court properly granted the law firms' motion for summary judgment as to the plaintiff's legal malpractice claim in count one against the law firms.

B

Finally, the plaintiff challenges the court's granting of the law firms' motion for summary judgment as to count thirteen of the third revised complaint, which sounded in transferee liability. The law firms contend that the court properly granted their motion for summary judgment as to count thirteen. We agree.

The following additional facts are pertinent to this claim. On August 12, 2020, the law firms moved for summary judgment as to the remaining thirteenth count, on the grounds that transferee liability is not a viable claim, or in the alternative, is moot, in light of the court's determination of no liability on the part of the predecessor law firm, Kratter & Gustafson, LLC. The court granted their motion for summary judgment on November 2, 2020.

211 Conn. App. 223

MARCH, 2022

223

Dept. of Public Health v. Estrada

Count thirteen seeks to impose liability on the Law Offices of Mark M. Kratter, LLC, for the alleged liability of the predecessor law firm, Kratter & Gustafson, LLC. Because the court found no liability on the part of Kratter & Gustafson, LLC, there is no possible successor liability that could attach to the Law Offices of Mark M. Kratter, LLC. “[T]he liability of a successor . . . is derivative in nature and the successor may be held liable for the conduct of its predecessor only to the same extent as the predecessor. . . . [S]uccessor liability does not create a new cause of action against the purchaser so much as it transfers the liability of the predecessor to the purchaser.” (Emphasis omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Robbins v. Physicians for Women’s Health, LLC*, 311 Conn. 707, 715–16, 90 A.3d 925 (2014). Accordingly, we conclude that the court properly rendered summary judgment as to count thirteen.

The judgments are affirmed.

In this opinion the other judges concurred.

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH v.
JUANITA ESTRADA ET AL.
(AC 43891)

Alexander, Suarez and DiPentima, Js.

Syllabus

The defendant E filed a complaint with the defendant Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, alleging that her employer, the plaintiff Department of Public Health, had retaliated against her for a protected whistleblower disclosure that she made pursuant to statute (§ 4-61dd). As part of her job duties, E was assigned to review an appointment letter submitted to the department by the then director of health for the city of Hartford, requesting approval of W as the acting director of health for the city. Both the letter and W’s resume indicated that W held a master’s degree in public health. Although she did not independently verify that W had actually received a master’s degree in public health, E drafted a letter approving W’s appointment, which the commissioner

Dept. of Public Health v. Estrada

of the department signed. E later learned that W did not possess a master's degree in public health, and she reported that information to her supervisor. Following this disclosure, E received multiple written reprimands and negative and unsatisfactory performance appraisals, and she was demoted, all of which she claimed were the result of retaliation for her disclosure. A hearing was held before a human rights referee from the commission's Office of Public Hearings, who concluded that E had made a protected whistleblower disclosure under § 4-61dd and that the department had retaliated against her for such disclosure. The department appealed to the trial court, which sustained the appeal, concluding that E's disclosure did not qualify as a whistleblower disclosure under § 4-61dd, that E failed to establish a causal connection between any alleged whistleblower disclosure and the complained of personnel actions, and that the commission lacked subject matter jurisdiction to adjudicate E's complaint because she had brought the same adverse personnel actions at issue through the grievance procedures in her collective bargaining agreement. On appeal to this court, *held*:

1. The trial court erred in concluding that the commission lacked subject matter jurisdiction to adjudicate E's complaint: it was undisputed that § 4-61dd contains a statutory waiver of sovereign immunity and confers on the Office of Public Hearings the authority to adjudicate whistleblower retaliation claims; moreover, the fact that § 4-61dd provides an alternative avenue for a complainant to seek redress for adverse personnel actions taken in retaliation for a whistleblower disclosure, namely, through the procedures provided in an applicable collective bargaining contract, did not deprive the Office of Public Hearings of subject matter jurisdiction over E's claim, as the issue concerned her election of remedies rather than subject matter jurisdiction; accordingly, pursuant to § 4-61dd, the Office of Public Hearings had subject matter jurisdiction to adjudicate E's whistleblower retaliation claim.
2. The trial court properly concluded that E did not make a protected whistleblower disclosure pursuant to § 4-61dd: the educational qualifications required by statute ((Rev. to 2015) § 19a-200) did not apply to W, an acting director of health, because the statute distinguishes between directors of public health, who must, *inter alia*, possess a degree in public health, and acting directors of health, who must only be deemed suitable to serve as acting director during the period in which the director of public health is absent or unable to serve or in which a vacancy exists; accordingly, because W's appointment did not result in a violation of (Rev. to 2015) § 19a-200, E did not disclose a violation of state law, and she was not entitled to protection under § 4-61dd.

Argued October 14, 2021—officially released March 15, 2022

Procedural History

Appeal from the decision of a human rights referee
for the defendant Commission on Human Rights and

211 Conn. App. 223

MARCH, 2022

225

Dept. of Public Health v. Estrada

Opportunities concluding that the named defendant made a protected whistleblower disclosure for which the plaintiff had retaliated, brought to the Superior Court in the judicial district of New Britain, where the court, *Cordani, J.*, rendered judgment sustaining the appeal, from which the defendant Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities appealed to this court. *Affirmed.*

Anna-Marie Puryear, human rights attorney, with whom, on the brief, were *Michael E. Roberts*, human rights attorney, and *Eric C. Krupa*, former human rights attorney, for the appellant (defendant Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities).

Jennifer P. Bennett, assistant attorney general, with whom, on the brief, were *William Tong*, attorney general, *Clare E. Kindall*, solicitor general, and *Matthew Larock*, assistant attorney general, for the appellee (plaintiff).

Opinion

ALEXANDER, J. This appeal arises out of an alleged whistleblower retaliation action filed by the defendant Juanita Estrada in which a human rights referee (referee) from the Office of Public Hearings (office of public hearings) of the defendant Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities (commission) concluded that Estrada made a protected whistleblower disclosure pursuant to General Statutes § 4-61dd. Thereafter, the Superior Court sustained the appeal of the plaintiff, the Department of Public Health (department), concluding that Estrada's disclosure to her supervisor was not a whistleblower disclosure under § 4-61dd, that Estrada failed to establish a causal connection between any alleged whistleblower disclosure and the complained of personnel actions, and that the commission lacked subject matter jurisdiction to adjudicate Estrada's complaint because she had brought the same adverse personnel actions at issue through the grievance procedures in her collective bargaining agreement. On appeal,

226

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 223

Dept. of Public Health *v.* Estrada

the commission claims that the court erred (1) in concluding that the commission lacked subject matter jurisdiction to adjudicate Estrada’s complaint, (2) in concluding that Estrada did not make a protected whistleblower disclosure pursuant to § 4-61dd, (3) in concluding that Estrada failed to establish a causal connection between the alleged disclosure and the adverse personnel actions, and (4) by failing to apply the proper standard of review in its analysis of the administrative decision. We agree with the commission that the court improperly determined that the commission lacked subject matter jurisdiction to adjudicate Estrada’s whistleblower retaliation complaint. We determine, however, that the court properly concluded that Estrada did not make a protected whistleblower disclosure pursuant to § 4-61dd and that the court applied the proper standard of review in making this determination. Accordingly, we affirm the judgment of the court.

The following facts, as found by the referee, and procedural history are relevant to our resolution of the defendants’ appeal. Estrada began working for the department in 1995 as an epidemiologist. By 2010, she had been promoted to the position of epidemiologist 4 within the department’s division of the Office of Local Health Administration (OLHA). The OLHA is responsible for coordinating with and ensuring delivery of public health services to local health departments. These local health departments are made up of municipal health departments and regional health districts. Pursuant to General Statutes (Rev. to 2015) § 19a-200 (a),¹ the director of each local health department is nominated at the local level.²

¹ Hereinafter, unless otherwise indicated, all references to § 19a-200 in this opinion are to the 2015 revision of the statute.

² General Statutes (Rev. to 2015) § 19a-200 (a) sets forth the process for nominating a director of a municipal health department and provides in relevant part: “The mayor of each city, the warden of each borough, and the chief executive officer of each town shall . . . nominate some person to be director of health for such city, town or borough”

211 Conn. App. 223

MARCH, 2022

227

Dept. of Public Health *v.* Estrada

Section 19a-200 also prescribes the minimum qualifications that a director of health must possess. Pursuant to § 19a-200 (a), the director of health for a municipality must “(1) be a licensed physician and hold a degree in public health from an accredited school, college, university, or institution, or (2) hold a graduate degree in public health from an accredited school, college or institution. . . .” General Statutes (Rev. to 2015) § 19a-200 (a). Additionally, § 19a-200 (a) provides in relevant part: “In case of the absence or inability to act of a city, town or borough director of health or if a vacancy exists in the office of such director, the appointing authority of such city, town or borough may, with the approval of the [commissioner of the department], designate in writing a suitable person to serve as acting director of health during the period of such absence or inability or vacancy, provided the commissioner [of the department] may appoint such acting director if the city, town or borough fails to do so. The person so designated, when sworn, shall have all the powers and be subject to all the duties of such director. . . .” General Statutes (Rev. to 2015) § 19a-200 (a).

As part of Estrada’s job duties as an epidemiologist 4 within the OLHA, she was assigned to review an applicant’s qualifications to serve as a director or acting director of health. “[T]he customary process within the OLHA was to review a letter from a municipality or a district board of health appointing an individual to a permanent or acting director of health. Once the OLHA received the appointment letter from a municipality or the district board of health, [Estrada] would review the appointed individual’s resume to ensure that it stated that the individual had a graduate degree from an accredited school.” “Once [Estrada] reviewed the appointment letter and resume, she would then draft a letter for [Ellen] Blaschinski’s³ review stating that the [depart-

³ At the time of the hearing in front of the referee, Blaschinski held the position of chief operating officer of the department. She supervised Estrada beginning in 2011.

228

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 223

Dept. of Public Health v. Estrada

ment] approved the appointment. After Blaschinski reviewed the letter she would send it [to] the commissioner of [the department] for [the commissioner's] review. Between 2011 and July, 2015, [Estrada] and Blaschinski undertook this process approximately ten times.”

“On May 8, 2015, [Raul] Pino, then director of health for the city of Hartford, submitted a letter requesting approval of Ruonan Wang as acting director of health for the city of Hartford.” Both Pino’s letter and Wang’s resume stated that Wang held a master’s degree in public health from the University of Connecticut. After receiving the letter and resume, Estrada drafted a letter for Blaschinski’s review but did not verify that Wang actually had received a master’s degree in public health. The letter subsequently was signed by the commissioner of the department approving Wang’s appointment as acting director of health.⁴

On June 17, 2015, an employee of the department notified Estrada that she had received information from an employee of the city of Hartford that Wang did not possess a master’s degree in public health. Estrada asked her secretary to contact the University of Connecticut, who confirmed that Wang in fact did not receive a master’s degree in public health from the university.⁵ Thereafter, Estrada reported this new information to Blaschinski.

In July, 2017, Estrada filed an amended complaint with the commission in which she alleged that her report to Blaschinski, which stated that Wang did not possess a graduate degree in public health, disclosed a violation of § 19a-200 because the statute requires

⁴The letter, signed by the commissioner of the department, stated in relevant part: “We have reviewed . . . Wang’s credentials and find them appropriate for the position. Therefore, pursuant to Section 19a-200 of the Connecticut General Statutes, you may appoint . . . Wang as the Acting/Interim Director of Health for the City of Hartford”

⁵There are no facts in the record to indicate that Wang received a master’s degree in public health from any other institution.

