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on behalf of herself and all others similarly situated

SUPERIOR COURT OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

FOR THE COUNTY OF RIVERSIDE

CLAUDIA E. GONZALEZ, an individual, on behalf of herself and others similarly situated, Plaintiff, vs. THE ANNENBERG FOUNDATION TRUST AT SUNNYLANDS, a non-profit entity; and DOES 1 through 50, inclusive, Defendants.	Case No.: CVRI2401980 <u>CLASS ACTION</u> <u>Assigned for All Purposes To:</u> Hon. Harold W. Hopp Dept.: 1 **MEMORANDUM OF POINTS AND AUTHORITIES IN SUPPORT OF PLAINTIFF'S <u>UNOPPOSED</u> MOTION FOR PRELIMINARY APPROVAL OF CLASS AND PAGA ACTION SETTLEMENT** Date: August 5, 2025 Time: 8:30 a.m. Dept.: 1 Reservation: **075110275535** Original Complaint Filed: April 12, 2024 First Amended Complaint: September 23, 2024 Trial Date: None Set

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MEMORANDUM OF POINTS AND AUTHORITIES

I. INTRODUCTION

Plaintiff Claudia E. Gonzalez ("Plaintiff" or "Class Representative") seeks preliminary approval for a $198,000.00 non-reversionary wage and hour class and PAGA action settlement for an estimated 260 non-exempt, hourly employees who worked for Defendant The Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands ("Defendant") from April 13, 2020, through the date of preliminary approval of the settlement ("Class Period").

After engaging in substantial investigation and extensive negotiations with the assistance of a respected mediator, the parties agreed to settle all claims on a class-wide, non-reversionary basis for One Hundred Ninety-Eight Thousand Dollars and Zero Cents ($198,000.00), inclusive of all fees and costs. The parties' Class Action and PAGA Settlement Agreement ("Settlement", "Settlement Agreement" or "SA") defines the class as "all non-exempt, hourly employees that worked for Defendant during the Class Period" ("Class"). All 260 Class Members will receive a settlement payment unless they opt out of the Settlement. The Settlement Agreement is attached as Exhibit 1 to the Declaration of Marta Manus, filed concurrently herewith.

The proposed settlement reflected in the Settlement Agreement is fair, reasonable, and adequate, and in the best interests of the Class. Consequently, Plaintiff, with the consent of Defendant, hereby moves this Court for an order: (1) granting preliminary approval of the proposed class action settlement, as embodied in the Settlement Agreement filed concurrently herewith; (2) approving the Notice of Class Action Settlement and Hearing Date for Final Court Approval ("Class Notice") to be sent to Class Members; and (3) setting a hearing for final approval of the class action settlement.

II. STATUS OF THE LITIGATION

A. Procedural History

On April 12, 2024, Plaintiff commenced a Class Action by filing a Complaint alleging causes of action against Defendant for (1) Failure to Pay Minimum Wages; (2) Failure to Pay Wages and Overtime Under Labor Code §510; (3) Meal Period Liability Under Labor Code §226.7; (4) Rest Break Liability Under Labor Code § 226.7; (5) Violation of Labor Code

§226(a);; (6) Violation of Labor §221; (7) Violation of Labor Code §204; (8) Violation of Labor Code §203; (9) Failure to Maintain Records Required Under Labor Code §1174 and 1174.5; (10) Failure to Reimburse Necessary Business Expenses §2802; (11) Violation of Business & Professions Code §17200 *et seq*; and (12) Penalties under Private Attorney General Act ("PAGA") (the "Action"). See Declaration of Marta Manus in Support of Plaintiff's Motion for Preliminary Approval ("Manus Decl."), ¶ 11.

Pursuant to Labor Code section 2699.3, subd.(a), Plaintiff gave timely written notice to Defendant and the Labor Workforce Development Agency ("LWDA") by sending the PAGA Notice on April 12, 2024 (LWDA—CM-1021974). The LWDA did not express an interest in investigating Plaintiff's claims within the 65 day period. Therefore, on September 23, 2024, Plaintiff filed a First Amended Complaint adding a cause of action for penalties under PAGA (the "Operative Complaint"). *Id*. at ¶ 12.

B. Investigation

Before filing the lawsuit, Class Counsel investigated and researched the facts and circumstances underlying the pertinent issues and the law applicable thereto. This required thorough discussions and interviews between Class Counsel and Plaintiff, as well as preliminary research into the various legal issues involved in the case. After conducting their initial investigation, Class Counsel determined that Plaintiff's claims were well-suited for class and representative action adjudication owing to what appeared to be a common course of conduct affecting a similarly situated group of employees. Manus Decl., ¶ 14.

In advance of mediation, Class Counsel conducted a thorough investigation into the facts of, and applicable law to, the Action, including speaking to current and former employees of Defendant regarding Defendant's employment policies and practices. Plaintiff's counsel provided Defendant's counsel with a comprehensive listing of informal discovery items required to constructively mediate. Defendant responded by producing timekeeping and corresponding payroll records for approximately 241 putative class members covering the period of April 12, 2020 through December 13, 2024. Prior to mediation, Plaintiff obtained and analyzed the production of a sampling time and payroll data for Class Members and the necessary policy documents through informal discovery to properly evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the claims and engage in meaningful settlement discussions. The sample was taken from approximately 245 Class Members and contained approximately 217 individuals, yielding an approximate 88% sample size. Manus Decl. ¶ 17; Declaration of Jarrett Gorlick ("Gorlick Decl.") ¶ 6, filed herewith. Plaintiff's investigation was sufficient to satisfy the criteria for court approval set forth in *Dunk v. Foot Locker Retail, Inc*., (1996) 48 Cal.App.4th 1794, 1801 and *Kullar v. Foot Locker Retail, Inc*., (2008) 168 Cal.App.4th 116, 129-130 ("*Dunk/Kullar*"). The Class enumerated in this action is ascertainable because Class Members may be readily identified by reference to Defendant's records. See Declaration of Robert Bell ("Bell Decl."), filed herewith. Defendant has agreed to share the information from these records with the Administrator in order to identify and contact Class Members. There are approximately 260 total Class Members. Manus Decl., ¶ 15.

