Jamie K. Serb (SBN 289601)
jamie@crosnerlegal.com
Sepideh Ardestani, Esq. (SBN 274259)
sepideh@crosnerlegal.com
Zachary M. Crosner, Esq. (SBN 272295)
zach@crosnerlegal.com
CROSNER LEGAL, PC
9440 Santa Monica Blvd. Suite 301
Beverly Hills, CA 90210
Tel: (866) 276-7637
Fax: (310) 510-6429

Attorneys for Plaintiff
RHINA VILLEDA

SUPERIOR COURT OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

IN AND FOR THE COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES

RHINA VILLEDA, as an individual and on behalf of all others similarly situated,

Plaintiff,

v.

SOLHEIM LUTHERAN HOME, a California corporation; and DOES 1-100 inclusive,

Defendants.

CASE NO. 21STCV45430

Assigned for All Purposes to:
Hon. Lawrence P. Riff
Dept. SSC-7

MEMORANDUM OF POINTS AND AUTHORITIES IN SUPPORT OF MOTION FOR PRELIMINARY APPROVAL OF CLASS ACTION AND PAGA SETTLEMENT

Date: TBD
Time: 10:00 a.m.
Dept.: SSC-7

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I. INTRODUCTION

Plaintiff Rhina Villeda respectfully requests that the Court preliminarily approve the Class Action and PAGA Settlement Agreement and Class Notice ("Agreement") entered into between Plaintiff and Defendant Solheim Lutheran Home ("Solheim" or "Defendant"). The proposed settlement seeks to resolve claims in the above captioned matter in exchange for a non-reversionary $225,000 Gross Settlement Amount. The settlement class is comprised of all current and former non-exempt employees who are not bound by Solheim's arbitration agreement and employed by Solheim in California during the Class Period of December 14, 2017 to the date of preliminary approval (unless modified under the Settlement's Escalator Clause).

The Agreement and notice distribution plan are the products of adversarial, arm's-length negotiations by informed counsel and parties, facilitated by an experienced mediator. The settlement is fair, reasonable, and adequate to all. Plaintiff has analyzed the strengths and vulnerabilities of the claims with Defendant's potential exposure and determined the $225,000 proposed settlement is well within the range of reasonableness and is in the Class Members' best interests. The length and risks of further litigation and trial that affect the value of the claims were all carefully weighed. In addition, the defenses asserted by Defendant, the uncertainty of class certification, the difficulties of complex litigation, and the lengthy process of establishing specific damages and various possible delays and appeals, were also considered by Plaintiff and counsel in negotiating the proposed settlement. Further, the proposed settlement satisfies the criteria for preliminary approval under California Rules of Court, Rule 3.769.

Accordingly, Plaintiff seeks: (1) preliminary approval of the settlement; (2) provisional certification of the Class; (3) appointment of Plaintiff as Class Representative; (4) appointment of Crosner Legal, PC as Class Counsel; (5) approval of the Parties' proposed Notice of Class Action Settlement ("Notice") and method of notifying the Class Members; (6) a hearing date for Plaintiff's Motion for Final Approval of Class Action Settlement; and (7) entry of an Order Granting Preliminary Approval of Class Action Settlement.

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II. BACKGROUND/LITIGATION HISTORY

Defendant Solheim is a senior living facility in Eagle Rock, California, that provides residential living, assisted living, memory care, skilled nursing and rehabilitation services to its clients. Plaintiff Villeda worked for Defendant from 1994 through January 2021 as a non-exempt Certified Nursing Assistant. Her duties included providing physical support to clients in performing daily living activities, including rising out of bed, bathing, dressing, toileting, walking or exercising, and social actions. Due to the physically demanding nature of her position, Plaintiff slowly became unable to perform her duties due to the pain and injuries she suffered throughout the years of her employment and filed a worker's compensation claim. After her doctor ordered that she perform light duties only, Solheim claimed it was unable to accommodate her work restrictions, which Plaintiff claims was unlawful. (Ardestani Decl., ¶ 12.)

During her employment and during the class period, Plaintiff contends she lost compensable time while waiting in line to clock in/out for her shifts and lunch breaks, and also that Defendant failed to pay overtime at the correct rate because it did not properly calculated the employees' "regular rate of pay" used to determine the overtime rate. Plaintiff further alleges she he and other class members frequently were denied the opportunity to take compliant meal and rest periods due to the nature of the work, and breaks regularly were late, shortened or interrupted. Per Plaintiff, Defendant rarely paid any premiums for these missed/non-compliant breaks. Finally, Plaintiff alleges she and the class members had to use their personal phones on company business, such as communicating with supervisors, and never received any reimbursement. (Ardestani Decl., ¶ 13.)

Based on these allegations, on December 14, 2021, Plaintiff filed a class action complaint against Defendant. On May 9, 2022, after notice to the LWDA and Defendant and exhausting administrative remedies, Plaintiff filed a First Amended Complaint (the "Operative Complaint"), alleging a cause of action against Solheim pursuant to the Private Attorneys General Act ("PAGA"). The Operative Complaint alleges claims for failure to pay wages, including overtime wages, meal and rest break violations, inaccurate wage statements, waiting time penalties, failure to reimburse expenses, and unfair competition.[1] (Agreement, § 2.1.) (Ardestani Decl., ¶ 14.)