211 Conn. App. 223

MARCH, 2022

229

Dept. of Public Health v. Estrada

that a person nominated for the position of director of health hold a graduate degree in public health. She alleged that this new information constituted a protected whistleblower disclosure pursuant to § 4-61dd. She further claimed that, after her report to Blaschinski, she was subjected to retaliation on multiple occasions. Estrada alleged that, in response to her disclosure, she received multiple “unwarranted and unjustified written reprimand[s]” and “negative and unsatisfactory performance appraisal[s]” and that she was demoted from the position of epidemiologist 4 to epidemiologist 3. Pursuant to § 4-61dd, Estrada sought, inter alia, “compensation for [lost wages], restoration of her position [as] epidemiologist 4, [damages for] emotional distress and loss of enjoyment [of life’s activities], the removal of documentation from her personnel file reflecting the acts of retaliation against her, and reimbursement for the attorney’s fees and costs that she has incurred”

A hearing on Estrada’s complaint took place in September, 2017. In July, 2018, the referee issued a final decision in which she concluded that Estrada had made a protected whistleblower disclosure under § 4-61dd and that the department had retaliated against her.⁶ Thereafter, the department appealed to the Superior Court. On January 14, 2020, after a hearing, the court issued a memorandum of decision sustaining the appeal

⁶ In order for Estrada to establish a prima facie case of whistleblower retaliation, three elements must be shown: (1) Estrada must have engaged in a protected activity as defined by the statute; (2) Estrada must have incurred or been threatened with an adverse personnel action; and (3) there must be a causal connection between the actual or threatened personnel action and the protected activity. See General Statutes § 4-61dd; *Kisala v. Malecky*, Superior Court, judicial district of New Britain, Docket No. CV-13-5015760-S (October 7, 2013) (56 Conn. L. Rptr. 902, 905); see generally *Commissioner of Mental Health & Addiction Services v. Saeedi*, 143 Conn. App. 839, 841–42 n.1, 71 A.3d 619 (2013); *Eagen v. Commission on Human Rights & Opportunities*, 135 Conn. App. 563, 565–66 n.1, 42 A.3d 478 (2012).

230

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 223

Dept. of Public Health *v.* Estrada

and rendering judgment for the department. The court concluded that the commission lacked subject matter jurisdiction to adjudicate the complaint, that Estrada had not made a protected whistleblower disclosure under § 4-61dd, and that Estrada had failed to establish a causal connection between any alleged whistleblower disclosure and the alleged retaliation.⁷ This appeal followed.

I

We first address the commission's claim that the court erred in concluding that the commission lacked subject matter jurisdiction to adjudicate Estrada's complaint. We agree.

The following additional facts and procedural history are relevant to our resolution of this claim. In its answer to Estrada's amended whistleblower retaliation complaint, the department asserted five special defenses. The first special defense asserted that "[t]he office of public hearings lacks subject matter jurisdiction over this complaint, as [Estrada] fails to make a valid claim of whistleblower retaliation, as required by . . . § 4-61dd."⁸ Additionally, the department filed a "motion to dismiss and/or strike" in which it argued, *inter alia*, that the office of public hearings lacked jurisdiction "to hear a whistleblower claim for any of [Estrada's] alleged adverse personnel actions for which she has filed a grievance under her collective bargaining contract . . . because the two remedies are mutually exclusive" and that Estrada's claims did not "fall under the purview of . . . § 4-61dd and are therefore barred by sovereign immunity." This motion was denied by the referee.

⁷ Because we agree with the court that Estrada did not prove that she was engaged in any protected whistleblower activity, we need not address the commission's remaining claims of whistleblower retaliation.

⁸ The remaining four special defenses are not relevant to this claim.

211 Conn. App. 223

MARCH, 2022

231

Dept. of Public Health *v.* Estrada

In its posthearing brief, the department argued that the office of public hearings lacked jurisdiction because § 4-61dd offered Estrada “a clear choice of either filing a grievance or bringing the instant [whistleblower retaliation] case, but not both.” (Emphasis omitted.) The department asserted that, because Estrada had filed grievances in connection with the adverse employment actions that she claimed were acts of retaliation in her whistleblower retaliation complaint, the office of public hearings had no jurisdiction to hear the case. In addition, the department argued that Estrada’s claim did not “qualify as a whistleblower retaliation claim under the plain meaning of [§ 4-61dd]” and, therefore, the action was “barred by sovereign immunity” and “beyond the jurisdiction of [the office of public hearings]”

In her decision, the referee determined that the office of public hearings had subject matter jurisdiction over Estrada’s whistleblower retaliation complaint. The referee stated that, “[w]hen a defendant challenges a complaint on the ground that a plaintiff has elected an exclusive remedy, the issue is properly raised by a special defense and not a motion to dismiss since [i]t is both rational and fair to place the burden of pleading and proving an election of remedies on the party asserting the claim” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) She concluded that the department’s “argument that this tribunal does not have jurisdiction and violates sovereign immunity is without merit”

The court disagreed with the referee’s conclusion and determined that the office of public hearings lacked subject matter jurisdiction to hear Estrada’s whistleblower retaliation case. The court discussed the three grievances filed by Estrada and determined that her whistleblower retaliation complaint challenged the same personnel actions that were raised in her grievances. The court analyzed the relevant statute, § 4-61dd,

232

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 223

Dept. of Public Health v. Estrada

and concluded that, because “the statute clearly provides a mutually exclusive choice in this regard, [Estrada] is precluded from relitigating the propriety of the same personnel actions before the [referee]. The statute offered [Estrada] a clear choice of either filing grievances or bringing the instant [whistleblower retaliation] case to address the personnel actions, but not both.”

On appeal, the department argues that “[t]he fact that Estrada filed grievances regarding the same adverse personnel actions at issue in this case deprived [the office of public hearings] of subject matter jurisdiction because Estrada’s claim does not fall within the statute’s limited waiver of sovereign immunity.” We are not persuaded by this contention and conclude that the office of public hearings had subject matter jurisdiction to adjudicate Estrada’s whistleblower retaliation claim pursuant to § 4-61dd.

We begin our analysis by setting forth the legal principles relevant to our review of this claim. “The principle that the state cannot be sued without its consent, or sovereign immunity, is well established under our case law. . . . [T]he practical and logical basis of the doctrine [of sovereign immunity] is today recognized to rest . . . on the hazard that the subjection of the state and federal governments to private litigation might constitute a serious interference with the performance of their functions and with their control over their respective instrumentalities, funds, and property.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Jezouit v. Malloy*, 193 Conn. App. 576, 584, 219 A.3d 933 (2019).

“Sovereign immunity relates to a court’s subject matter jurisdiction over a case, and therefore presents a question of law over which we exercise de novo review. . . . In so doing, we must decide whether [the trial court’s] conclusions are legally and logically correct

211 Conn. App. 223

MARCH, 2022

233

Dept. of Public Health v. Estrada

and find support in the facts that appear in the record.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Columbia Air Services, Inc. v. Dept. of Transportation*, 293 Conn. 342, 349, 977 A.2d 636 (2009).

“[I]t is well established that, in determining whether a court has subject matter jurisdiction, every presumption favoring jurisdiction should be indulged. . . . Subject matter jurisdiction involves the authority of the court to adjudicate the type of controversy presented by the action before it. . . . The subject matter jurisdiction requirement may not be waived by any party, and also may be raised by a party, or by the court sua sponte, at any stage of the proceedings, including on appeal.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Sousa v. Sousa*, 322 Conn. 757, 770, 143 A.3d 578 (2016).

Furthermore, “[s]ubject matter jurisdiction does not rest on the viability of the claims that a court is asked to adjudicate. Subject matter jurisdiction involves the authority of a court to adjudicate the *type* of controversy presented by the action before it. . . . A court does not truly lack subject matter jurisdiction if it has competence to entertain the action before it. . . . Once it is determined that a tribunal has authority or competence to decide the class of cases to which the action belongs, the issue of subject matter jurisdiction is resolved in favor of entertaining the action.” (Emphasis in original; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Olympus Healthcare Group, Inc. v. Muller*, 88 Conn. App. 296, 300, 870 A.2d 1091 (2005).

“[T]he sovereign immunity enjoyed by the state is not absolute. There are [three] exceptions: (1) when the legislature, either expressly or by force of a necessary implication, statutorily waives the state’s sovereign immunity . . . (2) when an action seeks declaratory or injunctive relief on the basis of a substantial claim that the state or one of its officers has violated the

234

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 223

Dept. of Public Health v. Estrada

plaintiff's constitutional rights . . . and (3) when an action seeks declaratory or injunctive relief on the basis of a substantial allegation of wrongful conduct to promote an illegal purpose in excess of the officer's statutory authority. . . . For a claim made pursuant to the first exception, this court has recognized the well established principle that statutes in derogation of sovereign immunity should be strictly construed. . . . Where there is any doubt about their meaning or intent they are given the effect which makes the least rather than the most change in sovereign immunity. . . . In the absence of a proper factual basis in the complaint to support the applicability of these exceptions, the granting of a motion to dismiss on sovereign immunity grounds is proper." (Citations omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Columbia Air Services, Inc. v. Dept. of Transportation*, supra, 293 Conn. 349–50.

The department does not dispute that § 4-61dd contains a statutory waiver of sovereign immunity. Rather, the department argues that, because Estrada filed grievances challenging the same adverse personnel actions that form the basis of her whistleblower complaint, her whistleblower retaliation action falls outside of the waiver of sovereign immunity in § 4-61dd and, therefore, the office of public hearings lacks subject matter jurisdiction to hear Estrada's whistleblower claim. By way of this argument, the department attempts to transform an election of remedies claim into an issue of subject matter jurisdiction by implicating sovereign immunity.

"As a general rule, facts must be pleaded as a special defense when they are consistent with the allegations of the complaint but demonstrate, nonetheless, that the plaintiff has no cause of action." *Mitchell v. Guardian Systems, Inc.*, 72 Conn. App. 158, 166, 804 A.2d 1004, cert. denied, 262 Conn. 903, 810 A.2d 269 (2002). Our

211 Conn. App. 223

MARCH, 2022

235

Dept. of Public Health v. Estrada

courts previously have stated that an election of remedies claim is properly raised by a special defense rather than as a challenge to the jurisdiction of the court.

In *Grant v. Bassman*, 221 Conn. 465, 470, 473, 604 A.2d 814 (1992), our Supreme Court held that the defendants' claim that the plaintiffs had made an exclusive election of workers' compensation pursuant to General Statutes § 31-284 (a)⁹ was not raised properly by a motion to dismiss challenging the court's subject matter jurisdiction and should have been raised by a special defense. In that case, a minor employee was injured at work and applied for and began receiving workers' compensation benefits for his injuries. *Id.*, 468. Thereafter, the plaintiffs, the injured employee and his mother, filed a personal injury action against the defendant employer and its president, seeking damages for injuries sustained by the employee. *Id.*, 466. The defendant employer moved to dismiss the plaintiffs' complaint, arguing that the trial court lacked subject matter jurisdiction because the employee had applied for and received workers' compensation benefits for those injuries. *Id.* The court explained that "[t]he purpose of a special defense is to plead facts that are consistent

⁹ General Statutes § 31-284 (a) provides: "An employer who complies with the requirements of subsection (b) of this section shall not be liable for any action for damages on account of personal injury sustained by an employee arising out of and in the course of his employment or on account of death resulting from personal injury so sustained, but an employer shall secure compensation for his employees as provided under this chapter, except that compensation shall not be paid when the personal injury had been caused by the wilful and serious misconduct of the injured employee or by his intoxication. All rights and claims between an employer who complies with the requirements of subsection (b) of this section and employees, or any representatives or dependents of such employees, arising out of personal injury or death sustained in the course of employment are abolished other than rights and claims given by this chapter, provided nothing in this section shall prohibit any employee from securing, by agreement with his employer, additional compensation from his employer for the injury or from enforcing any agreement for additional compensation."

