AEGIS LAW FIRM, PC
KASHIF HAQUE, State Bar No. 218672
SAMUEL A. WONG, State Bar No. 217104
JESSICA L. CAMPBELL, State Bar No. 280626
KRISTY R. CONNOLLY, State Bar No. 328477
9811 Irvine Center Drive, Suite 100
Irvine, California 92618
Telephone: (949) 379-6250
Facsimile: (949) 379-6251
kconnolly@aegislawfirm.com

Attorneys for Plaintiff Kristina Lura, individually, and on behalf of all others similarly situated.

SUPERIOR COURT OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

FOR THE COUNTY OF CALAVERAS

KRISTINA LURA, individually and on behalf of all others similarly situated, Plaintiffs, vs. CALAVERAS HEALTHY IMPACT PRODUCT SOLUTIONS (C.H.I.P.S.); and DOES 1 through 20, inclusive, Defendants.	Case No. 23CV46783 *Assigned for all purposes to:* *Hon. David M. Sanders* *Dept. 2* **MEMORANDUM OF POINTS AND AUTHORITIES IN SUPPORT OF PLAINTIFF'S MOTION FOR PRELIMINARY APPROVAL OF CLASS ACTION SETTLEMENT** Date: March 7, 2023 Time: 9:00 a.m. Dept: 2

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I. INTRODUCTION

Pursuant to California Rules of Court 3.769 (d) and (e), Plaintiff Kristina Lura ("Plaintiff") requests that the Court grant preliminary approval of a class action settlement of wage and hour claims, including a claim under the California Private Attorneys General Act of 2004, codified at Labor Code §§ 2698, *et seq.* ("PAGA"), against Defendant Calaveras Healthy Impact Product Solutions (C.H.I.P.S.) ("Defendant") (collectively, Plaintiff and Defendant referred to as the "Parties"). The putative class consists of approximately 229 non-exempt employees who worked for Defendant in California (individually, "Class Member"; collectively, the "Class") from December 18, 2018 through August 19, 2024 (the "Class Period"). The basic terms of the Joint Stipulation of Settlement ("Settlement Agreement" or "Settlement")[1] provide for the following:

(1) A non-reversionary Gross Settlement Amount of $175,000.00 allocated to approximately 229 Class Members on a pro rata basis according to the number of weeks each Class Member worked during the Class Period;

(2) An award of up to one-third of the Gross Settlement Amount (currently $58,333.33) and up to $25,000.00 in reimbursement of costs to Plaintiff's Counsel for services rendered as counsel on this matter;

(3) Service Payment of up to $10,000.00 to the Named Plaintiff;

(4) Settlement Administration fees and costs of up to $8,500.00; and

(5) Allocations of $10,000.00 for resolution of civil penalties under PAGA. Seventy-five percent (75%) of this payment will be paid to the California Labor and Workforce Development Agency ("LWDA Payment"), and twenty-five percent (25%) will be paid to Class Members who worked for Defendant during the PAGA Period (the "PAGA Group Member").

With each Class Member allocated an average recovery of approximately $275 from the Net

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[1] A true and correct copy of the fully-executed "Class Action and PAGA Settlement Agreement and Class Notice" is attached as **Exhibit 1** to the Declaration of Kristy R. Connolly in Support of Plaintiff's Motion for Preliminary Approval of Class Action Settlement ("Connolly Decl."), filed concurrently herewith. Unless otherwise defined herein, all capitalized terms in this Motion will be used as such terms are defined and used in the Settlement.

Settlement Amount, the Settlement satisfies the criteria for preliminary approval and falls well within the range of reasonableness given the risks and costs of continued litigation. The Settlement was reached through informed, arms-length bargaining at and after mediation between experienced attorneys. As such, Plaintiff requests that the Court grant preliminary approval of the Settlement, conditionally certify the Class for settlement purposes only, appoint Plaintiff as the Class Representative, appoint Plaintiff's Counsel as Class Counsel, appoint Phoenix Settlement Administrator as the Settlement Administrator, authorize the Settlement Administrator to send notice of the Settlement, and set a final approval hearing date.