Defendant, for its part, vigorously contested liability, the amount of claimed damages, and the propriety of class certification. After Class Counsel analyzed the relevant documents and other gathered data, Class Counsel believed that this case was appropriate for resolution via mediation.. Given the level of risk present for both sides and the cost and burden associated with litigation for Defendant, the parties elected to mediate Plaintiff's claims and explore the possibility of settlement. Manus Decl., ¶ 16.

C. Settlement Efforts

On February 27, 2025, the parties attended mediation with Kelly Knight, Esq., a respected and highly experienced mediator in wage and hour class actions. During mediation, Plaintiff's and Defendant's counsel discussed all aspects of the case, including the risks of litigation and the risks to both parties of proceeding with a motion for class certification, as well as the law relating to unpaid wages, meal periods, rest periods, wage statements, reimbursement of business expenses, and final pay. As a result of the mediation, the parties agreed to settle the lawsuit according to the terms set forth in the Settlement Agreement. *See* Manus Decl., ¶ 18, **Exhibit 1**.

From Class Counsel's review of the facts, strengths, and weaknesses of the case, the risks and delays posed by further litigation, and Class Counsel's own prior litigation experience, Class Counsel believes that the recovery for each Class Member is fair and reasonable taking into consideration the amounts received in other wage and hour class actions, the risks inherent in litigation of this genre, and the reasonable tailoring of each Class Member's claim to the settlement award he or she will receive. Further, and based on the settlement negotiations, which were extensive, and conducted in good faith and at arm's length between attorneys with substantial experience litigating class actions and wage and hour cases, the Settlement Agreement was the product of a non-collusive settlement process in which the parties were forced to make significant compromises in the interest of reaching a full and complete settlement of the lawsuit. Class Counsel and counsel for Defendant are not aware of any other class, representative or other collective action in this or any other jurisdiction that asserts claims similar to those asserted in this action on behalf of a class or group of individuals whom would also be members of the class defined in this action. Manus Decl., ¶ 19; Declaration of David W. Moreshead ¶ 2.

III. SETTLEMENT AGREEMENT AND ACCOMPANYING DOCUMENTS

Under the terms of the proposed Settlement Agreement, Defendant has agreed to pay One Hundred Ninety-Eight Thousand Dollars and Zero Cents ($198,000.00) ("Gross Settlement Amount") on a non-reversionary basis to settle and release all claims asserted by Plaintiff in the Action on behalf of the proposed Class. Manus Decl., ¶ 20; SA ¶ 23. The Settlement Agreement defines the "Class" as ""all non-exempt, hourly employees that worked for Defendant during the Class Period" ("Class"). Manus Decl., ¶ 21; SA ¶ 6.

The "Net Settlement Amount," available for distribution to Class Members, shall be the Gross Settlement Amount, less the following payments in the amounts approved by the Court: PAGA Penalties, Class Representative Enhancement Award, Class Counsel Fees Payment, Class Counsel Litigation Expenses Payment, and the Administration Costs. Manus Decl., ¶ 22; SA ¶ 29. These amounts are detailed as follows:

- Class Counsel Fees Payment of not more than Sixty-Six Thousand Dollars and Zero Cents ($66,000.00) and a Class Counsel Litigation Expenses Payment of not more than Twenty-Five Thousand Dollars and Zero Cents ($25,000.00); SA ¶¶ 8 – 9;
- Administration Expenses Payment of not more than Seven Thousand Five

Hundred Dollars and Zero Cents ($7,500.00); SA ¶ 3;

- Class Representative Enhancement Award of not more than Ten Thousand Hundred Dollars and Zero Cents ($10,000.00) to Plaintiff (SA ¶ 16); and
- PAGA Penalties in the amount of Ten Thousand Dollars and Zero Cents ($10,000.00) for civil penalties under PAGA, with 75% ($7,500.00) paid to the LWDA for the LWDA PAGA Payment and 25% ($2,500.00) paid to Aggrieved Employees for their Individual PAGA Payments. Manus Decl., ¶ 22; SA ¶ 36.

The "Individual Class Payment" is each Class Member's share of the Net Settlement Amount and will be calculated and apportioned from the Net Settlement Amount based on the number of Workweeks a Class Member worked during the Class Period. Manus Decl., ¶ 23; SA ¶ 23. Using a straight average and assuming they worked throughout the Class Period, Plaintiff estimates that each Class Member will receive an average of $304.81 (NSA of $79,250/260) for their Individual Class Payment. *Id.* at ¶ 59. The "Individual PAGA Payment" means the Aggrieved Employee's pro rata share of 25% of the PAGA Penalties calculated according to the number of Pay Periods worked during the PAGA Period. *Id*; SA ¶ 25.

Defendant will pay its employer-side payroll tax obligations on the Wage Portion of the Individual Class Payments in addition to the Gross Settlement Amount. Manus Decl., ¶ 24; SA ¶ 54.

Class Members will receive the Class Notice via first class mail. Manus Decl., ¶ 26; SA ¶ 82(a). Class Members will have an opportunity to dispute the Workweeks and Pay Period information provided in their Class Notice and produce evidence to support their contentions. Manus Decl., ¶ 27; SA ¶¶ 82(c), 84. The Settlement Administrator will make the final determination as to any disputes involving Class Members' allocation of Workweeks and Pay Periods. *Id.*

Class Members wishing to opt out from the Settlement Agreement must send a signed written request for exclusion to the Settlement Administrator within 45 days from the initial mailing of the Class Notice. Manus Decl., ¶ 28; SA ¶ 83. Participating Class Members will also have the opportunity to object to the Settlement Agreement by serving a copy of the objection to the Settlement Administrator within 45 days after the mailing of the Class Notice. *Id.*; SA ¶ 85.