236

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 223

Dept. of Public Health v. Estrada

with the allegations of the complaint but demonstrate, nonetheless, that the plaintiff has no cause of action. . . . The claim that a plaintiff has elected an exclusive remedy relies on facts outside those alleged in the complaint that operate to negate what may once have been a valid cause of action. . . . It is therefore both rational and fair to place the burden of pleading and proving an election of remedies on the party asserting the claim, usually the defendant.” (Citations omitted.) *Id.*, 472–73. The court concluded that a special defense, and not a motion to dismiss, was the proper procedural mechanism for the defendant employer’s challenge to the plaintiffs’ complaint. *Id.*, 473.

In making its determination, our Supreme Court in *Grant v. Bassman*, *supra*, 221 Conn. 471–72, adopted the reasoning of the court in *Fusaro v. Chase Brass & Copper Co.*, 21 Conn. Supp. 240, 242–44, 154 A.2d 138 (1956), in which the court discussed the appropriate procedural mechanism for raising a claim that a plaintiff has made an exclusive election of workers’ compensation. The court in *Fusaro* stated that the exclusivity provision “is not at all a denial of jurisdiction in the Superior Court, as such, but is basically a destruction of an otherwise existent common-law right of action. . . . The confusion, if there be any, arises from the fact that the compensation procedure which is substituted for the common-law right of action involves a special tribunal, rather than the Superior Court. However, this is a mere incident of the destruction of the common-law right of action. In other words, there is not a lack of jurisdiction in the court but a want of a cause of action in the plaintiff.” *Id.*, 243.

In *Commissioner of Mental Health & Addiction Services v. Saeedi*, 143 Conn. App. 839, 71 A.3d 619 (2013), the defendant filed a whistleblower retaliation complaint with the office of public hearings in which he alleged that he had been subjected to retaliation for

211 Conn. App. 223

MARCH, 2022

237

Dept. of Public Health v. Estrada

making a whistleblower disclosure pursuant to § 4-61dd. Id., 845. The plaintiffs filed an answer in which they pleaded one special defense asserting that the office of public hearings lacked subject matter jurisdiction because the defendant had failed to satisfy the prerequisites for protection under § 4-61dd. Id. The plaintiffs also filed a motion to dismiss in which they alleged, inter alia, that the office of public hearings did not have subject matter jurisdiction because the defendant had filed grievances through his union and, therefore, had elected to pursue his remedies through his collective bargaining agreement. Id., 846. After the referee found in favor of the defendant, the plaintiffs appealed to the Superior Court and again argued, inter alia, that the office of public hearings lacked subject matter jurisdiction. Id., 855. The Superior Court upheld the decision of the referee. Id. On appeal to this court, the plaintiffs presented “the argument that [the defendant’s] use of the grievance process served to invalidate [the defendant’s] claims because he chose to pursue them through the forum provided by the collective bargaining agreement. The plaintiffs no longer claim[ed] that this deprive[d] the referee of jurisdiction to decide the matter. They claim[ed] that [the defendant’s] claims should have been dismissed because § 4-61dd requires the employee to elect an exclusive forum in which to pursue these claims, and [the defendant] elected his exclusive forum when his union filed its grievances.” (Footnote omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) Id., 855–56. This court declined to review the plaintiffs’ claim because it was raised for the first time on appeal. Id., 857. The court stated, however, that “[t]he plaintiffs’ abandonment of their jurisdictional argument is unsurprising considering our Supreme Court’s holding in *Grant v. Bassman* [supra, 221 Conn. 472].” *Commissioner of Mental Health & Addiction Services v. Saeedi*, supra, 143 Conn. App. 856 n.16.

238

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 223

Dept. of Public Health v. Estrada

In the present case, the statute at issue, § 4-61dd, provides two procedures to challenge an alleged retaliatory personnel action. First, an employee may “file a complaint . . . with the Chief Human Rights Referee The decision of a human rights referee under this subsection may be appealed by any person who was a party at such hearing, in accordance with the provisions of section 4-183.” General Statutes § 4-61dd (e) (2) (A). Second, “[a]n alternative to the provisions of subdivision (2) of this subsection: (A) A state or quasi-public agency employee who alleges that a personnel action has been threatened or taken may file an appeal . . . with the Employees’ Review Board under section 5-202, or, in the case of a state or quasi-public agency employee covered by a collective bargaining contract, in accordance with the procedure provided by such contract” General Statutes § 4-61dd (e) (3).

There is no dispute that § 4-61dd contains a waiver of sovereign immunity and confers on the office of public hearings the authority to adjudicate the type of controversy presented in this case: a whistleblower retaliation claim. The fact that the statute also provides for an “alternative” avenue for a complainant to seek redress for adverse personnel actions taken in retaliation for a whistleblower disclosure; General Statutes § 4-61dd (e) (3); does not deprive the office of public hearings of subject matter jurisdiction to the claim. Although the language used in § 4-61dd differs from that used in § 31-284 and discussed in *Grant v. Bassman*, supra, 221 Conn. 471–73, in both circumstances, the issue that arises is one regarding the election of remedies. When a complainant elects to pursue one of the avenues provided for in § 4-61dd and then subsequently proceeds to pursue the second avenue, the issue concerns the complainant’s election of remedies, not subject matter jurisdiction. Estrada’s complaint to the office of public hearings, even if it is pursued after

211 Conn. App. 223

MARCH, 2022

239

Dept. of Public Health v. Estrada

the initial grievance process, does not create a lack of subject matter jurisdiction. Instead, it may result in “ ‘a want of a cause of action’ ”; (emphasis omitted) *id.*, 472; which the department may challenge in a special defense. See *id.*, 471. Accordingly, we conclude that the office of public hearings had subject matter jurisdiction to adjudicate Estrada’s whistleblower retaliation claim.

II

We next address the commission’s contention that the court erred when it concluded that Estrada did not make a protected whistleblower disclosure pursuant to § 4-61dd. The commission asserts, specifically, that Estrada’s disclosure “fits within three of the enumerated categories [in § 4-61dd]: a violation of law, mismanagement, and a danger to public safety.” We conclude that Estrada did not disclose a violation of law and, therefore, did not make a protected whistleblower disclosure pursuant to § 4-61dd.¹⁰

The following additional facts and procedural history are relevant to our resolution of this claim. In her decision, the referee stated that § 4-61dd “ ‘is a remedial

¹⁰ The commission claims that Estrada’s disclosure to Blaschinski fits within two other enumerated categories under § 4-61dd: mismanagement and a danger to public safety. The commission raises these arguments, however, for the first time on appeal. “We adhere to the well settled principle that [t]his court will not review issues of law that are raised for the first time on appeal. . . . We have repeatedly held that this court will not consider claimed errors on the part of the trial court unless it appears on the record that the question was distinctly raised at trial and was ruled upon and decided by the court adversely to the appellant’s claim.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Rosa v. Lawrence & Memorial Hospital*, 145 Conn. App. 275, 309, 74 A.3d 534 (2013). “[A] party cannot present a case to the trial court on one theory and then seek appellate relief on a different one” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *U.S. Bank National Assn. v. Eichten*, 184 Conn. App. 727, 756, 196 A.3d 328 (2018). These arguments were neither raised by the defendants at the administrative hearing or in the trial court nor decided by the referee or the court. Therefore, we decline to review the commission’s claims that Estrada’s report to Blaschinski was a disclosure of mismanagement or a danger to public safety pursuant to § 4-61dd.

240

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 223

Dept. of Public Health *v.* Estrada

statute and is to be interpreted broadly to effectuate [its] purpose.’ . . . By using such broadly defined words as ‘abuse’ and ‘mismanagement,’ the legislature intended to protect employees who disclose a wide array of transgressions under . . . § 4-61dd.” (Citation omitted.) In concluding that Estrada had made a protected disclosure under § 4-61dd, the referee stated that Estrada “reported a violation of . . . § 19a-200, which required a city health director possesses the required degrees. General Statutes § 19a-2a¹¹ confers broad powers to the [department] to administer all laws under the jurisdiction of the [department], which includes oversight of compliance with . . . § 19a-200. The OLHA is charged with reviewing resumes to determine if the schools attended by the applicant were properly accredited; the OLHA is part of the [department]. This is clearly reporting a violation of law under the jurisdiction of the agency; and falls squarely within a qualifying disclosure.” (Footnote added; footnotes omitted.)

On appeal, the court disagreed with the conclusions of the referee. It concluded, *inter alia*, that Estrada’s disclosure to Blaschinski was not a whistleblower disclosure under § 4-61dd. The court stated that “the disclosure does not reveal corruption, unethical practices, violations of state law or regulations, mismanagement, gross waste of funds, abuse of authority or danger to public safety occurring in any state department or agency or quasi-public agency as required by [the statute].” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) The court further stated that the letter from the department approving the city of Hartford’s appointment of Wang as acting director was merely a mistake, as a result of Wang’s misrepresentation and Estrada’s failure to verify

¹¹ General Statutes § 19a-2a provides in relevant part: “The Commissioner of [the department] shall employ the most efficient and practical means for the prevention and suppression of disease and shall administer all laws under the jurisdiction of the [department] and the Public Health Code. . . .”

211 Conn. App. 223

MARCH, 2022

241

Dept. of Public Health v. Estrada

Wang’s qualifications. The court determined that there was “no evidence that the commissioner, Blaschinski, [Estrada], or any other personnel at [the department] knew that the letter was mistaken at the time it was sent. . . . [S]ending the letter did not violate any law, nor did it represent corruption or unethical practices on the part of [the department] or the commissioner. . . . Further, the commissioner and [the department] promptly addressed the mistake when they discovered it.”

The court then analyzed the relevant statutes to determine if a violation of law had occurred. “It is true that . . . § 19a-200 specifies the required qualifications of a city director of health. It is also true that . . . § 19a-2a confers broad authority upon the commissioner to administer public health laws, which includes oversight of compliance with § 19a-200. The disclosure, however, as here, that an acting city health director was unknowingly, mistakenly appointed and approved does not create a violation of law, corruption, or unethical practice at the [department] or by the commissioner [of the department]. . . .

“Two important points clearly arise from [§ 19a-200]. First, and most importantly, the commissioner [of the department] had the absolute power to approve persons for *acting* directors of health who he deems suitable. It is undisputed that Wang was an acting director of health. As such, the commissioner’s letter approving Wang as an *acting* director of health broke no law. The commissioner [of the department] had the ability to deem Wang suitable and approve him. The specific [educational] qualifications for a permanent director of health do not apply to an acting director of health. Second, the obligation to appoint directors of health that meet the applicable qualifications lies with the appointing authority (i.e., the city), not the commissioner [of the department]. As such, even if the commissioner mistakenly approved a

242

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 223

Dept. of Public Health v. Estrada

person without the necessary qualifications, he broke no law, but merely made a mistake.” (Emphasis in original; footnotes omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.)

We first set forth our standard of review and the legal principles relevant to our resolution of this claim. We review the trial court’s judgment pursuant to the Uniform Administrative Procedure Act, General Statutes § 4-166 et seq. “[I]t is [not] the function . . . of this court to retry the case or to substitute its judgment for that of the administrative agency.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Valliere v. Commissioner of Social Services*, 328 Conn. 294, 308, 178 A.3d 346 (2018).

