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STATE OF CONNECTICUT *v.* CESAR A. OLIVERO
(AC 42991)

Cradle, Suarez and Harper, Js.

Syllabus

Convicted, after a jury trial, of the crime of assault in the first degree in connection with his attack on H with a handsaw, the defendant appealed to this court. The defendant lived in a condominium owned by K, with whom the defendant had a relationship. Approximately two weeks before the assault on H, the relationship between the defendant and K became strained and the defendant began staying with his mother. However, the defendant retained keys to the condominium, kept personal belongings there, and went to and from the condominium at will. The night prior to the assault, in a series of text messages between K and the defendant, K asked the defendant to return his keys and indicated to him that he was no longer allowed to live there. The next night, K went out for dinner and drinks with H, an acquaintance she met a few months earlier and with whom she had exchanged text messages. They returned to the condominium so H could wait for his car service. H and K were unaware that the defendant was in the condominium. When H exited the bathroom in the condominium, the defendant attacked him with a handsaw, severely injuring him. The defendant was charged with assault in the first degree, burglary in the first degree, and home invasion. Prior to trial, the court denied the defendant's request to present the testimony of K and himself in support of his motion to dismiss the charges of burglary in the first degree and home invasion. The trial court denied the motion to dismiss. At trial, the jury was unable to reach a unanimous verdict on the first degree burglary and home invasion charges and the court declared a mistrial as to those charges. *Held:*

1. The trial court properly denied the defendant's pretrial motion to dismiss the first degree burglary and home invasion charges: contrary to the defendant's claim that there was insufficient evidence to establish that the defendant had unlawfully entered or remained in the condominium, the proffered proof, viewed in the light most favorable to the state, warranted a person of reasonable caution to believe that the defendant unlawfully entered the condominium, as required for a conviction of first degree burglary and home invasion; moreover, a fact finder could reasonably find that whatever privilege the defendant previously held to enter K's condominium was expressly and clearly revoked by K on the day prior to the incident via the text messages she sent to the defendant in which she asked him to return his keys and informed him that he did not live there anymore; furthermore, although the defendant claimed that he retained his privilege to enter the condominium because, inter alia, he still had keys to the condominium and kept his personal

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- belongings there, the text messages sent by K on the day prior to the incident illustrated that the defendant was no longer permitted to enter the condominium, and it was undisputed that he entered it on the night of the incident.
2. The trial court did not abuse its discretion in denying the defendant's requests to present testimony in support of his pretrial motion to dismiss the first degree burglary and home invasion charges because there was no factual dispute between the defendant and the state to warrant the evidentiary testimony of the defendant and K: it was clear from the parties' representations at the hearing on the motion that they agreed on 95 percent of the relevant factual predicate to the defendant's motion, which claimed that the facts themselves were insufficient to support the first degree burglary and home invasion charges against the defendant; moreover, because defense counsel provided a full and detailed proffer of the testimony he requested to present, which the state mostly accepted as true, a full evidentiary hearing to iterate those same facts would have been superfluous; furthermore, the defendant did not identify on appeal, how, if at all, his testimony or the testimony of K would have supplemented or been different from the proffer articulated by defense counsel, and therefore, the defendant failed to demonstrate that, even if the court's ruling was incorrect, he was harmed by the ruling.
 3. The defendant could not prevail on his unpreserved claim that the trial court judge improperly failed to disqualify himself from presiding over the defendant's trial because the judge was actually biased against him on the basis of the judge's use of the term "victim" to refer to H in various pretrial hearings and because the judge's denial of his motion to dismiss established the appearance of bias: the judge's use of the term "victim" in pretrial hearings did not objectively establish that he was actually biased against the defendant so as to constitute a due process violation depriving the defendant of a fair trial, the judge's reference to H as "victim" was not critical or hostile to the defendant, as the judge used the term victim merely to identify H, who indisputably sustained significant physical injuries as a result of the defendant's conduct, the judge did not refer to H as a victim in front of the jury, and the judge's use of the term did not establish that he had predetermined the defendant's guilt prior to the start of trial, nor did it reflect on the strength of the state's case or the defendant's claim of self-defense; moreover, the judge's use of the term could not support a claim of actual bias as the term was not derived from an extrajudicial source, but from judicial proceedings, and did not reveal a high degree of antagonism so as to make a fair judgment impossible, and the defendant cited no conduct by the judge during the trial that suggested that he conducted the trial in a way that was biased against the defendant; furthermore, this court declined to review the defendant's unpreserved claim that the judge's denial of his motion to dismiss was sufficient to establish

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- the appearance of bias because a claim of judicial bias based solely on the appearance of partiality was not of constitutional dimension.
4. The defendant could not prevail on his unpreserved claim that the trial court violated his confrontation clause rights by improperly restricting his ability to cross-examine H concerning the content of text messages between H and K in an effort to impeach H's credibility: the defendant, through his defense counsel, abandoned his effort to question H regarding the content of the text messages at trial and, thus, waived his appellate claim; the record sufficiently demonstrated that, although the trial court had granted the state's motion in limine, without prejudice, to preclude the defendant from questioning H as to the content of the messages, defense counsel, at trial, outside the presence of the jury, expressed an intention to question H on the content of those messages, but, the next day, stated that he no longer sought to question H in that regard, and, instead, expressed his intention to question H regarding the volume of the messages, which the trial court permitted, and, ultimately, defense counsel never attempted to question H as to the content of the text messages.
 5. The defendant could not prevail on his claim that the prosecutor's use of the term "victim" approximately fourteen times during the evidentiary portion of the trial and in closing argument constituted prosecutorial impropriety that deprived him of his constitutional right to a fair trial: the prosecutor's use of the term "victim" to refer to H was not sufficiently prevalent and chronic so as to be improper, as the number of instances the term was used was not sufficiently excessive in light of the length of the trial, which lasted six days and culminated in approximately 900 pages of transcript, the majority of the prosecutor's use of the term during the evidentiary portion of the trial occurred after witnesses used it for the first time, and the one time defense counsel objected to the prosecutor's use of the term victim, the court sustained the objection, the prosecutor rephrased the question and the prosecutor did not use the term throughout the remaining three days of evidence; moreover, even if this court were to assume that each of these uses of the term "victim" by the prosecutor was improper, the defendant failed to satisfy his burden of demonstrating that those improprieties were so egregious as to amount to a denial of due process, this court having concluded, after applying the factors set forth in *State v. Williams* (204 Conn. 523), that the alleged improprieties did not deprive the defendant of a fair trial because, although the alleged improprieties were not invited by defense counsel and no curative instructions were adopted by the trial court, and, although the term victim was central to the critical issue of the case, which was whether H was the victim of assault or an intruder, which supported the defendant's claim of self-defense, the use of the term was infrequent when compared to the length of the trial, the trial court repeatedly instructed the jury during various parts of trial that counsel's arguments did not constitute evidence, that the jurors were the

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sole arbiters of credibility, and that the jurors must confine themselves to the evidence in the record, the state's case was strong because there was an abundance of evidence that supported the charge of first degree assault, and, finally, although the jury deliberated for five days, their deadlock was on the unlawful entry element of the first degree burglary and home invasion charges, not on the assault charge.

Argued September 7, 2022—officially released May 30, 2023

Procedural History

Substitute information charging the defendant with the crimes of assault in the first degree, burglary in the first degree, and home invasion, brought to the Superior Court in the judicial district of Stamford-Norwalk, where the court, *White, J.*, denied the defendant's motion to dismiss the charges of burglary in the first degree and home invasion; thereafter, the matter was tried to the jury before *White, J.*; verdict of guilty of assault in the first degree; subsequently, the court declared a mistrial as to the charges of burglary in the first degree and home invasion; judgment of guilty, from which the defendant appealed to this court. *Affirmed.*

Peter G. Billings, assigned counsel, for the appellant (defendant).

Denise B. Smoker, senior assistant state's attorney, with whom, on the brief, was *Paul J. Ferencek*, state's attorney, for the appellee (state).

Opinion

HARPER, J. The defendant, Cesar A. Olivero, appeals from the judgment of conviction, rendered after a jury trial, of assault in the first degree in violation of General Statutes § 53a-59 (a) (1).¹ On appeal, the defendant claims that (1) the trial court incorrectly denied his

¹ As subsequently explained, the defendant also was tried on the charges of burglary in the first degree in violation of General Statutes § 53a-101 (a) (2), and home invasion in violation of General Statutes § 53a-100aa (a) (2). The court declared a mistrial on those two charges after the jury was unable to reach a unanimous verdict.

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pretrial motion to dismiss the charges of first degree burglary and home invasion, (2) the trial court abused its discretion by denying his requests to present testimony in support of his pretrial motion to dismiss, (3) the trial judge, *White, J.*, improperly failed, sua sponte, to disqualify himself from presiding over the defendant's jury trial because Judge White previously had denied the defendant's motion to dismiss and used the term "victim" in various pretrial hearings, (4) the trial court improperly restricted his ability to cross-examine the victim concerning the content of certain text messages, and (5) the prosecutor's use of the term "victim" during the trial and in closing argument deprived him of his constitutional right to a fair trial.² We affirm the judgment of the trial court.

The following facts, which the jury reasonably could have found, and procedural history are relevant to this appeal. The defendant began a relationship with K³ sometime around 2011, and they have one minor child together, born in 2014.⁴ In 2014, the defendant and K moved into K's condominium located in Stamford. On June 14, 2015, two weeks prior to the incident, the defendant and K had a heated argument, which caused them to take a "break" from their relationship. The defendant consequently left K's condominium to reside with his mother in Manhattan.

Also in the spring of 2015, K was seeking employment at a peer-to-peer networking company that employed

² For ease of discussion, we address the defendant's claims in a different order than they are presented in his principal appellate brief.

³ In accordance with federal law; see 18 U.S.C. § 2265 (d) (3) (2018), as amended by the Violence Against Women Act Reauthorization Act of 2022, Pub. L. No. 117-103, § 106, 136 Stat. 49, 851; we decline to identify any person protected or sought to be protected under a protection order, protective order, or a restraining order that was issued or applied for, or others through whom that person's identity may be ascertained.

⁴ At the time of trial in November, 2017, the defendant and K were engaged to be married.

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the victim, Alejandro Herrera. Herrera interviewed K for the position, but the company did not hire her. Nevertheless, Herrera and K stayed in touch via email, and Herrera attempted to help K with other professional opportunities. Although initially their emails were professional, the two then began exchanging text messages that were friendly and social. Then their text messages became, as Herrera described at trial, “fun,” “a little flirty,” and “racy,” which was “inappropriate” because Herrera was married with four children.

On June 25, 2015, the night of the incident, Herrera and K met for dinner at a restaurant in White Plains, New York, at approximately 6 p.m. K informed the defendant that she was going out with her friends, and she did not tell the defendant that she was going to dinner with Herrera because he was married. K asked the defendant to watch their child, but the defendant told her that he could not. Herrera took the train and a cab from his residence in New Jersey to the restaurant, and he had scheduled a car service to pick him up at 8:30 p.m. because they were planning on having a few drinks and his license was suspended in New York due to a pending charge for driving under the influence (DUI). After dinner, Herrera learned that the car service he had scheduled was stuck in traffic in New York, so he and K went to a few more bars in the area. At approximately 10 p.m., K invited Herrera to her condominium so that he could wait for his car service.

On the drive to K’s condominium, the defendant repeatedly called K’s cell phone. K answered one of the defendant’s calls and she told the defendant that she was getting ready to go to bed. After the call ended, the defendant sent K several text messages accusing her of not being home because it sounded to him like K was not indoors and that she was wide awake. The defendant also texted K: “Your very selfish, what goes

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around comes around,” and “[l]augh now, cry later & I won’t feel sorry this time.”

K and Herrera then arrived at K’s condominium, and they parked in the garage on the first floor. Herrera asked to use the bathroom, and K walked with him up the staircase from the garage to the bathroom that was located just at the top of the stairs on the second floor. Herrera used the bathroom for approximately two minutes, and during that time he heard sounds in the condominium that were “indicative of like dishes and water running and like . . . kitchen sounds.” Herrera then took one or two steps outside of the bathroom and noticed a light coming from inside the kitchen area, and he could not see K. K asked Herrera if he wanted a drink, which he declined.

K suddenly screamed, “Cesar, no,” and Herrera heard a crashing sound that he described at trial as resembling “if somebody had pushed somebody over or knocked somebody over banging and clanking sound.” Herrera then felt a violent impact on the top of his head from behind, which caused him to see stars and to buckle. Herrera turned to see the defendant standing in the dark holding a fifteen inch handsaw. The defendant rushed at Herrera and swung the saw with “all his force” and “like a crazy person,” hitting Herrera multiple times on the head, face, left shoulder, and hands. While swinging the saw, the defendant shouted, “[t]his is what you get, this is what you get, this is what you get for fucking my girlfriend.” Herrera attempted to evade the saw, and to grab the saw, but his hands were “cut in pieces.” After three or four minutes, Herrera and the defendant ended up in the kitchen area where the defendant struck the light in the kitchen with the saw, causing glass to shatter everywhere. The defendant eventually dropped the saw, and Herrera, at trial, stated that it was like the defendant “snapped out of a trance, like, it just was like a different person.”

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K then called 911 and reported that the defendant had attacked Herrera with a saw. Shortly thereafter, Stamford police officers, including Officer William Mercado and Officer Neals Mira, arrived at the scene and K informed them that her former boyfriend was inside and that he had attacked Herrera with a saw. The police officers apprehended the defendant at the bottom of the stairs to the garage, and they then proceeded up the stairs to find Herrera, who was covered in blood, sitting in a chair in the kitchen. They observed blood on the walls and on the floor of the kitchen, broken glass on the floor, and a bloody handsaw on the table in the dining room. Emergency medical personnel transported Herrera to Stamford Hospital, and he was later transferred to Westchester Medical Center to obtain medical treatment from a hand specialist. Herrera suffered severe injuries and lacerations to his upper body area, arms, head, face, and hands, which required staples, stitches, and five surgeries. Herrera sustained permanent scars, continues to suffer from pain, and he has lost the use of most of the fingers on his right hand.

The defendant subsequently was charged, by way of the state's October 23, 2017 information, with assault in the first degree in violation of § 53a-59 (a) (1), burglary in the first degree in violation of General Statutes § 53a-101 (a) (2), and home invasion in violation of General Statutes § 53a-100aa (a) (2). Following a jury trial on these charges, and five days of jury deliberations, the defendant was found guilty only on the assault charge, and the jury was unable to reach a unanimous verdict on the first degree burglary and home invasion charges. Consequently, the court declared a mistrial as to the first degree burglary and home invasion charges. The court sentenced the defendant to fourteen years of incarceration followed by six years of special parole. This appeal followed. Additional facts and procedural history will be set forth as necessary.

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I

The defendant first claims that the court incorrectly denied his pretrial motion to dismiss the first degree burglary and home invasion charges. The defendant argues that the state failed to establish sufficient probable cause for an essential element common to both the first degree burglary and home invasion charges, specifically, that the defendant “enter[ed] or remain[ed] unlawfully” in K’s condominium.⁵ See General Statutes §§ 53a-101 (a) (2) and 53a-100aa (a) (2). We disagree.

We first set forth the undisputed facts and procedural history relevant to our resolution of this claim. On August 7, 2017, the state filed an information charging the defendant with three counts: assault in the first degree in violation of § 53a-59 (a) (1) (count one); burglary in the first degree in violation of § 53a-101 (a) (3) (count two); and home invasion in violation of § 53a-100aa (a) (2) (count three). Relevantly, in count two, the state charged the defendant with unlawfully entering or remaining in a building at night with the intent to commit a crime therein, to wit: assault, in violation of § 53a-101 (a) (3). In count three, the state charged the defendant with unlawfully entering or remaining in a

⁵ This court sua sponte raised at oral argument the issue of whether the defendant’s claim that the court incorrectly denied his motion to dismiss the first degree burglary and home invasion charges was moot because a mistrial was entered on those counts. In response, both parties contended that this claim was not moot. An appeal from the denial of a motion to dismiss may become moot if the state’s ability to recharge the defendant has been foreclosed, for instance, if the original charges were nolle and the statute of limitations had expired; see *State v. Owen*, 331 Conn. 658, 664 n.5, 207 A.3d 17 (2019); *State v. Williams*, 106 Conn. App. 323, 327, 941 A.2d 985, cert. denied, 287 Conn. 908, 950 A.2d 1287 (2008), cert. denied, 556 U.S. 1153, 129 S. Ct. 1683, 173 L. Ed. 2d 1038 (2009); or if the jury finds the defendant guilty of the charges. See *State v. Ward*, 306 Conn. 698, 713, 52 A.3d 591 (2012). Neither of these circumstances are present here because the state, as it represented at oral argument before this court, has the ability to recharge the defendant with first degree burglary and home invasion. Therefore, we agree with the parties that the defendant’s claim is not moot.