The parties received quotes for the administration of the Settlement from Apex Class Action, LLC ("Apex") and Phoenix Class Action Administration Solutions. The quote from Apex was the most competitive. The parties agreed to appoint Apex to handle the notice and administration of the Settlement. Manus Decl., ¶ 29; SA ¶ 2. Apex has procedures in place to protect the security of class data, adequate insurance in the event of a data breach or defalcation of funds, and is qualified to administer the Settlement. Declaration of Michael Sutherland in Support of Plaintiff's Motion for Preliminary Approval of Class and PAGA Settlement ("Sutherland Decl."), filed herewith. The procedures for mailing notice and processing exclusions and objections as well as distribution of the Net Settlement Amount are detailed in the Settlement Agreement. *Id.*; SA ¶¶ 79-86.

IV. CERTIFICATION FOR SETTLEMENT PURPOSES ONLY IS APPROPRIATE

Express judicial policy favors maintaining wage and hour actions as class actions. *Prince v. CLS Transp., Inc.* (2004) 118 Cal. App. 4th 1320, 1328; *Richmond v. Dart Industries, Inc.* (1981) 29 Cal. 3d 462. Any doubt as to the appropriateness of class treatment should be resolved in favor of class certification, subject to later modification if necessary. *Richmond*, 29 Cal. 3d at 473-75. The decision to certify a class is a procedural one, and should be based on the allegations in the operative complaint, and not in the perceived factual or legal merit of the class claims. *Linder v. Thrifty Oil Co.* (2000) 23 Cal. 4th 429, 439-41.

To certify a settlement class, the Court must find the two primary requirements for maintaining a class action: (1) there must be an ascertainable class, and (2) there must be a well-defined community of interest in the questions of law and fact involving the parties to be represented. *See Vasquez v. Superior Court* (1971) 4 Cal. 3d 800, 805-09; *Daar v. Yellow Cab Company* (1967) 67 Cal. 2d 695, 704. These criteria are met here for the reasons set forth below.

A. There Is A Numerous and Ascertainable Class

Whether a class is ascertainable is determined by examining the class definition, the size of the class and the means available for identifying class members. *Vasquez, supra,* 4 Cal. 3d at 821-22; *Reyes v. Board of Supervisors of San Diego County,* (1987) 196 Cal. App. 3d 1263, 1271. Class members are "ascertainable" where they may be readily identified without unreasonable expense or time. *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).

Plaintiff contends, and Defendant does not dispute for settlement purposes only, this requirement and the requirement of numerosity is met. Class Members are "all non-exempt, hourly employees that worked for Defendant in California from April 13, 2020 through the date of the Preliminary Approval Order, or an earlier date as determined in accordance with this Agreement." Manus Decl., ¶ 21; SA ¶ 6. Documents and information exchanged between the parties reflect a class of approximately 260 Class Members. Manus Decl., ¶ 76(a). The Class Members have already been identified by reference to Defendant's payroll and personnel records. *Id*. at ¶ 76(b).

Therefore, and notwithstanding the foregoing, there is a numerous and ascertainable class.

B. There Is A Well-Defined Community of Interest

A community of interest is established by the predominance of common issues of law and fact. *See Vasquez*, 4 Cal. 3d at 811. The requirement of a community of interest:

> [D]oes not depend upon an identical recovery, and the fact that each member of the class must prove his separate claim to a portion of any recovery by the class is only one factor to be considered ... The mere fact that separate transactions are involved does not of itself preclude a finding of the requisite community of interest so long as every member of the alleged class would not be required to litigate numerous and substantial questions to determine his individual right to recover subsequent to the rendering of any class judgment which determined in plaintiff' favor whatever questions were common to the class.

Id. at 809.

Plaintiff contends, and Defendant does not dispute for settlement purposes only, that common issues of fact and law predominate as to each of the claims alleged by Plaintiff, and the Class is united in its proof. Manus Decl., ¶ 76(e). Because Plaintiff has alleged a single scheme, "the relevant proof [does] not vary among class members" and "clearly presents a common question fundamental to all class members." *See In Re NASDAQ Market-Makers Antitrust Litigation* (SDNY 1997) 172 F.R.D. 119, 123 (citing In Re NASDAQ Market-Makers Antitrust

Litigation, (SDNY 1997) 169 F.R.D. 493, 518). California courts show "no hesitancy" in inferring class-wide causation, class-wide injury, and class-wide damages when a common course of action has been shown. *B.W.I. Custom Kitchen*, 191 Cal. App. 3d at 1350. This inference "'eliminates the need for each class member to prove individually the consequences of the defendants' actions to him or her.'" *Id.* at 1351 (quoting *Rosack v. Volvo of America Corp* (1982) 131 Cal. App. 3d 741, 753 [emphasis added]).

This action involves, *inter alia*, a determination about Defendant's alleged failure to provide meal period and rest periods, failure to pay wages and overtime due to allegedly common and unlawful policies, failure to provide accurate wage statements, failure to reimburse business expenses, failure to pay sick pay, failure to pay final wages when required, and largely derivative claims under the Business & Professions Code and PAGA. Plaintiff contends these practices affected Class Members in the same way. Plaintiff contends these practices resulted in a failure to compensate employees at termination, and incomplete wages displayed on wage statements. The outcome of litigation on this matter depends upon questions that are common to Class Members. Manus Decl., ¶ 76(e).

C. The Named Plaintiff's Claims Are Typical

A class representative's claims are typical when they arise from the same event, practice, or course of conduct that gives rise to the claims of other putative class members, and if their claims rest on the same legal theories. The class representative's claims must be "typical" but not necessarily identical to the claims of other class members. It is sufficient that the representative is similarly situated so that he or she will have the motive to litigate on behalf of all class members. *Classen v. Weller* (1983) 145 Cal.App.3d 27, 47; *B.W.I. Custom Kitchens v. Owens-Illinois, Inc.* (1987) 191 Cal.App.3d 1341, 1347 ("[I]t has never been the law in California that the class representative must have identical interests with the class members.") Thus it is not necessary that the class representative should have personally incurred all of the damages suffered by each of the other class members. *Wershba v. Apple Computer, Inc.* (2001) 91 Cal.App.4th 224, 228.