In July 2024, the Parties participated in mediation with Henry Bongiovi, Esq., a respected wage and hour class action mediator. The mediation lasted a full day and with the mediator's assistance the Parties reached agreement on all major issues and ultimately prepared and executed the Agreement now before the Court for approval. (Ardestani Decl., ¶ 15.)

III. <u>INVESTIGATION</u>

Prior to the mediation, the Parties engaged in written discovery and, after agreeing to mediation, engaged in further informal discovery. As a result, Defendant provided Plaintiff with extensive informal discovery, including Plaintiff's personnel, time, and payroll records, time and payroll records for a sampling of 75% of the Class Members,[2] wage statement exemplars, Defendant's employee handbooks, including Defendant's policies and procedures regarding the payment of wages, the provision of meal and rest breaks, timekeeping policies (including recording hours), issuance of wage statements, and termination wages, as well as information regarding the number of putative Class Members who are current and former employees, the number of Aggrieved Employees, the number of workweeks throughout the Class Period, and the number of pay periods throughout the PAGA Period. From this information, Plaintiff was able to analyze Defendant's liability for the claims asserted in this case and, with the assistance of Plaintiff's experts at Berger Consulting Group, the potential exposure and damages. (Ardestani Decl., ¶ 16.)

[1] Plaintiff uploaded the FAC to the LWDA. (Ardestani Decl., Exh. 5.)
[2] Plaintiff's experts confirmed the 75% sampling would be statistically significant and sufficient for them to extrapolate their analysis to the entire class for purposes of mediation. (Ardestani Decl., ¶ 16.)

Based on this informal discovery, Plaintiff contends the Class Members were not paid all wages due, not provided with legally compliant meal and rest periods, did not receive compliant wage statements, did not receive required expense reimbursement, and did not receive all wages due on separation of employment. In considering the reasonableness of the proposed settlement, Plaintiff considered each of Defendant's counterarguments, which sharply contested Plaintiff's claims. Plaintiff and counsel weighed the strength of Defendant's arguments, including the risks of prevailing at class certification and on the merits, Defendant's financial condition, and determined that the proposed settlement is in the best interests of the Class. Although remaining confident in the strength of her claims, these factors led Plaintiff to discount the exposure analysis, as discussed below. (Ardestani Decl., ¶ 17.)

IV. <u>TERMS OF THE PROPOSED SETTLEMENT</u>

A. <u>Deductions from the Settlement</u>

The Parties have agreed (subject to the Court's approval) to resolve this matter for the non-reversionary total sum of $225,000.00 ("Gross Settlement Amount" or "GSA") (Agreement, § 3.1.) The GSA includes: (a) reasonable attorney's fees of up to $75,000.00 (33.33% of the GSA)[3] to compensate Class Counsel for work already performed and all work remaining to be performed (Agreement, § 3.2.2.); (b) actual litigation expenses as documented and not to exceed $10,000.00[4] (Agreement, § 3.2.2.); (c) an Enhancement Award to Plaintiff in an amount not to exceed $2,500.00 (Agreement, § 3.2.1.); (d) Administration Costs to Simpluris, Inc. (the proposed settlement administrator) in an amount not to exceed $7,000 (Agreement, § 3.2.3.); and (e) PAGA penalties to the LWDA of $18,750.00 (which is 75% of the $25,000.00 PAGA Payment, with the remaining 25% or $6,250.00 to Aggrieved Employees) (Agreement, § 3.2.5.).

[3] The percentage method, with or without a lodestar cross-check, may be used in common fund cases like this one. *Laffitte v. Robert Half Internat., Inc.* (2016) 1 Cal.5th 480, 503. In support of their fee request at Final Approval, Class Counsel will provide the Court with lodestar information to permit the Court to do a lodestar cross-check in connection with Class Counsel's request for attorney's fees.

[4] At Final Approval, Class Counsel will provide documentation regarding actual expenses incurred to support Class Counsel's request for reimbursement of actual expenses.

Defendant will pay all applicable employer-side payroll taxes separate and apart from the GSA. (Agreement, § 3.1.)

B. Calculation of the Individual Settlement Payments to Class and Aggrieved Employees

After all Court-approved deductions from the GSA, it is estimated that at least $100,500 ("Net Settlement Amount" or "NSA"), less any applicable employee-side taxes, will be distributed to the estimated 169 Class Members, with an average individual settlement amount of around $595. Additionally, it is estimated that the 25% PAGA Payment ($6,250.00) will be distributed to the estimated 357 Aggrieved Employees,[5] resulting in an average payment of about $17.50 per Aggrieved Employee. (Ardestani Decl., ¶ 19.) The distribution will be made 14 days after Solheim funds the GSA, and under no circumstances will any portion of the Settlement revert to Defendant. (Agreement, §§ 3.1 and 4.4.)