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dwelling, with the intent to commit a crime therein, to wit: assault, while a person other than a participant in the crime was actually present in such dwelling, and, in the course of committing the home invasion, was armed with a dangerous instrument, in violation of § 53a-100aa (a) (2).⁶

On September 21, 2016, the defendant, pursuant to Practice Book § 41-8 (5), filed a motion to dismiss the first degree burglary and home invasion charges against him on the ground that there was insufficient evidence to support those charges. In his memorandum of law in support of his motion to dismiss, the defendant maintained that a common essential element of both the first degree burglary charge pursuant to § 53a-101 and the home invasion charge pursuant to § 53a-100aa was that he “unlawfully” entered and remained in a dwelling. The defendant argued that he lawfully entered and remained in K’s condominium at the time of the incident because he previously had resided there, had a key to the condominium, received mail at the condominium, kept his clothing at the condominium, prepared meals at the condominium, and assisted in providing care for their minor child at the condominium. The defendant attached to his motion screenshots of a series of text messages between K and the defendant on the day prior to the incident. In those messages, K twice asked the defendant to “leave” his set of keys to her condominium, to which the defendant responded, “[i]ts not necessary” and “[w]hy would you want me to leave the keys

⁶ We pause to resolve a discrepancy stemming from the August 7, 2017 information and the October 23, 2017 information. As noted previously, count two of the August 7, 2017 information charged the defendant with a violation of § 53a-101 (a) (3), whereas count two of the October 23, 2017 information charged the defendant with a violation of § 53a-101 (a) (2). The August 7, 2017 information was operative for purposes of the defendant’s motion to dismiss, and, despite the parties’ representations in their appellate briefs to the contrary, it is apparent from the record that the October 23, 2017 information was operative for purposes of trial.

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I still live here?” K responded, “[n]o u don’t. Leave them please.” The defendant then asked, “[s]o you don’t want me here?” K answered, “[n]o. U need to get your shit together. I’m done babysitting.”

On August 14, 2017, the court held a hearing on the defendant’s motion to dismiss. At the outset of the hearing, the court stated that the parties in chambers had “essentially agreed” on the factual predicate of the defendant’s motion to dismiss and, thus, the court requested that the parties “make those representations on the record.” Defense counsel agreed with the court’s account, and he stated that the parties “were able to agree to about probably 95 percent of the chronology.” The court then summarized its understanding of the parties’ agreed upon facts as follows: “[K] and the defendant . . . were in a relationship for about a period of five years. They lived together . . . in Stamford. The two had a child together. They had a somewhat volatile relationship. They broke up about two weeks prior to this incident. The . . . address is a condo[minimum] owned by [K]. That the defendant moved out of that address and was living in New York with his mother. And a specific address was mentioned. And the claim is that the defendant was in and out of the [condominium] during this two week period. He still had a key to the [condominium]. And the claim is that, I guess, a day before this incident there was an exchange of text messages between the defendant and [K], and in that exchange [K] asked this defendant to return the house key. And he never did.”

Defense counsel responded that the court’s recitation was “correct,” but “incomplete.” Defense counsel thus made a series of requests to present to the court the testimony of K and the defendant, which he represented was necessary for context. The court did not initially rule on the defendant’s requests to present testimony but, instead, invited defense counsel to make a proffer

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as to the substance of the testimony he intended to present. Defense counsel then described the expected testimony of K and the defendant as follows. The relationship between the defendant and K began ten years prior to the incident, and they had been cohabitating at three separate addresses for five years prior to the incident. Five days prior to the incident and the day prior to the incident, the defendant visited the condominium to visit with K, their minor child, K's family, and his friend, and, on those occasions, the defendant "came and went from the apartment . . . on his own."⁷ Stored throughout the condominium were the defendant's personal belongings, including his clothes, computer, books and records, music equipment, and a sofa bed. During the two weeks prior to the incident, the defendant slept on the sofa at his mother's apartment in Manhattan, and he returned to K's condominium "of his own free will" for changes of clothing, laundry, and to pick up and drop off his personal belongings. At some uncertain point during those same two weeks, K invited the defendant "to come back into" the condominium.

In response, the state represented that it did not dispute "most" of defense counsel's proffer, and, more specifically, that it did not dispute what happened in the two weeks prior to the incident, the day before the incident, or the fact that the defendant's clothes remained at the condominium. The state's argument instead focused on the events just prior to the incident,

⁷ It is unclear from the record whether K's text messages to the defendant—in which K requested that the defendant return his keys and instructed him that he no longer lived there—occurred prior to, during, or after the defendant's visit to the condominium with K's family on the day before the crime. Viewing the evidence in the light most favorable to the state, as we are required to do when reviewing a court's decision on a pretrial motion to dismiss; *State v. Pelella*, 327 Conn. 1, 18–19, 22 n.17, 170 A.3d 647 (2017); we will assume for purposes of our analysis that the text messages occurred after the defendant had left the condominium that day.

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including K's text messages to the defendant on the day prior to the incident in which K, the owner of the condominium, clearly communicated to the defendant that he should return his keys and that he no longer lived at the condominium.

After hearing both parties' arguments as to whether the agreed upon facts were sufficient to support the first degree burglary and home invasion charges, the court orally denied the defendant's motion to dismiss. The court reasoned that, even crediting the entirety of the defendant's proffer, there was sufficient evidence to support the conclusion that the defendant unlawfully entered and remained in K's condominium on the night of the incident, so as to warrant presenting that question of fact to the jury. The court also did not permit the defendant to present testimony, reasoning that there was no "real dispute between the state and the defense" as to the facts.⁸

We next set forth the standard of review and relevant legal principles governing our review of this claim. "The standard to be applied in determining whether the state can satisfy this burden in the context of a pretrial motion to dismiss under General Statutes § 54-56⁹ and Practice Book § 41-8 (5)¹⁰ is no different from the standard applied to other claims of evidentiary sufficiency.

⁸ After the state rested its case at trial, defense counsel orally moved to dismiss the first degree burglary and home invasion charges on the same ground. The court denied defense counsel's oral motion. On appeal, the defendant does not challenge the propriety of the court's denial of the oral motion to dismiss.

⁹ General Statutes § 54-56 provides that "[a]ll courts having jurisdiction of criminal cases shall at all times have jurisdiction and control over informations and criminal cases pending therein and may, at any time, upon motion by the defendant, dismiss any information and order such defendant discharged if, in the opinion of the court, there is not sufficient evidence or cause to justify the bringing or continuing of such information or the placing of the person accused therein on trial."

¹⁰ Practice Book § 41-8 provides in relevant part: "The following defenses or objections, if capable of determination without a trial of the general issue, shall, if made prior to trial, be raised by a motion to dismiss the information

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. . . When assessing whether the state has sufficient evidence to show probable cause to support continuing prosecution [following a motion to dismiss under § 54-56], the court must view the proffered proof, and draw reasonable inferences from that proof, in the light most favorable to the state. . . . The quantum of evidence necessary to [overcome a motion to dismiss] . . . is less than the quantum necessary to establish proof beyond a reasonable doubt at trial In [ruling on the defendant’s motion to dismiss], the court [must] determine whether the [state’s] evidence would warrant a person of reasonable caution to believe that the [defendant had] committed the crime.” (Citations omitted; footnotes added; footnote omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *State v. Pelella*, 327 Conn. 1, 18–19, 170 A.3d 647 (2017). We exercise plenary review over the court’s decision to deny the defendant’s motion to dismiss. *Id.*, 9–10; see also *State v. Cyr*, 291 Conn. 49, 56, 967 A.2d 32 (2009).

The parties agree that a common essential element for both first degree burglary pursuant to § 53a-101 and home invasion pursuant to § 53a-100aa is that the state must prove that the defendant “enters or remains unlawfully” in K’s condominium. “A person ‘enter[ed] or remain[ed] unlawfully’ in or upon premises when the premises, at the time of such entry or remaining, are not open to the public and when the actor is not otherwise licensed or privileged to do so.” General Statutes § 53a-100 (b). “To enter unlawfully means to accomplish an entry by unlawful means, while to remain unlawfully means that the initial entering of the building . . . was lawful but the presence therein became unlawful because the right, privilege or license to remain was extinguished.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *State v. Weaver*, 85 Conn. App. 329, 342, 857

. . . (5) Insufficiency of evidence or cause to justify the bringing or continuing of such information or the placing of the defendant on trial”

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A.2d 376, cert. denied, 271 Conn. 942, 861 A.2d 517 (2004). “A license in real property is defined as a personal, revocable, and unassignable privilege, conferred either by writing or parol, to do one or more acts on land without possessing any interest therein. . . . Generally, a license to enter premises is revocable at any time by the licensor. . . . It is exercisable only within the scope of the consent given. . . . The term, privilege, is more general. It is a right or immunity granted as a peculiar benefit, advantage, or favor; special enjoyment of a good or exemption from an evil or burden; a peculiar or personal advantage or right esp[ecially] when enjoyed in derogation of common right; prerogative. . . . The phrase, licensed or privileged, as used in [our burglary statutes], is meant as a unitary phrase, rather than as a reference to two separate concepts.”¹¹ (Emphasis omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *State v. Marsan*, 192 Conn. App. 49, 56, 216 A.3d 818, cert. denied, 333 Conn. 939, 218 A.3d 1049 (2019); see also *State v. Ashby*, 336 Conn. 452, 489, 247 A.3d 521 (2020). “Whether an entry on premises is ‘unlawful’ within the meaning of . . . § 53a-100 (b) is a question of fact for the jury.” *State v. Grant*, 6 Conn. App. 24, 31, 502 A.2d 945 (1986).

¹¹ The defendant recognizes in his principal appellate brief that “[t]here is a well-developed body [of] law interpreting . . . § 53a-100 (b), as well as its application to the separate acts of unlawful entry and unlawful remainder in dwellings as they relate to the burglary and home invasion statutes.” Nevertheless, the defendant primarily relies on summary process statutes; see General Statutes § 47a-23 et seq.; and landlord tenant statutes; see General Statutes § 47a-43 et seq.; to contend that he had the “legal authority” to be inside the condominium because K had not formally evicted him. The defendant in his appellate reply brief states that, “[a]lthough the defendant agrees that these [statutes] are not controlling, it is certainly worthwhile to consider when determining whether the defendant, as a matter of law, could have been unlawfully occupying the premises.” We are not persuaded by this argument and, instead, we apply our established criminal precedents to determine whether the defendant was “licensed or privileged” to enter the condominium at the time of the incident. See General Statutes § 53a-100 (b).

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For instance, the state can sufficiently establish that a defendant unlawfully entered a private residence if there is evidence that the resident or owner of the residence informs a defendant that he or she is not permitted inside the home. See, e.g., *State v. Kyle A.*, 212 Conn. App. 239, 252, 74 A.3d 896 (evidence at trial was sufficient to establish that defendant unlawfully entered home because defendant was not residing at home on date of incident, resident of home previously had communicated to defendant that he was not permitted to enter home, and defendant forcibly had entered home without obtaining permission from resident), cert. granted, 343 Conn. 930, 281 A.3d 1187 (2022); *State v. Calabrese*, 116 Conn. App. 112, 124, 975 A.2d 126 (evidence at trial was sufficient to establish that defendant unlawfully entered home because owner of house twice told defendant not to come to house, yet defendant entered house despite owner “having made it quite clear that he was not welcome”), cert. denied, 293 Conn. 933, 981 A.2d 1076, and cert. denied, 293 Conn. 933, 981 A.2d 1076 (2009).

Applying the foregoing, we conclude that the court properly denied the defendant’s motion to dismiss because the proffered proof, viewed in the light most favorable to the state, would warrant a person of reasonable caution to believe that the defendant unlawfully entered the condominium, as required for a conviction of first degree burglary and home invasion. Specifically, a fact finder could reasonably find that whatever license or privilege the defendant once had to enter K’s condominium was *revoked* by K on the day prior to the incident. A fact finder could reasonably find that the facts supporting the defendant’s argument—including that he retained a key to the condominium, had his possessions there, resided there up until two weeks prior to the incident, and visited several times during the two weeks

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prior to the incident—were vitiated by K’s text messages to the defendant on the night prior to the incident. After the occurrence of all these events; see footnote 7 of this opinion; a fact finder reasonably could find that the defendant’s license or privilege to enter the condominium was expressly and clearly revoked by K through her text messages exchanged with the defendant on the night prior to the incident. In those messages, K twice asked the defendant to return his set of keys to her condominium, and twice informed the defendant that he did not live at her condominium anymore. K’s statements made it quite clear to the defendant that he was not permitted to enter the condominium, yet, despite these statements, it was undisputed that the defendant entered the condominium on the night of the incident. As in *State v. Kyle A.*, supra, 212 Conn. App. 252, and *State v. Calabrese*, supra, 116 Conn. App. 124, the communication by the resident of the dwelling to the defendant that he was not permitted to enter is sufficient to establish that the defendant unlawfully entered the dwelling. Therefore, we conclude that the court properly denied his pretrial motion to dismiss the first degree burglary and home invasion charges because a fact finder could reasonably find that the defendant entered K’s condominium unlawfully.

II

The defendant next claims that the court abused its discretion by denying his requests to present testimony in support of his pretrial motion to dismiss. Specifically, he argues that the court should have permitted defense counsel to present to the court the testimony of the defendant and K “to ensure [that] the state had sufficient probable cause on the home invasion and burglary charges” We disagree.

We first set forth the standard of review and relevant legal principles governing our review of this claim. Our

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Supreme Court “consistently [has] held that, unless otherwise required by statute, a rule of practice or a rule of evidence, whether to conduct an evidentiary hearing generally is a matter that rests within the sound discretion of the trial court.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *State v. Michael J.*, 274 Conn. 321, 332, 875 A.2d 510 (2005). The defendant does not claim that an evidentiary hearing was required by a statute, rule of practice, or rule of evidence; thus, we review the court’s decision not to hear testimony for an abuse of discretion. “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 where an abuse of discretion is manifest or where injustice appears to have been done. . . . Discretion means a legal discretion, to be exercised in conformity with the spirit of the law and in a manner to subserve and not to impede or defeat the ends of substantial justice. . . . It goes without saying that the term abuse of discretion does not imply a bad motive or wrong purpose but merely means that the ruling appears to have been made on untenable grounds.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Wheeler v. Beachcroft, LLC*, 210 Conn. App. 725, 757, 271 A.3d 141 (2022).

As explained in part I of this opinion, the defendant filed a pretrial motion to dismiss the first degree burglary and home invasion charges against him on the ground that there was insufficient evidence to establish that he had unlawfully entered or remained in the condominium. At the hearing on the motion, the court stated that the parties in chambers had “essentially agreed” on the factual predicate of the defendant’s motion to dismiss and, thus, the court requested that the parties “make those representations on the record.” Defense counsel stated that the parties “were able to agree to about probably 95 percent of the chronology.”

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The court then summarized its understanding of the parties' agreed upon facts, and the defendant responded that the court's recitation was "correct" but "incomplete." Defense counsel thus made a series of requests to present to the court the testimony of K and the defendant, which he represented was necessary for context.¹² The court did not initially rule on the defendant's requests to present testimony but, instead, asked defense counsel to make a proffer as to the substance of the testimony he intended to present. Defense counsel then provided the court with a description of the expected testimony of K and the defendant. Afterward, the state represented that it did not dispute "most" of defense counsel's proffer, and, more specifically, that it did not dispute what happened in the two weeks prior to the incident, the day before the incident, or the fact that the defendant had his clothes at the condominium. Given the absence of any "real dispute between the state and the defense" as to the facts, the court ultimately denied the defendant's requests to present testimony.