Plaintiff contends, and Defendant does not dispute for settlement purposes only, that Plaintiff's claims are typical of Class Members' claims because they arose from the same factual basis and are based on the same legal theories. Manus Decl., ¶ 76(c). Plaintiff was employed by Defendant during the Class Period, and was subject to the allegedly unlawful meal and rest policies and pay practices at issue in this litigation. Declaration of Claudia E. Gonzalez in Support of Plaintiff's Motion for Preliminary Approval ("Gonzelez Decl.") ¶ 2. Accordingly, Plaintiff is a member of the Class. The central issues of this litigation (whether Defendant failed to pay all wages, whether Defendant failed to provide meal and rest periods, etc.) apply to the other Class Members as well. The answer to these questions would determine Defendant's liability to the Class.. Thus, the claims of Plaintiff are typical of the claims of the Class. Accordingly, the typicality requirement is satisfied. *Id*

D. Adequacy of Class Counsel and Class Representatives

Class Counsel are experienced in class actions, have represented their clients zealously and have no conflicts of interest. Manus Decl., ¶¶ 3-9, 76(d) . The Class Representative's interests are aligned with those of Class Members, she has suffered the same injuries as Class Members, and has no conflicts of interest. *Id.* Therefore, Class Counsel and the Class Representative are adequate.

E. Predominance and Superiority

Individual issues do not predominate over those common to the class. The class action mechanism is superior to individualized actions because Class Members have little incentive to bring claims that are small. Manus Decl., ¶ 76(f) – (g).

V. THE TWO-STEP APPROVAL PROCESS

Any settlement of class action litigation must be reviewed and approved by the Court. This is accomplished in two steps: (1) An early (preliminary) review by the trial court, and (2) a detailed review after the notice has been distributed to the class members for their comments or objections. In this regard, the Manual for Complex Litigation (Second) explains:

> A two-step process is followed when considering class settlements… If the proposed settlement appears to be the product of serious, informed, non-collusive negotiations, has no obvious deficiencies, does not improperly grant preferential treatment to class representative or segments of the class, and falls within the range of possible approval, then the court should direct that notice be given to the class members of a formal fairness hearing, at which evidence

may be presented in support of and in opposition to the settlement.

Manual for Complex Litigation (Second) (1985) at § 30.44.

The preliminary approval of the class action settlement by the trial court is simply a conditional finding that the settlement appears to be within the range of acceptable settlements. *See, e.g., Newberg*, § 11.25; *North County Contractor's Assn., Inc. v. Touchstone Ins. Services* (1994) 27 Cal. App. 4th 1085, 1094-95. Thus, the preliminary approval of the class action settlement by the trial court is simply a conditional finding that the settlement appears to be within the range of acceptable settlements.

Settlements to resolve PAGA claims also require court approval. Labor Code § 2699(l)(2). There is no articulated standard for approving PAGA settlements. PAGA settlements for as little as $0 have been approved. *Nordstrom Com'n Cases* (2010) 186 Cal.App.4th 576, 589 (approving PAGA settlement and release that allocated $0 to PAGA claim). Courts have also approved settlements for $20,000 or less. *See, e.g., Hicks v. Toys 'R' Us–Delaware, Inc.,* (C.D. Cal. Sept. 2, 2014) 2014 WL 4703915, at *1 (approving $5,000 PAGA payment in $4 million settlement); *Chu v. Wells Fargo Invest. LLC* (N.D. Cal. Feb. 16, 2011) 2011 WL 672645, at *1 (approving PAGA payment of $7,500 in $6.9 million settlement); *Williams v. Brinderson Constructors* (C.D. Cal. Feb. 6, 2017) 2017 WL 490901, at *5 ($10,000 PAGA settlement in $300,000 settlement).

A review of the preliminary approval criteria demonstrates a substantial basis for granting the instant Motion and proceeding to a final settlement approval hearing.

VI. THE SETTLEMENT IS FAIR AND ADEQUATE

As a matter of public policy, courts both encourage the use of the class action device and favor settlement over continued litigation. *Linder v. Thrifty Oil Co.* (2000) 23 Cal. 4th 429, 434 ("Courts have long acknowledged the importance of class actions as a means to prevent a failure of justice in our judicial system."); *Class Plaintiff v. City of Seattle* (1992) 955 F.2d 1268, 1276 ("[S]trong judicial policy . . . favors settlements, particularly where complex class action litigation is concerned.").

Moreover, courts presume the absence of fraud or collusion in the negotiation of a settlement unless evidence to the contrary is offered. In short, there is a presumption that the negotiations were conducted in good faith. *Newberg*, §11.51; *Rodriguez v. West Publ. Corp.* (C.D. Cal. August 10, 2007) 2007 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 74767, 24-25 ; *Priddy v. Edelman* (6th Cir. 1989) 883 F.2d 438, 447. Courts do not substitute their judgment for that of the proponents, particularly when settlement has been reached by experienced counsel familiar with the litigation. *Rodriguez*, 2007 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 74767 at 24; *Hammon v. Barry* (D.D.C. 1990) 752 F. Supp. 1087.

In *Kullar v. Foot Locker Retail, Inc.*, (2008) 168 Cal. App. 4th 116, 128, the court laid out several factors that should be analyzed in determining if a class action settlement should be approved. These factors include: (1) the strength of plaintiff's case; (2) the risk, expense, complexity and likely duration of further litigation; (3) the risk of maintaining class action status through trial; (4) the amount offered in settlement; (5) the extent of discovery completed and stage of the proceedings; (6) the experience and views of counsel; (7) the presence of a governmental participant; and (8) the reaction of the Class Members to the proposed settlement.