“Judicial review of an administrative agency decision requires a court to determine whether there is substantial evidence in the administrative record to support the agency’s findings of basic fact and whether the conclusions drawn from those facts are reasonable. . . . An administrative finding is supported by substantial evidence if the record affords a substantial basis of fact from which the fact in issue can be reasonably inferred. . . . The substantial evidence rule imposes an important limitation on the power of the courts to overturn a decision of an administrative agency . . . and . . . provide[s] a more restrictive standard of review than standards embodying review of weight of the evidence or clearly erroneous action. . . . [A]s to questions of law, [t]he court’s ultimate duty is only to decide whether, in light of the evidence, the [agency] has acted unreasonably, arbitrarily, illegally, or in abuse of its discretion. . . . Conclusions of law reached by the administrative agency must stand if the court determines that they resulted from a correct application of the law to the facts found and could reasonably and logically follow from such facts.” (Citation omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Blinkoff v. Commission on Human Rights & Opportunities*, 129 Conn.

211 Conn. App. 223

MARCH, 2022

243

Dept. of Public Health v. Estrada

App. 714, 720–21, 20 A.3d 1272, cert. denied, 302 Conn. 922, 28 A.3d 341 (2011).

“Cases that present pure questions of law, however, invoke a broader standard of review than is . . . involved in deciding whether, in light of the evidence, the agency has acted unreasonably, arbitrarily, illegally or in abuse of its discretion. . . . Furthermore, when a state agency’s determination of a question of law has not previously been subject to judicial scrutiny . . . the agency is not entitled to special deference. . . . We have determined, therefore, that the traditional deference accorded to an agency’s interpretation of a statutory term is unwarranted when the construction of a statute . . . has not previously been subjected to judicial scrutiny [or to] . . . a governmental agency’s time-tested interpretation Even if time-tested, we will defer to an agency’s interpretation of a statute only if it is reasonable; that reasonableness is determined by [application of] our established rules of statutory construction.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Valliere v. Commissioner of Social Services*, supra, 328 Conn. 308. In the present case, the parties do not claim that the referee’s interpretation of the statute is time-tested or has previously been subjected to judicial scrutiny.

The question before this court is whether Estrada’s disclosure that the commissioner of the department improperly designated Wang as acting director of health for the city of Hartford constituted a protected disclosure under § 4-61dd. Section § 4-61dd (a) provides in relevant part: “Any person having knowledge of any matter involving . . . corruption, unethical practices, *violation of state laws* or regulations, mismanagement, gross waste of funds, abuse of authority or danger to the public safety occurring in any state department or agency, [or] any quasi-public agency . . . may transmit all facts and information in such person’s possession

244

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 223

Dept. of Public Health *v.* Estrada

concerning such matter to the Auditors of Public Accounts. . . .” (Emphasis added.)

The statute further provides in relevant part: “No state officer or employee . . . shall take or threaten to take any personnel action against any state or quasi-public agency employee . . . in retaliation for (A) such employee’s . . . disclosure of information to (i) an employee of the Auditors of Public Accounts . . . [or] (ii) an employee of the state agency or quasi-public agency where such officer or employee is employed” General Statutes § 4-61dd (e) (1). The commission contends that Estrada’s reporting to Blaschinski that Wang did not hold a master’s degree constituted a disclosure of a violation of § 19a-200 and, therefore, is a protected whistleblower disclosure under § 4-61dd. Specifically, the commission argues that § 19a-200 requires all directors, whether permanent or acting, either to be a licensed physician with a degree in public health or to hold a graduate degree in public health and that, regardless of the qualifications set forth in the statute, Wang was not “‘suitable’” for the position of acting director of health. Therefore, we must determine whether Estrada’s disclosure constitutes a disclosure of a “violation of state laws” as used in § 4-61dd. We conclude that it does not.

“When construing a statute, [o]ur fundamental objective is to ascertain and give effect to the apparent intent of the legislature. . . . In seeking to determine that meaning, General Statutes § 1-2z directs us first to consider the text of the statute itself and its relationship to other statutes. If, after examining such text and considering such relationship, the meaning of such text is plain and unambiguous and does not yield absurd or unworkable results, extratextual evidence of the meaning of the statute shall not be considered. . . . The test to determine ambiguity is whether the statute, when

211 Conn. App. 223

MARCH, 2022

245

Dept. of Public Health v. Estrada

read in context, is susceptible to more than one reasonable interpretation. . . . When a statute is not plain and unambiguous, we also look for interpretive guidance to the legislative history and circumstances surrounding its enactment, to the legislative policy it was designed to implement, and to its relationship to existing legislation and common law principles governing the same general subject matter” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Chairperson, Connecticut Medical Examining Board v. Freedom of Information Commission*, 310 Conn. 276, 283, 77 A.3d 121 (2013). We iterate that, because the referee’s interpretation of the statute “has not been ‘subjected to judicial scrutiny or consistently applied by the agency over a long period of time,’ our review is de novo.” *Id.*; see also *Valliere v. Commissioner of Social Services*, supra, 328 Conn. 309 (“no special deference is required because there is no claim that the department’s construction of the applicable statutes is time-tested, or has previously been subject to judicial scrutiny”).

The parties dispute whether § 19a-200 requires that an *acting* director of health possess the qualifications set forth in § 19a-200 (a) and, consequently, whether Estrada’s report that Wang did not possess a master’s degree in public health disclosed a violation of state law and, thus, was a protected disclosure under § 4-61dd. We conclude that the statutory qualifications set forth in § 19a-200 do not apply to a person designated to serve as an acting director of health. Estrada, therefore, did not disclose a violation of § 19a-200 and, consequently, did not make a protected disclosure under § 4-61dd.

Section 19a-200 (a) provides in relevant part: “[A]ny person nominated to be a director of health shall (1) be a licensed physician and hold a degree in public health . . . or (2) hold a graduate degree in public health” General Statutes (Rev. to 2015) § 19a-200

246

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 223

Dept. of Public Health v. Estrada

(a). It further provides that, in the absence or inability to act of a director of health or if a vacancy exists, the appointing local authority, with approval of the commissioner of the department, may “designate in writing a *suitable* person to serve as *acting* director of health” (Emphasis added.) General Statutes (Rev. to 2015) § 19a-200 (a). The statute makes a distinction between qualifications required for a director of health, who must either be a licensed physician and hold a degree in public health or hold a graduate degree in public health, and those for an *acting* director of health, stating that an *acting* director of health need only be *suitable*. See General Statutes (Rev. to 2015) § 19a-200 (a).

In construing the statute, the commission’s argument that the qualifications set forth in § 19a-200 (a) for a director of public health also apply to an *acting* director of public health is belied by the plain language of the statute. When subsection (a) is read as a whole, it is apparent that the legislature did not intend for the qualifications set forth in § 19a-200 (a) to apply to an *acting* director of health. It is significant that the legislature stated that a director of health must possess certain educational qualifications but used the phrase “suitable person” when discussing the designation of an acting director of health. See *Stone v. East Coast Swappers, LLC*, 337 Conn. 589, 602, 255 A.3d 851 (2020) (“[t]he use of the different terms . . . within the same statute suggests that the legislature acted with complete awareness of their different meanings . . . and that it intended the terms to have different meanings” (internal quotation marks omitted)). The legislature’s inclusion of qualifications for those nominated as a director of health, while stating that an individual designated for *acting* director should be “suitable,” indicates its decision that the qualifications required for a director of health not apply to an *acting* director of health. Because

211 Conn. App. 223

MARCH, 2022

247

Dept. of Public Health v. Estrada

our objective is to ascertain and give effect to the apparent intent of the legislature, “we cannot accomplish a result that is contrary to the intent of the legislature as expressed in the [statute’s] plain language. . . . The intent of the legislature, as [the] court has repeatedly observed, is to be found not in what the legislature meant to say, but in the meaning of what it did say.” (Footnote omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Vincent v. New Haven*, 285 Conn. 778, 792, 941 A.2d 932 (2008).

We conclude that no violation of § 19a-200 occurred, and, therefore, it follows that Estrada did not disclose a violation of law. We conclude that her report to Blaschinski is not a protected disclosure under § 4-61dd.¹² Thus, we agree with the court that Estrada is not entitled to protection under § 4-61dd on these facts and circumstances.

The judgment is affirmed.

In this opinion the other judges concurred.

¹² Moreover, this is not the type of disclosure intended to be protected under § 4-61dd. The court concluded that the letter signed by the commissioner of the department approving Wang as acting director of health was prepared and executed without knowledge that the information in Wang’s resume was incorrect and that Wang did not actually possess a master’s degree in public health. Therefore, the approval was merely a mistake. Furthermore, the court stated that Estrada “bore substantial responsibility for the mistake” because she drafted the letter with an understanding of the purpose of the letter and knowing that the letter would be signed by the commissioner of the department. The court determined that, “[a]lthough the letter was mistaken, sending the letter did not violate any law, nor did it represent corruption or unethical practices on the part of [the department] or the commissioner [of the department]. . . . Further, the commissioner [of the department] and [the department] promptly addressed the mistake when they discovered it.” We agree with the court’s analysis. Therefore, even assuming, arguendo, that § 19a-200 (a) requires that an acting director of health possess the qualifications that apply to permanent directors of health, Estrada did not disclose a violation of law but merely disclosed the fact that the department was mistaken in believing that Wang held a master’s degree in public health, a mistake that was “induced by the false resume of Wang” We conclude that a mistake such as this one is not the type of disclosure the legislature intended to protect under the statute.

248

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 248

Bova v. Commissioner of Correction

MARK BOVA v. COMMISSIONER OF CORRECTION
(AC 43993)

Moll, Clark and Bear, Js.

Syllabus

The petitioner, who had previously been convicted of murder and conspiracy to commit murder, filed an amended petition for habeas corpus, claiming, inter alia, that the state failed to disclose exculpatory evidence or to correct certain false and misleading testimony, in violation of his due process rights. At the petitioner's criminal trial, D, a coconspirator, testified as to how she and the petitioner were involved in the death of the victim, and her testimony was corroborated by forensic evidence. The habeas court rendered judgment dismissing in part and denying in part the petitioner's claims, from which the petitioner, on the granting of certification, appealed to this court. *Held* that the petitioner could not prevail on his claim that the habeas court erred in failing to find the existence of a cooperation agreement or understanding between D and the state with respect to D's testimony: the petitioner's reliance on *Gomez v. Commissioner of Correction* (336 Conn. 168) was misplaced because, even assuming the veracity of the petitioner's allegations that D was provided benefits in exchange for her cooperation, *Gomez* applies only when a petitioner establishes the existence of an agreement between the state and a witness and that the witness received some benefit as a result of the agreement, and this court's review of the record confirmed the habeas court's finding that the petitioner failed to prove that the state had entered into an agreement or understanding with D; moreover, with respect to the petitioner's due process claim, the habeas court's finding that the petitioner had not proved that an agreement or understanding existed between the state and D was supported by substantial evidence.

Submitted on briefs January 26—officially released March 15, 2022

Procedural History

Amended petition for a writ of habeas corpus, brought to the Superior Court in the judicial district of Tolland, where the court, *Newson, J.*, dismissed in part the petition; thereafter, the case was tried to the court, *Seeley, J.*; judgment dismissing in part and denying in part the petition, from which the petitioner, on the granting of certification, appealed to this court. *Affirmed.*

J. Patten Brown III, assigned counsel, for the appellant (petitioner).

211 Conn. App. 248

MARCH, 2022

249

Bova v. Commissioner of Correction

Nancy L. Chupak, senior assistant state's attorney, with whom, on the brief, were *Margaret E. Kelley*, state's attorney, and *Angela R. Macchiarulo* and *Michael Joseph Proto*, senior assistant state's attorneys, for the appellee (respondent).

