# Case 3:15-cv-01329-JSC Document 51 Filed 03/21/16 Page 1 of 16

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10	IN THE UNITED STAT	TES DISTRIC	T COURT
11	FOR THE NORTHERN DI	STRICT OF (	CALIFORNIA
12	DANIEL SCHUCHARDT and MICHELLE	Case No ·	3:15-cv-01329-JSC
13	MUGGLI, on behalf of themselves and others similarly situated,	PLAINTIFFS' UNOPPOSED	
14			FOR FINAL APPROVAL S ACTION SETTLEMENT
15	Plaintiffs,		
16	vs.	Date:	April 28, 2016
17	LAW OFFICE OF RORY W. CLARK, A PROFESSIONAL LAW CORPORATION,	Time:	9:00 a.m.
18 19	Defendant.		
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### **Table of Contents** Introduction \_\_\_\_\_\_1 Each participating class member will receive at least \$14.84, and Defendant has agreed to III. The settlement provided for direct mail notice to all members of the class and did not require class members to submit documentation to receive benefits. Argument \_\_\_\_\_4 II. This Court should approve the settlement as "fair, reasonable, and adequate" under Rule A. The settlement resulted from arm's-length negotiations among experienced counsel. ... 6 B. The posture of the case and experience and views of counsel favor final approval. ..... 6 The strengths of Plaintiffs' case and the risks inherent in continued litigation and securing D. The cash relief afforded by the settlement—when compared to the limitations on damages Conclusion 12

1	Table of Authorities
2 3	Baldwin v. Glasser & Glasser, P.L.C., No. 15-490, 2015 WL 7769207 (E.D. Va. Dec. 1, 2015)
4	Bellinghausen v. Tractor Supply Co., 306 F.R.D. 245 (N.D. Cal. 2015)
5 6	Bishop v. Ross Earle & Bonan, P.A., Case No. 15-12585 (11th Cir. 2015)
7 8	Catala v. Resurgent Capital Servs., L.P., No. 08-2401, 2010 WL 2524158 (C.D. Cal. June 22, 2010)
9	Chamberlin v. Mullooly, Jeffrey, Rooney & Flynn, LLP, No. 15-02361, ECF No. 36 (D.N.J. Feb. 9, 2016)9
11	Cotton v. Hinton, 559 F.2d 1326 (5th Cir. 1977)5
12 13	Date v. Sony Elecs., Inc., No. 07-15474, 2013 WL 3945981 (E.D. Mich. July 31, 2013)
14 15	Dispennett v. Frederick J. Hanna & Associates, P.C., No. 15-636, ECF No. 37 (W.D. Pa. Sept. 21, 2015)
16 17	Franklin v. Kaypro Corp., 884 F.2d 1222 (9th Cir. 1989)
18	Garza v. Mitchell Rubenstein & Assocs., P.C., No. 15-1572, 2015 WL 9594286 (D. Md. Dec. 28, 2015)
19 20	Hanlon v. Chrysler Corp., 150 F.3d 1011 (9th Cir. 1998)
21 22	Kemper v. Andreu, Palma & Andreu, PL, No. 15-21226, Doc. 36 (S.D. Fla. Jan. 11, 2016)
23 24	Nat'l Rural Telecomms. Coop. v. DirecTV, Inc., 221 F.R.D. 523 (C.D. Cal. 2004)
25	Officers for Justice v. Civil Serv. Comm'n, 688 F.2d 615 (9th Cir. 1982)
<ul><li>26</li><li>27</li></ul>	Paxson v. Blatt, Hassenmiller, Leibsker & Moore, LLC, No. 15-01488, ECF No. 40 (N.D. Ill. Oct. 16, 2015)
28	-iii-

## Case 3:15-cv-01329-JSC Document 51 Filed 03/21/16 Page 4 of 16

1 2	Rodriguez v. West Publ'g Corp.,         563 F.3d 948 (9th Cir. 2009)       6	
3	Sanders v. Jackson, 209 F.3d 998 (7th Cir. 2000)9	
4	Spokeo, Inc. v. Robins,	
5	Case No. 13-1339 (2014)	
6	Van Bronkhorst v. Safeco Corp.,	
7	529 F.2d 943 (9th Cir. 1976)	
8	Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. v. Visa U.S.A., Inc., 396 F.3d 96 (2d Cir. 2005)	
9	Whitford v. Weber & Olcese, P.L.C.,	
10	No. 15-400, 2016 WL 122393 (W.D. Mich. Jan. 11, 2016)	
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12 13		
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### Introduction