The Settlement here satisfies each of these factors. Class Counsel conducted extensive informal discovery before entering into meaningful settlement negotiations in this matter, including a detailed analysis of Defendant's policies and a reasonable sample of Defendant's time and pay records. Manus Decl., ¶¶ 15-17. This discovery permitted Class Counsel to fairly evaluate the strengths of the case and the risks associated with ongoing litigation. Class Counsel is very experienced in the handling of wage and hour class actions and supports this Settlement. Manus Decl., ¶¶ 3-9.

A. The Strength of Plaintiff's Case.

Plaintiff alleges that Defendant failed to pay Class Members all minimum and overtime wages due and owing, including by requiring off the clock work, failing to provide all legally compliant, off-duty meal and rest breaks, failing to furnish accurate wage statements, failing to timely pay wages including final wages, failing to maintain accurate records, failing to reimburse necessary business expenses, and failing to accurately calculate the regular rate of pay for sick leave and meal premium payments. Manus Decl., ¶ 13.

Class Counsel felt confident that the claims in this case would be certified given that

Defendant's policies were applicable to all Class Members and unlawful. Manus Decl., ¶ 14. Defendant contended, however, that its policies complied with California law and denied Plaintiff's allegations.

B. The Risks Associated with the Merits.

As with all litigation, there are risks that a party will not prevail on the merits. In this case, Plaintiff alleged that Defendant failed to pay Plaintiff and Class Members at least minimum wages for all hours worked and proper overtime wages for hours worked in excess of eight hours in a day and 40 hours in a week. Specifically, Plaintiff alleged Class Members were required to wait in line to clock in on a single computer, frequently causing delays of several minutes in line, off-the-clock. Plaintiff alleged these delays constitute off the clock work as Employees were under Defendants' authority and control during this time. As a result of Defendants' timekeeping practices, Defendants inaccurately recorded Employees' time entries and failed to compensate them for all their actual hours worked. Because off-the-clock hours worked is based on anecdotal evidence such as Class Member estimates, Plaintiff took into consideration the challenges in proving this claim. Manus Decl., ¶ 34.

Defendant contended that it paid for all reported hours worked, that Class Members were instructed and required to record all hours worked, and that any off the clock work was performed without Defendant's knowledge. Defendant argued that given their written policies and practices, any unrecorded hours are likely subject to individualized inquiry and unlikely to be certified. Given the difficulty in certifying this claim, Class Counsel applied a significant discount to damages. Manus Decl., ¶ 36.

Plaintiff also contended that Defendant failed to provide compliant, duty-free meal periods to Class Members since they were required to perform work and remain under Defendant's control during their meal breaks and had to forego full, uninterrupted meal breaks because employees were, at times, instructed to clock out for lunch and continue working. Manus Decl., ¶¶ 38-39. Defendant contended that Class Members were given a reasonable opportunity to take their meal periods, and in fact were provided with an opportunity to take duty-free meal periods on all eligible shifts. *Id.* at ¶ 41. If Defendant's contentions are proven true and prevail in trial, the likely outcome of this claim would be no recovery for Class Members. *Id.*

Plaintiff also contended that Defendant did not provide Class Members with paid 10-minute rest breaks for every four hours or major fraction thereof. Manus Decl., ¶ 43. Class Members were prohibited from leaving the operations building during meal breaks and compelled to remain in the area they were cleaning for their rest breaks. *Id.* Defendant maintained that they provided a reasonable opportunity for Class Members to take duty-free rest breaks during their shifts and disputed all allegations that rest breaks were not provided. Defendant also pointed out that, unlike meal periods, rest breaks need not be recorded, so any rest break violations would likely be difficult to prove at trial. In light of these considerations, which were likely to diminish the damages and ultimately recoverable, Class Counsel applied appropriate discounts to the valuation of the rest break claim. *Id* at ¶ 44.

C. The Risks Associated with Paystub Violations and Waiting Time Penalties.

In order to establish liability for these penalties, Plaintiff would first have to establish liability for the underlying claims. Plaintiff would then have to establish that Defendant's conduct was willful and knowing. Labor Code §§ 203, 226(e).

With waiting time penalties, there is always the risk that the trier of fact would not have held that Defendant's actions were done "willfully." A good faith belief in a legal defense can preclude a finding of willfulness. *Gonzalez v. Downtown LA Motors* (2013) 215 Cal.App.4th 36, 54; 8 C.C.R. § 13520. As discussed above, Plaintiff alleged that Defendant failed to pay for all hours worked and premiums for non-compliant meal breaks due to the underreporting of hours and off-the-clock work. Plaintiff contended the Class Members are entitled to these wages and premiums, which she alleged were not paid at the time of their termination or resignation. If Plaintiff is successful on her claims, the penalties pursuant to Labor Code § 203 shall attach. Defendant, however, contends it provided employees with the reasonable opportunity to take meal breaks, asked Class Members to confirm the accuracy of their time records, and therefore had good-faith defenses under *Brinker* and its progeny. Defendant likewise contends that it properly paid all hours worked by its employees. Based upon Defendant's potential success in establishing both that a good faith dispute existed with regard to unpaid wages, and Defendant endeavored in good faith to supply accurate wage statements, Defendant argues the claims for paystub violations and waiting time penalties have little or no value. *See Maldonado v. Epsilon Plastics, Inc.*, (2018) 22 Cal. App. 5th 1308, 1336-1337 (wage statements that accurately report wages paid to employees do not violate Labor Code § 226, even if it is later determined that employer did not properly pay all wages due). As such, there was risk associated with wage statement and waiting time penalties that Class Counsel had to consider. Manus Decl., ¶¶ 46-48.