Simpluris will calculate and issue Individual Class Payments to Participating Class Members by "(a) dividing the Net Settlement Amount by the total number of Workweeks worked by all Participating Class Members during the Class Period and (b) multiplying the result by each Participating Class Member's Workweeks." (Agreement, § 3.2.4.) Additionally, Simpluris will calculate and issue payments to Aggrieved Employees based (a) dividing the amount of the Aggrieved Employees' 25% share of PAGA Penalties ($1,250) by the total number of PAGA Period Pay Periods worked by all Aggrieved Employees during the PAGA Period and (b) multiplying the result by each Aggrieved Employee's PAGA Period Pay Periods." (Agreement, § 3.2.5.1.) Each Class Member's class settlement award will be apportioned as 20% wages and 80% percent statutory penalties and interest, while the PAGA awards are allocated 100% to penalties. (Agreement, § 3.2.4.) ILYM will be responsible for issuing Forms W-2 and 1099 for the portions allocated to wages and penalties/interest. (Agreement, §§ 3.2.4.1 and 3.2.5.2.)

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[5] Since the Class includes only individuals who did not sign an arbitration agreement (Agreement, § 1.5) , there are more Aggrieved Employees that Class Members.

C. Uncashed Funds to Unclaimed Property Fund

Settlement checks must be cashed or deposited within 180 days after issuance. (Agreement, § 4.4.1.) In the event a settlement check remains uncashed, such uncashed funds shall be transmitted to the California State Controller's Unclaimed Property Fund. (Agreement, § 4.4.3.)

D. Notice and Extended Response Deadline for Re-Mailed Notices

Within 30 calendar days after entry of the Preliminary Approval Order, Defendant will provide Simpluris with the Class Data, which Simpluris will maintain as private and confidential. (Agreement, § 4.2.)

Prior to mailing, Simpluris will perform a search for updated addresses in the National Change of Address database, and will use the NCOA database and skip traces to attempt to find current addresses for any Notice returned as undeliverable. (Agreement, § 7.4.2-3.) If Simpluris is unable to obtain a better address for a Class Member, it will be under no obligation to make further attempts to locate or notice the Class Member. (Agreement, § 7.4.3.) Within 14 days after receipt of the Class Data, Simpluris will mail the Notice to all Class Members via First-Class mail. (Agreement, § 7.4.2.)

The contents of the Notice are consistent with the terms of the Agreement and California Rule of Court 3.769. The Notice informs Class Members how and when to request exclusion or object to the settlement, and of their estimated payment amount which they will automatically receive a settlement payment if they do nothing. (Ardestani Decl., ¶¶ 23-24; Exh. 3.)

E. Responses to the Settlement and Deadlines

Class Members will have 45 days from the initial mailing of the Notice to respond to the settlement by submitting a challenge to the number of weeks or pay periods attributed to them, objecting, or requesting exclusion. (Agreement, § 1.47.) Class Members can also request for exclusion from the settlement by mailing or faxing a written request, including his or her name, address, phone number or email address, last four digits of their Social Security Number or Employment Authorization number, and a statement demonstrating his or her intent to opt out of the settlement. (Agreement, § 7.5.) The Notice also informs the Class Members/Aggrieved Employees that they can dispute the number of workweeks/pay periods used to calculate their settlement payments by contacting Simpluris before the Response Deadline and providing documentation to support their dispute. Simpluris will investigate the dispute, request additional information from Defendant, and make a final decision as to the number of eligible work weeks/pay periods. (Agreement, § 7.6.). Finally, Class Members can object to the settlement in writing via mail or fax by submitting a document with their name, the words "Notice of Objection" or "Formal Objection" and a description of the arguments supporting their objection, or they may be heard at the Final Approval Hearing. (Agreement, § 7.7.)

F. <u>Funding and Distribution of the Settlement</u>

Defendant will fund the settlement the full GSA, plus all amounts needed to pay employer-side payroll taxes, within 14 days of the Effective Date. The Settlement Administrator will disburse all payments required under this Settlement within 14 days of receipt of the settlement funds. (Agreement, §§ 4.3-4.)

G. <u>Release of Claims</u>

Upon final approval, Participating Class Members shall forever release the Released Parties[6] for the Released Claims for the Class Period, including all claims pleaded in the Operative Complaint, and which could reasonably have been alleged, based on the Class Period facts, allegations, and/or claims stated in the Operative Complaint, for work performed during the Class Period, and as specifically detailed in Sections 5 of the Agreement. (Agreement, § 5.2). Additionally, the Aggrieved Employees will the Released Parties from all claims for PAGA penalties that were alleged, or reasonably could have been alleged, based on the PAGA Period facts stated in the Operative Complaint, and PAGA Notice, and as more specifically detailed in Section 5.3 of the Agreement.

[6] "Released Parties" means Defendant and each of its current and former directors, officers, shareholders, owners, members, attorneys, insurers, predecessors, successors, assigns, employees, managing agents, subsidiaries, parents, affiliates, and or related companies (including its parent corporation and any affiliated corporations, its owners, officers, directors, stockholders, managers, agents, employees, and representatives) (Agreement, § 1.45.)

H. <u>The Class Representative Service Award Is Justified Given the Risks and Should be Preliminarily Approved</u>

The Agreement provides for a service payment not to exceed $2,500.00 to Plaintiff. (Agreement, § 3.2.1.) Courts routinely approve service payments, or incentive awards, to compensate named plaintiffs for the services they provide and the risks they incur during class litigation. *In re Cellphone Fee Termination Cases* (2010) 186 Cal. App. 4th 1380, 1393 ("These awards are discretionary…and are intended to compensate class representatives for work done on behalf of the class, to make up for financial or reputational risk undertaken in bringing the action, and, sometimes, to recognize their willingness to act as a private attorney general."); *Bell v. Farmers Ins. Exch*. (2004) 115 Cal. App. 4th 715, 725-26 (upholding service payments to class representatives); Manual § 21.62 n. 971 (noting that service payments are warranted).