Opinion

PER CURIAM. Following the granting by the habeas court of his petition for certification to appeal, the petitioner, Mark Bova, appeals from the judgment of the habeas court denying his third petition for a writ of habeas corpus. On appeal, the petitioner claims that the habeas court erred in failing to find the existence of a cooperation agreement or understanding between Diana Donofrio, a coconspirator, and the state with respect to Donofrio's testimony at the petitioner's criminal trial. We disagree with the petitioner's claim of error and, accordingly, affirm the judgment of the habeas court.

The following facts and procedural history are relevant to our resolution of the petitioner's appeal. After a jury trial, the petitioner was found guilty of the murder of his wife in violation of General Statutes § 53a-54a (a) and of conspiracy to commit murder in violation of General Statutes §§ 53a-48 (a) and 53a-54a (a). *State v. Bova*, 240 Conn. 210, 213, 690 A.2d 1370 (1997). At the petitioner's criminal trial, Donofrio testified as to how she and the petitioner were involved in the death of the petitioner's wife. *Id.*, 216–17.¹ Donofrio's testimony was corroborated

¹ Specifically, our Supreme Court summarized Donofrio's testimony as follows: "In May, 1993, the [petitioner] terminated his relationship with Donofrio and moved in with another woman. Two months later, Donofrio contacted the West Haven police to report that the [petitioner] had killed the victim. Thereafter, Donofrio explained that she and the [petitioner] had discussed his plans to murder the victim at least one week prior to the murder. Specifically, the [petitioner] told Donofrio that he loved her and could not afford a divorce, that he intended to kill the victim by strangulation, and that he would commit the murder on a Tuesday because he did not work on Wednesday.

"Donofrio testified that the [petitioner] telephoned her between 6 and 6:30 p.m. on Tuesday, January 28, 1992, to tell her that he was in the process of killing the victim and that he needed her assistance. When Donofrio arrived at the [petitioner's] home a few minutes later, she found the [petitioner] and

250

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 248

Bova v. Commissioner of Correction

by forensic evidence presented at the trial. *Id.*, 217–18. The petitioner appealed from the judgment of the trial court, which sentenced him to concurrent terms of sixty years of incarceration on the murder conviction and twenty years of incarceration on the conspiracy conviction. *Id.*, 212–13. Our Supreme Court affirmed the judgment of the trial court. *Id.*, 246.

On April 24, 2017, the petitioner filed his third petition for a writ of habeas corpus.² The petitioner subsequently amended his petition on August 16, 2018, and September 13, 2018. In the operative petition, the petitioner asserted claims of (1) judicial misconduct, (2) prosecutorial impropriety, (3) insufficient probable cause, and (4) the state’s failure to disclose exculpatory evidence or to correct false and misleading testimony with respect to an informal agreement or understanding with Donofrio that, in return for her testimony against the petitioner, the state would provide her with various benefits, including pretrial release on a \$100,000 nonsurety bond, a reduction in the severity of the charges against her, and no recommendation by the state concerning her sentence. On February 6, 2019, the habeas court dismissed the petitioner’s claim of prosecutorial impropriety. On January 15, 2020, after a trial, the habeas court dismissed the petitioner’s claims of judicial misconduct and insufficient probable cause. The habeas court also rendered judgment denying

the victim in the couple’s bedroom. The victim was lying on the bed, face down and unconscious. The [petitioner], who was on top of the victim, was strangling her with an extension cord. Because the victim continued to exhibit a pulse, the [petitioner] began to strangle her manually, holding his thumbs on the back of her head and his fingers at the front of her neck. Donofrio then helped the [petitioner] move the victim from the bed onto the floor, where they took turns smothering her with a pillow until she had no pulse.” *State v. Bova*, *supra*, 240 Conn. 216.

² The petitioner’s prior petitions for a writ of habeas of corpus were unsuccessful. See *Bova v. Commissioner of Correction*, 162 Conn. App. 348, 131 A.3d 268, cert. denied, 320 Conn. 920, 132 A.3d 1094 (2016); *Bova v. Commissioner of Correction*, 95 Conn. App. 129, 894 A.2d 1067, cert. denied, 278 Conn. 920, 901 A.2d 43 (2006).

211 Conn. App. 248

MARCH, 2022

251

Bova v. Commissioner of Correction

the habeas petition because the petitioner had failed to prove his claim that there was any agreement or understanding between the state and Donofrio for her testimony, and thus, the petitioner could not prove that the state had not disclosed exculpatory evidence to him, or failed to correct any false and misleading testimony by Donofrio about any agreement or understanding with the state with respect to her testimony.

On January 28, 2020, the petitioner filed a petition for certification to appeal, which was granted by the habeas court. On appeal, the petitioner claims that the court erred in finding that no agreement or understanding existed between Donofrio and the state concerning her testimony.³ Specifically, the petitioner claims that his due process rights were violated because Donofrio testified falsely that she had not entered into an agreement with the state, and the state failed to correct this false testimony. We disagree.

We begin by setting forth the applicable standard of review. “The existence of an undisclosed plea agreement is an issue of fact for the determination of the trial court. . . . Furthermore, the burden is on the [petitioner] to prove the existence of undisclosed exculpatory evidence. . . . A finding of fact will not be disturbed unless it is clearly erroneous in view of the evidence and pleadings on the whole record [W]hen a question of fact is essential to the outcome of a particular legal determination that implicates a defendant’s constitutional rights, and the credibility of witnesses is not the primary issue, our customary deference to the trial court’s factual findings is tempered by a scrupulous examination of the record to ascertain that the trial court’s factual findings are supported by substantial evidence.” (Citation omit-

³ The petitioner has not appealed from the judgment of the habeas court dismissing in part and denying in part his claims of prosecutorial impropriety, judicial misconduct, and insufficient probable cause.

252

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 248

Bova v. Commissioner of Correction

ted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Greene v. Commissioner of Correction*, 330 Conn. 1, 29, 190 A.3d 851 (2018), cert. denied sub nom. *Greene v. Semple*, U.S. , 139 S. Ct. 1219, 203 L. Ed. 2d 238 (2019).

In the present case, the petitioner relies on the decision of our Supreme Court in *Gomez v. Commissioner of Correction*, 336 Conn. 168, 243 A.3d 1163 (2020). This reliance, however, is misplaced. In the consolidated criminal case in *Gomez*, the petitioner and his two codefendants were each charged, inter alia, with one count of murder and one count of conspiracy to commit murder. *Id.*, 171. During their criminal trial, two other alleged coconspirators testified against the petitioner and his codefendants. *Id.*, 171–72. In his habeas appeal, the petitioner in *Gomez* claimed that both of the alleged coconspirators “falsely testified at trial that (1) the state had not promised them anything in return for their cooperation, and (2) they did not receive any benefit at their respective bond hearings in exchange for cooperating.” *Id.*, 176. Our Supreme Court resolved this claim in favor of the petitioner after determining that “the prosecutor . . . had promised both [of the alleged coconspirators] that he would bring their cooperation to the attention of the sentencing court,” and that they did, in fact, receive benefits in exchange for their cooperation that were not disclosed to the jury. *Id.*

In the present case, the petitioner argues that *Gomez* applies because “Donofrio was given three benefits in exchange for her cooperation: (1) she was released on a nonsurety bond;⁴ (2) the state filed substitute charges (which did not include a charge of perjury); and (3) the state did not recommend a sentence.” (Footnote added.) Even if we assume that these allegations are true, the

⁴ During the habeas trial, the petitioner did not offer the transcript of Donofrio’s arraignment as an exhibit, and, therefore, there is no evidence to support the petitioner’s argument that the prosecutor suggested that this “benefit” was provided to her.

211 Conn. App. 248

MARCH, 2022

253

Bova v. Commissioner of Correction

petitioner's reliance on *Gomez* is still misplaced. *Gomez* applies only when a petitioner establishes (1) the existence of an agreement between the state and a witness *and* (2) that the witness did, in fact, receive some benefit as a result of the agreement. See *Gomez v. Commissioner of Correction*, *supra*, 336 Conn. 176. Our review of the record in the present case confirms the finding of the habeas court that "the petitioner has failed to prove that the [state] had entered into a[n] . . . agreement or understanding, either formal or informal, with Donofrio."⁵ With respect to the petitioner's due process claim, we conclude that the habeas court's finding that the petitioner had not proved that an agreement or understanding existed between the state and Donofrio is supported by

⁵ The habeas court set forth the following facts in support of its finding that no agreement or understanding existed between the state and Donofrio: "On February 23, 1995, Donofrio pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit murder and making a false statement to the police before the same trial judge, *Gormley, J.*, who had presided over the petitioner's [criminal] trial. Prior to the entry of Donofrio's guilty pleas, the prosecutor . . . indicated that she was filing a substituted information as a result of a judicial pretrial that had occurred subsequent to the jury's verdict in the petitioner's case. [The prosecutor] stated that 'prior to the time of this pretrial which occurred after the guilty verdict was entered on [the petitioner], there had been no representation to defense counsel or to the court as to what the state would do.' Donofrio's counsel . . . confirmed that 'there were never any agreements that were entered into by us and the state regarding any disposition of the case.' Judge Gormley also stated that 'there were no discussions with reference to a disposition of [Donofrio's] case prior to the verdict being entered in the case of [the petitioner].' The court indicated disposition for Donofrio's guilty pleas was a maximum sentence of twelve years, execution suspended after the service of six years, followed by probation, with Donofrio's counsel having the opportunity to argue for a lesser sentence.

"Donofrio was sentenced on April 6, 1995, to a total effective sentence of ten years of incarceration, execution suspended after the service of four years, followed by a period of probation of three years. During the sentencing hearing, the trial court stated: 'One further thing the court wants to say and to say very clearly and categorically, and that is that there have been no deals at all in this case. I read in the paper this morning that the Bova family still believes, and will believe until their dying days, that there has been a deal. I can't change how they feel and they can feel there's been a deal for as long as they want. I can only tell them that there has been no deal, none that I've participated in.'"

254 MARCH, 2022 211 Conn. App. 254

Griffin Hospital v. ISOThrive, LLC

substantial evidence. *Greene v. Commissioner of Correction*, supra, 330 Conn. 29. Accordingly, we conclude that the finding of the habeas court that no agreement or understanding existed between the state and Donofrio with respect to her testimony precludes the application of the law set forth in *Gomez* to the petitioner's claim.

The judgment is affirmed.

GRIFFIN HOSPITAL v. ISOTHRIVE, LLC
(AC 43714)

Alvord, Clark and Bishop, Js.

Syllabus

The plaintiff sought to recover damages from the defendant for breach of contract, alleging that the defendant had failed to make the final payment for services rendered. The parties had entered into a research agreement for the plaintiff to study the potential benefits of the defendant's nutrition supplement on a certain group of individuals. The agreement was amended and was accompanied by a revised protocol concerning the characteristics of individuals suitable for the study. The defendant filed a counterclaim alleging that the plaintiff breached the parties' contract by, inter alia, failing to comply with the requirements of the agreement and the protocol regarding the population of individuals to be included in the study. Following a trial to the court, the court awarded the plaintiff damages for the defendant's breach of contract and prejudgment interest based on its finding that the defendant had wrongfully withheld funds from the plaintiff, and the defendant appealed to this court. *Held:*

1. The trial court properly concluded that the defendant had breached the research agreement by failing to pay a final invoice, the plaintiff having conducted the study in accordance with the agreement: contrary to the defendant's claim, the plaintiff was not obligated, under the definitive terms of the revised protocol and amended agreement, to perform any analysis to determine whether certain medications had the potential to interact with the ingredients in the supplement, as the language of the parties' revised protocol unambiguously provided that the plaintiff was required to exclude only potential study participants with diabetes or hypertension who were taking medication with a known potential to interact with the supplement; moreover, the language of the revised protocol, including the term "overweight but otherwise healthy," was clear and unambiguous with respect to the selection of study participants, as it set forth the criteria that, if met, would allow prospective participants to enroll in the study and detailed the criteria that would

211 Conn. App. 254

MARCH, 2022

255

Griffin Hospital v. ISOThrive, LLC

- exclude a prospective participant from the study; furthermore, there was ample evidence in the record to support the court's finding that the plaintiff performed its obligations under the contract, including the selection of study participants, and the fact that the defendant did not obtain the results it wanted from the study did not constitute a breach of contract nor did it negate its obligation to pay the amount due on the final invoice.
2. This court concluded that the trial court did not abuse its discretion by awarding prejudgment interest to the plaintiff pursuant to the applicable statute (§ 37-3a), as the record supported the court's finding that the defendant had no good faith basis to withhold final payment and, therefore, doing so was a wrongful detention of money due under the contract.