On the basis of the foregoing, we conclude that the court did not abuse its discretion by denying the defendant's requests to present testimony in support of his pretrial motion to dismiss. It was clear from the parties' representations at the hearing that there was no factual dispute between the parties because they had agreed on 95 percent of the predicate facts. Rather, the issue presented was whether those facts were sufficient to support the first degree burglary and home invasion charges against the defendant. In light of the fact that defense counsel provided a full and detailed summary

¹² The defendant further contends that he made a request to present testimony in support of his motion to dismiss in his November 4, 2016 motion for hearing in advance of trial. The defendant, however, represented in that motion that "[i]t is likely that no evidence or live testimony will be necessary in order for the court to adjudicate the issues raised in the motion to dismiss."

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of the testimony he requested to present, which the state mostly accepted as true, a full evidentiary hearing to iterate those same facts would have been superfluous. Indeed, the defendant on appeal does not identify how, if at all, his testimony or the testimony of K would have supplemented or been different from the proffer articulated by defense counsel. The defendant, therefore, has failed to demonstrate that, even if the court's ruling was incorrect, he was harmed by the ruling. Under these circumstances, the defendant has not demonstrated that the court abused its discretion by denying his requests to present testimony in support of his motion to dismiss.

III

The defendant next claims that Judge White improperly failed, *sua sponte*, to disqualify himself from presiding over his jury trial because Judge White previously had denied the defendant's motion to dismiss and, when referring to Herrera, used the term "victim" in various pretrial hearings. Specifically, the defendant argues that, although "[t]here is no statute or rule that expressly prohibits a judge who finds probable cause against a particular defendant from later presiding at that defendant's trial," Judge White's failure to disqualify himself deprived the defendant of his constitutional right to a fair trial. The defendant's claim has two parts. First, he argues that Judge White's use of the term "victim" approximately twenty-four times in eleven different pretrial hearings established that Judge White *actually was biased* against him. Second, he argues that Judge White's denial of his motion to dismiss was sufficient to establish the *appearance of bias*. We disagree.

At the outset, the defendant concedes that this claim is unpreserved because he failed to seek the disqualification of Judge White in the trial court, and requests

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review pursuant to the standards set forth in *State v. Golding*, 213 Conn. 233, 239–40, 567 A.2d 823 (1989), as modified by *In re Yasiel R.*, 317 Conn. 773, 781, 120 A.3d 1188 (2015). Pursuant to *Golding*, “a defendant can prevail on a claim of constitutional error not preserved at trial only if *all* of the following conditions are met: (1) the record is adequate to review the alleged claim of error; (2) the claim is of constitutional magnitude alleging the violation of a fundamental right; (3) the alleged constitutional violation . . . exists and . . . deprived the defendant of a fair trial; and (4) if subject to harmless error analysis, the state has failed to demonstrate harmlessness of the alleged constitutional violation beyond a reasonable doubt.” (Emphasis in original; footnote omitted.) *State v. Golding*, *supra*, 239–40; see *In re Yasiel R.*, *supra*, 781 (modifying third prong of *Golding*).

The defendant asserts, and the state agrees, that the entirety of the defendant’s claim satisfies the first two prongs of *Golding*. We disagree that the entirety of the judicial bias claim is reviewable under *Golding*. We agree with both parties that the defendant’s actual bias claim satisfies the first two prongs of *Golding* and, thus, is reviewable. Particularly, the record is adequate to review the defendant’s actual bias claim because the record contains the transcripts reflecting Judge White’s use of the term “victim”; see *State v. Milner*, 325 Conn. 1, 10, 155 A.3d 730 (2017); and actual bias rises to the level of a constitutional violation. See *State v. Cane*, 193 Conn. App. 95, 133 n.33, 218 A.3d 1073, cert. denied, 334 Conn. 901, 219 A.3d 798 (2019). In contrast with the parties, we conclude that the defendant’s appearance of bias claim fails the second prong of *Golding* and, thus, is not reviewable because a claim of judicial bias based solely on the appearance of partiality is not of constitutional dimension. See *id.*; *State v. Stanley*, 161 Conn. App. 10, 32–33, 125 A.3d 1078 (2015), cert. denied,

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320 Conn. 918, 131 A.3d 1154 (2016). Accordingly, we turn our focus to determine whether the defendant's actual bias claim satisfies the third prong of *Golding*.

“A claim of judicial bias is a very serious matter.” *State v. Carlos C.*, 165 Conn. App. 195, 206, 138 A.3d 1090, cert. denied, 322 Conn. 906, 140 A.3d 977 (2016). “The United States Supreme Court consistently has held that a judge’s failure to disqualify himself or herself will implicate the due process clause only when the right to disqualification arises from actual bias on the part of that judge. . . . [M]ost questions concerning a judge’s qualifications to hear a case are not constitutional ones, because the [d]ue [p]rocess [c]lause of the [f]ourteenth [a]mendment establishes a constitutional floor, not a uniform standard. . . . Instead, these questions are, in most cases, answered by common law, statute, or the professional standards of the bench and bar. . . . But the floor established by the [d]ue [p]rocess [c]lause clearly requires a fair trial in a fair tribunal . . . before a judge with no actual bias against the defendant or interest in the outcome of his particular case. . . . [C]ertainly *only in the most extreme of cases* would disqualification on [the basis of allegations of bias or prejudice] be constitutionally required” (Emphasis added; internal quotation marks omitted.) *State v. Stanley*, *supra*, 161 Conn. App. 32. “Accusations of judicial bias or misconduct implicate the basic concepts of a fair trial. . . . [A] claim of judicial bias strikes at the very core of judicial integrity and tends to undermine public confidence in the established judiciary. . . . No more elementary statement concerning the judiciary can be made than that the conduct of the trial judge must be characterized by the highest degree of impartiality. If [the judge] departs from this standard, he [or she] casts serious reflection upon the system of which [the judge] is a part.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *State v. Cane*, *supra*, 193 Conn. App. 133.

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“The standard to be employed is an objective one, not the judge’s subjective view as to whether he or she can be fair and impartial in hearing the case.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Id.*, 133–34; see also *Rippo v. Baker*, 580 U.S. 285, 287, 137 S. Ct. 905, 197 L. Ed. 2d 167 (2017) (“[r]ecusal is required when, objectively speaking, ‘the probability of actual bias on the part of the judge or [decision maker] is too high to be constitutionally tolerable’”). “[J]udicial remarks during the course of a trial that are critical or disapproving of, or even hostile to, counsel, the parties, or their cases, ordinarily do not support a bias or partiality challenge. They may do so if they reveal an opinion that derives from an extrajudicial source; and they will do so if they reveal such a high degree of favoritism or antagonism as to make fair judgment impossible.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Ponns Cohen v. Cohen*, 342 Conn. 354, 363, 270 A.3d 89 (2022).

In the present case, the defendant’s actual bias claim is founded on Judge White’s use of the term “victim” approximately twenty-four times in various pretrial hearings.¹³ He argues that “our [Supreme] Court has frowned upon the prosecutors use of the word ‘victim’ because the jury could understand that the state was expressing its personal opinion that the defendant had victimized the complainant. *State v. Warholic*, 278 Conn. 354, [370] n.7, [897 A.2d 569] (2006). This same reasoning applies to Judge White.” He contends that Judge White’s use of that term “demonstrates that he already made conclusions about the guilt of the defendant even before starting the trial,” and, thus, establishes that Judge White was not impartial.¹⁴

¹³ We note that the factual predicate of the defendant’s claim is not as grave as he presents it. Of the twenty-four times that the defendant contends that the court used the term “victim,” the court used the phrase “alleged victim” nine of those times and the phrase “female victim,” presumably to refer to K, two of those times.

¹⁴ The defendant also urges this court to adopt the rationale of the dissent in *State v. D’Antonio*, 274 Conn. 658, 877 A.2d 696 (2005), in which Justice

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We conclude that Judge White’s use of the term “victim” in pretrial hearings does not objectively establish that he actually was biased against the defendant so as to constitute a due process violation depriving the defendant of a fair trial. Although a prosecutor’s repeated use of the term “victim” in front of a jury may be improper under some circumstances; see part V of this opinion; we disagree with the defendant that “this same reasoning” applies to Judge White’s use of that term in pretrial proceedings. In *Warholic*, the case cited by the defendant in support of his argument, our Supreme Court “caution[ed] the state . . . against making excessive use of the term ‘victim’ to describe a complainant when the commission of a crime is at issue because prevalent use of the term may cause the jury to draw an improper inference that the defendant committed a crime against the complainant.” *State v. Warholic*, supra, 278 Conn. 370 n.7. The reasoning of *Warholic* is inapposite to the present case because the court did not refer to Herrera as the victim in front of the jury.

Furthermore, Judge White’s use of the term “victim” does not support the defendant’s actual bias claim because it is not critical or hostile to the defendant. *Ponns Cohen v. Cohen*, supra, 342 Conn. 363. Instead, Judge White used the term “victim” in pretrial proceedings merely to identify the individual, Herrera, who

Katz concluded, in contrast to the majority, that a violation of the *Niblack* rule was structural error and, thus, harmless error analysis was inappropriate. Id., 722 (*Katz, J.*, dissenting); see *State v. Niblack*, 220 Conn. 270, 280, 596 A.2d 407 (1991) (establishing nonconstitutional rule that it is improper for trial judge to preside over defendant’s trial after having participated actively in unsuccessful plea negotiations in case). We decline to adopt the rationale of Justice Katz’ dissent because *Niblack* is not implicated in the present case and it is axiomatic that we cannot accept the rationale of the dissent because we are bound by the majority’s decision in *D’Antonio*. See *State v. Hurdle*, 217 Conn. App. 453, 475, 288 A.3d 675 (explaining that Appellate Court is bound by, and cannot overrule or discard, decisions of our Supreme Court), cert. granted, 346 Conn. 923, A.3d (2023).

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indisputably sustained significant physical injuries as a result of the defendant's conduct. Judge White's use of the term "victim" does not establish that he predetermined the defendant's guilt prior to starting the trial, and it expresses no definite opinion on the strength of the state's case or the defendant's claim of self-defense. The defendant's argument is further undercut by the fact that defense counsel used the term "victim" three times during those same pretrial hearings.

Additionally, Judge White's use of the term "victim" does not support his actual bias claim because it neither derived from an extrajudicial source nor revealed a high degree of antagonism to make fair judgment impossible. See *Ponns Cohen v. Cohen*, supra, 342 Conn. 363. It was apparent from the outset of the criminal proceeding that Herrera was the individual who sustained injuries as a result of the defendant's conduct and, thus, the court's designation of Herrera as the "victim" stemmed from judicial proceedings, not any extrajudicial source. See *State v. Cane*, supra, 193 Conn. App. 137 (court's reference to defendant as "violent" stemmed from defendant's criminal history noted in presentence investigation report). The use of the term "victim" further does not reveal any antagonism by Judge White that would impact his fair judgment. Indeed, as the state aptly notes, it was the duty of the jury, not Judge White, to determine whether the defendant was guilty. See *id.*, 134–35 n.35 (noting that judge's use of term "victims" in pretrial decision "was not indicative of bias" as judge did not refer to "victims in front of the jury" and defendant "subsequently [was] tried by a jury, and not by the court"). The defendant cites no conduct by the court during the trial that would suggest that Judge White conducted the trial in a way that was biased against the defendant.

In light of the foregoing, this is not one of the " 'most extreme of cases' " in which the constitution requires

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a judge to recuse himself or herself. *State v. Stanley*, supra, 161 Conn. App. 32–33. Therefore, we conclude that Judge White did not improperly fail to disqualify himself from presiding over the defendant’s trial.

IV

The defendant next claims that the court improperly restricted his ability to cross-examine Herrera concerning the content of certain text messages. Particularly, the defendant contends that the court violated his confrontation clause rights by forbidding him from cross-examining Herrera regarding text messages exchanged between Herrera and K concerning Herrera’s “pending DUI at the time of the incident, prior violent behavior . . . and texts that contradicted [Herrera’s] testimony to the jury.” In response, the state contends, among other things, that the defendant abandoned this claim at trial. We agree with the state.

We first set forth the undisputed facts and procedural history relevant to our resolution of this claim. The defendant’s claim regarding the cross-examination of Herrera as to text messages exchanged between Herrera and K stems from the state’s October 11, 2017 pretrial motion in limine. In that motion in limine, the state sought to preclude the defendant from introducing certain text messages between Herrera and K on the ground that those messages constituted improper extrinsic evidence to impeach the credibility of Herrera pursuant to §§ 4-5 and 6-6 of the Connecticut Code of Evidence. The motion specifically sought to exclude, inter alia, two categories of text messages concerning (1) a pending criminal action in New York against Herrera stemming from his DUI arrest, his plea negotiations relating to his DUI, and the fact that he previously had been pulled over approximately four to five times, and (2) Herrera’s frustration with his defense counsel in the New York DUI action and his statement that he “was

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fighting with Jews all day.” In the October 11, 2017 motion, the state noted in a footnote that many of the text messages exchanged between Herrera and K were of a sexual nature and were the subject of a separate motion in limine filed on August 7, 2017.

On October 31, 2017, the court heard oral argument on the state’s October 11, 2017 motion in limine. The state argued that these text messages should be excluded because the messages have nothing to do with Herrera’s credibility and, instead, “simply show that you know perhaps he is a bad person.” In response, the defendant argued that the text messages should be admitted to impeach Herrera and to corroborate the defendant’s theory that Herrera was a violent person who was intoxicated at the time of the incident. After hearing the parties’ arguments, the court orally granted the state’s motion in limine, without prejudice, holding that “these texts are essentially texts for purposes of impeaching . . . Herrera’s character, saying he’s a bad guy, or made some inappropriate or derogatory comments.”

On the first day of trial, the state presented the testimony of Herrera. Prior to the start of the defendant’s cross-examination of Herrera, and outside the presence of the jury, the parties again addressed the defendant’s use of the text messages between Herrera and K. The state asked that defense counsel abide by the court’s prior motion in limine ruling as to the admissibility of the text messages, and defense counsel stated that “[t]here’s no ruling” and indicated that he intended to question Herrera concerning a set of redacted text messages. The court stated that, in light of Herrera’s testimony that his relationship with K was flirtatious, it was going to give the defendant some leeway to cross-examine Herrera on the nature of his relationship with K, and that it would take up the issue of text messages afterward because “we may not even have to go there

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with the texts.” The defendant proceeded to start, but did not finish, his cross-examination of Herrera on the first day of trial, and he did not question Herrera about his text messages with K.¹⁵

After the close of the first day of evidence and outside the presence of the jury, defense counsel indicated his intention to introduce approximately 600 text messages between Herrera and K, which had been redacted to “remove any references to the objectionable subject matters, which had been the subject of some motions in limine.” Defense counsel stated that the purpose of the text messages was to impeach the credibility of Herrera with respect to his activities on the night of the incident, and the nature of his relationship with K. The state disputed the adequacy of the defendant’s redactions because some of the salacious messages that the state moved in limine to exclude had not been redacted. The court marked the text messages for identification as exhibit D and indicated that it would take up the issue before the start of evidence on the next day.

Prior to the start of the second day of evidence and outside the presence of the jury, the court again heard arguments on the defendant’s admission of text messages to impeach Herrera. Preliminarily, defense counsel indicated that he no longer intended to offer any specific text messages between Herrera and K. Specifically, defense counsel stated that Herrera’s testimony “was circumspect if not outright misleading about the depth of his communications of the volume of his communications. So, my application at this point is simply

¹⁵ Defense counsel, however, did ask Herrera: “In the week prior to this tragedy, describe your relationship with [K]. Was it something where you were socializing with her? Were you arranging a date with her? Were you giving her employment advice? Were you mentoring [her]? What’s the best [way] to understand it?” Herrera responded: “I can’t recall a specific week two and a half years ago. I’m sorry, I can’t answer that question.”