II. SUMMARY OF THE LITIGATION

On June 14, 2023, Plaintiff's counsel provided written notice to the LWDA and Defendant regarding Defendant's alleged Labor Code violations, as required by Labor Code section 2699.3(a). Connolly Decl., ¶ 3, Exhibit 2. The LWDA did not respond to this notice, indicating it did not intend to investigate, thus allowing Plaintiff to bring a PAGA claim against Defendant. *Id.* On June 15, 2023, Plaintiff filed a putative class action on behalf of Defendant's non-exempt employees alleging the following causes of action: (1) failure to pay minimum wages; (2) failure to pay overtime wages; (3) failure to comply with California Prevailing Wage Law; (4) failure to provide meal periods; (5) failure to permit rest breaks; (6) unlawful deductions; (7) failure to reimburse business expenses; (8) failure to provide accurate itemized wage statements; (9) failure to pay all wages timely during employment; (10) failure to pay all wages due upon separation of employment for the preceding claims. *Id.* at ¶ 4. On August 21, 2023, Plaintiff filed a First Amended the Complaint adding a PAGA claim. *Id.*

The Parties agreed to attend early, private mediation. Connolly Decl., ¶ 5. To that end, the Parties agreed to stay litigation pending mediation with an informal exchange of records. *Id.* Defendant produced a significant amount of documents and information, including Plaintiff's personnel file, relevant policy documents, and a 30% sample of class members' timekeeping and pay records. *Id.* Plaintiff's Counsel engaged an expert to quantify the potential exposure using the time and payroll records, and then assessed the risks associated with each of the claims. *Id.*

On August 19, 2024, the Parties attended a mediation session with Jill Sperber, a respected mediator. Connolly Decl., ¶ 6. After a full day of negotiating, the Parties agreed to settle this action. *Id.*

The Parties spent the next several months negotiating the terms of the Settlement, which was finalized in November of 2024. *Id.* The negotiations were adversarial, conducted at arm's length and tempered by the efforts of both sides to serve the interests of their clients. *Id.*

On February 4, 2025, Plaintiff submitted the Settlement and this Motion to the LWDA pursuant to Labor Code section 2699(l)(2). Connolly Decl., ¶ 7, Exhibit 3.

III. SUMMARY OF THE SETTLEMENT

A. Terms of Settlement

Plaintiff and Defendant agreed to settle the class claims in exchange for a Gross Settlement Amount of $175,000.00. Settlement Agreement, § 3.06(a). The Gross Settlement Amount will be used to make payments for the following: (1) Individual Settlement Payments to Participating Class Members; (2) attorneys' fees to Class Counsel of up to one-third of the Gross Settlement Amount; (3) reimbursement of Class Counsel's litigation costs of up to $25,000.00; (4) an Incentive Award to Plaintiff of up to $10,000.00; (5) Settlement Administration fees and costs of $8,500.00; and (6) an allocation of $10,000 to the settlement of PAGA claims. *Id.* at § 3.06(b) – 3.06(e). Of the PAGA amount, 25% (or $2,500) will be paid to the PAGA Group Members regardless of whether they opt out of they settlement. *Id.* at § 3.06€.

Defendant will pay the Gross Settlement Amount in four equal installments into a Qualified Settlement Fund established by the Settlement Administrator as follows: $43,750 due no later than February 19, 2025, $43,750 due no later than August 19, 2025, $43,750 due no later than February 19, 2026, and $43,750 plus the amount sufficient to fund the employer-side taxes due no later than August 19, 2026. Settlement Agreement, § 3.06(a). Within ten days of receiving Defendant's final payment, the Settlement Administrator will distribute the funds. *Id.*

Individual Settlement Payments will be calculated by comparing the total Qualifying Workweeks for the Class to each individual Class Member's Qualifying Workweeks. *Id.* at § 3.06(f). The settlement was reached based on the representation that there are 8,650 Workweeks at issue. Accordingly, from the Net Settlement Amount, Class Members will receive $7.30 per Workweek ($63,166.67/8,650 = $7.30). However, if the number of Class Members exceeds 229 or the number of Qualifying Workweeks exceeds

8,650 by more than 5%, the Gross Settlement Amount will increase pro rata per additional Class Member or additional Qualifying Workweek, whichever is greater. *Id.* at § 3.05(e).

The Settlement Administrator will calculate the actual estimated recovery to include in the Class Notice and provide the estimated low and high range of possible recovery at final approval. Settlement Agreement, Ex. A (Notice of Class Action Settlement).