D. The Risks Associated with the PAGA Penalties.

Labor Code § 2699.3 gives aggrieved employees the right to recover civil penalties for specific Labor Code violations by way of a civil action. The PAGA provides a penalty amount of one hundred dollars ($100) for each aggrieved employee per pay period for the initial violation and two hundred dollars ($200) for each aggrieved employee per pay period for each subsequent violation. Labor Code § 2699(e)(2). However, if a civil penalty is provided in a specified amount by the Labor Code section relating to the underlying alleged Labor Code violation, that amount shall apply. *Id*. The PAGA also gives the Court discretion to award any lesser amount than the maximum civil penalty. (*Id*. ["…a court may award a lesser amount than the maximum civil penalty amount specified by this part if, based on the facts and circumstances of the particular case, to do otherwise would result in an award that is unjust, arbitrary and oppressive, or confiscatory."]); *See, e.g., Lopez v. Friant & Assocs., LLC*, (2017) 15 Cal. App. 5th 773, 788, *rev. denied* (2018), (recognizing court's ability to reduce PAGA penalties). Courts have held that situations similar to the current one (e.g. injuryless violations, technical errors, and substantial compliance) should lead to reductions in penalties. *See Thurman v. Bayshore Transit Management, Inc.*, (2012) 203 Cal. App. 4th 1112, 1134-1135 (holding that reduction was justified when employer "attempted to comply with the law"); *Fleming v. Covdien, Inc.*, No. ED CV10-01487 RGK (OPx), 2011 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 154590 at *8-9 (C.D. Cal. August 12, 2011) (reducing PAGA penalties more than 80% – from $2.8 million to $500,000 – when "employees suffered no injury" employers were "not aware" of the violation and "took prompt steps to correct all violations once notified").

Plaintiff discounted potential penalties under this claim given this authority, and for reasons already discussed. The PAGA claims are premised on the same underlying unpaid wages, meal and rest break, wage statement, and waiting time claims, and thus subject to the same disputes and defenses. There is also a dispute as to whether violations in later pay periods trigger the $200 penalty under PAGA as a "subsequent violation." *Amaral v. Cintas Corp. No. 2*, (2008) 163 Cal. App. 4th 1157, 1203. As such, there is a fair amount of risk associated with PAGA claims which makes the settlement's proposed PAGA payment of $10,000.00 appropriate. Manus Decl., ¶ 56.

E. The Risk, Expense, Complexity and Likely Duration of Further Litigation.

Given the risks outlined above, the issues in this case were complex and the risk for Plaintiff and Class Members associated with this litigation was significant. Manus Decl., ¶¶ 60-63. A class trial would have required the retention of expensive expert witnesses, the accrual of extensive litigation costs, and the parties would have had to spend a substantial amount of time litigating this matter. *Id.*

Finally, given the complexity and unsettled nature of the issues, it is likely that any outcome at trial would have resulted in a lengthy and costly appeal. An appeal would result in further delay for Class Members who will have already waited considerable time for resolution in this matter.

F. The Risk of Maintaining Class Action Status Through Trial.

In class actions, decertification is always a possibility. There is always a risk that a trial of this magnitude can become unmanageable. Given cases like *Duran v. U.S. Bank Nat. Assn.*, (2014) 59 Cal. 4th 1, 34 that deal with the complexity of using statistical samples in class actions, decertification is a real risk that Class Counsel must take into account.

G. The Amount Offered in Settlement.

There can be no doubt that this Settlement is the result of vigorous, adversarial, non-collusive, and arms-length negotiations between the parties with an experienced mediator. In order to determine the approximate potential damages which would be owed to each of the Class Members, Class Counsel analyzed the time records for Plaintiff and Defendant provided Class Counsel with records for a sampling of Class Members. By analyzing this information, Class

Counsel was able to estimate the full value of the case if Plaintiff were to prevail at trial. Manus Decl., ¶¶ 33, 67.

There are approximately 260 total Class Members. Based on the data provided, Class Counsel estimated Defendant's realistic exposure on the primary claims in this case as follows: unpaid wages claim at $491,161 (discounted by 75% to $122,790.25), unpaid overtime wages claim (miscalculation of regular rate) at $5,876, meal period claim at $18,601 (discounted by 50% to $9,300.50, rest period claim at $2,105,270 (discounted by 75% to $526,317.50), wage statement claim at $549,150 (discounted by 75% to $127,875.50), waiting time penalties at $508,818 (discounted by 75% to $137,204.50), underpaid meal premium and sick leave claim at $8,769. With these discounts applied, the total damages exposures amounts to <u>$938,132.75</u>. PAGA penalties were calculated at $2,286,600 (using the initial violation rate of $100 per employee per violation), bringing the maximum total exposure to $3,224,732.75. Manus Decl., ¶¶ 32.

However, taking into account the difficulties of proof, the Defendant's defenses, and other attendant risks, Plaintiff believes the realistic exposure is no more than 25% of the maximum, or <u>$806,183.19</u> given that the total amount of damages, monetary penalties, or other relief that the class could reasonably expect to be awarded at trial is significantly less than the maximum exposure estimated above. Once Plaintiff was able to determine the realistic maximum exposure, Plaintiff was able to determine a fair and reasonable settlement for the Class. Manus Decl., ¶ 33.

Once Class Counsel was able to determine the maximum potential damages, they were able to determine a fair and reasonable settlement for the Class. *Id*. Class Counsel analyzed the likelihood of success on the merits and believed that the Class had a reasonable likelihood of success on the core claims. *Id*. However, Defendant disputes this contention, denies all wrongdoing in this matter and are confident it has strong legal and factual defenses to Plaintiff's claims. After taking into account the likelihood of success on each claim and the challenges faced with certifying these claims, coupled with Defendant's status as a non-profit organization, Class Counsel determined that the settlement amount of $198,000.00 was fair and reasonable. *Id*

Class Counsel has devoted a considerable amount of time to the prosecution of this case, including but not limited to, interviewing Plaintiff on repeated occasions, drafting pleadings, conducting discovery, and meeting and conferring with defense counsel about same; reviewing and analyzing time records and various policies, Plaintiff's personnel file, and other documentation; researching California law; preparing for and attending mediation; and negotiating and finalizing the Settlement Agreement and related documents. Manus Decl., ¶¶ 14-15, 17, 67.