The requested service award is reasonable in light of the benefits Plaintiff conferred upon the entire Class, resulting in a benefit to all Class Members and the State of California, the time spent assisting counsel with the investigation and prosecution of these claims, commitment to responding to discovery, and consenting to the proposed Agreement. Furthermore, by attaching his name to this lawsuit, Plaintiff also took on the reputational risk that future employers would learn of his participation in this case and would unfairly associate them with costly litigation, costing him future employment opportunities. Any future employer could easily perform a simple Google search – an unauthorized simple background check unknown to Plaintiff that can still provide a plethora of information – and conclude that Plaintiff is not worth the risk of hiring given his prior involvement in a lawsuit against a former employer. This is the kind of reputational risk, borne only by Plaintiff, that the incentive award is meant to compensate. Furthermore, in pursuing this action on behalf of the Class, Plaintiff risked a judgment against him for attorney's fees and costs in the event this matter should Solheim prevail. For these reasons, at final approval, Plaintiff will request the Court award an enhancement payment in an amount that does not exceed $2,500. (Ardestani Decl., ¶ 29; Declaration of Rhina Villeda, ¶¶ 2-9.)

V. <u>ARGUMENT</u>

In deciding whether to approve a proposed class action settlement under Code of Civil Procedure section 382, the Court must find that a proposed settlement is "fair, adequate and reasonable." *Dunk v. Ford Motor Co.* (1996) 48 Cal.App.4th 1794, 1801 [quoting *Officers for Justice v. Civil Serv. Comm'n* (9th Cir. 1982) 688 F.2d 615, 625, cert. den. (1983) 459 U.S. 1217]. A proposed class action settlement is **presumed** fair under the following circumstances: (1) the parties reached settlement after arms-length negotiations; (2) investigation and discovery were sufficient to allow counsel and the court to act intelligently; (3) counsel is experienced in similar litigation; and (4) the percentage of objectors is small. *Id.* at 1802. As the following shows, all of these elements are present here and the Court should grant of preliminary approval.

A. <u>The Settlement was Reached as a Result of Arm's Length Negotiations</u>

The proposed settlement was reached as a result of arm's-length negotiations facilitated by a respected mediator. Though cordial and professional, the settlement negotiations have been, at all times, adversarial and non-collusive. Following mediation, counsel for the Parties conducted further extensive and arm's length negotiations on the settlement terms memorialized in the Agreement. (Ardestani Decl., ¶ 30.)

While Plaintiff believes in the merits of his case, he also recognizes the inherent risks of litigation and understand the benefit of Class Members receiving significant settlement funds immediately as opposed to risking continued litigation in achieving class certification, the merits of the case before and after trial, the damages awarded and/or an appeal that can take several more years to litigate. (Ardestani Decl., ¶ 31.)

B. <u>The Settlement is the Result of Thorough Investigation and Discovery</u>

The Parties thoroughly investigated and evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of their factual and legal arguments before reaching the proposed settlement, and engaged in sufficient investigation, research and discovery to support the settlement. The proposed settlement was only possible following significant analysis and evaluation of Defendant's relevant policies and procedures, as well as the data it produced for the putative Class. (Ardestani Decl., ¶¶ 16-17, 32.)

This litigation has reached the stage where “the Parties certainly have a clear view of the strengths and weaknesses of their cases” sufficient to support the Settlement. *Boyd v. Bechtel Corp.* (N.D. Cal. 1979) 485 F. Supp. 610, 617.

C. **Counsel for the Parties are Experienced in Similar Litigation**

Counsel for the Parties are particularly experienced in wage and hour employment law, class actions and PAGA actions. Plaintiff’s Counsel has prosecuted numerous cases on behalf of employees for wage and hour violations and thus are experienced and qualified to evaluate the class and PAGA claims, evaluate settlement versus trial on a fully informed basis, and to evaluate the viability of the defenses. This experience informed Plaintiff’s Counsel on the risks and uncertainties of further litigation and guided their determination to endorse the proposed settlement.[7] (Ardestani Decl. ¶¶ 6-11.)

D. **The Proposed Settlement is a Reasonable Compromise of Claims**

An understanding of the amount in controversy is an important factor into whether the settlement “of the class members’ claims is reasonable in light of the strengths and weaknesses of the claims and the risks of the particular litigation.” *Kullar v. Foot Locker Retail, Inc.* (2008) 168 Cal.App.4th 116, 129; *Munoz v. BCI Coca-Cola Bottling Co. of Los Angeles* (2010) 186 Cal.App.4th 399, 409. The most important factor in this regard is “the strength of the case for plaintiffs on the merits, balanced against the amount offered in settlement.” *Kullar*, 168 Cal.App.4th at 129.