The Individual Settlement Payments to Class Members will be allocated for tax purposes as follows: 20% to wages; 80% to penalties and interest. Settlement Agreement, § 3.06(f). The employer-side payroll taxes on the portion allocated to wages will be paid by Defendant separately from, and in addition to the Gross Settlement Amount. *Id* at § 3.06(a). No portion of the Gross Settlement Amount will revert to Defendant. *Id* at § (I)n. Funds from uncashed or undeliverable checks will be tendered by the Settlement Administrator to the State Controller Unclaimed Property Fund in the name of the Class Member for whom the funds are designated. *Id*. at § 3.06(f).

B. Proposed Opt-Out and Objection Process

Once the Court grants preliminary approval, Defendant will have 5 business days to deliver the Class Data to the Settlement Administrator. Settlement Agreement, § 3.03. The Settlement Administrator will then have ten business days to send Class Members the Notice of Class Action Settlement ("Class Notice") by first-class mail after checking for updated addresses through the National Change of Address database. *Id.* at §§ 3.03, 3.06(f). The Class Notice provides information regarding the nature of the lawsuit, a summary of the substance of the settlement terms, the formula for calculating Individual Settlement Payments, the individual's estimated payout, a statement that Class Members who take no action will release their claims and receive settlement checks, instructions regarding how to dispute the calculations, instructions regarding how to request exclusion or object to the Settlement, the date for the final approval hearing, the amounts sought for attorneys' fees and costs, the Settlement Administration Costs, the Class Representative's Incentive Payment, and the PAGA allocation. *See* Settlement Agreement, Ex. A (Class Notice).

The Class Notice provides instructions for Class Members who choose to exclude themselves from the Settlement. *See* Settlement Agreement § 3.04(b). To opt out, Class Members are instructed to submit a Request for Exclusion to the Settlement Administrator by a specified date (60 days after the date of mailing of the Class Notice). *See* Settlement Agreement, Ex. A (Class Notice), pp. 1, 6. Class Members do not need to submit a claim form to participate in the Settlement. *Id.* at p. 2. Class Members are informed of how they can object to the Settlement, and the Class Notice informs Class Members of the date, time, and location of the final fairness and approval hearing so that they can appear in person. *Id.* at pp. 2, 8. The Class Notice also informs Class Members to check the Administrator's website or contact Class Counsel to verify the date and time of the Final Approval Hearing. *Id.* at p. 8. Accordingly, the content of the Class Notice complies with the requirements of California Rules of Court Rule 3.766(d).

If Class Notice packets are returned as undeliverable, the Settlement Administrator will perform a skip-trace or other search, and re-mail the Class Notice with an extended deadline, to opt out or object, of 5 days from the date of mailing or the original deadline, whichever is later. Settlement Agreement, § 3.03. The initial 60-day notice period and extension process ensures the notice program provides due process by giving Class Members enough time to determine whether they want to participate in the Settlement. This means of notice is reasonably calculated to apprise Class Members of the pendency of the action. *See* California Rules of Court Rule 3.766 (d)-(f).

C. Proposed Release

The release to be given by Class Members is limited to Defendant and each of its past, present and future subsidiaries, dbas, parents, divisions, related entities, joint venturers, as well as each of their respective owners, co-employers, joint employers, agents, officers, directors, stockholders, shareholders, investors, members, principles, subsidiaries, affiliates, partners, predecessors, successors, assigns, insurers, reinsurers, employees, attorneys, agents, heirs, estates, executors, spouses, associates, representatives, administrators, fiduciaries, trustees, accountants, auditors, company-sponsored employee benefit plans of any nature (the "Released Parties"). Settlement Agreement, § (I) ii. Under the proposed release, Class Members who do not exclude themselves from the Settlement will be deemed to have released the following:

(i) all claims that were alleged, or could have been alleged based on the facts alleged in the Operative Complaint or otherwise ascertained in the course of the Action including, without limitation, failure to pay minimum wages (2) failure to pay overtime wages (3) failure to comply with California Prevailing Wage Law; (4) failure to provide meal periods and/or pay meal period premiums (5) failure to authorize or permit rest periods and/or pay rest period premiums (6) failure to reimburse necessary business expenses (7) failure to pay wages during employment (8) failure to pay wages upon separation of employment and within the required time (9) failure to furnish accurate itemized wage statements wage statements; (10) violation of California Business and Professions Code §§17200, et seq., based on the preceding claims; (11) PAGA penalties pursuant to Labor Code §2699, et seq. (collectively, "Released Claims"); and (12) Unlawful Deductions.