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that I'm not going to offer any of the specific text messages between them. I do want the jury to hear, and I will question him about the volume of text messages in the five day period preceding this transaction. So, I—I think that there may be some problems with his recollection or his accuracy, but I don't foresee independently offering on this witness any of those messages." The state objected to the proposed inquiry concerning the quantity of text messages because it did not "see how the number of text messages between the two of them impeaches anything that . . . Herrera said yesterday." The court stated that, as it previously had indicated, defense counsel could "impeach on credibility but you can't introduce extrinsic evidence," and that it was going to give defense counsel "a little bit of leeway in asking about" the quantity of text messages, but that it was "not going to let you put in the texts. But you said you're not offering them anyway." Defense counsel responded that he was "not making an offer. I'm alerting counsel that I am going to ask this witness about the volume of his text communication in the five day[s] preceding this encounter." Finally, the court stated that it was "going to give the defense some leeway in that regard. But at some point I'm going to say that's enough," and defense counsel responded that he "[u]nderstood."

During the second day of evidence, defense counsel resumed his cross-examination of Herrera. Relevantly, defense counsel asked Herrera: "I think you said there was some texting between you and [K] in a period leading up to [the date of the incident], is that fair?" Herrera responded, "yes." Defense counsel then asked Herrera, "[w]ithout going into what any particular text said or didn't say, do you recall about how much texting you did with [K] in, say, the five day period leading up to this?" Herrera responded, "I don't recall exactly, but

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there was a lot of texting,” and that he “really would be just guessing” at the volume of text messages.

Defense counsel then asked Herrera three questions regarding the quantity of messages exchanged between himself and K. First, defense counsel asked if it would refresh Herrera’s recollection to “look at . . . a tab of the texts . . . that went on between you?” Second, defense counsel asked if it was “fair to say that more than fifteen hundred texts passed between you and [K]?” Third, defense counsel asked whether Herrera could “say with any specificity the number of texts that” passed between him and K. The state objected to the first two questions without specifying the basis for the objection and objected to the third question on the ground of relevancy, and the court sustained each of the state’s objections. Defense counsel did not ask any further questions of Herrera regarding his text messages to K.

A threshold issue is whether the defendant preserved this claim. He contends on appeal that defense counsel’s “arguments, objections and the court’s ruling have preserved this claim for review,” and that, alternatively, this claim is reviewable under *Golding*. We disagree with the defendant that he preserved this claim because, as outlined previously, the defendant never attempted to cross-examine Herrera regarding the content of his text messages and did not raise a confrontation clause claim with respect to the scope of Herrera’s testimony. Although the defendant previously opposed the state’s motion in limine to exclude the text messages on evidentiary grounds, this argument failed to preserve his confrontation clause claim as to the scope of Herrera’s testimony. We nevertheless conclude that the first two prongs of *Golding* are met and, thus, turn to *Golding*’s third prong to determine whether the defendant’s confrontation clause violation actually occurred and

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deprived the defendant of a fair trial. See *State v. Golding*, supra, 213 Conn. 239–40; see *In re Yasiel R.*, supra, 317 Conn. 781 (modifying third prong of *Golding*).

We next set forth legal principles of abandonment that govern our resolution of this claim. “It is well settled that a criminal defendant may waive rights guaranteed to him under the constitution. . . . [T]he definition of a valid waiver of a constitutional right . . . [is] the intentional relinquishment or abandonment of a known right. . . . When a party consents to or expresses satisfaction with an issue at trial, claims arising from that issue are deemed waived and may not be reviewed on appeal. . . . Additionally, it is well settled that defense counsel may waive a defendant’s sixth amendment right to confrontation.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *State v. Sweet*, 214 Conn. App. 679, 695, 280 A.3d 1243, cert. denied, 345 Conn. 920, 284 A.3d 983 (2022). “A defendant may waive his right of confrontation . . . either expressly or impliedly by his deliberate action.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *State v. Smith*, 289 Conn. 598, 621, 960 A.2d 993 (2008). “Waiver consists of the intentional abandonment or voluntary relinquishment of a known right [It] involves the idea of assent, and assent is an act of understanding. . . . [W]aiver does not have to be express, but may consist of acts or conduct from which waiver may be implied In other words, waiver may be inferred from the circumstances if it is reasonable to do so.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *State v. Gaskin*, 116 Conn. App. 739, 753, 977 A.2d 681, cert. denied, 294 Conn. 914, 983 A.2d 851 (2009).

“[W]hen a party abandons a claim or argument before the trial court, that party waives the right to appellate review of such claim because a contrary conclusion would result in an ambush of the trial court” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *State v. McLaughlin*, 135 Conn. App. 193, 198, 41 A.3d 694, cert. denied, 307 Conn.

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904, 53 A.3d 219 (2012). “Our appellate courts frequently have stated that a party may not pursue one course of action at trial for tactical reasons and later on appeal argue that the path he rejected should now be open to him.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *State v. Fuller*, 158 Conn. App. 378, 393, 119 A.3d 589 (2015). “[A] constitutional claim that has been waived does not satisfy the third prong of the *Golding* test because, in such circumstances, we simply cannot conclude that injustice [has been] done to either party . . . or that the alleged constitutional violation . . . exists and . . . deprived the defendant of a fair trial To reach a contrary conclusion would result in an ambush of the trial court by permitting the defendant to raise a claim on appeal that his or her counsel expressly had abandoned in the trial court.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *State v. Sweet*, supra, 214 Conn. App. 695.

Our review of the record, and in particular the defendant’s arguments prior to the second day of evidence, leads us to conclude that the defendant abandoned his earlier effort to question Herrera regarding the content of the text messages at trial and, thus, he has waived this appellate claim.¹⁶ Prior to trial, the court granted, without prejudice, the state’s motion in limine to exclude certain text messages between Herrera and K. After the first day of evidence, the defendant, through defense counsel, expressed an intention to question Herrera regarding the content of the subject text messages. Nevertheless, on the morning prior to the second

¹⁶ To be clear, the defendant does not challenge on appeal the court’s evidentiary rulings excluding certain text messages and sustaining the state’s objections to his last three questions as to the volume of text messages. Instead, he argues that his confrontation clause rights were violated because he was prohibited from questioning Herrera regarding the *content* of these text messages, including Herrera’s DUI, Herrera’s comments about defense counsel in the DUI case, and the sexual nature of Herrera’s relationship with K. In his appellate reply brief, the defendant did not address the state’s argument that he abandoned this claim.

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day of evidence, defense counsel made clear that he no longer sought to question Herrera regarding the content of the text messages. Defense counsel expressly stated that he was “not going to offer any of the specific text messages between them,” and that he did not “foresee independently offering on this witness any of those messages.” Instead, defense counsel expressed his intention to question Herrera as to the volume of text messages between the defendant and K, and the court permitted him some “leeway” to pursue this avenue of inquiry over the state’s objection. Then, during the second day of evidence, defense counsel asked Herrera as to the amount of text messages he exchanged with K, and “[w]ithout going into what any particular text said or didn’t say, do you recall about how much texting you did with [K] in, say, the five day period leading up to this?” (Emphasis added.) In response, Herrera testified that there was a fair amount of texting between them, but he did not recall the exact amount. In accordance with his prior indications, defense counsel did not ask Herrera regarding the content of the text messages. The defendant, through his counsel, made the decision not to question Herrera regarding the text messages, so he cannot “later on appeal argue that the path he rejected should now be open to him.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *State v. Fuller*, supra, 158 Conn. App. 393. In sum, we conclude that the defendant abandoned this claim and, consequently, it fails the third prong of *Golding*.

V

The defendant finally claims that the prosecutor’s use of the term “victim” during the trial and in closing argument deprived him of his constitutional right to a fair trial. The defendant argues that the prosecutor’s use of the term “victim” fourteen total times, specifically, nine times during the evidentiary portion of the

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trial and five times during closing argument, constituted prosecutorial impropriety.¹⁷ We disagree.

We first set forth the undisputed facts relevant to our resolution of this claim. The evidentiary portion of the trial and closing argument spanned six days and culminated in approximately 900 transcript pages. During the evidentiary portion of the trial, the prosecutor used the term “victim” to refer to Herrera on nine occasions, specifically when questioning the law enforcement personnel. On the first day of evidence, Mercado testified on direct examination that when police arrived at the scene, they “found the victim, [Herrera], in the kitchen sitting at a chair.” In turn, the prosecutor asked Mercado the following three questions utilizing the term “victim”: (1) “Now, while waiting for the EMT or an ambulance, did you . . . and Officer Mira remain with the victim?” (2) “[D]o you recall how many technicians assisted the victim, if you recall?” And (3) “were you there when

¹⁷ In his appellate brief, the defendant supports his prosecutorial impropriety claim with reference to three categories of statements: (1) the prosecutor’s use of the term “victim” at least four times during pretrial hearings; (2) the prosecutor’s use of the term “victim” at least twenty times in front of the jury; and (3) the witnesses’ use of the term “victim” an unspecified number of times.

First, we summarily reject the defendant’s reliance on the first category of statements because they were made by the prosecutor in pretrial hearings outside the presence of the jury and, accordingly, cannot serve as the basis for his prosecutorial impropriety claim. See *State v. Warholic*, supra, 278 Conn. 370 n.7 (explaining that reason prosecutor’s use of term “victim” could support prosecutorial impropriety claim is because jury could understand that state was expressing its personal opinion that defendant had victimized complainant).

Second, with respect to the second category of statements, at oral argument before this court, the defendant represented that the state, in its appellee brief, adequately had identified each of the times the prosecutor used the term “victim” to refer to Herrera in front of the jury. We construe defense counsel’s representations as accepting the state’s recitation of the fourteen times that the prosecutor used the term “victim” to refer to Herrera as the basis for his claim.

Third, the defendant at oral argument before this court abandoned the aspect of his claim based on the third category of statements.

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they were assisting the victim or did you move to another area at the condo?” Also, on the first day of evidence, Officer Fabio Rodriguez testified that his purpose for being dispatched to Stamford Hospital was “[t]o stay with the victim at the hospital.” The prosecutor then asked Rodriguez two questions using the term “victim”: “What kind of victim?” And, “[d]id you notice any injuries to [the] victim’s—Mr. Herrera’s thumb, if you recall?” On the second day of evidence, the prosecutor asked Officer Eva Maldonado, who interviewed K at the Stamford Police Department the day after the incident, whether she was “appraised when you were briefed as to the facts of the case, umm, were you appraised as to who was the victim in the case?” On the third day of evidence, the prosecutor asked Sergeant Adrian Novia three questions using the term “victim”: (1) “Now, while on scene, did you actually meet with the assault victim?” (2) “[A]nd where was the assault victim, if you know, when you got on scene?” And (3) “where did you interview [K] after the . . . victim was taken away by the medics?” In response to the second question to Novia, defense counsel objected to the prosecutor’s use of the terms “victim” and “assault.” The court sustained the objection, and the prosecutor rephrased his question to omit those terms. The prosecutor did not use the term “victim” for the remaining evidentiary portion of the trial. After the conclusion of evidence, the defendant did not move for a mistrial or a new trial alleging prosecutorial impropriety based on the prosecutor’s use of the word “victim,” nor did he request an instruction to the jury concerning the prosecutor’s use of the term.

During closing argument, the prosecutor referred to Herrera as the “victim” on five occasions. In its initial closing argument, the prosecutor stated: “You recall Sergeant Novia’s testimony, that on the evening of the assault, after the defendant was taken into custody and

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after the victim was taken to the hospital, they sat down with [K], and she had calmed down somewhat and she—they asked her a number of questions to explain what she had observed and what had happened.” During the state’s rebuttal closing argument, the prosecutor stated: “[Y]ou will see . . . that right outside the bathroom there is blood spatter on the wall, consistent with the victim’s rendition of facts. You can see it right here. And this is state’s exhibit 59. You can see it bigger in the photograph that Officer Rondano said he zoomed in on, you can see the blood spatter on the wall just above the molding, and that’s right outside the bathroom. How is the blood evidence inconsistent with the victim’s story? There’s blood on the wall right outside the bathroom. There is, consistent with the victim’s story, blood right outside the banister, you can see, this was blown up. And again, [Officer] Rondano [showed you] the blood drops on the floor. Take a look at this when you’re in the deliberation room. What does this show? This supports the victim’s story that he was whacked over the head, right outside the bathroom, not in the kitchen.”

The court repeatedly instructed the jury—prior to the start of evidence, prior to closing argument, during defense counsel’s closing argument, and after the conclusion of closing arguments—that the argument of counsel does not constitute evidence, that the jurors were the sole arbiters of credibility, and that the jurors must confine themselves to the evidence in the record. Additionally, the prosecutor began his closing argument by reminding the jury that “you are the fact finders in this case. You find the facts, not me, not [defense counsel], not Judge White. Your verdict has to be based on the evidence in the case.”

We next set forth the relevant legal principles governing our review of the defendant’s claim.¹⁸ “In analyzing

¹⁸ As an initial matter, we agree with both parties that it is immaterial whether the defendant’s one objection to the prosecutor’s use of the term

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claims of prosecutorial impropriety, we engage in a two step analytical process. . . . The two steps are separate and distinct. . . . We first examine whether prosecutorial impropriety occurred. . . . Second, if an impropriety exists, we then examine whether it deprived the defendant of his due process right to a fair trial. . . . In other words, an impropriety is an impropriety, regardless of its ultimate effect on the fairness of the trial. Whether that impropriety was harmful and thus caused or contributed to a due process violation involves a separate and distinct inquiry.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *State v. Hinds*, 344 Conn. 541, 555–56, 280 A.3d 446 (2022); see *State v. Johnson*, 345 Conn. 174, 215, 283 A.3d 477 (2022) (defendant has burden to establish both parts of prosecutorial impropriety test).

With respect to the first prong, in *State v. Warholc*, 278 Conn. 354, 370, 897 A.2d 569 (2006), our Supreme Court held that a prosecutor’s reference to the complainant as the “victim” in closing argument was not necessarily inappropriate because “the jury was likely to understand that the state’s identification of the complainant as the victim reflected the state’s contention that, based on the state’s evidence, the complainant was the victim of the alleged crimes.” Our Supreme Court “caution[ed] the state, however, against making excessive use of the term ‘victim’ to describe a complainant when the commission of a crime is at issue

“victim” preserved his prosecutorial impropriety claim because “under settled law, a defendant who fails to preserve claims of prosecutorial [impropriety] need not seek to prevail under the specific requirements of *State v. Golding*, [supra, 213 Conn. 239–40], and, similarly, it is unnecessary for a reviewing court to apply the four-pronged *Golding* test.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *State v. Hinds*, 344 Conn. 541, 555 n.7, 280 A.3d 446 (2022). “The reason for this is that the defendant in a claim of prosecutorial misconduct must establish that the prosecutorial misconduct was so serious as to amount to a denial of due process” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *State v. Darryl W.*, 303 Conn. 353, 375 n.19, 33 A.3d 239 (2012).

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because prevalent use of the term may cause the jury to draw an improper inference that the defendant committed a crime against the complainant.” *Id.*, 370 n.7.

Although “[t]here is . . . no mathematical formula that can be applied ritualistically” to this type of claim; *State v. Rodriguez*, 107 Conn. App. 685, 702, 946 A.2d 294, cert. denied, 288 Conn. 904, 953 A.2d 650 (2008); our Supreme Court and this court “repeatedly have concluded that a prosecutor’s infrequent use of the term ‘victim’ does not constitute prosecutorial impropriety.” *State v. Johnson*, *supra*, 345 Conn. 217; see, e.g., *id.*, 216 (prosecutor’s reference to complainant as “victim” on one occasion during examination of witness did not amount to impropriety); *State v. Ciullo*, 314 Conn. 28, 55, 59, 100 A.3d 779 (2014) (prosecutor’s reference to complainants as “victims” on seven occasions during examination of witnesses in thirteen days of trial and closing argument was not sufficiently excessive to be improper); *State v. Warholic*, *supra*, 278 Conn. 370 n.7 (prosecutor’s reference to complainant as “victim” on two occasions during closing argument did not amount to impropriety); *State v. Williams*, 200 Conn. App. 427, 438–39, 238 A.3d 797 (prosecutor’s reference to complainant as “victim” on four occasions during closing argument did not amount to impropriety), cert. denied, 335 Conn. 974, 240 A.3d 676 (2020); *State v. Kurrus*, 137 Conn. App. 604, 621, 49 A.3d 260 (prosecutor’s reference to complainant as “victim” on three occasions during closing argument did not amount to impropriety), cert. denied, 307 Conn. 923, 55 A.3d 566 (2012); *State v. Rodriguez*, *supra*, 107 Conn. App. 701, 703 (prosecutor’s sporadic use of term “victim” during closing argument did not amount to impropriety).