In weighing the strength of Plaintiff’s case, *Kullar* instructs that the court is not to “decide the merits of the case or to substitute its evaluation of the most appropriate settlement for that of the attorneys.” 168 Cal.App.4th at 133. Further, this analysis does not require an explicit statement of the maximum amount the plaintiff class could recover if it prevailed on all its claims, provided there is a record which allows “an understanding of the amount that is in controversy and the realistic range of outcomes of the litigation.” *Munoz*, 186 Cal. App. 4th at

[7] The final factor mentioned in *Dunk* - the number of objectors - is not determinable until the Notice of Class Action Settlement has been provided to the Class and they have had an opportunity to respond. This information will be provided to the Court in conjunction with the Motion for Final Approval of Class Action Settlement.

409. Put differently, "as the court does when it approves a settlement as in good faith under Code of Civil Procedure section 877.6, the court must at least satisfy itself that the class settlement is within the 'ballpark' of reasonableness." *Kullar*, 168 Cal. App. 4th at 133 citing *Tech-Bilt v. Woodward-Clyde & Associates* (1985) 38 Cal. 3d 488, 499-500. As shown below, the Parties' investigation and discovery revealed several reasons to discount claims and agree to this settlement.

E. The Settlement is Fair and Reasonable Based on the Strengths of Plaintiff's Case and the Risks and Costs of Further Litigation

The proposed settlement was only possible following significant analysis and evaluation of Defendant's relevant policies and procedures, as well as the data that Defendant produced for the Class. This permitted Plaintiff's Counsel to engage in a comprehensive analysis of liability and potential damages. The discovery conducted resulted in Plaintiff's central theories of liability, which are based on Plaintiff's claims that Defendant failed to pay all wages due, failed to provide compliant meal and rest periods, failed to reimburse expenses, failed to provide accurate, itemized wage statements and failed to pay all wages due on separation of employment As explained above, Defendant maintains that the discovery produced demonstrates it likely would prevail on both class certification and the merits. (Ardestani Decl., ¶¶ 16-17, 32.)

Plaintiff believes this case is suitable for certification as she contends there are company-wide policies that violate California law and uniformly affect the Class Members. Defendant's counterarguments, however, raise uncertainties with respect to both class certification and success on the merits. As the California Supreme Court emphasized in *Sav-On v. Superior Court* (2004) 34 Cal.4th 319, class certification is always a matter of the trial court's sound discretion, and decisions following *Sav-On* have reached different conclusions with respect to certification of wage and hour claims.[8] While remaining confident in the strengths of her claims, all of these

[8] *E.g.*, *Harris v. Superior Court*, 154 Cal.App.4th 164 (2007) (reversing decertification of class claiming misclassification and ordering summary adjudication in favor of employees), *review granted*, 171 P.3d 545 (2007) (not cited as precedent, but rather for illustrative purposes only); *Walsh v. IKON Solutions, Inc.*, 148 Cal.App.4th 1440 (2007) (affirming decertification of class claiming misclassification); *Aguilar v. Cintas Corp. No. 2*, 144 Cal.App.4th

factors led Plaintiff to discount the following maximum potential damage claims. (Ardestani Decl., ¶¶ 33-34.)

1. The Settlement Amount is Reasonable

Defendant provided Plaintiff with class-wide data from which Plaintiff's Counsel extrapolated a damage analysis in preparation of mediation. For purposes of the mediation, there were a total of 169 Class Members who worked approximately 12,583 work weeks in the limitations period, and 357 Aggrieved Employees and 12,855 pay periods within the PAGA Period. (Ardestani Decl., ¶ 35.)

First, Plaintiff contends she and class members were not paid for time spent waiting in line to clock in and out for shifts and as meal periods. As the California Supreme Court held in *Frlekin v. Apple Inc*. (2020) 8 Cal. 5th 1038, time spent by employees waiting in line for and undergoing exit searches was time subject to employer control and therefore compensable. Plaintiff contends the time she spent waiting for the time clock likewise was subject to Solheim's control and she estimates that she was not paid for about an hour per week while waiting to clock in/out. On the other hand, Solheim argued its time keeping policies fully complied with California law and that it accurately recorded and paid for all hours worked by the class members. Solheim further argued (a) there were ample time clocks available and (b) there would not be more than a handful of employees clocking in/out at the same time, such that there would be no need to wait longer than a few seconds to use a time clock. Without taking into account any of Solheim's defenses, Plaintiff estimated about **$166,725** in unpaid minimum wages. (Ardestani Decl., ¶ 36.)

Plaintiff also contends Solheim underpaid employees for their overtime because it didn't correctly calculate the "regular rate of pay" and failed to include certain forms of non-discretionary compensation, such as shift differentials and bonuses, in the calculation as required under law. "Where an employee receives a higher wage or rate because of undesirable hours or

121 (2006) (reversing denial of certification); *Dunbar v. Albertson's Inc.,* 141 Cal.App.4th 1422 (2006) (affirming denial of certification).

disagreeable work, such wage represents a shift differential or higher wages because of the character of work done or the time at which he is required to labor. Such payments enter into the determination of the regular rate of pay." *Huntington Mem'l Hosp. v. Superior Court*, (2005) 131 Cal. App. 4th 893, 894. *See also, Marin v. Costco Wholesale Corp*. (2008) 169 Cal.App.4th 804, 807 (holding that bonuses must be included in the calculation of an employee's regular rate of pay); *see also, Alvarado v. Dart Container Corp. of Cal*., (2018) 4 Cal. 5th 542 549 (holding that bonuses should be factored into the employee's regular rate of pay so the regular rate reflects all forms of regular compensation that the employee earned). While Plaintiff believes this is one of her stronger claims, she also notes the amount of underpaid overtime is modest and amounts to only a few dollars per pay period. Here, Plaintiff's experts estimated the damages at about **$46,000.** (Ardestani Decl., ¶ 37.)