Id at § 5.1.

PAGA Group Members will release the Released Parties from all claims for PAGA penalties arising during the PAGA Period that were alleged, or reasonably could have been alleged, based on the facts stated in the operative Complaint. Settlement Agreement, § 5.02.

IV. <u>LEGAL ARGUMENTS SUPPORTING PRELIMINARY APPROVAL</u>

A. Provisional Certification of the Class is Appropriate

Class certification is appropriate when there exists (1) an ascertainable and sufficiently numerous class, (2) a well-defined community of interest among class members, and (3) when certification would be a fair and efficient means of adjudicating the action, rendering class litigation superior to alternative means. *See Brinker Restaurant Corp. v. Superior Court*, 53 Cal. 4th 1004, 1021 (2012).

1. The Proposed Class is Numerous and Ascertainable

Whether a class is "ascertainable" is "determined by examining (1) the class definition, (2) the size of the class, and (3) the means available for identifying class members." *Reyes v. Bd. of Supervisors*, 196 Cal. App. 3d 1263, 1271 (1987). Here, the Class consists of all current and former non-exempt employees who are or were employed by Defendant in California at any time from December 18, 2018 through August 19, 2024. Settlement Agreement, §§ (I)c, f. Defendant's records show the Class consists of approximately 229 individuals, making joinder of all Class Members impracticable. Connolly Decl., ¶ 8. Further, the Class is readily ascertainable from Defendant's business records because all Class Members are current or former employees of Defendant. *Id.*

2. A Well-Defined Community of Interest Exists Among Class Members

"[T]he 'community of interest requirement embodies three factors: (1) predominant common questions of law or fact; (2) class representatives with claims or defenses typical of the class; and (3) class representatives who can adequately represent the class.'" *Fireside Bank v. Superior Court*, 40 Cal. 4th 1069, 1089 (2007) (quoting *Richmond v. Dart Industries, Inc.*, 29 Cal. 3d 462, 470 (1981)).

a. *Common Questions Predominate*

To assess whether common questions predominate, courts focus on whether the theories of recovery advanced are likely to prove amenable to class treatment. *See Sav-On Drug Stores, Inc. v. Superior Court*, 34 Cal. 4th 319, 327 (2004). In other words, courts determine whether the elements necessary to establish liability are susceptible of common proof, even if the class members must individually prove their damages. *Brinker*, *supra*, 53 Cal. 4th at 1021-1022, 1024.

Plaintiff alleged that Defendant maintained uniform employment policies and/or practices that illegally deprived Class Members of lawful wages, meal periods, rest breaks, accurate wage statements, and waiting time pay. Connolly Decl., ¶ 8. Plaintiff's allegations present common legal and factual questions of, *inter alia*, whether Defendant applied the same scheduling, timekeeping, minimum and overtime pay, meal period, and rest break policies to all Class Members; whether these policies and practices resulted in Labor Code violations; whether Defendant's conduct was intentional; and whether Class Members are entitled to penalties. *Id*. These common questions could be resolved using Class Members' schedules, time punches, and payroll records, Defendant's corporate representative's testimony, written communications between Defendant and Class Members, and Class Member declarations. *Id.* Thus, the Court can and should exercise its discretion to grant conditional class certification for settlement purposes.

b. *Plaintiff's Claims are Typical of the Class Claims*

The typicality requirement is satisfied when the legal theories and facts supporting Plaintiff's claims are substantially similar to other class members. *See Classen v. Weller*, 145 Cal. App. 3d 27, 46 (1983). Here, Plaintiff alleges that he and other Class Members were employed by Defendant and injured by Defendant's common wage and hour policies and practices, including Defendant's scheduling, timekeeping, minimum wage pay, overtime pay, meal period, and rest break practices and policies. Connolly Decl., ¶ 9. Through documents and information exchanged in informal discovery, including hundreds of pages of written time sheets by Defendant, Plaintiff's Counsel confirmed that these common policies and practices similarly affected Plaintiff and the Class. *Id.* Thus, Plaintiff's claims arise from the same employment practices and are based on the same legal theories as those applicable to other Class Members, as further explained in Plaintiff's exposure analysis below.