On January 20, 2016, this Court granted preliminary approval of the settlement set forth in the parties' Class Action Settlement Agreement ("Agreement"). ECF No. 50. Pursuant to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 23(e), Daniel Schuchardt and Michelle Muggli ("Plaintiffs") now respectfully request final approval of their settlement with the Law Office of Rory W. Clark, A Professional Law Corporation ("Defendant"). Through a separate motion, Plaintiffs also seek an award of attorneys' fees and expenses for their counsel.

As detailed in the Declaration of Aaron D. Radbil submitted concurrently with this motion, the settlement represents an excellent result for class members, and was achieved only after full briefing on the parties' cross-motions for summary judgment, such that the parties had a clear view on their respective positions in this litigation. As a result of the settlement, each of the 917 participating class members will receive at least \$14.84. The monies will be paid from a common fund that exceeds the statutory damages available under the Fair Debt Collection Practices Act ("FDCPA").

Additionally, while Defendant denies that it violated the FDCPA and maintains that the language of the letter giving rise to this action was more favorable to the consumer than as required by the FDCPA, it has confirmed in writing that it ceased using the form letter at issue. Considering this change in Defendant's business practices, along with the statutorily-limited damages available

At the time the parties entered into the Agreement, they believed there to be 1,361 class members. However, Defendant has since determined that there were actually 1,361 *accounts* for which an allegedly violative letter was mailed to a total of only 930 *persons*. In other words, the class numbers only 930 because some members had multiple accounts with Defendant and therefore received multiple letters. However, the settlement fund will still be distributed on a pro-rata basis. Given that, thus far, 13 members of the class excluded themselves from the settlement, each of the 917 participating class members is now entitled to approximately \$14.84. This payout figure is subject to (relatively minor) adjustment in the event more class members exclude themselves between the filing of this motion and the deadline for such exclusions (April 18, 2016).

under the FDCPA, the settlement here represents a very favorable result for the members of the class, as well as any consumers who will encounter Defendant's debt collection practices in the future. Underscoring the favorable nature of the settlement is that, to date, not a single class member lodged an objection, nor have any objections resulted from notice issued pursuant to the Class Action Fairness Act ("CAFA").<sup>2</sup>

Plaintiffs and their counsel strongly believe that the settlement is fair, reasonable, and adequate, and in the best interest of the class. As more fully set forth below, Plaintiffs respectfully request that the Court enter the accompanying order granting final approval of the settlement. Defendant does not oppose this relief.

### **Summary of the Settlement**

I. Each participating class member will receive at least \$14.84, and Defendant has agreed to change its form debt collection letter.

The settlement defines a settlement class under Rule 23(b)(3) comprised of all persons with a California address to whom Defendant mailed an initial debt collection communication that stated: "If you notify this firm within thirty (30) days after your receipt of this letter, that the debt or any portion thereof, is disputed, we will obtain verification of the debt or a copy of the judgment, if any, and mail a copy of such verification or judgment to you," between June 1, 2014 and June 1, 2015, in connection with the collection of a consumer debt. Defendant has identified 930 class members, including Plaintiffs. The settlement requires Defendant to create a settlement fund of \$13,610.00 (the "Settlement Fund").

Class members who do not exclude themselves from the settlement will each receive a check for at least \$14.84. To the extent any settlement checks go uncashed after the claims

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> CAFA notice was issued March 18, 2016. Should any objections result from such notice prior to this Court's final fairness hearing on April 28, 2016, Plaintiffs will address those objections by way of a separate filing in advance of the hearing.

administrator takes all reasonable steps to forward checks to any forwarding addresses, such funds will be disbursed as a *cy pres* award to Bay Area Legal Aid. None of the funds will revert back to Defendant.

