

8/26/11

STATE OF RHODE ISLAND  
COMMISSION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

RICHR NO. 11 EPD 249

EEOC No. 16J-2011-00219

Complainant

DECISION ON MOTION  
TO DISMISS A PARTY

Respondents

INTRODUCTION

On March 18, 2011, [redacted] (hereafter referred to as the complainant) filed a charge of discrimination with the Rhode Island Commission for Human Rights (hereafter referred to as the Commission) against [redacted] (hereafter referred to as [redacted]) and [redacted]. The charge alleged in relevant part that [redacted] discriminated against the complainant in employment because of her disability in violation of the Fair Employment Practices Act, Title 28, Chapter 5 of the General Laws of Rhode Island (FEPA) and the Civil Rights of People with Disabilities Act, Title 42, Chapter 87 of the General Laws of Rhode Island (PDA). On or around March 31, 2011, [redacted] filed a motion to dismiss, arguing that it was not the complainant's employer and that therefore the charge against it should be dismissed. On May 25, 2011, the complainant filed an objection to the motion.

DISCUSSION

THE STANDARDS FOR ASSESSING A MOTION TO DISMISS

In determining a motion to dismiss, the Commission will view the complainant's allegations in a light most favorable to the complainant. See, e.g., DiMase v. Fleet Nat'l Bank, 723 A.2d 765, 768 (R.I. 1999).

In determining a motion to dismiss based on failure to state a claim, the Commission's role is a limited one. See Hyatt v. Vill. House Convalescent Home, Inc., 880 A.2d 821 (R.I. 2005). In Hyatt, the Court determined that dismissal should be granted only when it is clear:

"that the plaintiff would not be entitled to relief from the defendant under any set of facts that could be proven in support of the plaintiff's claim." Hendrick, 755

A.2d at 793 (quoting Bruno v. Criterion Holdings, Inc., 736 A.2d 99, 99 (R.I. 1999) and Folan v. State, 723 A.2d 287, 289 (R.I. 1999)); see also Ellis v. Rhode Island Public Transit Authority, 586 A.2d 1055, 1057 (R.I. 1991).

[Footnotes omitted.]

880 A.2d at 825.

THE ALLEGATIONS OF THE CHARGE AGAINST \_\_\_\_\_ ARE SUFFICIENT TO  
JUSTIFY INVESTIGATION

The charge alleges that \_\_\_\_\_ discriminated against the complainant in employment because of her disability with respect to terms and conditions of employment, including denial of reasonable accommodation, and termination. The charge alleges, among other things, that the complainant sought a reasonable accommodation for her disability from \_\_\_\_\_, consisting of an extension of a leave of absence, that \_\_\_\_\_ has "an inflexible policy" with respect to the length of leaves, and that \_\_\_\_\_ denied her the accommodation and terminated her employment. Thus, the charge alleges that \_\_\_\_\_ was involved in employment actions which the complainant argues are discriminatory.

\_\_\_\_\_ contends that Rhode Island Hospital was the actual employer of the complainant. \_\_\_\_\_ further states that Lifespan is a health system comprised of four hospitals and that \_\_\_\_\_ serves as a "supporting organization and holding company for the health system". Motion to Dismiss, p. 1. \_\_\_\_\_ asserts that it has no first-hand knowledge of the complainant or the allegations of the charge.

The definition of "employer" contained within Section 28-5-6(7)(i) of the FEPA is as follows: "Employer" includes the state and all political subdivisions of the state and any person in this state employing four (4) or more individuals, and **any person acting in the interest of an employer directly or indirectly.**" [Emphasis added.]

R.I.G.L. Section 28-5-7(6) provides that it is an unlawful employment practice:

**For any person, whether or not an employer, employment agency, labor organization, or employee, to aid, abet, incite, compel, or coerce the doing of any act declared by this section to be an unlawful employment practice, or to obstruct or prevent any person from complying with the provisions of this chapter or any order issued pursuant to this chapter, or to attempt directly or indirectly to commit any act declared by this section to be an unlawful employment practice** .... [Emphasis added.]

The PDA contains even broader language, providing that any person or entity doing business in the state of Rhode Island is a proper respondent under the PDA. See R.I.G.L. Section 42-87-2.

Court cases interpreting state laws with language similar to R.I.G.L. Section 28-5-7(6) have held non-employers liable for discrimination. *See, e.g., Sgrignoli v. Schneider Training Academy, Inc.*, 2009 WL 1069163 (M.D.Pa. 2009) (where the prospective direct employer decided not to hire the plaintiff based on guidelines as interpreted by the parent company, the plaintiff could proceed with the claim that the parent company aided and abetted disability discrimination under state law); *Edwards v. New Opportunities, Inc.*, 2007 WL 947996 (D. Conn. 2007) (complaint for ancestral origin discrimination under Connecticut law would not be dismissed against an individual defendant who was employed by a company other than the complainant's employer as the plaintiff alleged that the individual defendant aided, abetted and incited ancestral origin discrimination against the plaintiff); *Cronin v. Hall Street Cold Storage Warehouses, Inc.*, 1997 WL 720753 (E.D.N.Y. 1997) (summary judgment denied in plaintiff's age discrimination complaint against an individual who was considering buying the plaintiff's employer because the plaintiff submitted sufficient evidence that the individual aided, abetted and incited age discrimination); *Colorado Civil Rights Com'n v. Travelers Ins. Co.*, 759 P.2d 1358 (Colo. 1988) (state commission's finding of discrimination against an insurance company which provided a discriminatory insurance policy to the plaintiff's employer upheld as the insurance company aided and abetted the employer's discrimination).

The plain language of the FEPA and relevant case law make clear that R.I.G.L. Section 28-5-7(6) prohibits non-employers from aiding, abetting or inciting unlawful employment practices. The plain language of the FEPA defines an employer to include any person acting in the interest of an employer. The PDA covers anyone doing business in Rhode Island whether they are employers or not.

will not be dismissed as a respondent because the charge, interpreted favorably to the complainant, alleges that [redacted] violated the FEPA and the PDA. The Commission cannot at this point determine whether or not [redacted] was the complainant's employer. Even if [redacted] was not the complainant's employer, the Commission cannot at this point determine whether [redacted] had a role in alleged discriminatory actions and/or the policies that are alleged to be discriminatory. The Commission emphasizes that it is not finding at this point that [redacted] has discriminated; it is simply finding that investigation of the allegations can proceed. At the end of the investigation, the Commission will determine whether or not there is probable cause to believe the allegations of the charge with respect to [redacted].

### CONCLUSION

The Commission has assessed the allegations of the charge, in light of the standards for motions to dismiss, and found that the allegations are sufficient to proceed with investigation. At the conclusion of the investigation, the Commission will determine whether or not there is probable cause to believe the allegations of the charge with respect to [redacted].

**ORDER**

's motion to dismiss it as a party is denied.

Entered this <sup>x</sup>26<sup>th</sup> day of August, 2011.



ALBERTO APONTE CARDONA, ESQ.

Alberto Aponte Cardona  
Preliminary Investigating Commissioner