Argued September 22, 2021—officially released March 15, 2022

Procedural History

Action to recover damages for breach of contract, and for other relief, brought to the Superior Court in the judicial district of New Haven, where the defendant filed a counterclaim; thereafter, the matter was tried to the court, *Wilson, J.*; judgment for the plaintiff on the complaint and on the counterclaim, from which the defendant appealed to this court. *Affirmed.*

Matthew D. Popilowski, for the appellant (defendant).

Peter T. Fay, for the appellee (plaintiff).

Opinion

BISHOP, J. This appeal concerns a dispute between the parties arising out of an agreement to study the potential benefits of a certain nutrition supplement on a group of overweight but otherwise healthy individuals. The central question at issue in this appeal is whether the plaintiff, Griffin Hospital,¹ conducted the study in accordance with the study protocol agreed upon by the parties. After trial, the court found in favor of the plaintiff, concluding that the defendant, ISOThrive, LLC,

¹ Although the plaintiff in this matter is Griffin Hospital, the research which is the subject of this appeal was conducted by the Yale-Griffin Prevention Research Center, a division of the plaintiff.

256

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 254

Griffin Hospital *v.* ISOThrive, LLC

had breached the research agreement by failing to pay a final invoice. The court found for the plaintiff, as well, on the defendant's counterclaim, which alleged that the plaintiff had breached the research agreement by failing to conduct the study in accordance with the agreement's research study protocol. Accordingly, the court awarded the plaintiff \$68,204.12 on its breach of contract claim. Additionally, the court ordered the defendant to pay prejudgment interest at the rate of 8 percent for its wrongful detention of funds due to the plaintiff. This appeal followed.

On appeal, the defendant argues that the court improperly (1) concluded that the plaintiff was not obligated to perform an analysis to determine whether certain medications had the potential to interact with the supplement, (2) concluded that the term "overweight but otherwise healthy" was governed exclusively by the inclusion and exclusion criteria set forth in the parties' agreement, (3) concluded that the plaintiff performed the study in accordance with the agreement, (4) awarded prejudgment interest to the plaintiff, and (5) found against the defendant on its counterclaim.² We affirm the judgment of the court.

We briefly set forth the standards of review applicable to the defendant's various claims. In addressing the defendant's claims regarding the court's interpretation of the parties' agreement, our review implicates the court's factual findings as well as its interpretation of the contract. As to the defendant's claims that challenge

² In its counterclaim, the defendant sought damages on the basis of the plaintiff's alleged breaches of the parties' agreement by not following the protocol established for the study, by failing to provide certain analyses in its study report and by publicly posting the study results. On review, we need not separately reach the defendant's counterclaim because our resolution of the appeal affirming the trial court's awards to the plaintiff subsumes and resolves, by necessity, the defendant's arguments in support of its counterclaim.

211 Conn. App. 254

MARCH, 2022

257

Griffin Hospital v. ISOThrive, LLC

the court's factual findings, we apply the clearly erroneous standard of review to determine whether the record supports the court's factual findings. See *Coppola Construction Co. v. Hoffman Enterprises Ltd. Partnership*, 157 Conn. App. 139, 158, 117 A.3d 876, cert. denied, 318 Conn. 902, 122 A.3d 631 (2015), and cert. denied, 318 Conn. 902, 123 A.3d 882 (2015). As to the defendant's claims that challenge the court's legal conclusions, "our review is plenary and we must decide whether its conclusions are legally and logically correct and find support in the facts that appear in the record." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Sun Val, LLC v. Commissioner of Transportation*, 330 Conn. 316, 325–26, 193 A.3d 1192 (2018). Lastly, as to the defendant's claim that the court improperly awarded prejudgment interest, as authorized by General Statutes § 37-3a, we apply an abuse of discretion standard of review. See *Riley v. Travelers Home & Marine Ins. Co.*, 173 Conn. App. 422, 460–61, 163 A.3d 1246 (2017) ("The decision of whether to grant interest under § 37-3a is primarily an equitable determination and a matter lying within the discretion of the trial court. . . . Under the abuse of discretion standard of review, [w]e will make every reasonable presumption in favor of upholding the trial court's ruling, and only upset it for a manifest abuse of discretion." (Internal quotation marks omitted.)), *aff'd*, 333 Conn. 60, 214 A.3d 345 (2019).

This matter was tried to the court over the course of three days in January, 2019. In its memorandum of decision, the court found the following facts. "In October, 2014, the defendant entered into a research agreement with the plaintiff, which the defendant's [chief executive officer], Jack Oswald, signed on behalf of the defendant on October 24, 2014. The agreement provided that the plaintiff would provide its research services pursuant to the study protocol and would provide the defendant with a final written report. The agreement

258

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 254

Griffin Hospital v. ISOThrive, LLC

also provided that the plaintiff would invoice the defendant according to the following schedule: 50 percent upon execution of the agreement, 40 percent at the six month mark, and 10 percent upon completion of the study and final report. The defendant was to pay the invoices within thirty days. The parties signed a Supplemental Agreement, effective April 17, 2015, which called for a final budget of \$302,403. The defendant has made payments of \$224,731.40. On December 18, 2015, the plaintiff issued a final invoice to the defendant in the amount of \$68,204.12 [which the defendant declined to pay].”

During the course of their dealings, the parties amended their “agreement to reflect the fact that the defendant had decided to change the study design. The amended agreement was effective March 23, 2015, and signed by Jack Oswald on April 2, 2015. Attached to the amended agreement was a revised protocol, which stated that the study’s purpose was ‘[t]o compare the effects of daily intake of the [defendant’s] supplement [versus] a placebo on the primary outcome measure of body weight and secondary outcome measures (hunger/satiety, health-related measures and self-reported quality of life) in a group of overweight but otherwise healthy adults.’ The revised protocol provided that the study would be of ‘105 overweight men and women in the age range of 18 to 75 years, who are nonsmokers with a body mass index (BMI) \geq 25, and a maximum body weight of 350 pounds (due to limitations of the weight scale). *Individuals with diabetes or hypertension will be included in the study if they are not taking medications with a known potential to interact with ingredients in the supplement.*’”³ (Emphasis in original.)

³ The revised protocol set forth the following exclusion criteria: “Pregnant and/or lactating women”; “Evidence or history of substance or alcohol abuse (include if over [five] years)”]; “History of major depression, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, any type of obsessive-compulsive disorder”; “Current history of migraine headaches (include if controlled with medication)”]; “Current use of any prescription or non-prescription weight loss products”];

211 Conn. App. 254

MARCH, 2022

259

Griffin Hospital v. ISOThrive, LLC

In its decision, the court found that “[i]t is undisputed that the defendant contracted with the plaintiff to perform a clinical trial, and agreed to pay for such services. It is equally undisputed that the defendant failed to pay the final invoice, despite demand from the plaintiff and the fact that the plaintiff sent a final report on February 23, 2016, and a revised final report on July 14, 2016, as required by the contract.” The court awarded the plaintiff \$68,204.12 in contract damages and, in addition, prejudgment interest at the rate of 8 percent on the basis of its finding that the defendant had wrongfully withheld funds from the plaintiff. This appeal followed. Additional facts will be set forth as necessary.

The defendant first argues that the court erred in concluding that the plaintiff was not obligated, under the definitive terms of the revised protocol and amended agreement, to perform any analysis to determine whether certain medications had the potential to interact with the ingredients of the supplement under study. We disagree.

Subsequent to the parties’ initial agreement, they agreed to a revised protocol for the study concerning the characteristics of individuals suitable for the study. The protocol detailed both inclusion and exclusion criteria. At trial, the parties were not in agreement regarding

“Tobacco use”; “Active eating disorder including anorexia nervosa and bulimia”; “Known sensitivity or allergy to any of the ingredients in the product”; “Symptomatic coronary artery disease or congestive heart failure”; “History of a stroke in the past year”; “Symptomatic arrhythmia”; “Uncontrolled hypertension (i.e., systolic pressure >180 mmHg and or diastolic > 100mmHg)”; “History of a seizure in the past [five] years”; “Any cancer in the past [five] years other than non-melanoma skin cancer or in-situ cervical cancer”; “Active or history of inflammatory bowel disease”; “Current use of TNF-alpha inhibitor medications”; “Current use of COX-2 inhibitor medications”; “Current use of JAK inhibitor medications”; “History of weight loss procedures including bariatric surgery”; and “[H]abitual use of probiotic supplements or more than occasional consumption of naturally fermented foods, including probiotics such as kimchi and sauerkraut.”

260

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 254

Griffin Hospital v. ISOThrive, LLC

the terms of this protocol as to the characteristics of potential subjects for inclusion and for exclusion. The court's task, then, was to interpret the relevant provisions of the protocol. In doing so, the court was performing the legal task of contract interpretation. Accordingly, as noted, our review of this claim is plenary.

The relevant provision of the revised protocol states that “[i]ndividuals with diabetes or hypertension will be included in the study if they are not taking medications with a known potential to interact with ingredients in the supplement.” On the basis of our review of the revised protocol, including the provision in question, we agree with the trial court’s conclusion that “[t]he revised protocol did not exclude persons with a current use of antibiotics and the plaintiff was not obligated by the terms of the agreement to undertake any form of analysis to determine whether a medication had a potential to interact with the ingredients of the supplement.”

It is well established that “[a] contract must be construed to effectuate the intent of the parties, which is determined from the language used interpreted in the light of the situation of the parties and the circumstances connected with the transaction.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Poole v. Waterbury*, 266 Conn. 68, 87–88, 831 A.2d 211 (2003). Here, we agree with the trial court’s determination that the language of the revised protocol unambiguously provides that the plaintiff was only required to exclude potential study participants with diabetes or hypertension who were taking medication with a *known* potential to interact with the supplement. Accordingly, the unambiguous language of the parties’ agreement does not support the defendant’s claim that the plaintiff was required to conduct a particular analysis to determine whether a participant’s medication might interact with the defendant’s supplement.

211 Conn. App. 254

MARCH, 2022

261

Griffin Hospital v. ISOThrive, LLC

The defendant next argues that the court erred in concluding that the term “overweight but otherwise healthy” in the revised protocol was unambiguous and governed exclusively by the inclusion and exclusion criteria. This argument is similarly unavailing. On the basis of our review, we determine that the court’s conclusions regarding this claim were legally correct.

Notwithstanding the defendant’s framing of this claim, our review of the court’s memorandum of decision reveals that the court did not conclude that the term “overweight but otherwise healthy” was governed exclusively by the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Rather, the court stated that “[t]he phrase ‘overweight but otherwise healthy’ must be understood in the context of the inclusion and exclusion criteria; the language of the revised protocol makes no sense otherwise.”