Plaintiff also alleges Defendant failed to provide legally compliant meal and rest breaks. Specifically, as to meal breaks, Plaintiff contends numerous violations where Defendant's time records show breaks were untimely, short, not taken at all, or subject to an "auto deduct" policy that recorded a 30 minute break regardless of actual time records. Thus, per Plaintiff, regardless of whether Solheim had a compliant written policy, its records suggest numerous "de facto" violations, and Plaintiff's expert's analysis suggested around 65% of shifts reflected a unique meal violation. Further, Plaintiff's analysis showed only a small percentage of violations were compensated with the required extra hour of pay. (Ardestani Decl., ¶ 38.)

Plaintiff also contends Solheim failed to provide duty-free rest periods to class members by instructing them to stay on Defendant's premises during their rest periods to help assist patients if needed, thus resulting in on-duty rest periods which must be compensated by Defendant. In addition to being restricted to Defendant's premises during rest breaks, Plaintiff also alleges rest breaks frequently were cut short and/or interrupted by work and did not last a net 10 minutes. (Ardestani Decl., ¶ 39.)

Defendant denies Plaintiff's contentions, claiming it made meal and rest breaks available to Class Members in compliance with California law. Defendant contends its meal and rest break policies are lawful and that Class Members were frequently reminded they were required to take all meal and rest breaks. Defendant also contends that time records demonstrate that Class Members took duty-free, timely meal and rest breaks. Defendant also contends its meal and rest break policies and practices comported with the flexibility the *Brinker* court held was integral to California's meal and rest period requirements. Finally, Defendant argues that Plaintiff's meal and rest break claims are not susceptible to common proof, as the claims would require individualized inquiry, including whether there was an unlawful companywide policy, whether employees had the opportunity to take meal and rest periods, whether they voluntarily chose to forego their meal and rest periods, and whether Defendant ever prevented them from taking meal and rest periods. Accordingly, Defendant contends these claims are vulnerable to a ruling that class treatment is not appropriate. Without taking into consideration any of Defendant's defenses to certification or on the merits, Plaintiff estimates Solheim faces around **$672,730** in damages for meal period violations. On the rest period claims, Plaintiff estimates around **$591,930** in damages, again assuming a 50% violation rate (Ardestani Decl., ¶ 40.)

For the expense reimbursement claim, Plaintiff alleged Defendant failed to reimburse necessary business expenses for use of personal cell phones, as supervisors would contact Plaintiff and other employees on their personal phones both at and away from work. <u>Cochran v. Schwan's Home Service, Inc</u>. (2014) 228 Cal. App. 4th 1137. Defendant countered there typically would be no need for employees to communicate via phone or text while performing their job duties, or for them to otherwise use their personal phones for any reason. Per Defendant, to the extent Plaintiff or other employees used their individual phones for work purposes, it was done purely for personal convenience and was neither required nor necessary in order to perform their job duties. Thus, per Defendant, no reimbursement was required. Labor Code § 2802. Without taking into consideration any of Defendant's defenses to certification or on the merits, Plaintiff estimates Solheim faces around **$62,915** in damages assuming $5/week in reimbursement. (Ardestani Decl., ¶ 41.)

As a result of the above alleged violations, Plaintiff also derivatively alleges that Solheim's wage statements violated Section 226 and further that Solheim failed to timely pay all wages that were due and owing upon separation of employment. Thus, should the primary claims fail, Plaintiff's claim for inaccurate wage statements and waiting time penalties would also fail. Defendant also contends it would not be liable for waiting time penalties because a "good faith dispute" exists over the payment of past wages. *Amaral v. Cintas Corp. No. 2* (2008) 163 Cal.App.4th 1157, 1201. Further, Defendant contends Plaintiff would have to prove Defendant "willfully" failed to pay Class Members appropriate wages due upon separation of employment. Without taking into consideration any of Defendant's defenses to certification or on the merits, Plaintiff calculated Defendant's maximum exposure for statutory penalties for inaccurate wage statements at **$287,450**, and exposure for waiting time penalties at about **$245,520** based on 50 former employees during the limitations period. (Ardestani Decl., ¶ 42.)

As far as potential PAGA liability, the theoretical civil penalties likely are around $5.8 million should Plaintiff prevail on all claims and establish violations of the multiple Labor Code sections at issue. (Ardestani Decl., ¶ 43.) As with the class claims, Plaintiff discounted the potential PAGA penalties based on Defendant's various defenses on the merits and also accounted for the Court's wide discretion to reduce such penalties, or to decline to award penalties at all. Labor Code § 2699(e)(2); *Carrington v. Starbucks Corp.* (2018) 30 Cal.App.5th 504 (trial court awarded penalties of $5 per pay period after a bench trial, which decision was upheld on appeal); *In re Taco Bell Wage and Hour Actions* (E.D. Cal. Apr. 8, 2016) 2016 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 48557 (PAGA penalties denied after trial). Accordingly, the Parties allocated $5,000 to PAGA penalties. (Agreement, § 3.2.5.)