Class Counsel believes that the settlement is fair and reasonable and serves the best interests of Class Members. *Id*. at ¶ 67. Although the recommendations of counsel proposing the class settlement are not conclusive, the Court can properly take the recommendations into account, particularly if counsel has been involved in litigation for some period of time, appear to be competent, and have experience with this type of litigation, and significant discovery has been completed. *See Newberg,* §11.47.

VII. THE CLASS REPRESENTATIVE ENHANCEMENT PAYMENT IS FAIR AND REASONABLE

It is appropriate to provide a relatively modest additional incentive payment to the class representative. See *Newberg*, § 12.1; *Van Vranken v. Atlantic Richfield Co.* (N.D. Cal. 1995) 901 F.Supp. 294.

Plaintiff is entitled to a reasonable service payment for her efforts and initiative in bringing and helping to prosecute this class action. Plaintiff spent significant time better apprising herself of her rights, deciding whether remedial action should be taken, how it should be taken, searching for attorneys, and contacting Class Counsel, who spent many hours with Plaintiff discussing the case and the law. Manus Decl., ¶ 74; Gonzalez Decl., ¶ 10. In the end, Plaintiff decided to vindicate not only her own rights but also those of her co-workers by filing a class action lawsuit.

The courage it took to do this should not be underestimated. By suing Defendant and serving as the class representative in this case, Plaintiff contends she increased her risk of retaliation by prospective employers and put their own future employment prospects at risk. Gonzalez Decl., ¶ 11. But Plaintiff did not allow her fear of the potential repercussions of being a class representative deter her from acting for the benefit of Class Members. *Id*. at ¶ 13. To the contrary, Plaintiff has been intimately involved in this case since its inception. She has devoted a substantial amount of time to helping Class Counsel effectively develop and prosecute this action at every stage of the litigation. Both before and after the filing of this lawsuit, Plaintiff conferred with Class Counsel to discuss every aspect of this case; Plaintiff has provided Class Counsel with information about Defendant and about the industry generally, reviewed documents, identified witnesses, consulted Class Counsel throughout the litigation, participated in the mediation process, monitored the progress of the litigation with Class Counsel, and reviewed and signed the Settlement Agreement. *Id*. at ¶¶ 9-10, 13.

In sum, Plaintiff has diligently, adequately, and fairly represented Class Members, and has not placed her interests above any member of the putative class. This sort of payment to a class representative has been a common feature of settlements negotiated by Class Counsel and has been routinely approved by trial courts.

The Settlement allocates an incentive award in the amount of $10,000 to the Class Representative. Manus Decl., ¶¶ 22; SA ¶16. This amount is a far cry from the $50,000 of enhancement awards to the two named plaintiffs approved by the trial court in *Clark. See Clark Clark v. American Residential Services, LLC* (2009) 175 Cal.App.4th at 807. Although Class Counsel appreciate that the Court has a duty to ensure that class representatives are not overcompensated at the expense of the class, modest incentive awards in employment class actions, such as the one here, are necessary not only to compensate class representatives for the time they spend in the case, but also, and more importantly, to encourage employees to challenge questionable employment practices notwithstanding the very real consequences they may face.

In light of the foregoing, Class Counsel believes that the incentive award in the amount of $10,000.00 to the Class Representative is fair and reasonable. Manus Decl., ¶ 75.

VIII. THE PROPOSED CLASS NOTICE PROVIDES ADEQUATE NOTICE TO THE CLASS MEMBERS.

Constitutional due process requires that class members be provided with notice sufficient to give them an opportunity to be heard in the proceedings. *Mullane v. Central Hanover Bank &*

Trust Co. (1950) 339 U.S. 306. Proper notice must provide the class members with sufficient information to make an informed decision as to whether to accept or object to the settlement. *Id.* at 314. The notice must apprise the class members of the pendency of the action; reasonably convey information regarding the settlement and the class members' rights, entitlements, and obligations; and afford class members the opportunity to present their objections. *Id.*

The Class Notice meets constitutional standards because it provides all the information a reasonable person would need to make a fully informed decision about the settlement. It will notify all class members of the terms of the settlement, of its effect on their rights, of their options as class members (i.e., participate, object, opt out, do nothing), and of the consequences of exercising those options. Manus Decl., ¶¶ 64-66. Moreover, the Class Notice will specifically direct any class members who have questions or concerns to contact the Settlement Administrator or Class Counsel. *Id*.

The standard for determining the adequacy of notice is whether the notice has "a reasonable chance of reaching a substantial percentage of the class members."*Cartt v. Superior Court* (1975) 50 Cal.App.3d 960, 974.) The Judicial Council of California's Deskbook on the Management of Complex Civil Litigation (Matthew Bender 2003), § 3.74 notes that individual notice by mail is preferred when possible and dissemination of combined certification/settlement notice is a common and accepted practice. *In re Vitamin Cases* (2003) 107 Cal.App.4th 820, 828.

Here, the Class Notice will be sent via first-class mail to each Class Member. If any Class Notices are returned undeliverable without a forwarding address, the Settlement Administrator will use the national change of address database and perform a skip trace to locate the Class Member and mail a new Class Notice to him or her at the correct address. Manus Decl., ¶ 64; SA §83(a)-(b).Thus, most, if not all, Class Members will likely receive the Class Notice.

Pursuant to controlling authority, the proposed Class Notice and method of distribution fully comport with due process requirements. Therefore, the Court should approve the Class Notice and direct that it be distributed as proposed herein.

IX. STANDING TO OBJECT TO PROPOSED SETTLEMENT

Non-settling parties and third parties periodically may attempt to object to proposed class action settlements, but the right of non-settling parties to object at the final settlement approval hearing, let alone the preliminary approval hearing, is quite limited. As a general rule, only class members have standing to object to a proposed settlement. "Beginning from the unassailable premise that settlements are to be encouraged, it follows that to routinely allow non-class members to inject their concerns via objection at the settlement stage would tend to frustrate this goal." *Gould v. Alleco, Inc.* (4th Cir. 1998) 883 F.2d 281, 284. Since an application is being filed to obtain a good faith determination, no persons other than class members have standing to object to the proposed settlement. *In re School Asbestos Litigation* (3rd Cir. 1990) 921 F.2d 1330.