c. Plaintiff and Plaintiff's Counsel Will Adequately Represent the Interests of the Proposed Class

Certification requires adequacy of both the proposed class representative(s) and proposed class counsel. With respect to the class representative, a plaintiff must adequately represent and protect the interests of other members of the class and demonstrate that his or her claim is not inconsistent with the claims of other members of the class. *See Capitol People First v. State Dep't of Developmental Servs.*, 155 Cal. App. 4th 676, 696-697 (2007). Here, Plaintiff's interests are coextensive with the interests of the Class. Plaintiff demonstrated an ability to advocate for the interests of the Class by litigating this action, gathering documents and information, helping respond to written discovery, being available on the day of mediation to answer questions, meeting with his attorneys on several occasions to understand the claims and theories of liability at issue, assisting attorneys in preparing for mediation, reviewing the proposed settlement agreement to understand its legal effect, and obtaining a fair settlement on behalf of Class Members who stand to recover a substantial amount under the Settlement.

Likewise, Aegis Law Firm, PC has expended considerable time and effort on this case and will continue to do so through final approval. *See generally,* Connolly Decl. Accordingly, Plaintiff should be appointed Class Representative, and Plaintiff's Counsel should be appointed Class Counsel

3. A Class Action is Superior to a Multitude of Individual Lawsuits

Class treatment is superior to other methods of adjudication when the probability is small that each class member will come forward to prove his or her claim and when the class approach would deter and redress the alleged wrongdoing. *See Linder v. Thrifty Oil Co.*, 23 Cal. 4th 429, 435, 446 (2000); *Ghazaryan v. Diva Limousine, Ltd.*, 169 Cal. App. 4th 1524, 1537-1538 (2008). Here, none of the other 229 Class Members had shown any interest in bearing the expense and burden of litigating their own claims. Connolly Decl. ¶ 21. Thus, a class action is the superior method for seeking relief.

B. The Settlement Meets the Standards for Preliminary Approval

Preliminary approval is warranted if the settlement falls within a "reasonable range." *See North*

County Contractor's Ass'n., Inc. v. Touchstone Ins. Servs., 27 Cal. App. 4th 1085, 1089-90 (1994); Conte & Newberg, *Newberg on Class Actions*, § 11.26 (4th ed. 2002). In reviewing the fairness of a class action settlement, due regard should be given to what is "'otherwise a private consensual agreement between the parties.'" *Cellphone Termination Fee Cases*, 186 Cal. App. 4th 1380, 1389 (2010). The inquiry "must be limited to the extent necessary to reach a reasoned judgment that the agreement is not the product of fraud or overreaching by, or collusion between, the negotiating parties, and that the settlement, taken as a whole, is fair, reasonable and adequate to all concerned." *Id.*

Reasonableness and fairness are presumed where (1) the settlement is reached through "arms-length bargaining"; (2) investigation and discovery are "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." *Dunk v. Ford Motor Co.*, 48 Cal. App. 4th 1794, 1802 (1996). The Settlement satisfies the first three factors. Plaintiff will analyze the fourth factor at the final approval stage.

1. The Settlement is Entitled to a Presumption of Fairness

a. <u>The Settlement is the Result of Arm's-Length Negotiations</u>

Courts presume the absence of fraud or collusion in the negotiation of a settlement, unless evidence to the contrary is offered. Thus, there is a presumption that settlement negotiations are conducted in good faith. Here, the Settlement was the product of extensive investigation and a full day mediation session with a respected mediator after extensive informal discovery. Connolly Decl. ¶¶ 5-6. The negotiations were adversarial, conducted at arm's length and tempered by the efforts of both sides to serve the interests of their clients. *Id.* at ¶ 6. The amount of Plaintiff's requested Service Award was not negotiated until after the Parties agreed to the Gross Settlement Amount and many other terms. *Id.* at ¶ 22.

b. <u>Plaintiff's Counsel Conducted Sufficient Investigation and Discovery</u>

Plaintiff's Counsel thoroughly investigated the class claims, applicable law, and potential defenses. *See generally,* Connolly Decl. In particular, Plaintiff's Counsel assessed the value of the class claims using Defendant's data and documents produced through discovery. Connolly Decl., ¶ 9. Plaintiff's counsel extensively reviewed policy documents and Class Members' written timesheets and wage statements to perform a thorough analysis. *Id*. Further, Plaintiff's Counsel engaged an expert to quantify the potential exposure using the time and payroll records, and then assessed the risks associated with each of the claims meriting reductions in the likely recovery at trial. *Id.* Accordingly, Plaintiff's Counsel fully understood the strengths and weaknesses of the claims before the Parties reached a settlement. *Id*.