“On the other hand, when a prosecutor’s references to a complainant as a ‘victim’ are ‘prevalent and chronic,

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[our appellate courts] have determined that such references have invaded the propriety of the trial proceeding.’” *State v. Johnson*, supra, 345 Conn. 217; see, e.g., *State v. Thompson*, 146 Conn. App. 249, 270–72, 76 A.3d 273 (prosecutor’s use of term “victim” on seven occasions during examination of witnesses and closing argument, each of which was subject to timely defense objection that court promptly sustained without opposition by state, constituted impropriety), cert. denied, 310 Conn. 956, 81 A.3d 1182 (2013); *State v. Albino*, 130 Conn. App. 745, 766, 24 A.3d 602 (2011) (when there was challenge as to whether crime occurred, prosecutor’s reference to complainant as “victim” on twenty-seven occasions during examination of witnesses, in conjunction with twelve references to killing as “murder” and six references to firearm as “murder weapon,” constituted impropriety), aff’d, 312 Conn. 763, 97 A.3d 478 (2014).

Although we iterate our caution that the state should refrain from making excessive use of the term “victim” to describe a complainant when the commission of a crime is at issue, we conclude that the prosecutor’s use of the term “victim” to refer to Herrera was not sufficiently prevalent and chronic so as to be improper.¹⁹ The prosecutor’s fourteen uses of that term were not sufficiently excessive particularly in light of the fact that the evidentiary portion of the trial and

¹⁹ The state does not contest on appeal that the commission of a crime, specifically the defendant’s assault of Herrera, was at issue. At trial, the defendant’s theory of the case was that he acted in self-defense because Herrera initiated the physical confrontation. Thus, despite the fact that the defendant did not dispute that Herrera sustained significant physical injuries during the incident, it was a question of fact whether those injuries were the result of actions taken by the defendant in self-defense or whether they were the result of criminal activity. See *State v. Albino*, supra, 130 Conn. App. 766 (commission of crime at issue where “there is no doubt that a homicide occurred and that the defendant was the person who caused it to occur, and the only question for the jury is whether the homicide was justified” based on defendant’s theory of self-defense (footnote omitted)).

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closing argument spanned six days and culminated in approximately 900 transcript pages. Additionally, the majority of the prosecutor's use of the term "victim" during the evidentiary portion of the trial occurred after the witnesses first used the term. With the exception of these fourteen occurrences, the prosecutor consistently referred to Herrera by his name, his pronouns (he/his/him), and as an "individual." During the evidentiary portion of the trial, the prosecutor only used the term "victim" on the first three days, and the prosecutor did not use that term to question any of the witnesses after the court sustained defense counsel's objection to the use of the terms "assault" and "victim." During closing argument, the prosecutor's use of the term "victim" was not improper because the jury would understand that it was based on evidence presented and on the state's argument that the defendant had committed the crimes charged. See *State v. Rodriguez*, supra, 107 Conn. App. 703 (use of word "victim" by prosecutor during closing argument was nothing more than permissible rhetorical device, based on state's view of evidence).

Furthermore, the prosecutor's use of the term "victim" did not rise to the level of egregiousness that this court has determined to be improper in *Thompson* and *Albino*. In *State v. Thompson*, supra, 146 Conn. App. 270–72, this court held that the prosecutor's use of the term "victim" on seven occasions during examination of the witnesses and in closing argument, each of which was subject to a timely defense objection that the court promptly sustained without opposition by the state, was improper. More specifically, this court rejected the state's "argument that such references were not improper because there were too few of them to constitute excessive use, within the meaning of *Warholic*, ignores the important distinguishing fact that the trial court had repeatedly ruled them to be improper and

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instructed the prosecutor not to use them, yet the prosecutor, unaccountably even to herself, could not restrain herself from repeating them.” *Id.*, 271. Here, unlike in *Thompson*, the court never ruled that the use of the term “victim,” by itself, was improper, never instructed the prosecutor not to use the term, and the prosecutor did not continue to use the term in violation of the court’s rulings. Instead, there was only one objection by defense counsel to the prosecutor’s use of the terms “assault” and “victim,” the court sustained the objection, the prosecutor rephrased the question, and the prosecutor did not use the terms throughout the remaining three days of evidence.

In *State v. Albino*, *supra*, 130 Conn. App. 766, this court held that the prosecutor’s reference to the complainant as “victim” on twenty-seven occasions during the examination of witnesses, in conjunction with twelve references to killing as “murder” and six references to firearm as “murder weapon,” was improper. In the present case, there were fourteen references to the term “victim,” far less than the twenty-seven references at issue in *Albino*. Additionally, the defendant’s challenge in the present appeal is limited to the prosecutor’s use of the term “victim,” and does not include any additional terms. In sum, we conclude that the prosecutor’s use of the term “victim” on fourteen occasions was not improper.

Even if we were to assume that each of these uses of the term “victim” by the prosecutor was improper, we cannot conclude that the defendant satisfied his burden of demonstrating that those improprieties were so egregious as to amount to a denial of due process. “To aid us in determining whether prosecutorial impropriety so infected the proceedings with unfairness as to deprive a defendant of a fair trial, [our appellate courts apply] the factors set forth in *State v. Williams*, 204 Conn. 523, 540, 529 A.2d 653 (1987). These factors

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include: the extent to which the [impropriety] was invited by defense conduct or argument . . . the severity of the [impropriety] . . . the frequency of the [impropriety] . . . the centrality of the [impropriety] to the critical issues in the case . . . the strength of the curative measures adopted . . . and the strength of the state’s case.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *State v. Hinds*, supra, 344 Conn. 563–64.

Applying the *Williams* factors, we conclude that the alleged improprieties did not deprive the defendant of a fair trial. First, the impropriety was not invited by defense counsel. Second, we do not view the alleged improprieties as severe primarily because defense counsel objected to the prosecutor’s use of the term “victim” only on the eighth of the fourteen occasions, which suggests that defense counsel did not perceive the term as being severe. See *id.*, 564 (defense counsel’s failure to object to allegedly improper comments was strong indication that those comments were not so egregious to rise to level of constitutional violation). Additionally, this court in *Albino* held that the prosecutor’s use of the term “victim” on twenty-seven occasions was not so severe as to deprive the defendant of a fair trial; *State v. Albino*, supra, 130 Conn. App. 766, 778; whereas the prosecutor in the present case used the term “victim” fourteen times. Third, as explained previously, the use of the term “victim” was not frequent when compared to the entirety of the trial, which was six days and culminated in approximately 900 transcript pages. See *id.*, 779 (prosecutor’s use of term “victim” twenty-seven times, although sufficient to constitute an impropriety, did not satisfy third *Williams* factor because uses of term “were infrequent when compared to the entirety” of two week trial and 1000 pages of transcript). Fourth, although neither party takes a position on this factor, we conclude that the alleged impropriety was central to the critical issue in the case, namely, whether

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Herrera was the victim of an assault or an intruder, allegedly justifying the defendant's use of self-defense. See *id.* (use of term "victim" by prosecutor was central to critical issue of case, specifically whether defendant was acting in self-defense).

Fifth, no curative instructions as to the prosecutor's use of the term "victim" were adopted; however, this can be attributed "to [defense counsel's] failure to object or request any curative instruction from the court." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *State v. Hinds*, supra, 344 Conn. 564; see *State v. Albino*, supra, 130 Conn. App. 780 ("defense counsel has a responsibility to call perceived prosecutorial improprieties to the attention of the court" and, thus, "the court did not adopt, nor have the opportunity to consider whether to adopt, specific curative measures"). Nevertheless, the court repeatedly instructed the jury—prior to the start of evidence, prior to closing argument, during defense counsel's closing argument, and after the conclusion of closing arguments—that the argument of counsel does not constitute evidence, that the jurors were the sole arbiters of credibility, and that the jurors must confine themselves to the evidence in the record. These general instructions were more than adequate to counteract any harm resulting from the alleged improprieties. See *State v. Hinds*, supra, 564; *State v. Albino*, supra, 781. Additionally, the prosecutor began his closing argument by informing the jury that it was the fact finder, not him, not defense counsel, and not Judge White.

Sixth, we conclude that the state's case was strong because there was an abundance of compelling evidence supporting the state's first degree assault charge.²⁰

²⁰ As for the sixth factor, the defendant argues in full: "The final factor, the strength of the case, weighs in favor of the defendant. The jury had before it evidence that [Herrera] took the initial steps towards the defendant. Similarly, the defendant stayed at the scene while police arrived. This was not a slam dunk case for the state."

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The evidence established that the defendant sent K several threatening text messages just prior to her arrival with Herrera at the condominium, stating “[y]our very selfish, what goes around comes around,” and “[l]augh now, cry later & I won’t feel sorry this time.” After K and Herrera arrived at the condominium, the defendant suddenly and violently attacked Herrera with a saw for three to four minutes while the defendant shouted: “This is what you get, this is what you get, this is what you get for fucking my girlfriend.” The defendant never disputed that he repeatedly struck Herrera with the saw; rather, the defendant’s theory was that he was acting in self-defense because Herrera initiated the confrontation. The defendant’s self-defense claim was weak because it was founded entirely on K’s account at trial that Herrera took two steps toward the defendant with both of his arms bent in front of him at the elbows. Furthermore, K’s testimony drastically contrasted with her description of the incident in her 911 call and to the investigating police officers, in which K told officers that the defendant came out of nowhere and attacked Herrera with a saw. Finally, although the jury deliberated for five days, their deadlock was on the unlawful entry element of the first degree burglary and home invasion charges that resulted in a mistrial, not the assault charge.

In sum, we conclude that the alleged improprieties did not deprive the defendant of a fair trial. Therefore, we reject the defendant’s claim that the prosecutor’s use of the term “victim” during the trial and closing argument deprived him of his constitutional right to a fair trial.

The judgment is affirmed.

In this opinion the other judges concurred.

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U.S. BANK NATIONAL ASSOCIATION,
TRUSTEE v. SHOLEH WEINBAUM
(AC 45043)

Elgo, Suarez and Clark, Js.

Syllabus

Pursuant to the rules of practice (§ 17-32 (b)), a motion for judgment shall not be filed “before the expiration of fifteen days from the date of the notice of issuance of the default”

Pursuant further to the rules of practice (§ 17-33 (b)), a court, at or after the time it renders a default, may render judgment in foreclosure cases “notwithstanding Section 17-32 (b) . . . provided the plaintiff has also made a motion for judgment and provided further that any necessary affidavits of debt or accounts or statements verified by oath, in proper form, are submitted to the judicial authority. . . .”

The plaintiff bank sought to foreclose a mortgage on certain real property owned by the defendant homeowner. The plaintiff filed a motion for default for failure to plead on September 6, 2019, which was granted by the clerk of court on September 17, 2019. The plaintiff then filed a motion for judgment of strict foreclosure on September 24, 2019, eighteen days after the motion for default was filed and seven days after the default had entered. The trial court denied the defendant’s subsequent motion to set aside the default and rendered a judgment of foreclosure by sale. On the defendant’s appeal to this court, *held*:

1. The defendant could not prevail on her claim that the trial court was required to set aside the default or, alternatively, that the default was set aside automatically when she filed her answer and special defenses, which was based on her claim that the plaintiff’s motion for judgment of strict foreclosure was filed only seven days after the clerk of court granted the motion for default for failure to plead in violation of Practice Book § 17-32 (b): the trial court was not required to set aside the default because the fifteen day filing limitation in § 17-32 (b) is not controlling in foreclosure proceedings, as Practice Book § 17-33 (b) expressly authorizes a court to render judgment in foreclosure cases at or after the time default is rendered and, thus, the defendant’s contentions found no support in the language of §§ 17-32 and 17-33 or this court’s cases interpreting those provisions; moreover, nothing prevented the defendant from filing a timely pleading in the first instance or from filing a motion to set aside the default and making the requisite showing of good cause; furthermore, the record did not support the defendant’s contention that the plaintiff was not prepared to proceed with its first motion for judgment of strict foreclosure when it was filed because the court ultimately rendered judgment on the plaintiff’s second motion for judgment, as the second motion was filed because the defendant had

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- sought reinclusion into the foreclosure mediation program after the first motion for judgment was filed.
2. The trial court did not abuse its discretion by denying the defendant's motion to set aside the default: because the default was not set aside automatically when she filed her answer and special defenses, it was incumbent on the defendant to file a motion to set aside the default and to demonstrate good cause for doing so, and the defendant's motion to set aside did not allege any facts demonstrating good cause; the plaintiff filed its motion for default for failure to plead approximately one year after it commenced this action, after the foreclosure mediation period had terminated due to the defendant's failure to appear at a scheduled mediation session and, instead of explaining in her motion to set aside the default why she did not timely file a responsive pleading, the defendant, through counsel, simply set forth the parties' mediation efforts and indicated that the mediation period had ended because she missed a session.

Argued March 8—officially released May 30, 2023

Procedural History

Action to foreclose a mortgage on certain real property owned by the defendant, and for other relief, brought to the Superior Court in the judicial district of Fairfield, where the defendant was defaulted for failure to plead; thereafter, the court, *Spader, J.*, denied the defendant's motion to set aside the default; subsequently, the case was tried to the court, *Spader, J.*; judgment of foreclosure by sale, from which the defendant appealed to this court. *Affirmed.*

John J. Ribas, for the appellant (defendant).

Geoffrey Milne, with whom, on the brief, was *Victoria L. Forcella*, for the appellee (plaintiff).

Opinion

CLARK, J. In this foreclosure action, the defendant, Sholeh Weinbaum, appeals from the judgment of foreclosure by sale rendered by the trial court in favor of the plaintiff, U.S. Bank National Association, As Trustee for Structured Adjustable Rate Mortgage Loan Trust, Mortgage Pass Through Certificates, Series 2006-4. On appeal, the defendant claims that the court improperly

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denied her motion to set aside the default that was entered against her for failing to plead because the plaintiff's motion for judgment was filed prematurely. Alternatively, she makes the related claim that the default was set aside by operation of law when she filed her answer and special defenses. Lastly, she claims that the court abused its discretion when it denied her motion to set aside the default. We affirm the judgment of the trial court.

We begin by setting forth the relevant procedural history of the case. On August 24, 2018, the plaintiff commenced this foreclosure action against the defendant by writ of summons and complaint, which sought to foreclose a mortgage on property located at 5 Daniel Court in Westport. On October 24, 2018, the plaintiff filed a motion for default for failure to appear, which the clerk of court granted on October 31, 2018.

On November 13, 2018, the defendant, who was then self-represented, filed an appearance in the case.¹ On November 14, 2018, she filed a petition to participate in the foreclosure mediation program, which the court granted on November 30, 2018. The court assigned the case to the mediation program on December 3, 2018.

On September 6, 2019, following the termination of the mediation period, the plaintiff moved for the entry of default for failure to plead. The clerk granted that motion on September 17, 2019. On September 24, 2019, the plaintiff filed a motion for judgment of strict foreclosure.

On or about October 18, 2019, the defendant retained counsel, who filed an appearance in the case. On October 28, 2019, the defendant filed an answer and special defenses to the plaintiff's complaint. On October 30,

¹ Practice Book § 17-20 (d) provides in relevant part: "If the defaulted party files an appearance in the action prior to the entry of judgment after default, the default shall automatically be set aside by operation of law. . . ."