X. THE STIPULATED AWARD OF ATTORNEY'S FEES AND COSTS IS REASONABLE AND SHOULD BE APPROVED.

Under the Settlement Agreement, subject to approval by this Court, Class Counsel will seek an award of fees of no more Sixty-Six Thousand Dollars and Zero Cents ($66,000.00), 33.33% of the Gross Settlement Amount, and actual reasonable litigation costs in an amount not to exceed Twenty-Five Thousand Dollars and Zero Cents ($25,000.00). Manus Decl. ¶ 68; SA ¶¶8-9. The requested fees are fair compensation for a law firm involved in undertaking complex, risky, expensive, and time-consuming litigation solely on a contingent basis. Defendant will not oppose Class Counsel's above fees and cost request. *Id*.

California courts routinely look to the federal courts on class action approvals. The Ninth Circuit has recognized that an appropriate method for awarding attorneys' fees in class actions is to award a percentage of the "common fund" created as a result of the settlement. *Vincent v. Hughes Air West, Inc*. (9th Cir. 1977) 557 F.2d 759, 769. The purpose of the common fund/percentage approach is to "spread litigation costs proportionally among all the beneficiaries so that the active beneficiary does not bear the entire burden alone." *Id*. Accordingly, courts have discretion to choose either the percentage-of-the-fund method or the lodestar method. *In re Wash. Pub.Power Supply Sys. Sec. Litigation* (9th Cir. 1994) 19 F.3d 1291, 1295-96.

Several courts have, however, expressed frustration with the "lodestar" approach for deciding fee awards, which usually involves wading through voluminous time records. Thus, the percentage approach can be preferable to the lodestar in certain situations because: (1) it aligns the interests of class counsel and absent class members; (2) it encourages efficient resolution of the litigation by providing an incentive for early, yet reasonable, settlement; and (3) it reduces the demands on judicial resources. *In re Activision Securities Litigation*, (N.D. Cal. 1989) 723 F.Supp. 1373, 1378-79. The Ninth Circuit has used the percentage of the common fund approach to determine the award of attorneys' fees. *In re Pacific Enterprises Securities Litigation* (9th Cir. 1994) 47 F.3d 373, 378-79 (approving attorneys' fee of 33 1/3% of settlement fund).

Class Counsel's application for attorneys' fees in light of the facts and circumstances surrounding this case is well within the range of reasonableness. Historically, courts have awarded percentage fees in the range of 20% to 50% of the common fund, depending on the circumstances of the case. *Newberg*, at §14.03; *see also In re Activision Securities Litigation*, 723 F. Supp. at 1378. *Newberg* further notes: "[A]chievement of a substantial recovery with modest hours expended should not be penalized but should be rewarded for considerations of time saved by superior services performed." *Id.* at §§ 14-10:14-11.

The attorneys' fees request provided for in the Settlement Agreement is commensurate with judicial precedent. Both state and federal courts regularly approve fee awards equal to or greater than the percentage requested in this case. *See, e.g., In re Pacific Enterprises Securities Litigation* (9th Cir. 1995) 47 F.3d 373, 379 (affirming an award equal to 33% of the common fund); *In re Activision Securities Litigation* (N.D. Cal. 1989) 723 F.Supp. 1373, 1375 (awarding plaintiff' counsel 32.8% of the common fund created to settle the litigation); *In re Ampicillin Antitrust Litigation* (D. D.C. 1981) 526 F.Supp. 494 (awarding 45% of $7.3 million settlement fund); *Parker v. City of Los Angeles* (1974) 44 Cal.App.3d 556, 557-568 (affirming fee award to counsel of one-third (1/3) of recovery achieved).

In wage and hour class actions in particular, California trial courts have customarily approved attorney's fees consistent with or greater than the percentage of the common fund requested in this case. *See Evans v. Coca-Cola*, Los Angeles County Super. Ct. Case No. BC 220525 (Hon. Richard C. Hubbell) (Dec. 2001) (approving an award of attorneys' fees of at least 33-1/3% of the settlement); *see also Estrada v. Dr. Pepper/Seven-Up*, Los Angeles County Super. Ct. Case No. BC 262247 (May 2005) (Hon. Anthony J. Mohr); *Moreno v. Miller Brewing,* Los

Angeles County Super.Ct. Case No.BC 278170 (April 2004) (Hon. David M. Minning); *Josiah Eaton v. Adolph Coors Company* (2003) Orange County Super. Ct. Case No. 01CC00140 (Hon. Stephen J. Sundvold); *Manusbell v. Abercrombie & Fitch Stores, Inc.*, Los Angeles County Super.Ct. Case No.BC 277359 (Sept. 2006) (Hon. Kenneth R. Freeman); *Daum v. Claim Jumper Restaurants,* Orange County Super.Ct. Case No.02CC10201 (2006) (Hon. Ronald L. Bauer).

Here, Class Counsel has borne the entire risk and costs of litigation and will not receive any compensation until recovery is obtained. Manus Decl., ¶ 68. The Court should also consider the benefit obtained by Class Counsel on behalf of Class Members.

Thus, the requested award for Class Counsel is reasonable.

XI. ACTION REQUESTED AS A PART OF THE MOTION FOR PRELIMINARY APPROVAL

Plaintiff respectfully requests the Settlement be preliminarily approved, Notice approved and ordered mailed to the Class, Apex Class Action, LLC be appointed Settlement Administrator, Emil Davtyan, David Yeremian, Alvin B. Lindsay, and the other attorneys of D.Law, Inc. be appointed Class Counsel, Claudia Gonzalez be appointed Class Representative, and a Final Approval Hearing date be set.

Dated: June 12, 2025 Respectfully submitted,

D.LAW, INC.

By ______________________

Emil Davtyan
David Yeremian
Alvin B. Lindsay
Enoch J. Kim
Marta Manus
Attorneys for Plaintiff on behalf of herself and others similarly situated