c. *Plaintiff's Counsel is Experienced in Similar Litigation*

Plaintiff is represented by Aegis Law Firm, PC ("Class Counsel"). Class Counsel prosecute wage and hour class actions on behalf of employees and others who have had their rights violated. Connolly Decl. ¶¶ 24-36. The attorneys working on this case have been appointed class counsel in many cases, through both contested motions and settlement approval motions. *Id.* Thus, Plaintiff's Counsel has extensive experience in similar litigation and should be appointed as Class Counsel.

2. The Settlement is Reasonable Given the Strengths of Plaintiff's Claims and the Risks and Expense of Litigation

Courts have discretion to approve class settlements by assessing several factors, including the "strength of plaintiffs' case, risk, expense, complexity and likely duration of further litigation and risk of maintaining the class action through trial." *Munoz v. BCI Coca-Cola Bottling Co. of L.A.*, 186 Cal. App. 4th 399, 407 (2010); *see Kullar v. Foot Locker Retail, Inc.*, 168 Cal. App. 4th 116, 129 (2008).

While Plaintiff and her counsel believed and continue to believe this is a strong case for certification, the significant risks and expenses associated with class certification and liability proceedings were taken into account. Connolly Decl., ¶ 12. To determine if the amount offered at mediation was reasonable, Plaintiff's Counsel weighed that figure against many risk factors. *Id.* at ¶ 13. If Plaintiff continued to prosecute the claims rather than accept a settlement, Plaintiff would have faced deadlines to file a motion for class certification, had to have engaged in more formal written discovery and taken depositions, expended time and resources to resolve disputes, prepared and filed potential dispositive motions and/or discovery motions, and engaged in extensive trial preparation. *Id.* An adverse ruling at any one of these stages could have prevented the Class from obtaining any recovery. *Id.*

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a. Exposure Analysis

A settlement does not have to provide 100% of the damages sought to be considered a fair and reasonable settlement. *See Rebney v. Wells Fargo Bank*, 220 Cal. App. 3d 1117, 1139 (1991). Rather, compromise is expected:

> 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."

Wershba v. Apple Computer, Inc., 91 Cal. App. 4th 224, 250 (2001) (citation omitted). Here, Plaintiff contends that her claims are based on Defendant's common, class-wide policies and procedures, and that liability could be determined on a class-wide basis without dependence on individual assessments of liability. Connolly Decl., ¶ 11. Although the amount of Defendant's potential exposure – if proven – is substantial, the legitimate and serious risks of succeeding at class certification and trial compelled a serious consideration of the benefit of a settlement. *Id.* at ¶ 13.

<u>Unpaid Wages Claims</u>: Plaintiff believed her strongest claim was premised on the theory that Defendant failed to pay all overtime wages owed due to an invalid alternative workweek schedule that was not registered with the Department of Industrial Relations. Connolly Decl., ¶ 14. However, not all Class Members were subject to an alternative workweek schedule, which could impact Plaintiff's ability to prove commonality in connection with her class certification motion. *Id.* Plaintiff's expert calculated that this claim was worth approximately $261,673. *Id.* With an assumed 60% chance of success at class certification and a 50% chance at trial, the realistic value of the claim was worth about $78,502 for settlement purposes. *Id.*

<u>Meal Period Claims</u>: Plaintiff's meal period claim was potentially worth about $351,502 in light of the violations shown in the records (*i.e.*, a meal period that was late, missed, or short). Connolly Decl., ¶ 15. However, Defendant provided evidence of its written policies that provided lawful meal periods and argued that employees could choose to waive their meal period, citing to *Brinker Restaurant Corp. v. Superior Court* 53 Cal. 4th 1004, 1029 (2012), in which the Supreme Court explained that employers do not need to "police" breaks, i.e., ensure that a meal is being taken if it was provided. *Id.* Indeed, about 60% of the recorded meal violations were for meal periods that could be lawfully waived