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2019, the defendant also filed a motion to set aside the September 17, 2019 default for failure to plead, setting forth therein the parties' mediation history and arguing, inter alia, that, "[w]hile the undersigned respectfully takes the position that the default is automatically opened when applying the 'wait and see approach' required by, read in conjunction, Practice Book [§§] 17-32 (b) and 17-33 (b) as discussed in *Chase Manhattan Mortgage Corp. v. Burton*, 81 Conn. App. 662, 666–67, 841 A.2d 248, cert. denied, 268 Conn. 919, 847 A.2d 313 (2004) and *Deutsche Bank National Trust Co. v. Bertrand*, 140 Conn. App. 646, [59 A.3d 864, appeal dismissed, 309 Conn. 905, 68 A.3d 661 (2013)] (both of which ratify the well-known implication that, while the court may contemplate the entry of judgment of foreclosure notwithstanding the fifteen days contemplated in . . . § 17-32 (b), the filing of an answer before the judgment hearing sets aside and opens the entry of default for failure to plead as a matter of law), it files the instant motion in an abundance of caution." The court denied the motion to set aside the default on November 16, 2019. The defendant did not file a motion to reargue.

On October 30, 2019, the defendant also filed a petition for reinclusion in the foreclosure mediation program. The court granted that petition on November 8, 2019. The parties' participation in the mediation program ended on or about January 29, 2020.

On August 30, 2021, the plaintiff filed a new motion for judgment of strict foreclosure. On September 24, 2021, the court held a hearing on the plaintiff's motion. At the hearing, the defendant's counsel orally objected to proceeding with the hearing on the basis that the September 17, 2019 default for failure to plead had automatically been set aside by operation of law on October 28, 2019, when the defendant filed her answer and special defense because, in his view, the plaintiff's motion for judgment of strict foreclosure on September

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24, 2019, was filed too soon after the default for failure to plead had entered. Specifically, the defendant’s counsel argued that “the motion for judgment is actually moot and not properly before the court given the timing of filing. I mean, you notice that the motion for default for failure to plead was filed September 6th, granted the 17th. Motion for judgment filed seven days thereafter. We weren’t hired until October. And we immediately filed an answer and special defense. But, however, it seems more like a situation not analogous or contemplated by the *Burton* and *Bertrand* cases” The defendant’s counsel further argued that “[t]he reality is, is that the Practice Book mandates that you’re supposed to file a motion for judgment within fifteen days of the granting. And I know that the court can grant the motion for default simultaneously from the bench as contemplated by the cases. And that seems to—and—and *Burton* seems to state that that’s when they’re filed simultaneously. Here, it looked like there was a conscious decision to not file them simultaneously, which would therefore trigger the fifteen days.”

The plaintiff’s counsel disagreed. He argued that the defendant’s motion to set aside the default was filed on October 30, 2019, and denied by the court two years ago. He thus argued that this issue had already been adjudicated and that the defendant never filed a motion to reargue or an appeal. At the conclusion of this colloquy between the court and counsel, the court decided to continue the hearing on the August 30, 2021 motion for judgment so it could review the file more closely and consider the parties’ arguments. In an order dated September 27, 2021, the court found that the default for failing to plead was properly entered on September 17, 2019, and that the default was not automatically set aside when the defendant filed her answer and special defenses. Upon its review of the relevant provisions of the rules of practice and case law, the court concluded

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that, “in foreclosure matters such as the present matter, [Practice Book] § 17-32 (b) is not controlling as to the timing of the filing of a motion for judgment upon default as the judgment of default of foreclosure COULD enter simultaneously. [Practice Book] § 17-33 (b) would be a nullity and impossible to apply on the defendant’s reading of . . . § 17-32 (b).” The court also noted that the defendant did not timely address the issue until a “last minute oral volley” at the judgment hearing years later. It explained that, “had the defendant disagreed with the court, a motion to reargue or reconsider should have been timely filed. Counsel literally argued the same issue contained in [the] motion to [set aside] (which the court denied) two years after the denial.” The court therefore proceeded to hear the plaintiff’s motion for strict foreclosure on September 29, 2021. On September 29, 2021, the court rendered a judgment of foreclosure by sale, with a sale date of March 12, 2022. This appeal followed.

On appeal, the defendant claims that “[t]he trial court erred in denying [her] motion to open default when the plaintiff’s motion for judgment was filed only seven days after the granting of the plaintiff’s motion for default for failure to plead.” She claims that “[t]his was within the fifteen days prescribed by Practice Book [§] 17-32 (b).” Alternatively, the defendant claims that the default was automatically set aside by the filing of an answer and special defenses. Lastly, she argues that the court abused its discretion when it denied her motion to set aside the default because she was previously self-represented and, upon obtaining counsel, filed an answer and special defenses prior to the court acting on the plaintiff’s motion for judgment of strict foreclosure.²

² Although the defendant’s brief also sets out the claim that the “trial court erred in its interpretation of Practice Book § 17-33 (b),” that claim is subsumed in our discussion of her first claim.

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For the reasons discussed herein, we conclude that the defendant’s claims lack merit.

We begin with our standard of review. Our review is plenary with regard to the construction of our rules of practice. See *Deutsche Bank National Trust Co. v. Bertrand*, supra, 140 Conn. App. 655. To that end, “[i]n construing our rules of practice, we are guided by the principles governing statutory interpretation. . . . Our fundamental objective in interpreting a rule of practice is to ascertain and give effect to the intent of the drafters. . . . In other words, we seek to determine, in a reasoned manner, the meaning of the statutory language as applied to the facts of [the] case, including the question of whether the language actually does apply.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Id.*

With respect to the defendant’s claim that the court abused its discretion when it denied her motion to set aside the default, “[i]t is well established that [the] determination of whether to set aside [a] default is within the discretion of the trial court . . . [and] such a determination will not be disturbed unless that discretion has been abused or where injustice will result. In the exercise of its discretion, the trial court may consider not only the presence of mistake, accident, inadvertence, misfortune or other reasonable cause . . . factors such as [t]he seriousness of the default, its duration, the reasons for it and the degree of contumacy involved . . . but also, the totality of the circumstances, including whether the delay has caused prejudice to the nondefaulting party.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Westry v. Litchfield Visitation Center*, 216 Conn. App. 869, 875, 287 A.3d 188 (2022).

I

We turn now to the defendant’s claims that the court was required to set aside the default and that the default was set aside automatically when she filed her answer

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and special defenses because the plaintiff's motion for judgment of strict foreclosure was filed only seven days after the clerk of court granted the plaintiff's motion for default for failure to plead in violation of Practice Book § 17-32 (b).

Practice Book § 17-32 (b) provides: "If a party who has been defaulted under this section files an answer before a judgment after default has been rendered by the judicial authority, the default shall automatically be set aside by operation of law unless a claim for a hearing in damages or a motion for judgment has been filed. If a claim for a hearing in damages or a motion for judgment has been filed, the default may be set aside only by the judicial authority. A claim for a hearing in damages or motion for judgment shall not be filed before the expiration of fifteen days from the date of notice of issuance of the default under this subsection." Practice Book § 17-33 (b) provides: "Since the effect of a default is to preclude the defendant from making any further defense in the case so far as liability is concerned, the judicial authority, at or after the time it renders the default, notwithstanding Section 17-32 (b), may also render judgment in foreclosure cases, in actions similar thereto and in summary process actions, provided the plaintiff has also made a motion for judgment and provided further that any necessary affidavits of debt or accounts or statements verified by oath, in proper form, are submitted to the judicial authority. The judicial authority may render judgment in any contract action where the damages are liquidated provided that the plaintiff has made a motion for judgment and submitted the affidavits and attachments specified in Section 17-25 (b) (1)."

This court has previously addressed the interplay between these rules of practice in foreclosure matters. In *Chase Manhattan Mortgage Corp. v. Burton*, supra, 81 Conn. App. 663, for instance, the plaintiff filed a

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motion for default for failure to plead and a motion for a judgment of strict foreclosure on August 29, 2002. The court clerk granted the motion for default on September 11, 2002, and the court rendered a judgment of strict foreclosure on September 16, 2002. *Id.* This court disagreed with the defendant's contention that Practice Book § 17-32 (b) was controlling and that it required the court to wait at least fifteen days after the default had entered before rendering a judgment against him. *Id.*, 666–67. This court explained that, “[b]ecause this is a foreclosure proceeding, Practice Book § 17-33 (b), which allows a court to render judgment ‘at or after the time it renders the default,’ is applicable.” *Id.*, 667. As a result, we held that, “under . . . § 17-33 (b), the court properly rendered the judgment even though it did so only five days after the default was entered.” *Id.*

This court subsequently decided *Deutsche Bank National Trust Co. v. Bertrand*, *supra*, 140 Conn. App. 646. In *Bertrand*, the plaintiff, on June 15, 2011, reclaimed a motion for judgment of strict foreclosure that it had previously filed and, on June 22, 2011, filed its fifth motion for default for failure to plead because, as of that date, the defendant had not filed any substantive answer to the allegations in the foreclosure complaint. *Id.*, 651. The court took up the motion for judgment of strict foreclosure at a June 27, 2011 short calendar hearing, at which time counsel for the defendant began the hearing by arguing that the plaintiff should not be allowed to move forward with its adjudication of the motion for judgment of strict foreclosure because the court clerk had not yet acted on the plaintiff's motion for default for failure to plead. *Id.*, 652. According to the defendant's counsel, because Practice Book § 17-32 provides that a motion for default “shall be acted on by the clerk not less than seven days from the filing of the motion”; Practice Book § 17-32 (a); the defendant still had two days to avoid the entry of a

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default by filing an answer. *Deutsche Bank National Trust Co. v. Bertrand*, supra, 140 Conn. App. 652. The defendant's counsel also informed the court that he had brought with him to the hearing the defendant's answer and special defenses and requested permission to file them with the court at that time. *Id.* The court stated that it was too late to do so, that the defendant was required to electronically file his answer, and that the request was an "outrageous example" of delay. *Id.* The court told the parties that "[d]efault is entering" and, over the objection of the defendant's counsel, proceeded to render a judgment of strict foreclosure in favor of the plaintiff. *Id.*, 652–53.

On appeal, the defendant in *Bertrand* argued that the court had improperly defaulted him for failure to plead at the hearing on the motion for judgment of strict foreclosure. *Id.*, 654. According to the defendant, he had always intended to file an answer and special defenses but was not obligated to have done so as of the date of the hearing on the motion for judgment of strict foreclosure because, as he read Practice Book § 17-32 (a), he had seven days from the filing of the motion for default in which to file a pleading, and only five days had passed by the date of the hearing. *Id.* We disagreed with the defendant. *Id.*, 655. This court explained that "[n]othing in the plain language of . . . § 17-32 . . . exposes any intent to limit the authority of the court to render a default . . . or to impose upon a judge of the Superior Court any of the procedural restrictions contained in . . . § 17-32, which are expressly directed toward defaults entered by the clerk of the court pursuant to § 17-32." *Id.*, 657. We explained that, "[a]lthough at the time of the hearing . . . § 17-32 precluded the clerk of the court from acting on the plaintiff's pending motion for default, the defendant nevertheless had not fulfilled his obligation to advance the pleadings and the rule did not limit the court's

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authority to default the defendant, especially given the court's finding that the defendant's delay in filing his answer was outrageous and unfounded." *Id.*, 658.

This court in *Bertrand* also addressed the defendant's additional claim that the court violated Practice Book § 17-32 (b) when it refused to accept his answer and special defenses, which he offered to file with the court prior to the court's rendering the judgment of strict foreclosure. *Id.*, 660. In rejecting the defendant's arguments, we explained that § 17-32 (b) unambiguously pertains to the clerk of the court, imposing certain conditions on a clerk's authority to set aside a default. *Id.*, 661. "The rule does not speak to the court's authority to decide whether to accept pleadings that a party may attempt to file in court. [And] to the extent that . . . § 17-32 (b) can be read to imply that some amount of time must be permitted after the entry of a default in order to permit a defaulted defendant an opportunity to plead, *Practice Book § 17-33 expressly exempts the judicial authority from complying with . . . § 17-32 (b) in foreclosure proceedings and permits the court to render a default and a judgment thereon simultaneously.*" (Emphasis added.) *Id.*, 661. Accordingly, this court rejected the defendant's argument that the court's refusal to allow the defendant to file his pleading in court violated § 17-32. *Id.*, 661–62.

Most recently, in *Newtown v. Ostrosky*, 202 Conn. App. 13, 15, 245 A.3d 490 (2020), this court was presented with a similar claim to the one the defendant presses in this case. There, the defendant argued before the trial court that the plaintiff's motion for judgment of strict foreclosure filed on June 6, 2018, which was filed one day prior to the entry of default for failure to plead on June 7, 2018, "was filed prematurely in violation of the language of Practice Book § 17-32 (b), which states: 'A claim for a hearing in damages or motion for judgment shall not be filed before the expiration of

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fifteen days from the date of notice of the issuance of the default under this subsection.’” *Newtown v. Ostrosky*, Superior Court, judicial district of Fairfield, Docket No. CV-16-6060962-S (September 13, 2018) (reprinted at 202 Conn. App. 16, 245 A.3d 492), *aff’d*, 202 Conn. App. 13, 245 A.3d 490 (2020). The defendant argued that the fifteen day limitation in § 17-32 (b) had not expired when the plaintiff filed the motion for judgment of strict foreclosure. *Id.* The trial court rejected the defendant’s arguments, explaining that “[t]he plaintiff asserts, and the court agrees, that the foregoing fifteen day limitation of . . . § 17-32 (b) is excused by Practice Book § 17-33 (b) in the case [of] a judgment entered in a foreclosure case such as this.” *Id.* The court explained that “[t]he expressed reasoning of the . . . § 17-33 (b) exception to waiting fifteen days applies here: ‘Since the effect of a default is to preclude the defendant from making any further defense in the case so far as liability is concerned’” *Id.* The court therefore held that the filing of a motion for judgment of strict foreclosure *prior* to the entry of default by the clerk did not deprive the court of the ability to proceed with judgment less than fifteen days from the entry of a default. *Id.* On appeal, this court affirmed the judgment of the trial court and adopted its “well reasoned decision denying the defendant’s motion to reargue and for reconsideration as a statement of the facts and the applicable law with respect to the issues raised in [the] appeal.” *Newtown v. Ostrosky*, *supra*, 202 Conn. App. 16.

Guided by this court’s interpretation of the rules of practice at issue, we turn to the facts of this case. The plaintiff’s motion for default for failure to plead was filed on September 6, 2019, and was granted on September 17, 2019. The motion for judgment of strict foreclosure was filed eighteen days after the motion for default was filed and seven days after the default had entered. The defendant contends that, because the motion for

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judgment of strict foreclosure was filed only seven days after the default had entered, the motion violated the provision of Practice Book § 17-32 (b) stating that a motion for judgment shall not be filed before the expiration of fifteen days from the date of the notice of issuance of a default. As a result, she claims that the court was required to grant her motion to set aside the default. Alternatively, she argues that the default was set aside automatically under § 17-32 (b) when she filed her answer and special defenses on October 28, 2019. We disagree.

Contrary to the defendant's assertions, it is clear from the language of Practice Book § 17-33 (b) and the aforementioned cases that the fifteen day filing limitation in Practice Book § 17-32 (b) is not controlling in foreclosure proceedings. See, e.g., *Newtown v. Ostrosky*, supra, Superior Court, Docket No. CV-16-6060962-S (motion for judgment of strict foreclosure filed one day prior to entry of default by clerk for failure to plead was not premature). As we explained in *Bertrand*, “§ 17-33 expressly exempts the judicial authority from complying with . . . § 17-32 (b) in foreclosure proceedings and permits the court to render a default and a judgment thereon simultaneously.” *Deutsche Bank National Trust Co. v. Bertrand*, supra, 140 Conn. App. 661. Indeed, § 17-33 (b) expressly authorizes a court to render judgment in foreclosure cases “at or after” the time default is entered “*notwithstanding Section 17-32 (b) . . . provided the plaintiff has also made a motion for judgment* and provided further that any necessary affidavits of debt or accounts or statements verified by oath, in proper form, are submitted to the judicial authority. . . .” (Emphasis added.) Practice Book § 17-33 (b). The defendant's claim simply cannot be squared with this court's decisions interpreting § 17-33. If, as this court has held, a court can render a judgment of

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strict foreclosure simultaneously with a default, or render a judgment of strict foreclosure one day, or two days, or three days after a default is entered, a plaintiff surely cannot be required to wait fifteen days from the entry of a default before filing a motion for judgment of strict foreclosure.