### II. Defendant has changed its debt collection practices.

Furthermore, although Defendant maintains that it did not violate the FDCPA by using the letter at issue, Defendant has confirmed, in writing, that it changed the language of its form collection letter to address Plaintiffs' concerns here. In other words, Defendant will no longer engage in the practice that formed the basis for the allegations in Plaintiffs' class action complaint. Plaintiffs assert that this change benefits not only themselves and the members of the class, but also any other consumers who may encounter Defendant's debt collection business in the future.

# III. The settlement provided for direct mail notice to all members of the class and did not require class members to submit documentation to receive benefits.

The Agreement required a robust notice program consisting of direct mail notice to each class member. And members of the class were not required to submit a claim form to obtain the benefits of the settlement. That is, if a class member did nothing, she will receive the benefits of the settlement.

Based on a list of class members provided by Defendant, the Court-appointed class administrator, Kurtzman Carson Consultants, LLC ("KCC"), mailed notice of the settlement to 930 class members, including Plaintiffs. Prior to mailing the Court-approved notice, KCC followed its standard practice of verifying the addresses of class members. As of this filing, no members of the class objected to the settlement, while six class members excluded themselves from it. Once the deadline for exclusions and objections (April 18, 2016) has passed, KCC will file a declaration with this Court attesting to the final number of timely exclusions and objections.

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### IV. Defendant will provide statutory damages to Plaintiffs.

In addition to the relief outlined above, Defendant also will pay statutory damages of \$1,000 to Mr. Schuchardt and to Ms. Muggli. To that end, section 1692k(a) of the FDCPA provides:

Except as otherwise provided by this section, any debt collector who fails to comply with any provision of this subchapter with respect to any person is liable to such person in an amount equal to the sum of—

\* \* \*

- (A) in the case of any action by an individual, such additional damages as the court may allow, but not exceeding \$1,000; or
- (B) in the case of a class action, (i) such amount for each named plaintiff as could be recovered under subparagraph (A), and (ii) such amount as the court may allow for all other class members, without regard to a minimum individual recovery, not to exceed the lesser of \$500,000 or 1 per centum of the net worth of the debt collector; and

15 U.S.C. § 1692k(a) (emphasis added). Thus, by its express terms, the FDCPA provides that Plaintiffs each can recover up to \$1,000.00 in addition to such amount as each member of the class could recover. By securing a payment of \$1,000 as part of the settlement, Mr. Schuchardt and Ms. Muggli will receive the maximum statutory damages to which they are entitled. Plaintiffs do not seek any additional monies as an incentive award for their service to the class.

### **Argument**

### I. This Court should finally certify the class.

In its preliminary approval order, this Court preliminarily certified the class for settlement purposes. ECF No. 50 at 7-12. Plaintiffs agree with that reasoning and do not believe that it should be revisited in granting final approval. Accordingly, for the same reasons stated in Plaintiffs' unopposed motion for preliminary approval, *see* ECF No. 44 at 5-13, they respectfully submit that this Court should finally certify the class.

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# II. This Court should approve the settlement as "fair, reasonable, and adequate" under Rule 23(e).

To determine if proposed class settlement terms are fair, reasonable, and adequate under Rule 23(e), courts in the Ninth Circuit are to consider the following factors: (1) the strength of the plaintiffs' case; (2) the risk, expense, complexity, and likely duration of further litigation; (3) the risk of maintaining class action status throughout the trial; (4) the amount offered in settlement; (5) the extent of discovery completed and the stage of the proceedings; (6) the views of counsel; (7) the presence of a governmental participant; and (8) the reaction of the class members to the proposed settlement. *Hanlon v. Chrysler Corp.*, 150 F.3d 1011, 1026 (9th Cir. 1998).<sup>3</sup>

These factors firmly support the conclusion that the settlement here is fundamentally fair, adequate, and reasonable. As well, in applying these factors, this Court should be guided foremost by the general principle that settlements of class actions are favored. *See Franklin v. Kaypro Corp.*, 884 F.2d 1222, 1229 (9th Cir. 1989) ("It hardly seems necessary to 'point out that there is an overriding public interest in settling and quieting litigation. This is particularly true in class action suits. . . . "); *see also Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. v. Visa U.S.A., Inc.*, 396 F.3d 96, 116 (2d Cir. 2005) ("We are mindful of the strong judicial policy in favor of settlements, particularly in the class action context."); *Cotton v. Hinton*, 559 F.2d 1326, 1331 (5th Cir. 1977) ("Particularly in class action suits, there is an overriding public interest in favor of settlement.").