Plaintiff submits this amount is reasonable under the circumstances and in line with comparable settlements in other wage and hour class actions in California. *E.g.*, *Van Kempen v. Matheson Tri-Gas, Inc.* (N.D. Cal. Aug. 25, 2017) 2017 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 137182 (granting final approval of $5,000 PAGA penalty from $370,000 settlement, or 1.4 percent of total settlement); *Slavkov v. First Water Heater Partners I* (N.D. Cal. July 25, 2017) 2017 U.S. Dist. LEXIS

116303 (finding a $7,500 PAGA payment reasonable when measured against the overall settlement of $345,000 and the possible weaknesses in plaintiffs' case, or 2.2 percent of total settlement). Additionally, the LWDA has been informed of the terms of the PAGA portion of the settlement, and will be able to weigh in as necessary. *Jennings v. Open Door Mktg. Inc.* (N.D. Cal. Oct. 3, 2018) 2018 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 171356, at *27 (approving settlement with PAGA penalties of 0.6% where "[p]laintiffs [have] submitted the settlement agreement to the LWDA, and the LWDA has not objected to the settlement.

Thus, Plaintiff and her counsel discounted the value of the class claims consistent with the risks discussed above, and carefully weighed the likelihood of the class receiving substantially greater benefit if the litigation continued. Plaintiff and counsel concluded – in light of these very real and substantial risks, including the risk of any judgment being uncollectible – settlement on the proposed terms and without prolonged and costly litigation was in the best interests of the class. The overall $225,000 recovery represents a significant percentage of Defendant’s potential exposure. Given Defendant’s multi-layered defenses, all other potential risks of continued litigation, and the risk of Defendant’s potential insolvency, a total recovery for the class of $225,000, which will result in average award of at least $595 per class member, plus additional sums under PAGA, is a significant result well within the range of reasonableness considering all potential outcomes, and it will provide direct awards to all Class Members without further delay. [Ardestani Decl., ¶¶ 44-45.]

Importantly, the mere fact that a settlement does not provide the same recovery as might be achieved at trial is not a proper indicator of whether the settlement is fair, reasonable, and adequate. *Wershba,* 91 Cal.App.4th at 246, 250 (“Compromise is inherent and necessary in the settlement process…even if the relief afforded by the proposed settlement is substantially narrower than it would be if the suits were to be successfully litigated, this is no bar to a class settlement because the public interest may indeed be served by a voluntary settlement in which each side gives ground in the interest of avoiding litigation”); *7-Eleven Owners for Fair Franchising v. Southland Corp.* (2000) 85 Cal.App.4th 1135, 1150 (“The fact that a proposed settlement may amount to only a fraction of the potential recovery does not, in and of itself, mean that the proposed settlement is grossly inadequate and should be disapproved"); *White v. Experian Information Solutions, Inc.* (C.D. Cal. 2011) 803 F.Supp.2d 1086, 1098 (rejecting contention settlement was not fair and reasonable even though it represented 99% discount off the maximum value of the claims); *Lane v. Facebook, Inc.* (9th Cir. 2012) 696 F.3d 811, 819 ("[T]he question whether a settlement is fundamentally fair . . . is different from the question whether the settlement is perfect in the estimation of the reviewing court"). Importantly as well, the proposed settlement is non-reversionary and will provide immediate benefits to the Class Members without a claims process. <u>White</u>, 803 F.Supp.2d at 1098; <u>c.f.</u>, Federal Judicial Center, *Managing Class Action Litigation: A Pocket Guide for Judges* (3d ed. 2010) at 20, available at http:// www.fjc.gov/sites/default/files/2012/ClassGd3.pdf (reversionary provisions and/or cumbersome claims process may indicate lack of fairness). Plaintiff and her counsel submit the settlement is within the "range of reasonableness," and is fair and adequate for the Class.

F. <u>Provisional Class Certification Should be Granted</u>

A class action is appropriate when the class is ascertainable and there is "a well-defined community of interest in the questions of law and fact involved affecting the parties to be represented." Code Civ. Proc. § 382. Class certification requirements under Section 382 follow Rule 23 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, and require*:* numerosity, typicality of the class representatives' claims, adequacy of representation, predominance of common issues, and superiority. Fed.R.Civ.Pro. 23(b)(3); *Hanlon v. Chrysler Corp.* (9th Cir. 1998) 150 F.3d 1011, 1019. While a court must certify a class for settlement purposes if a class has not already been certified, "it is well established that trial courts should use different standards to determine the propriety of a settlement class, as opposed to a litigation class certification. Specifically, a lesser standard of scrutiny is used for settlement cases." *Glob. Minerals & Metals Corp. v. Superior Court* (2013) 113 Cal.App.4th 836, 859 *citing Dunk*, Cal.App.4th 1794, 1807, n.19; *Wershba v. Apple Computer* (2001) 91 Cal.App.4th 224, 237-38.