When reviewing a court’s determination regarding the ambiguity of an agreement, we reiterate that a “contract must be viewed in its entirety, with each provision read in light of the other provisions . . . and every provision must be given effect if it is possible to do so.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Cruz v. Visual Perceptions, LLC*, 311 Conn. 93, 103, 84 A.3d 828 (2014). Additionally, “the mere fact that the parties advance different interpretations of the language in question does not necessitate a conclusion that the language is ambiguous.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Id.*

Accordingly, on the basis of our review, we agree with the trial court that the language of the revised protocol is clear and unambiguous with respect to the selection of study participants. It sets forth the criteria that, if met, would allow prospective participants to enroll in the study. The revised protocol similarly details the criteria that would exclude a prospective participant from the study. See *State v. Lombardo Bros. Mason Contractors, Inc.*, 307 Conn. 412, 468, 54 A.3d 1005

262 MARCH, 2022 211 Conn. App. 254

Griffin Hospital v. ISOThrive, LLC

(2012) (“[a] court will not torture words to import ambiguity [when] the ordinary meaning leaves no room for ambiguity” (internal quotation marks omitted)).

The defendant also argues that the court erred in concluding that the plaintiff performed the study in accordance with the agreement. Specifically, the defendant argues that the plaintiff did not comply with the agreement because (1) the study participants included individuals who were not “otherwise healthy” and individuals who were taking medication that interacted with the supplement; (2) the number of obese individuals who participated in the study exceeded the agreed to percentage; and (3) the plaintiff failed to produce a written report containing all of the requisite analyses. This claim implicates the court’s fact-finding function.

After our careful review, we conclude that there is ample evidence in the record to support the court’s finding that “the plaintiff performed its obligations under the contract. . . . The fact that the defendant did not obtain the results it wanted from the study does not constitute a breach of contract nor does it negate its obligation to pay the amount due on the final invoice.”

The defendant next argues that the trial court erred in awarding prejudgment interest to the plaintiff pursuant to § 37-3a.⁴ More specifically, the defendant argues that “there existed additional good faith reasons for [the defendant] to refuse to pay the final invoice.”

“The purpose of § 37-3a is to compensate plaintiffs who have been deprived of the use of money wrongfully withheld by defendants. . . . Whether interest may be

⁴ General Statutes § 37-3a (a) provides in relevant part: “Except as provided in sections 37-3b, 37-3c and 52-192a, interest at the rate of ten per cent a year, and no more, may be recovered and allowed in civil actions or arbitration proceedings under chapter 909, including actions to recover money loaned at a greater rate, as damages for the detention of money after it becomes payable. . . .”

211 Conn. App. 254

MARCH, 2022

263

Griffin Hospital v. ISOThrive, LLC

awarded depends on whether the money involved is payable . . . and whether the detention of the money is or is not wrongful under the circumstances.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Riley v. Travelers Home & Marine Ins. Co.*, supra, 173 Conn. App. 461; see also *Ballou v. Law Offices Howard Lee Schiff, P.C.*, 304 Conn. 348, 365, 39 A.3d 1075 (2012) (“under § 37-3a (a), an interest rate of less than 10 percent is presumptively valid, and therefore will be upheld, unless the party challenging the rate set by the court can demonstrate that it represents an abuse of discretion”).

In awarding prejudgment interest, the court first found “that the plaintiff performed its obligations under the contract” and that “[t]he evidence presented at trial, including the facts stipulated to by the parties, clearly establishes that it was the parties’ agreement that the defendant would pay the final invoice within thirty days after receipt of the final report.” The court additionally found that “[t]he plaintiff delivered the Revised Final Report on July 14, 2016,” but “[t]he defendant has refused to pay the invoice, and the evidence establishes that it had no good faith basis for refusing to pay because its argument that the inclusion and exclusion criteria did not specify who could be enrolled in the study in accordance with the Revised Protocol strains credulity.”

On the basis of our review of the procedural history of this matter and the trial court’s findings as set forth in its memorandum of decision, we conclude that the court did not abuse its discretion by awarding prejudgment interest. This is because the record supports the court’s finding that the defendant had no good faith basis to withhold final payment and, therefore, doing so was a wrongful detention of money due under the contract.

The judgment is affirmed.

In this opinion the other judges concurred.

264

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 264

Scient Federal Credit Union v. Rabon

SCIENT FEDERAL CREDIT UNION v.
MARK RABON
(AC 43915)

Bright, C. J., and Elgo and Suarez, Js.

Syllabus

The plaintiff sought to recover damages resulting from the defendant's alleged breach of a credit card agreement. In its complaint, the plaintiff alleged that the defendant applied for and received a credit card by virtue of a credit card agreement, and the defendant defaulted under the terms of that agreement by failing to make the payments agreed to therein. The defendant filed a motion to dismiss on the ground that the trial court lacked personal jurisdiction over him due to insufficient service of process, which the court denied without issuing a memorandum of decision. Thereafter, the plaintiff filed a motion for summary judgment as to liability and damages. The plaintiff appended to the motion an affidavit from H, the director of collections for the plaintiff. H's affidavit stated that as a result of the defendant's credit card application submitted to the plaintiff, the defendant received two credit cards. Attached as exhibits to the affidavit were the defendant's credit card application, credit card disclosure statements, transaction listings for the two accounts, and the credit card agreement that allegedly established the defendant's liability to the plaintiff and the amount of the debt that the defendant owed, \$46,812.08. The defendant opposed the motion for summary judgment, arguing that it differed from the complaint because the complaint referenced only one credit card and underlying agreement, while the motion for summary judgment referenced multiple credit cards with separate debts, along with documents that indicated the existence of separate agreements. The trial court granted the plaintiff's motion for summary judgment and rendered judgment thereon, from which the defendant appealed to this court. *Held:*

1. The trial court properly granted the plaintiff's motion for summary judgment, that court having properly concluded that the plaintiff met its burden to establish the absence of any genuine issue of material fact as to the factual basis for the defendant's liability to the plaintiff and the amount of damages owed: although the defendant argued that the complaint referenced only one credit card agreement and one credit card, the defendant admitted at oral argument before this court that he held two separate accounts with the plaintiff and that the two accounts arose from the same application and, therefore, he failed to establish that there was a genuine issue of material fact with respect to his liability on the two accounts; moreover, because H's affidavit asserted that the plaintiff was owed \$46,812.08, which was also reflected in the attached transaction ledger for each account, and the defendant admitted at

211 Conn. App. 264

MARCH, 2022

265

Scient Federal Credit Union v. Rabon

- oral argument before this court that the total amount of the debt was \$46,812.08, there was no genuine issue of material fact in dispute as to the amount of damages.
2. The trial court properly denied the defendant's motion to dismiss that alleged that the court lacked personal jurisdiction over him due to insufficient service of process: pursuant to the applicable rule of practice (§ 10-30 (b)), a claim of lack of personal jurisdiction as a result of an insufficiency of service of process is waived unless raised by a motion to dismiss filed within thirty days of the filing of an appearance; accordingly, because the defendant filed an appearance and failed to file a motion to dismiss within thirty days of filing his appearance, he waived any right to challenge the court's exercise of personal jurisdiction over him.

Argued January 6—officially released March 15, 2022

Procedural History

Action to recover damages for the breach of a credit card agreement, and for other relief, brought to the Superior Court in the judicial district of New London, where the court, *Hon. James J. Devine*, judge trial referee, denied the defendant's motions to dismiss and to strike; thereafter, the court, *Hon. James J. Devine*, judge trial referee, granted the plaintiff's motion for summary judgment and rendered judgment thereon, from which the defendant appealed to this court. *Affirmed.*

Mark E. Rabon, self-represented, the appellant (defendant).

Kyle R. Barrett, for the appellee (plaintiff).

Opinion

SUAREZ, J. In this action seeking to recover credit card debt, the self-represented defendant, Mark Rabon, appeals from the judgment rendered by the trial court in favor of the plaintiff, Scient Federal Credit Union, following the granting of the plaintiff's motion for summary judgment. The defendant claims that the trial court improperly (1) granted the plaintiff's motion for summary judgment and (2) denied the defendant's

266

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 264

Scient Federal Credit Union v. Rabon

motion to dismiss. We affirm the judgment of the trial court.

The following facts and procedural history are relevant for our resolution of the defendant's claims. The plaintiff initiated this action by a single count complaint, which was dated July 13, 2017. In the complaint, the plaintiff alleged that "[b]y virtue of a Visa credit card agreement, the defendant applied for and received a credit card." The plaintiff further alleged that "[t]he defendant defaulted under the terms of the credit card agreement by failing to make the payments agreed to therein." Finally, the plaintiff alleged that "the defendant has failed and refused to satisfy the debt owed to the plaintiff" and that, "[a]s a result of the defendant's conduct, the plaintiff has been damaged."

Following the commencement of the present case, the defendant filed a motion to dismiss and a supporting memorandum of law on March 8, 2018. The defendant moved to dismiss this action on the ground that the court lacked personal jurisdiction over him due to insufficient service of process.¹ The plaintiff filed an objection to the motion to dismiss on April 18, 2018. The court, *Hon. James J. Devine*, judge trial referee, denied the motion to dismiss on May 1, 2018, and sustained the plaintiff's objection to the motion on the same day without issuing a memorandum of decision.

On September 27, 2018, the defendant filed a motion to strike, to which the plaintiff objected. In his motion to strike, the defendant alleged that "[t]he complaint [did] not properly plead facts with enough specificity" and that "[t]he complaint [alleged] conclusions that

¹ The defendant makes several arguments as to why the service of process was insufficient in the present case. Because we conclude that the court's denial of the defendant's motion to dismiss was proper on the basis of the untimeliness of the motion, it is unnecessary for us to address the merits of the defendant's claims with respect to improper service of process.

211 Conn. App. 264

MARCH, 2022

267

Scient Federal Credit Union v. Rabon

[were] unsupported by the facts alleged.” The court, *Hon. James J. Devine*, judge trial referee, sustained the plaintiff’s objection to the motion on February 4, 2019, and the motion was denied on February 6, 2019.

On May 30, 2019, the plaintiff filed a motion for summary judgment claiming that no genuine issues of material fact existed and that it was entitled to judgment as a matter of law as to both liability and damages. In support of its motion for summary judgment, the plaintiff submitted the affidavit of Irvine Hagewood, the director of collections for the plaintiff. The affidavit stated that the defendant submitted a “Loanliner Visa credit card application” to the plaintiff and, as a result of that application, the defendant received two credit cards. The plaintiff extended the credit accounts to the defendant on or about April 4, 2013. The defendant thereafter defaulted on the accounts by failing to pay the amounts that were due under the agreement. The affidavit further stated that the defendant was indebted to the plaintiff in the total amount of \$46,812.08.² The affidavit provided that the defendant had failed to pay the plaintiff the balance due, which constituted the outstanding balances under both accounts. The plaintiff attached to its affidavit several exhibits, including the defendant’s application, credit card disclosure statements, transaction listings for the two accounts, and the credit card agreement.

In its memorandum of law in support of the motion for summary judgment, the plaintiff argued that, because “the defendant has raised no special defenses and the plaintiff’s affidavit in support of summary judgment establishes the defendant’s liability to the plaintiff and the amount of damages owed, summary judgment

² Although not specified in the affidavit, the plaintiff’s memorandum in support of the motion for summary judgment clarifies that the defendant owed \$26,655.04 on one credit account and \$20,157.04 on the other credit account, which totaled \$46,812.08 in debt.

268

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 264

Scient Federal Credit Union v. Rabon

is proper as there are no genuine issues of material fact left in dispute and the plaintiff is entitled to judgment as a matter of law.”