The defendant nonetheless argues that, given the specific facts of this case, this court should conclude that the court was required to set aside the default or, alternatively, that the default automatically was set aside when she filed her answer and special defenses. Among other things, the defendant claims “that a plaintiff can essentially use [Practice Book] § 17-33 (b) as a means to foreclose a defendant from filing a pleading, even [if] it does not intend to proceed on its motion for judgment.” In particular, the defendant argues that, “[t]aking this case as an example, the plaintiff’s motion for default was filed on September 6, 2019, and that motion was granted on September 17, 2019. It is worth noting that the defendant was self-represented at the time. The motion for judgment was then filed on September 24, 2019. This was within the fifteen days prescribed by Practice Book [§] 17-32 (b). The motion for judgment likely first came on the short calendar in the first two weeks of October and was not prosecuted. In fact, none of the other necessary judgment documents (i.e., foreclosure worksheet or affidavit of debt) were filed alongside the September, 2019 motion for judgment of strict foreclosure. However, at that point, the harm is already done. Even if the plaintiff does not prosecute the motion for judgment for months or even years, the defendant is nonetheless required to move to open the default. The defendant avers that this was not the intent of this statutory scheme. The default, in such a situation, should be automatically opened, without the need for a motion, which in this case the defendant filed in an abundance of caution.”

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The defendant's contentions are not persuasive. First, and most importantly, they find no support in the language of Practice Book §§ 17-32 and 17-33 or our cases interpreting those provisions. Second, contrary to the defendant's assertion, nothing prevented her from filing a timely pleading in this case in the first instance or from filing a motion to set aside the default and making the requisite showing of good cause. Third, the record does not support the defendant's contention that the plaintiff was not prepared to proceed with its first motion for judgment of strict foreclosure when it was filed. The court ultimately did not entertain that motion and instead rendered judgment on the plaintiff's second motion for judgment in September, 2021, because the defendant sought reinclusion in the foreclosure mediation program after the first motion for judgment was filed.³

For all of the foregoing reasons, we conclude that the court was not required to set aside the default and that the default was not set aside automatically when the defendant filed her answer and special defenses.

II

The defendant next claims that the court abused its discretion by denying her motion to set aside the

³ We also reject the defendant's contention that the plaintiff could not avail itself of the benefits of Practice Book § 17-33 (b) because its first motion for judgment did not comply with the requirement of subsection (b) that a plaintiff submit with such motions the "necessary affidavits of debt or accounts or statements verified by oath, in proper form" Practice Book § 17-33 (b). Although § 17-33 requires such documents to be submitted in order for a court to render a judgment of foreclosure, we do not interpret the rule to require such documents to be submitted simultaneously with the motion for judgment. Such a requirement is not evident from the plain language of the rule. Moreover, such an interpretation would serve no useful purpose and would disrupt the customary practice of filing such documents on or shortly before a hearing on motions for judgment in foreclosure matters so that courts may enter orders based upon the most current and accurate financial information.

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default. The defendant claims, in a conclusory fashion, that the court abused its discretion because she “was previously self-represented and, upon obtaining counsel, filed an answer and special defenses prior to the court acting on the plaintiff’s motion for judgment of strict foreclosure.” We disagree.

Practice Book § 17-42 provides in relevant part that “[a] motion to set aside a default where no judgment has been rendered may be granted by the judicial authority for *good cause shown* upon such terms as it may impose. . . .” (Emphasis added.) “[The] determination of whether to set aside [a] default is within the discretion of the trial court . . . [and] such a determination will not be disturbed unless that discretion has been abused or where injustice will result.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Westry v. Litchfield Visitation Center*, supra, 216 Conn. App. 875.

Because the default that entered against the defendant was not set aside automatically when she filed her answer and special defenses, it was incumbent on the defendant to file a motion to set aside the default with the court and to demonstrate good cause for doing so. Although the defendant claims that the court erred in denying her motion to set aside the default, her claim fails for the simple reason that her motion did not allege any facts demonstrating that good cause existed. See, e.g., *Chevy Chase Bank, F.S.B. v. Avidon*, 161 Conn. App. 822, 833, 129 A.3d 757 (2015) (trial court did not abuse its discretion in denying motion to set aside default because “[t]he defendant’s motion to open the default did not allege any facts demonstrating that good cause existed to set aside the default”).

It is clear from the record that the plaintiff filed a motion for default for failure to plead approximately one year after it commenced the action against the

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defendant. The plaintiff filed the motion after the foreclosure mediation period had terminated due to the defendant's failure to appear at the last mediation session. Instead of explaining in her motion to set aside the default why she did not timely file her responsive pleading, the defendant, through counsel, simply sets forth the parties' mediation efforts and indicated that mediation ended because she missed a scheduled mediation session on July 30, 2018. She claimed that she was unaware that she should have filed a motion for continuance or a motion to extend the mediation period and that she would be filing a motion for reinclusion into the mediation program. The defendant's motion to set aside then noted that the defendant's counsel took the position that the default was automatically set aside when the defendant filed her answer and special defenses and that the motion had been filed out of an abundance of caution. The defendant's motion, however, did not provide any meaningful explanation for her failure to plead on time. On this record, we cannot conclude that the court abused its discretion in denying the defendant's motion to set aside the default. See, e.g., *Snowdon v. Grillo*, 114 Conn. App. 131, 142, 968 A.2d 984 (2009) (“[w]e agree with the court that the defendant's explanation for failing to plead did not rise to the level of good cause”).

The judgment is affirmed.

In this opinion the other judges concurred.

JOHN HANCOCK LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY
v. SUSAN CURTIN ET AL.
(AC 45565)

Alvord, Elgo and Harper, Js.

Syllabus

The plaintiff sought an interlocutory judgment of interpleader to determine the proper distribution of the proceeds of a life insurance policy it had

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issued to the decedent, J. Several years earlier, the marriage between J and the defendant C had been dissolved and a separation agreement between J and C was incorporated into the dissolution judgment. J and C had no children issue of the marriage, but C had a daughter, the defendant S. The separation agreement contained a clause stating that J shall maintain life insurance in the face amount of \$500,000 and shall designate S as a primary beneficiary and C as a secondary beneficiary. The agreement also provided that the failure of J to maintain such life insurance shall constitute a claim and charge against his estate by C in the face value amount of \$500,000. Two months prior to the rendering of the judgment of dissolution, J obtained a life insurance policy in the face amount of \$500,000, designated “Estate of John R. Curtin” as the primary beneficiary, and did not designate a secondary beneficiary. The plaintiff alleged that it was unable to determine which of the defendants, C, S, or G and E, the coexecutors of J’s estate, were entitled to the proceeds. C and S filed an answer, a special defense and a statement of claim, in which they sought the proceeds of the policy to be awarded to S. G and E filed a motion for summary judgment, in which they argued that the proceeds of the policy should be disbursed to the estate in accordance with the policy. The trial court granted the motion for summary judgment filed by G and E, finding that enforcement of the separation agreement, including the remedy provision, was the appropriate result, denied a cross motion for summary judgment filed by C and S, and entered an order directing the clerk of the court to distribute the proceeds of the policy to the estate. On the appeal of C and S to this court, *held* that the trial court properly concluded that the estate was entitled to summary judgment as a matter of law, as the equitable remedy that C and S sought in the interpleader action was inconsistent with the remedy provided to C in the separation agreement; the provision negotiated between J and C expressly designated that the remedy C had for J’s failure to comply with the insurance provision of the separation agreement was a claim against J’s estate, and this court could not read out of the agreement that provision.

Argued April 6—officially released May 30, 2023

Procedural History

Action for interpleader to determine the defendants’ rights to the proceeds of a certain life insurance policy, and for other relief, brought to the Superior Court in the judicial district of Stamford-Norwalk, where the court, *Clark, J.*, granted the motion for summary judgment filed by the defendant George L. Smith et al. and rendered judgment thereon, from which the named defendant et al. appealed to this court. *Affirmed.*

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Brenden P. Leydon, with whom, on the brief, was *Kevin Collins*, for the appellants (named defendant et al.).

Thomas P. O'Connor, with whom was *Trevor J. Larubia*, for the appellees (defendant George L. Smith et al.).

Opinion

ALVORD, J. The plaintiff, John Hancock Life Insurance Company, instituted this interpleader action to determine the proper distribution of the proceeds of a life insurance policy it had issued to the decedent, John R. Curtin (decedent). The defendants Susan Curtin (Curtin), the decedent's former spouse, and Deborah Schalm, Curtin's daughter, appeal from the summary judgment of the trial court rendered in favor of the defendants George L. Smith and Elizabeth Curtin (coexecutors), coexecutors of the estate of the decedent, and its attendant order distributing the proceeds of the life insurance policy to the estate of the decedent. On appeal, Curtin and Schalm claim that the court improperly determined that Schalm was not entitled to the insurance proceeds because a provision in the dissolution separation agreement, which required the decedent to maintain certain life insurance designating Schalm as the beneficiary, set forth Curtin's remedy for the decedent's failure to maintain such insurance. We affirm the judgment of the trial court.

The record reveals the following undisputed facts and procedural history. The marriage between the decedent and Curtin was dissolved on August 28, 2014, and their separation agreement dated the same day (separation agreement) was incorporated into the dissolution judgment. The decedent and Curtin had no children issue of the marriage. In article II of the separation agreement, governing alimony, the decedent and Curtin provided: "2.2 The Husband shall pay to the Wife non-taxable

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alimony in the semimonthly amount of two thousand five hundred (\$2,500.00) dollars commencing on October 1, 2014. Payments shall be on the 1st and 16th day of the month, each and every consecutive month thereafter.

“The term of said alimony shall be until the soonest of one of the following events: the death of the Husband; the death of the Wife; the remarriage of the Wife; the cohabitation of the Wife pursuant to C.G.S. § 46b-86 (b) except that it shall not be considered cohabitation for the Wife to reside with family members, such as her daughter.”

Also in article II of the separation agreement, the decedent and Curtin included the following provision: “2.3 The Husband shall maintain life insurance at his sole cost and expense in the face amount of \$500,000 until the death or remarriage of the Wife. The Husband shall designate as primary beneficiary Deborah Schalm and designate as secondary beneficiary Susan Curtin. The Husband shall direct the life insurance policy company to send any and all notice, inclusive of payments owed and received, notice of the status of the life insurance policy, and proof that such life insurance remains in full force and effect to Wife. Further, the Wife shall be listed on said policy as a person who shall receive notice from the carrier of any threatened cancellation of coverage.

“The failure of Husband to maintain such life insurance pursuant to this paragraph shall constitute a claim and charge against his estate by the Wife in the face value amount of \$500,000.” (Emphasis added.)

Two months prior to the rendering of the judgment of dissolution, on June 18, 2014, the decedent obtained a life insurance policy from the plaintiff in the face amount of \$500,000 (policy). The decedent designated “Estate of John R. Curtin” as the primary beneficiary. He

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did not designate a secondary beneficiary. The decedent died testate on January 28, 2020, and the coexecutors were appointed.

In July, 2020, the plaintiff commenced this interpleader action pursuant to General Statutes § 52-484.¹ In its complaint, the plaintiff alleged that it was “unable to determine to whom the amount due under the policy is payable and which of the defendants may be entitled thereto.” As relief, the plaintiff sought an interlocutory judgment of interpleader, a discharge of its liabilities upon paying the proceeds of the policy into the court, and “such other relief as the court deems proper, together with the costs and disbursements of this action, including reasonable attorney’s fees, to be paid out of the amount in dispute.”

On January 29, 2021, Curtin and Schalm filed an answer, including a special defense,² and a statement

¹ General Statutes § 52-484 provides: “Whenever any person has, or is alleged to have, any money or other property in his possession which is claimed by two or more persons, either he, or any of the persons claiming the same, may bring a complaint in equity, in the nature of a bill of interpleader, to any court which by law has equitable jurisdiction of the parties and amount in controversy, making all persons parties who claim to be entitled to or interested in such money or other property. Such court shall hear and determine all questions which may arise in the case, may tax costs at its discretion and, under the rules applicable to an action of interpleader, may allow to one or more of the parties a reasonable sum or sums for counsel fees and disbursements, payable out of such fund or property; but no such allowance shall be made unless it has been claimed by the party in his complaint or answer.”

² The special defense stated: “[The] defendants contend that there is no basis for any dispute as it is uncontested that a valid court judgment requires this life insurance policy to be payable to one or both the defendants and not the estate. The flagrant breach of a court order by John R. Curtin, the decedent, and the defendant in the dissolution proceedings cannot legally or equitably inure to the benefit of his estate. [The] defendants thus object to [the] plaintiff paying the proceeds into court as that could have the unintended effect of subjecting the insurance proceeds to an IRS lien and to the claims of other creditors, if any. Therefore, the issue of whether there really is a material dispute as to the rightful beneficiary of the insurance policy should be resolved before the proceeds of the life insurance policy are released by [the] plaintiff.”

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of claim, in which they sought the proceeds of the policy to be awarded to Schalm. The plaintiff thereafter filed replies to Curtin and Schalm's special defense and their statement of claim. On February 3, 2021, the coexecutors of the estate also filed an answer including a special defense.³ On January 19, 2022, the court entered an interlocutory judgment of interpleader and ordered the plaintiff to deposit the proceeds of the policy into court.

The parties filed cross motions for summary judgment. In their September, 2021 motion for summary judgment and memorandum of law in support, Curtin and Schalm argued, on equitable grounds, that the proceeds of the policy should be disbursed to Schalm in accordance with the separation agreement. On March 18, 2022, the coexecutors filed a motion for summary judgment and memorandum of law in support, wherein they argued that the proceeds of the policy should be disbursed to the estate in accordance with the policy. The coexecutors maintained that the separation agreement entitled Curtin to make a claim against the estate and that the court could not provide Curtin and Schalm with a different remedy than that specified in the separation agreement. In support of their motion for summary judgment, the coexecutors filed the affidavit of coexecutor Smith and attached thereto the decedent's certificate of death, the life insurance policy, the separation

³ The special defense stated that an interlocutory judgment of interpleader should enter and the funds should be deposited into the court. It further stated: "The court should thereafter permit the parties to join and/or cite in any nonparties that have an interest in the outcome of this proceeding. For example, in their answer and special defense, [Curtin and Schalm] allege that the IRS has an interest in the disputed fund. . . . Thus the IRS and others will have an interest in the outcome of this proceeding, and the court should order that they be formally noticed and/or joined so that they may protect their rights. . . . Once the court is satisfied that all interested parties have been noticed and/or joined as appropriate, it should proceed 'as in other cases' to adjudicate the merits of the underlying dispute based upon the claims submitted by the parties." (Citations omitted.)

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agreement, and Curtin’s claim against the estate. The coexecutors also filed a statement of claim.

Curtin and Schalm filed a reply memorandum, in which they argued that their equitable claim is not barred by the language in the separation agreement providing for a claim against the estate because the decedent and Curtin did not intend for that provision to set forth an exclusive remedy. The coexecutors also filed a reply memorandum, in which they argued that “*Curtin’s* rights and interests—defined by the terms of the separation agreement—are irreconcilable with the equitable relief that [Curtin and Schalm] now seek on behalf of . . . *Schalm*” and, accordingly, equitable relief must be denied. (Emphasis added.) The court held oral argument on May 9, 2022.

On June 7, 2022, the court issued its memorandum of decision on the cross motions for summary judgment, in which it stated: “While . . . Schalm and . . . Curtin present argument and authority for the court to remedy a situation where a party has failed to follow through on a court order, many of the cases to which they cite . . . are distinguishable in that those cases do not appear to have an available remedy within such order. This is simply not a case where the insurance policy was never taken out or funds were liquidated or diverted in some manner to eliminate claims for such proceeds. Rather, in this case the parties negotiated a consequence to a breach of the [separation] agreement in the form of a clear and specific remedy. A policy was purchased at exactly the value required. The proceeds for such policy remain available and have been deposited with the court. . . . Curtin may pursue her claim, including any related claim with . . . Schalm and press the priority of such claim(s) with the estate.