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1. The Proposed Class is Sufficiently Numerous and Ascertainable

First, the class is both sufficiently numerous, consisting of approximately 169 individuals, and ascertainable by reference to Defendant's personnel and payroll records. (Ardestani Decl., ¶ 46.) "There is no set number required to maintain a class action, and the statutory test is whether a class is so numerous that 'it is impracticable to bring them all before the court.'" *Hebbard v. Colgrove* (1972) 28 Cal. App. 3d 1017, 1030 (noting that there is no set minimum to meet the numerosity prerequisite, but that a class of as few as 28 is acceptable); *Bowles v. Superior Court* (1995) 44 Cal. 2d 574 (upholding a class of ten members); *Rose v. City of Hayward* (1981) 126 Cal. App. 3d 926, 932 (finding that "Class Members are 'ascertainable' where they may be readily identified without unreasonable expense or time by reference to official records."). Thus, the ascertainability requirement is met.

2. The Typicality and Adequacy Requirements Are Met

The typicality requirement is met if the claims of the named representative are typical of those of the Class, though, "they need not be substantially identical." *Classen v. Weller* (1983) 145 Cal.App.3d 27, 46-47. Here, Plaintiff's claims are typical of the Class Members' claims because they arise from the same factual basis and are based on the same legal theories applicable to the Class Members. Plaintiff further contends Defendant's policies applied to all Class Members and each Class Member is challenging the same policies and practices. As such, the typicality requirement is satisfied for purposes of settlement. (Guevara Decl., ¶¶ 2-9; Ardestani Decl. ¶ 47.)

Adequacy requires that the Plaintiff have no interests adverse to the interests of the proposed Class Members and be committed to vigorously prosecuting the case on behalf of the Class. *McGhee v. Bank of America* (1976) 70 Cal.App.3d 442, 450-51. Plaintiff has been and will continue to be committed to vigorously prosecuting this case, and he has no conflicts of interest with the Class. In this regard, the settlement of her individual wrongful termination and failure to accommodate claim is not an obstacle to her ability to serve as class representative for several reasons. First, her independent claim in no way impacted negotiation of the final class settlement, which was achieved with a mediator's assistance that took into account Plaintiff's individual claims – in other words, the settlement amount represents a professional neutral's independent evaluation of the value of the case. Further, Plaintiff is seeking an enhancement award substantially less than is typical in this kind of case in recognition of the fact she is receiving additional monies for her individual claims, and is waiving her right to receive a pro rata share of the class settlement proceeds. Thus, Plaintiff has in no way placed her own interests ahead of the class members' interests, nor has she acted for own personal benefit. She simply has received fair value for her separate employment tort claims in addition to securing a positive result for the absent class members. For these reasons, Plaintiff contends she is an adequate class representative. (Villeda Decl., ¶¶ 2-9; Ardestani Decl., ¶ 48.)

3. The Commonality Requirement is Met

Next, common questions of law and fact predominate – particularly for purposes of a settlement class – as the Class Members all were subject to the same meal and rest break policies and alleged "de facto" policies resulting in meal period violations, and similarly subject to the same failure to correctly calculate the "regular rate" and subsequently were underpaid for their overtime. Since the focus of the claims against Defendant concerns the legality of common policies applied uniformly to the entire class, common issues predominate over individualized inquiries concerning liability. For instance, Defendant either correctly calculated the regular rate of pay and paid overtime at the correct premium rate or it didn't. Regardless of that determination, it will decide liability for all class members one way or another. (Ardestani Decl., ¶ 49.)

By now it is well-settled a theory of recovery asserting the existence of a uniform policy violating California law is sufficient to satisfy the requirements for class certification. *Jones v. Farmers Ins. Exch.* (2013) 221 Cal.App.4th 986, 996 ("Claims alleging that a uniform policy consistently applied to a group of employees is in violation of the wage and hour laws are of the sort routinely, and properly, found suitable for class treatment"); *Williams v. Superior Court* (2013) 221 Cal.App.4th 1353 ("A company-wide practice can sustain a common question of fact or law that supports commonality for class certification"). Lastly, a class action is superior to other means for the fair and efficient adjudication of this controversy. (Ardestani Decl., ¶ 50.)

G. Simpluris Should be Appointed as the Settlement Administrator

The Parties agreed to use Simpluris, Inc. as the Settlement Administrator in this matter. (Agreement, §§ 1.2 and 7.1.) Simpluris is highly qualified and experienced as a settlement administrator, committed to the security of data (having experienced no data breaches at all), carries insurance for the theft of money or data, and has no relationship with Counsel. (Declaration of Eric Springer, ¶¶ 2-10; Exhs. A-C; Ardestani Decl., ¶ 51.)

V. CONCLUSION

Plaintiff respectfully submits that the proposed settlement is in the best interests of the Class Members, as it is fair, adequate, and reasonable. Plaintiff accordingly requests the Court certify the class for settlement purposes, appoint Plaintiff as Class Representatives, appoint Plaintiff's Counsel as Class Counsel, appoint Simpluris, Inc. as Settlement Administrator, approve the method of notice and the Notice to be sent to the Class, preliminarily approve the Settlement Agreement, enter the proposed order filed herewith, and set a Final Approval hearing date.

Dated: November 18, 2024 **CROSNER LEGAL, P.C.**

By: ______________________
Sepideh Ardestani, Esq.
Zachary M. Crosner, Esq.
Attorneys for Plaintiff RHINA VILLEDA