On November 12, 2019, the defendant filed his objection to the motion and a memorandum in opposition to the motion for summary judgment. In the memorandum, the defendant argued that genuine issues of material fact existed for several reasons. The defendant asserted that the plaintiff’s complaint referenced only one credit card agreement that had been breached and indicated that the defendant had received only one credit card. Although not stated in the complaint, the plaintiff’s memorandum of law in support of the motion for summary judgment asserted that the total amount of damages being sought reflected a combination of debts from two separate credit card accounts. The defendant also asserted in an affidavit, which was filed with his objection to the motion for summary judgment, that he received more than one credit card from the plaintiff. The defendant’s memorandum further asserted that both the plaintiff’s complaint and Hagewood’s affidavit failed to identify which credit card agreement had been breached. The defendant argued that the motion for summary judgment and the complaint “stand in stark contradiction” because the complaint referenced only one credit card and underlying agreement, while the motion for summary judgment referenced multiple credit cards with separate debts, along with documents indicating the existence of separate agreements.³

³ In this regard, the defendant essentially argued before the trial court and argues before this court that the allegations in the complaint do not align with the relief requested in the plaintiff’s motion for summary judgment. The defendant, however, did not file a request to revise to clarify the allegations in the complaint. Moreover, although the defendant focuses on the fact that the complaint references a single credit card, the uncontroverted evidence presented by the plaintiff in support of its motion for summary judgment reflects that it sought in its complaint to recover balances incurred by him by the use of two separate credit cards, which the defendant received after he filed a single application.

211 Conn. App. 264

MARCH, 2022

269

Scient Federal Credit Union v. Rabon

Despite raising these arguments, the defendant admitted in his affidavit, and he does not dispute on appeal, that he held multiple credit card accounts with the plaintiff. In his memorandum in opposition to the motion for summary judgment, the defendant also admitted that he owed the total amount being sought of \$46,812.08, and that this amount reflected the combined balance of multiple credit cards.⁴

On November 12, 2019, the court, *Calmar, J.*, ordered the defendant to refile his memorandum because it contained personal identifying information. The memorandum was refiled with redactions but without substantive changes on November 21, 2019. Prior to the defendant's refiling of the memorandum, on November 15, 2019, the court, *Hon. James J. Devine*, judge trial referee, granted the plaintiff's motion for summary judgment. The defendant filed a motion to reargue on November 21, 2019, which the court denied on January 22, 2020. The defendant also filed a motion for articulation on November 21, 2019, which the court denied on January 22, 2020.

The defendant filed the present appeal on February 10, 2020. Subsequent to filing this appeal, the defendant moved for the court to issue a written decision pursuant to Practice Book § 64-1, and the court issued its memorandum of decision on February 25, 2020. In its memorandum of decision, the court stated that, because the "defendant has raised no special defenses and the plaintiff's affidavit in support of summary judgment establishes the defendant's liability to the plaintiff and the amount of damages owed, summary judgment is proper

⁴ During oral argument before this court, the defendant once again acknowledged that he did in fact hold two separate accounts at the plaintiff, which were created simultaneously following the plaintiff's approval of the defendant's single application. The defendant also acknowledged at oral argument that he owed \$46,812.08 on the two accounts, which was the same amount that the plaintiff claimed in damages related to the accounts.

270

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 264

Scient Federal Credit Union *v.* Rabon

as there are no genuine issues of material fact left in dispute and the plaintiff is entitled to judgment as a matter of law.” This appeal followed.

I

The defendant first claims that the trial court improperly granted the plaintiff’s motion for summary judgment. Specifically, the defendant claims that he demonstrated that there were genuine issues of material fact in dispute and, therefore, the court should not have granted the plaintiff’s motion. Because the record establishes that there was no genuine issue of material fact as to whether the defendant applied for and received two separate credit accounts from the plaintiff by virtue of a single application or as to the total amount of the debt that the defendant owed on the two accounts, we conclude that the court properly granted the plaintiff’s motion for summary judgment.

We now set forth the legal principles and standard of review relevant to this claim. “The fundamental purpose of summary judgment is preventing unnecessary trials. . . . If a [party] is unable to present sufficient evidence in support of an essential element of his cause of action at trial, he cannot prevail as a matter of law. . . . To avert these types of ill-fated cases from advancing to trial, following adequate time for discovery, a [party] may properly be called upon at the summary judgment stage to demonstrate that he possesses sufficient counterevidence to raise a genuine issue of material fact as to any, or even all, of the essential elements of his cause of action. . . .

“Practice Book § [17-49] provides that summary judgment shall be rendered forthwith if the pleadings, affidavits and any other proof submitted show that there is no genuine issue as to any material fact and that the moving party is entitled to judgment as a matter of law. . . . In deciding a motion for summary judgment, the

211 Conn. App. 264

MARCH, 2022

271

Scient Federal Credit Union v. Rabon

trial court must view the evidence in the light most favorable to the nonmoving party. . . . The party seeking summary judgment has the burden of showing the absence of any genuine issue [of] material facts which, under applicable principles of substantive law, entitle him to a judgment as a matter of law . . . and the party opposing such a motion must provide an evidentiary foundation to demonstrate the existence of a genuine issue of material fact. . . .

“It is not enough . . . for the opposing party merely to assert the existence of such a disputed issue. Mere assertions of fact . . . are insufficient to establish the existence of a material fact and, therefore, cannot refute evidence properly presented to the court. . . . [T]ypically [d]emonstrating a genuine issue requires a showing of evidentiary facts or substantial evidence outside the pleadings from which material facts alleged in the pleadings can be warrantably inferred. . . . Only if the . . . moving party has submitted no evidentiary proof to rebut the allegations in the complaint, or the proof submitted fails to call those allegations into question, may the [nonmoving party] rest upon factual allegations alone. . . .

“[I]ssue-finding, rather than issue-determination, is the key to the procedure. . . . [T]he trial court does not sit as the trier of fact when ruling on a motion for summary judgment. . . . [Its] function is not to decide issues of material fact, but rather to determine whether any such issues exist. . . . Our review of the decision to grant a motion for summary judgment is plenary. . . . We therefore must decide whether the court’s conclusions were legally and logically correct and find support in the record.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Carolina Casualty Ins. Co. v. Connecticut Solid Surface, LLC*, 207 Conn. App. 525, 532–33, 262 A.3d 885 (2021).

272

MARCH, 2022

211 Conn. App. 264

Scient Federal Credit Union v. Rabon

The plaintiff's complaint sounds in breach of contract. "The elements of a breach of contract action are the formation of an agreement, performance by one party, breach of the agreement by the other party and damages." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *American Express Centurion Bank v. Head*, 115 Conn. App. 10, 15–16, 971 A.2d 90 (2009).

We first conclude that there was no genuine issue of material fact in dispute as to whether the defendant was liable to the plaintiff for breaching his contract with respect to two separate credit accounts. As noted previously in this opinion, the plaintiff submitted with its motion for summary judgment an affidavit prepared by Hagewood, which stated that the defendant became indebted to the plaintiff by virtue of a credit card application in which the defendant applied for two credit cards. Following the defendant's submission of the application, the plaintiff and the defendant entered into an agreement, and the plaintiff then extended the two credit accounts to the defendant. The defendant subsequently defaulted under the accounts and has failed to pay the balance due, which totals \$46,812.08. On the basis of these facts, the plaintiff has established the defendant's liability as to the two credit accounts.

Moreover, the defendant did not allege any defense to liability or otherwise establish any genuine issue of material fact that would eliminate his obligation to satisfy the debt claimed by the plaintiff. Although the defendant argues that the complaint referenced only one credit card agreement and one credit card, the defendant admitted at oral argument that he did in fact hold two separate accounts with the plaintiff and that the two accounts arose from the same application. Despite the defendant's argument that the complaint only references the breach of a singular credit card agreement, it is clear that both of the defendant's

211 Conn. App. 264

MARCH, 2022

273

Scient Federal Credit Union v. Rabon

accounts arose from that same application and agreement. We therefore conclude that the defendant has not raised a genuine issue of material fact with respect to his liability on the two credit accounts.

We also determine that there is no genuine issue of material fact in dispute as to the plaintiff's damages. Hagewood's affidavit asserts that the plaintiff is owed \$46,812.08 related to the agreement. Specifically, the defendant owed the plaintiff \$26,655.04 on one account and \$20,157.04 on the other account, which totaled \$46,812.08. The amounts of the debts were reflected on the true and accurate copies of the transaction ledger for each account. Before the trial court, the defendant never disputed the total amount of the debt. In fact, the defendant admitted at oral argument before this court that the total amount of the debt was \$46,812.08. Accordingly, we conclude that there is no genuine issue of material fact in dispute as to the amount of damages. The court's conclusion that there was no genuine issue of material fact and that the plaintiff was entitled to summary judgment as a matter of law was therefore logically and legally correct.

II

The defendant also claims that the trial court improperly denied his motion to dismiss. We disagree.

We begin by setting forth the legal principles and standard of review relevant to this claim. "A motion to dismiss . . . properly attacks the jurisdiction of the court, essentially asserting that the plaintiff cannot as a matter of law and fact state a cause of action that should be heard by the court. . . . A motion to dismiss tests, inter alia, whether, on the face of the record, the court is without jurisdiction." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Beecher v. Mohegan Tribe of Indians of Connecticut*, 282 Conn. 130, 134, 918 A.2d 880 (2007).

274 MARCH, 2022 211 Conn. App. 264

Scient Federal Credit Union v. Rabon

“A defect in process . . . implicates personal jurisdiction [W]hen a particular method of serving process is set forth by statute, that method must be followed. . . . Unless service of process is made as the statute prescribes, the court to which it is returnable does not acquire jurisdiction.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Pedro v. Miller*, 281 Conn. 112, 117, 914 A.2d 524 (2007).

“[T]he Superior Court . . . may exercise jurisdiction over a person only if that person has been properly served with process, has consented to the jurisdiction of the court or has waived any objection to the court’s exercise of personal jurisdiction. . . . Accordingly, jurisdiction over a person can be obtained by waiver.” (Citation omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Foster v. Smith*, 91 Conn. App. 528, 536, 881 A.2d 497 (2005). Practice Book § 10-30 (b), which governs motions to dismiss, provides that “[a]ny defendant, wishing to contest the court’s jurisdiction, shall do so by filing a motion to dismiss *within thirty days of the filing of an appearance.*” (Emphasis added.) As our Supreme Court has explained, § 10-30 (b) “specifically and unambiguously provides that any claim of lack of jurisdiction over the person as a result of an insufficiency of service of process is waived unless it is raised by a motion to dismiss filed within thirty days Thus, thirty-one days after the filing of an appearance . . . a party is deemed to have submitted to the jurisdiction of the court. Any claim of insufficiency of process is waived if not sooner raised.” (Citation omitted; emphasis omitted; footnote omitted.) *Pitchell v. Hartford*, 247 Conn. 422, 433, 722 A.2d 797 (1999).

In the present case, the defendant filed a self-represented appearance on January 16, 2018. The defendant’s motion to dismiss was not filed until March 8, 2018, which was fifty-one days after the defendant filed his

211 Conn. App. 264

MARCH, 2022

275

Scient Federal Credit Union v. Rabon

appearance in the present matter. The defendant, therefore, has waived any potential defects in the court's personal jurisdiction over him. Considering the untimeliness of the defendant's motion to dismiss, it is unnecessary for this court to examine the merits of the defendant's argument with respect to any improper service of process. Because the defendant filed his motion to dismiss more than thirty days after he filed an appearance, the defendant had submitted to the jurisdiction of the court. The defendant's motion to dismiss was untimely and, therefore, we conclude that the court properly denied the motion.

The judgment is affirmed.

In this opinion the other judges concurred.