“While . . . Schalm may claim a constructive trust was created for her benefit through the separation

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agreement, a review of any such right must be considered in light of the entire terms of the separation agreement. By negotiating a provision within the separation agreement which grants a remedy for breach to . . . Curtin, the parties appear to have limited the rights of . . . Schalm accordingly.”

The court concluded: “Given the clear language of the separation agreement which includes a remedy for a breach related to the life insurance that the parties negotiated and filed with the court, this court does not believe that equity requires it to rewrite the separation agreement or to ignore specific provisions that the parties agreed to as a remedy for breach. Based on the applicable law . . . the enforcement of the separation agreement, including the remedy provision, is, as a matter of law, the appropriate result.” Accordingly, the court granted the coexecutors’ motion for summary judgment and denied Curtin and Schalm’s motion for summary judgment. The court entered an order directing the clerk of the court to distribute the proceeds of the policy to the estate. This appeal followed.⁴

On appeal, Curtin and Schalm claim that the court erred in rendering summary judgment because it improperly determined that the separation agreement’s specified remedy was an exclusive remedy. The coexecutors first respond that the separation agreement provides an exclusive remedy. They additionally argue in the alternative that, even if the agreement does not contain an exclusive remedy, Curtin and Schalm’s equitable claim is precluded because it is inconsistent with

⁴ On June 17, 2022, Curtin and Schalm filed a motion for reconsideration, and the coexecutors filed a memorandum in opposition thereto. The court denied the motion for reconsideration, and Curtin and Schalm thereafter amended their appeal. Curtin and Schalm do not brief any claim that the court improperly denied their motion for reconsideration and, therefore, they have abandoned any such claim. See *Updike, Kelly & Spellacy, P.C. v. Beckett*, 269 Conn. 613, 642–43, 850 A.2d 145 (2004) (claims not briefed on appeal are considered abandoned).

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the terms of the separation agreement and the separation agreement cannot be construed as granting enforcement rights to Schalm as a third-party beneficiary. We conclude that we need not determine whether the separation agreement's specified remedy afforded to Curtin constituted an exclusive remedy because we conclude that the court properly determined, as a matter of law, that Curtin and Schalm were not entitled to equitable relief in the form of distribution of the policy proceeds to Schalm.

Before we address Curtin and Schalm's claim on appeal, we set forth the general legal principles regarding interpleader actions pursuant to § 52-484. Section 52-484 provides in relevant part: "Whenever any person has, or is alleged to have, any money or other property in his possession which is claimed by two or more persons, either he, or any of the persons claiming the same, may bring a complaint in equity, in the nature of a bill of interpleader, to any court which by law has equitable jurisdiction of the parties and amount in controversy, making all persons parties who claim to be entitled to or interested in such money or other property. Such court shall hear and determine all questions which may arise in the case" "Actions pursuant [to] § 52-484 involve two distinct parts In the first part, the court must determine whether the interpleader plaintiff has alleged facts sufficient to establish that there are adverse claims to the fund or property at issue. . . . If the court considers interpleader to be proper under the circumstances, then the court may render an interlocutory judgment of interpleader. . . . Only once an interlocutory judgment of interpleader has been rendered may the court hold a trial on the merits, compelling the parties to litigate their respective claims to the disputed property." (Citations omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Trikona Advisers*

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Ltd. v. Haida Investments Ltd., 318 Conn. 476, 483–84, 122 A.3d 242 (2015); see also Practice Book § 23-44.

We next set forth the standard regarding summary judgment. “A trial court’s decision on whether to grant a motion for summary judgment presents a question of law, and our review of that decision is plenary. . . . Summary judgment is appropriate when the record before the trial court reveals that there is no genuine dispute of material fact and that the moving party is entitled to judgment as a matter of law.” (Citation omitted.) *Martinez v. Empire Fire & Marine Ins. Co.*, 322 Conn. 47, 55, 139 A.3d 611 (2016). The material facts of the present case are undisputed; we therefore must determine whether, on the basis of those facts, the trial court properly determined that Curtin and Schalm were not entitled to the equitable relief they sought, given the terms of the separation agreement.

In making that determination, we must apply principles of contract interpretation. “Our Supreme Court has instructed that interpretation of a separation agreement incorporated into a dissolution decree is guided by the general principles governing the construction of contracts. . . . A contract must be construed to effectuate the intent of the parties, which is determined from the language used interpreted in light of the situation of the parties and the circumstances connected with the transaction. . . . [T]he intent of the parties is to be ascertained by a fair and reasonable construction of the written words and . . . the language used must be accorded its common, natural, and ordinary meaning and usage where it can be sensibly applied to the subject matter of the contract. . . . Where the language of the contract is clear and unambiguous, the contract is to be given effect according to its terms. A court will not torture words to import ambiguity where the ordinary meaning leaves no room for ambiguity Similarly, any ambiguity in a contract must emanate from the

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language used in the contract rather than from one party's subjective perception of the terms. . . .

“[T]he mere fact that the parties advance different interpretations of the language in question does not necessitate a conclusion that the language is ambiguous. . . . [A] contract is ambiguous if the intent of the parties is not clear and certain from the language of the contract itself. . . . The 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. . . . If the language of the contract is susceptible to more than one reasonable interpretation, the contract is ambiguous. . . .

“If contract language is definitive of the parties' intent, then the interpretation of the language becomes a question of law for the court. . . . Our review, in such a case, is plenary. . . . If, however, the language is not clear, then the intention of the parties as represented in the contract becomes a question of fact. . . . If the fact in question is genuinely material to the resolution of the issue, then it is not the proper subject of summary judgment.” (Citations omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Watkins v. Watkins*, 152 Conn. App. 99, 104–105, 96 A.3d 1264 (2014).

Finally, we set forth the relevant principles of law governing a claim for a constructive trust because that doctrine is at the root of Curtin and Schalm's equitable claim to the policy proceeds. “A constructive trust arises contrary to intention and in invitum, against one who, by fraud, actual or constructive, by duress or abuse of confidence, by commission of wrong, or by any form of unconscionable conduct, artifice, concealment, or questionable means, or who in any way against equity and good conscience, either has obtained or holds the legal right to property which he ought not, in equity and good conscience, hold and enjoy. . . .

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The issue raised by a claim for a constructive trust is, in essence, whether a party has committed actual or constructive fraud or whether he or she has been unjustly enriched.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Mitchell v. Redvers*, 130 Conn. App. 100, 112–13, 22 A.3d 659 (2011).

In applying these principles, we first conclude that the provision of the separation agreement related to the life insurance policy is clear and unambiguous. Pursuant to that provision, the decedent was required to maintain life insurance in the face amount of \$500,000 and to designate Schalm as the primary beneficiary and Curtin as the secondary beneficiary. The decedent breached the agreement by designating his estate as the beneficiary of the policy. The agreement provided that the failure of the decedent to maintain a policy in accordance with the agreement “shall constitute a claim and charge against his estate by [Curtin] in the face value amount of \$500,000.”

Curtin and Schalm’s claim that the court should have awarded the policy proceeds to Schalm in this interpleader action is inconsistent with, and contrary to, the provision negotiated between the decedent and Curtin in their separation agreement. “[A] court simply cannot disregard the words used by the parties or revise, add to, or create a new agreement.” (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *Nassra v. Nassra*, 139 Conn. App. 661, 669, 56 A.3d 970 (2012). The provision negotiated between the decedent and Curtin *expressly designated Curtin* as having a claim against the decedent’s estate; we cannot read out of the agreement the provision specifically affording Curtin a remedy.⁵ See *Isham v. Isham*,

⁵ As part of their argument that the court erred in rendering summary judgment in this interpleader action, because it improperly determined that the separation agreement’s specified remedy was an exclusive remedy, Curtin and Schalm argue that the coexecutors “are literally acting in knowing contempt of the divorce judgment and seeking the court to validate their contemptuous conduct.” Because we agree with the trial court’s conclusion

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292 Conn. 170, 182, 972 A.2d 228 (2009) (“in construing contracts, we give effect to all the language included therein, as the law of contract interpretation . . . militates against interpreting a contract in a way that renders a provision superfluous” (internal quotation marks omitted)).

The legal authority relied on by Curtin and Schalm to establish Schalm’s claim to the policy proceeds does not compel a contrary conclusion. The Connecticut case on which Curtin and Schalm principally rely is *Kulmacz v. New York Life Ins. Co.*, 39 Conn. Supp. 470, 466 A.2d 808 (1983). In that case, the trial court rendered a judgment dissolving the marriage of Bruno F. Kulmacz, the decedent, and his former spouse, Lydia C. Kulmacz, which included an order requiring the decedent to maintain “ ‘New York Life Insurance Co. policy No. 23176699 wherein the named beneficiaries are also irrevocable.’ ” *Id.*, 471–72. “At the time of the dissolution the sole beneficiary of this policy was Lydia; the parties and the court, however, were under the mistaken belief that the four children of the marriage were beneficiaries.” *Id.*, 472. Prior to his death, the decedent wrote to the insurer to request that the beneficiaries of the policy be changed from Lydia to his siblings, but the insurer never acted on the request. *Id.* Following the decedent’s death, a trial in an interpleader action was held and the court ruled that “ ‘[s]ince the policy named [Lydia] . . . as the beneficiary the [life insurance] [c]ompany is ordered to turn over the net proceeds to Lydia . . . and she in turn is ordered to distribute the funds to her children equally.’ ” *Id.*, 473.

On appeal in *Kulmacz*, the Appellate Session of the Superior Court affirmed the judgment of the trial court. The decedent’s siblings argued, inter alia, that the decedent’s request to change the beneficiaries constituted

that Curtin and Schalm cannot prevail on their equitable claim to the policy proceeds, this argument necessarily fails.

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substantial compliance with the procedure set forth in the policy and therefore effectuated the change. *Id.*, 474. The decedent’s siblings further argued that “since [the decedent] effectively changed beneficiaries, Lydia and the children no longer have a claim to the proceeds, but nonetheless have a cause of action against the estate for breach of contract.” *Id.*, 475. They maintained that Lydia and the children were “merely creditors of the estate and that their claim to the proceeds of the policy is subordinate” to that of the decedent’s siblings. *Id.* Rejecting the siblings’ argument, the court determined that “Lydia and the children had a vested interest in the policy proceeds by virtue of the dissolution judgment,” and the decedent’s attempt to change the beneficiaries was ineffective. *Id.* The court explained: “If sufficient consideration appears to support the insured’s promise to make the claimant the beneficiary or not to change the designation so as to deprive the named beneficiary of his interest therein, the claimant takes a vested interest in the proceeds. And this is true regardless of the fact that the policy gives the insured the right to change the designation. . . . A settlement of property rights arising from a contemplated divorce is satisfactory consideration for the acquisition of such a vested interest in a policy designation.” (Citation omitted; internal quotation marks omitted.) *Id.*

Kulmacz is not controlling in the present case because *Kulmacz* did not involve a separation agreement pursuant to which a third party was to be designated as the beneficiary of the life insurance policy. Moreover, in *Kulmacz*, there was no additional provision affording the former spouse a claim against the estate.⁶

⁶ Curtin and Schalm’s argument section of their principal appellate brief contains lengthy block quotes from Superior Court cases, which they describe as involving “similar situations.” The cases cited, however, are factually distinguishable, in that they, like *Kulmacz v. New York Life Ins. Co.*, *supra*, 39 Conn. Supp. 470, do not involve a separation agreement provision affording the former spouse with the specific remedy of a claim against the estate in the event that the decedent does not comply with a

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Curtin and Schalm have not provided this court with any authority, from this jurisdiction or any other, involving the precise factual situation present here. The cases on which they rely are distinguishable, as they all involve a decedent's former spouse or a decedent's child obtaining equitable relief following the decedent's breach of a separation agreement provision or noncompliance with a court order. See *Travelers Ins. Co. v. Daniels*, 667 F.2d 572, 573 (7th Cir. 1981) (decedent's minor child entitled to judgment in her favor where divorce decree required decedent to name her as beneficiary); *Rogers v. Rogers*, 63 N.Y.2d 582, 584, 473 N.E.2d 226 (1984) (former spouse entitled to summary judgment where separation agreement provided that decedent would continue present life insurance policy with former spouse and children as named equal irrevocable beneficiaries); *Wood v. Martin*, 299 Va. 238, 242, 848 S.E.2d 809 (2020) (former spouse entitled to judgment in her favor where separation agreement required decedent to maintain her as 50 percent beneficiary of specified policy as long as decedent had spousal support obligation or until youngest child graduated from college or reached twenty-third birthday). None of the cases on which Curtin and Schalm rely involve a separation agreement to designate a third party as the beneficiary of a life insurance policy and an accompanying provision affording a remedy for noncompliance to the decedent's former spouse rather than the third party.⁷

separation agreement provision requiring that the decedent designate a third party as a beneficiary.

⁷ The secondary sources relied on by Curtin and Schalm likewise do not address this unique factual situation. See 3 Restatement (Second), Contracts § 330, comment (c), p. 51 (1981); *id.*, illustration (6) ("As part of a property settlement in divorce proceedings A contracts with his wife C to make an irrevocable change in the beneficiary of a policy of insurance on A's life to D, their minor child. A fails to do so and later gratuitously makes his second wife E the beneficiary of the policy. On A's death B, the insurance company, pays the amount of the policy into court and interpleads C, D and E. D is entitled to the money."); 3 S. Plitt et al., *Couch on Insurance* (3d Ed. Rev. 2011) § 37:35, p. 37-35 ("[w]hen the insured is obligated by judicial decree

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Schalm and Curtin argue that “as a direct result of the court’s ruling Schalm will be getting much less of the proceeds due to the higher priority tax claims (and administration costs).⁸ Courts addressing this issue have specifically noted that equity compels a direct payment of insurance proceeds outside of probate for this very reason.” (Footnote added.) We recognize that courts have stated that, “[g]iven that a primary purpose of life insurance is the prompt payment of death claims, and that proceeds payable to a named beneficiary (as opposed to the estate) have the advantage of passing outside probate administration, we find no reason to require [the] defendant to file another costly action against the estate seeking proceeds for which she is equitably entitled and which [the] plaintiff holds, under equitable principles, as a trustee.” *Bailey v. Prudential Ins. Co. of America*, 124 Ohio App. 3d 31, 39, 705 N.E.2d 389 (1997), appeal dismissed, 81 Ohio St. 3d 1443, 690 N.E.2d 15 (1998); see also *Kulmacz v. New York Life Ins. Co.*, supra, 39 Conn. Supp. 476 (“where, as here, the insurer did not make payment to either claimant, we hold that it is equitable and proper to award the

to change the beneficiary under his or her policy, the law will regard him or her as having done that which he or she is obligated to do and will treat the policies as equitably assigned to the persons who should have been named as beneficiaries”).

⁸ The separation agreement also provided: “The Parties are presently liable for income tax returns (Federal and State) in an amount in excess of \$200,000 and said amount continues to increase due to the accrual of interest and/or penalties. Despite the fact that said liabilities are the result of joint tax filings by the parties, the Husband hereby agrees to assume all responsibility for such liabilities and shall indemnify Wife and hold her harmless relative thereto. In the event that income tax refunds are received on any joint tax returns, the Husband would retain one-hundred percent (100%) of such refunds up to the amount of any taxes, penalties, and interest actually paid by the Husband on joint federal and state income tax returns from the date of the judgment of the dissolution of the parties’ marriage. Once the Husband has been reimbursed for the payment of taxes, penalties and interest on joint income tax liabilities, the parties will then equally divide any refunds on joint federal and state income tax returns.”

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proceeds to the party legally entitled to them, rather than to another and thereby necessitating further litigation against the estate”). We do not find the reasoning articulated in *Bailey* and *Kulmacz* applicable here because the separation agreement in this case expressly designated Schalm, a third party, as the primary beneficiary but provided a remedy for noncompliance to Curtin.

Because the equitable remedy that Curtin and Schalm sought in this interpleader action is inconsistent with the remedy provided for in the separation agreement, the trial court properly concluded that the estate was entitled to summary judgment as a matter of law.

The judgment is affirmed.

In this opinion the other judges concurred.