By their very nature, because of the uncertainties of outcome, difficulties of proof, and lengthy duration, class actions readily lend themselves to compromise. *See Van Bronkhorst v. Safeco Corp.*, 529 F.2d 943, 950 (9th Cir. 1976) (public interest in settling litigation is "particularly true in class action suits . . . which frequently present serious problems of management and expense"). Moreover, the Court should give a presumption of fairness to arm's-length settlements

Internal citations and quotations are omitted, and emphasis is added, unless otherwise noted.

reached by experienced counsel. *See Rodriguez v. West Publ'g Corp.*, 563 F.3d 948, 965 (9th Cir. 2009) ("We put a good deal of stock in the product of an arms-length, non-collusive, negotiated resolution.").

# A. The settlement resulted from arm's-length negotiations among experienced counsel.

The parties' arm's-length settlement negotiations demonstrate the fairness of the settlement that was reached, and that the settlement is not a product of collusion. Indeed, at the time the parties reached their agreement, they had fully briefed dueling motions for summary judgment, and a hearing on those motions was imminent. Against this backdrop, and with the parties' fully aware of their respective positions in the litigation, counsel for Defendant and Plaintiffs each zealously negotiated on behalf of their clients. Plaintiffs were confident in their class claims, and they and their counsel believe the value of the class's recovery here—which exceeds the cap on statutory damages allowed under the FDCPA—reflects that confidence.

To be sure, a settlement was reached here only after the exchange of multiple settlement demands and counteroffers, and after multiple telephone conferences among counsel experienced in consumer protection class action litigation, particularly under the FDCPA.

# B. The posture of the case and experience and views of counsel favor final approval.

After months of litigation and informal discovery, the settlement here was achieved with a clear view as to the strengths and weaknesses of the case. To that end, the parties had fully briefed dueling summary judgment motions prior to their negotiations, and thus were able to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of their respective positions. The parties could compare the benefits of the proposed settlement to further litigation, and they also exchanged informal discovery, including information regarding the net worth of Defendant, class damages, and the number of potential class members. As well, in connection with Plaintiffs' unopposed preliminary

approval motion, Defendant submitted a declaration confirming that the class's recovery here exceeds 1% of Defendant's net worth, *see* ECF No. 49-2, which is the limit imposed by the FDCPA on a class's statutory damages recovery. 15 U.S.C. § 1692k(a)(2)(B).

Counsel, who have substantial experience in litigating class actions, and this Court are therefore adequately informed to evaluate the fairness of the settlement. Both Plaintiffs and class counsel firmly believe that the settlement is fair, reasonable, and adequate, and in the best interests of the Class. *See Nat'l Rural Telecomms. Coop. v. DirecTV, Inc.*, 221 F.R.D. 523, 528 (C.D. Cal. 2004) ("Great weight is accorded to the recommendation of counsel, who are most closely acquainted with the facts of the underlying litigation. This is because parties represented by competent counsel are better positioned than courts to produce a settlement that fairly reflects each party's expected outcome in the litigation.").

# C. The strengths of Plaintiffs' case and the risks inherent in continued litigation and securing class certification favor final approval.

Every class action—indeed, every case—involves some level of uncertainty on the merits. Settlements resolve that inherent uncertainty, and are therefore strongly favored by the courts, particularly in class actions. This action is not unique in this regard. The parties disagree about the merits, and there is uncertainty about the ultimate outcome of this litigation and whether a class would be certified, particularly in light of the parties' pending summary judgment motions.

While the overwhelming majority of decisions regarding the legal issue underlying this matter support Plaintiffs' position, at least one district court has rejected it, and that very issue is now before the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals. *See Bishop v. Ross Earle & Bonan, P.A.*, Case No. 15-12585 (11th Cir. 2015). Through its own summary judgment motion, Defendant also made various arguments and policy considerations to oppose Plaintiffs' claims. Thus, the risks of continuing to litigate this matter cannot be completely discounted.