(*i.e.*, for first meals if shifts worked less than 6 hours, or for second meals if a first meal was taken and the employee worked less than 10 hours). *Id.* Thus, Plaintiff discounted this claim for the risk that the damages could at least be reduced, and that the claim would be hard to certify with a compliant policy. *Id.* As such, Plaintiff's counsel believed there was a 40% chance succeeding at class certification and a 20% chance at trial, resulting in a value of $28,120. *Id.*

Rest Break Claim: Plaintiff alleged that Defendant failed to authorize timely rest breaks due to the work demands imposed on Class Members. Connolly Decl., ¶ 16. If Plaintiff could prove a 100% violation rate for each shift over 3.5 hours, then damages could reach up to $454,474. *Id.* However, Defendant argued that a 100% violation rate was unrealistic, and provided evidence that it authorized rest breaks of 15-minutes. *Id.* Further, like meal periods, Class Members could choose to waive their rest breaks voluntarily and such waivers do not need to be memorialized in writing. *Id.* As such, this claim would have relied on Class Member testimony, making it a riskier claim at class certification and liability stages. *Id.* Plaintiff's counsel believed there was a 30% chance succeeding at class certification and a 20% chance at trial, resulting in a value of $27,268. *Id.*

Waiting Time and Wage Statement Penalties: Plaintiff's Counsel also considered the arguable presence of derivative waiting time and wage statement penalties, and weighed the potential recoveries against probable defenses. Connolly Decl., ¶ 17. Specifically, Defendant could argue that Plaintiff could not prove the "willful" prong needed to obtain waiting time penalties under Labor Code section 203. *Id.* Additionally, Defendant could argue that Plaintiff could not show that Class Members suffered an "injury" as a result of the derivative wage statement violations, as required by Labor Code section 226. *Id.* Moreover, Plaintiff would not recover any of these derivative penalties if she failed to prove the underlying claims. *Id.* Further, even if the Court agreed with Plaintiff as to the unpaid wages claim, the Court could find that Defendant had a "good faith defense" to not paying all wages owed. *Id.* At the time of mediation, the California Supreme Court had recently ruled that an employer's reasonable, good faith, albeit mistaken, belief that it provided employees with adequate wage statements precluded award of civil penalties. *Naranjo v. Spectrum Security Services, Inc.* 15 Cal.5th 1056 (2024). Connolly Decl., ¶ 17. Although the Class arguably could have seen a payout of approximately $911,603 for waiting time penalties and $125,700 for wage statement penalties, Plaintiff would not recover any of these derivative penalties if she failed to prove the underlying claims. *Id.* Thus, Plaintiff discounted these claims assuming a 30% chance of class certification and 20% chance at the merits for both claims, resulting in a realistic value of $54,696 for the waiting time claim and $7,542 for the wage statement claim. *Id.*

PAGA Claim: The PAGA claim presented even higher hurdles. Connolly Decl., ¶ 18. Although Plaintiff's Counsel found Defendant's exposure could potentially reach approximately $132,600 under Labor Code section 2699(f), assuming the initial penalty rate of $100 for all 1,326 pay periods, Plaintiff would have to prove a violation in every pay period. *Id.* However, Defendant argued that the assumption that there were violations in every pay period is not supported by the evidence. *Id.* Most importantly, the Court would have discretion to reduce the PAGA award based on whether the amount of the award would be "unjust, arbitrary and oppressive, or confiscatory." Lab. Code § 2699(e)(2). Connolly Decl. ¶ 18. In theory, the Court could reduce the award by 99% if it so wished, especially if a large class judgment was entered for the same violations. *Id.* In other words, were this matter to go to trial, any award granted would be at the discretion of the Court. *See, e.g. Carrington v. Starbucks Corp.*, 30 Cal.App.5th 504, 528 (2018) (awarding PAGA penalties of only 0.2% of the maximum). In determining the value for PAGA penalties to be included in the Settlement, Plaintiff considered the risks described above as to each underlying claim, concluding that her best chance at trial would be to prove at least one penalty per pay period with a 15% chance of prevailing, which would result in a recover of about $19,890. Connolly Decl. ¶ 18. Plaintiff then estimated that the PAGA penalties could be reduce by around 50%, given Defendant's financial condition, making the potential recovery about $10,000. *Id.* Accordingly, Plaintiff could not place a high value on the PAGA penalties, and therefore allocated $10,000 of the Gross Settlement Amount to settle these claims. *Id.*