Moreover, Defendants' conduct was not particularly egregious, relatively speaking, and may not have been intentional. This is important because the FDCPA's damages provision is not mandatory. It provides for awards *up to* certain amounts, after balancing such factors as, *inter alia*, the nature of the debt collector's noncompliance, the number of persons adversely affected, and the extent to which the noncompliance was intentional. 15 U.S.C. § 1692k(b)(2).

As well, the Supreme Court's decision in *Spokeo, Inc. v. Robins*, Case No. 13-1339 (2014)—a case before the Court this term—could negatively affect Plaintiffs' claims. In short, the issue in *Spokeo*—whether a plaintiff has standing to seek statutory damages absent actual harm—could change the framework within which Plaintiffs must prove damages. In contrast to continued litigation, the settlement provides both Plaintiffs and absent class members immediate, guaranteed relief.

Given these considerations, approval of the settlement is appropriate to avoid the uncertainties of continued litigation. *See Catala v. Resurgent Capital Servs., L.P.*, No. 08-2401, 2010 WL 2524158, at \*3 (C.D. Cal. June 22, 2010) ("In most situations, unless the settlement is clearly inadequate, its acceptance and approval are preferable to lengthy and expensive litigation with uncertain results.").

# D. The cash relief afforded by the settlement—when compared to the limitations on damages imposed by the FDCPA—favors approval.

In evaluating the fairness of the consideration offered in settlement, it is not the role of the Court to second-guess the negotiated resolution of the parties. "[T]he court's intrusion upon what is otherwise a private, consensual agreement negotiated between the parties to a lawsuit 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." *Hanlon*, 150 F.3d at 1027 (quoting *Officers for Justice v. Civil Serv. Comm'n*, 688 F.2d 615, 626 (9th Cir. 1982)). The issue

is not whether the settlement could have been better in some fashion, but whether it is fair: "Settlement is the offspring of compromise; the question we address is not whether the final product could be prettier, smarter or snazzier, but whether it is fair, adequate and free from collusion." *Id*.

Here, the settlement provides cash relief to class members in excess of the limits imposed by the FDCPA. In particular, the FDCPA limits statutory damages to a maximum of 1% of Defendant's net worth. *See* 15 U.S.C. § 1682k(A)(2)(B). While the parties may disagree about the proper way to calculate Defendant's net worth, by making payments of at least \$14.84 to each participating class member, Defendant will pay a total of \$13,610.00 to class members—an amount that exceeds 1% of Defendant's net worth as defined by *Sanders v. Jackson*, 209 F.3d 998, 1004 (7th Cir. 2000) ("net worth" within meaning of § 1692k means "balance sheet or book value net worth" of assets minus liabilities); *see also* ECF No. 49-2 (declaration from Defendant's President and sole shareholder that the settlement fund of \$13,610 "exceeds 1% of Defendant's net worth at any time during the pendency of this action, as well as the present").

Further, the settlement compares favorably to other FDCPA class recoveries. For example, just recently, courts around the country have preliminarily or finally approved nearly identical FDCPA class action settlements in which the named plaintiffs will receive full statutory damages, class members will receive amounts ranging from \$10 to \$15, and the defendants similarly agreed to change their collection practices going forward. *See Chamberlin v. Mullooly, Jeffrey, Rooney & Flynn, LLP*, No. 15-02361, ECF No. 36 (D.N.J. Feb. 9, 2016) (preliminary approval for class members to receive approximately \$12.62 and plaintiff to receive \$1,500 in statutory damages and in recognition of her service to the class); *Kemper v. Andreu, Palma & Andreu, PL*, No. 15-21226, Doc. 36 (S.D. Fla. Jan. 11, 2016) (preliminary approval for \$10 per class member and \$1,000 to named plaintiff); *Whitford v. Weber & Olcese, P.L.C.*, No. 15-400, 2016 WL 122393 (W.D. Mich.