Financial Condition: Finally, Plaintiff's counsel took into consideration Defendant's operations as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that provides valuable wildfire prevention services and its financial condition. Connolly Decl., ¶ 19. Specifically, Plaintiff's counsel retained a forensic accounting expert to review Defendant's confidential financial documents and evaluate its ability to fund a class settlement amount. *Id*. Based upon the expert's findings, and further communications between the Parties as well as the mediator, the Parties agreed to a brief payment plan, which guarantees payment to the Class, instead of risking that Defendant files bankruptcy and stops providing wildfire prevention services, and the Class could recover nothing. *Id*.

Thus, given the realistic exposure to Defendant, the settlement amount of $175,000 is reasonable, fair, and proper. Connolly Decl., ¶ 20.

C. The Requested Incentive Award for Plaintiff

Plaintiff seeks an Incentive Award of up to $10,000.00 for accepting the responsibilities of representing the interests of the Class and assuming risks and potential costs that were not borne by any other Class Members. A named plaintiff is eligible for payment that reasonably compensates him or her for undertaking and fulfilling a fiduciary duty to represent absent class members. *See Cellphone Termination Fee Cases*, *supra,* 186 Cal. App. 4th at 1393; *Bell v. Farmers Ins. Exch.*, 115 Cal. App. 4th 715, 726 (2004).

Here, Plaintiff had the option to pursue her claims individually, but instead chose to pursue this class action, delaying individual recovery for her claims until approval of a class action settlement. Connolly Decl., ¶ 21. Throughout the case, Plaintiff assisted counsel in gathering the evidence necessary to prosecute the class claims, maintained regular contact with counsel, was available on the day of mediation and communicated with her attorneys during the day of mediation to answer critical questions, and reviewed the Settlement to make sure it was fair to the Class. *Id.* No action would likely have been taken by Class Members individually, and no compensation would have been recovered for them, but for Plaintiff's services on behalf of the Class. *Id.*

By actively pursuing this action, Plaintiff furthered the California public policy goal of enforcing the State's wage and hour laws. *See Sav-On Drug Stores, Inc.*, *supra*, 34 Cal. 4th at 340. The requested Incentive Award for Plaintiff's service as the class representative and for a general release of all employment claims is reasonable and should be preliminarily approved. At the final approval stage, Plaintiff will further support the request for the Incentive Award by a declaration addressing the factors for the award. Connolly Decl., ¶ 23.

D. The Requested Attorneys' Fees and Costs

The purpose of an attorneys' fee award in class action litigation is to reward counsel who invested in a case despite the risk of non-payment and achieved a substantial positive result for the class.

Attorneys' fees are awarded as a matter of equity. California courts routinely award attorneys' fees equaling one-third or more of the potential value of the common fund. *See Chavez v. Netflix, Inc.*, 162 Cal. App. 4th 43, 66, n.11 (2008) ("Empirical studies show that, regardless of whether the percentage method or the lodestar method is used, fee awards in class actions average around one-third of the recovery").

Plaintiff seeks appointment of Aegis Law Firm, PC as Class Counsel. The attorneys performed significant work and expended litigation costs in prosecuting the matter with no guarantee of any payment. Connolly Decl., ¶ 37. Plaintiff's Counsel seeks preliminary approval for up to one-third of the Gross Settlement Amount for attorneys' fees, and up to $25,000.00 in reimbursement of litigation costs. Given the work performed in this matter, the extensive information exchange, and substantial recovery obtained on behalf of Plaintiff and the Class, Plaintiff's Counsel achieved a settlement through efficient and diligent work. *See generally,* Connolly Decl. At final approval, Plaintiff's Counsel will fully brief the merits of their request for the award of attorneys' fees and litigation costs. *Id.* at ¶ 38.

V. CONCLUSION

The Parties have negotiated a fair and reasonable Settlement of the class claims in light of the risks present in this case. Plaintiff has appropriately presented the materials and information necessary for preliminary approval, and therefore, respectfully requests that the Court preliminarily approve the Settlement and schedule a date to conduct the final approval hearing.

Dated: February 4, 2025

AEGIS LAW FIRM, PC

By: Kristy Connolly

Kristy R. Connolly
Attorneys for Plaintiff Kristina Lura