Jan. 11, 2016) (final approval for \$10 per class member and \$1,00 for plaintiff); *Garza v. Mitchell Rubenstein & Assocs.*, *P.C.*, No. 15-1572, 2015 WL 9594286 (D. Md. Dec. 28, 2015) (preliminary approval for \$12.50 per class member, \$1,000 to plaintiff, and change to defendant's form letter); *Baldwin v. Glasser & Glasser*, *P.L.C.*, No. 15-490, 2015 WL 7769207 (E.D. Va. Dec. 1, 2015) (preliminary approval for \$15 per class member and \$1,500 to plaintiff).

As well, other FDCPA class settlements similarly support approval. *See* ECF No. 44 at 14-15 (collecting cases); *see also Paxson v. Blatt, Hassenmiller, Leibsker & Moore, LLC*, No. 15-01488, ECF No. 40 (N.D. Ill. Oct. 16, 2015) (preliminarily approving settlement fund of \$10,666.67 for the benefit of 2,015 class members, or approximately \$5.29 per class member); *Dispennett v. Frederick J. Hanna & Associates, P.C.*, No. 15-636, ECF No. 37 (W.D. Pa. Sept. 21, 2015) (preliminarily approving \$4,500 settlement fund benefitting 807 class members in the amount of \$5.57 per class member). In sum, because class members will receive statutory damages in excess of what they could receive had Plaintiffs prevailed at trial and on appeal, and considering their recovery in relation to other similar FDCPA settlements, the settlement here is fair, reasonable, and adequate, and should be approved by this Court.

### E. The settlement serves the public interest.

Because there is a strong public interest in encouraging settlement of complex litigation and class action suits, which are notoriously difficult and unpredictable, and because settlement conserves judicial resources, this settlement serves the public interest. *See Date v. Sony Elecs.*, *Inc.*, No. 07-15474, 2013 WL 3945981, at \*12 (E.D. Mich. July 31, 2013) ("There do not appear to the Court to be any countervailing public interests that would suggest that the Court should disapprove the Settlement Agreement and, significantly, no one has come forward to suggest one to the Court. This factor weighs in favor of final approval.").

Moreover, the settlement here further serves the public interest by ensuring that Defendant's initial debt collection letters will comply with 15 U.S.C. § 1692g(a)(4) going forward. As well, by virtue of the distribution of class notice in connection with this settlement, class members are now aware of their rights under the FDCPA. As indicated in Plaintiffs' preliminary approval motion, this is quite significant, as many FDCPA class members are often completely unaware of their rights under the statute, or that those rights may have been violated. *See* ECF No. 44 at 16 (collecting cases).

### F. The positive reaction of the class favors final approval.

"It is established that the absence of a large number of objections to a proposed class action settlement raises a strong presumption that the terms of a proposed class settlement action are favorable to the class members." *DirecTV*, 221 F.R.D. at 529 (collecting cases). "Thus, here, the Court may appropriately infer that a class action settlement is fair, adequate, and reasonable when few class members object to it." *Bellinghausen v. Tractor Supply Co.*, 306 F.R.D. 245, 258 (N.D. Cal. 2015) (Corley, J.) (class's favorable reaction supported settlement approval when no members objected and only nine excluded themselves).

As set forth above, the settlement administrator disseminated the Court-approved notice via U.S. Mail to 930 class members. To date, none has objected to the settlement, and only six have excluded themselves. In addition, Defendant served written notice of the settlement on the United States Attorney General and the Attorneys General of Arizona, California, Kansas, Michigan, Missouri, New York, Oregon, Texas, Utah, Virginia, and Washington. As of this filing, no objections have resulted from the CAFA notice either, further supporting the approval of the Settlement.

1	Conclusion				
2	Plaintiffs respectfully request that this Court grant final approval the above-described class				
3	action settlement and enter the order submitted concurrently herewith. As noted, neither				
4	Defendant, nor any class members to date, oppose the relief requested herein.				
5					
6	Dated: March 21, 2016 Respectfully submitted,				
7					
8	/s/ Aaron D. Radbil Aaron D. Radbil (pro hac vice)				
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17					
18	CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE				
19	I certify that a copy of the foregoing was filed electronically on March 21, 2016, via the				
20	Court Clerk's CM/ECF system, which will provide notice to all counsel of record.				
21	/s/ Aaron D. Radbil				
22	Aaron D. Radbil				
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