# UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT MIDDLE DISTRICT OF FLORIDA FORT MYERS DIVISION

JANET WASHBURN, an individual,

Plaintiff,

v.

BONITA SPRINGS FIRE CONTROL & RESCUE DISTRICT,

Defendant.

**CIVIL ACTION** 

Case No. 2:24-cv-121

Judge:

Mag. Judge:

## COMPLAINT AND DEMAND FOR JURY TRIAL

**NOW COMES** the Plaintiff, **JANET WASHBURN** ("WASHBURN" or "Plaintiff"), by and through undersigned counsel, and states the following for her Complaint:

## **CAUSES OF ACTION**

1. This is an action brought under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VII) and the Florida Civil Rights Act of 1992 (FCRA) for (1) gender discrimination in violation of Title VII, (2) gender discrimination in violation of the FCRA, (3) retaliation in violation of Title VII, and (4) retaliation in violation of the FCRA.

# **PARTIES**

- 2. The Plaintiff, **JANET WASHBURN** ("WASHBURN" or "Plaintiff") is an individual and a resident of Florida at all times relevant to this action, and was employed by the Defendant in Lee County, Florida. WASHBURN is a female person.
- 3. Defendant, **BONITA SPRINGS FIRE CONTROL & RESCUE DISTRICT** is a public employer that employed **WASHBURN** in Lee County,

  Florida. The Defendant is an employer under Title VII and the FCRA.
- 4. At all material times, the Defendant employed greater than fifteen (15) employees.

## **JURISDICTION AND VENUE**

- 5. This Court has jurisdiction of this matter under 28 U.S.C. §1331.
- 6. This Court has supplemental jurisdiction over **WASHBURN**'s state law claims pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1367.
- 7. Venue is proper in the United States District Court for the Middle District of Florida because the Plaintiff resides in, and the Defendant conducts business in, and some or all of the events giving rise to Plaintiff's claims occurred in Lee County, Florida, which is within the Middle District of Florida. Venue is proper in the Ft. Myers Division under Local Rule 1.04 since Lee County is within the Ft. Myers Division.

8. **WASHBURN** received her Notice of Right to Sue from United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission ("EEOC") on November 23, 2023 and the instant Complaint is filed within the time frame required under the law. (A true and accurate copy of the Notice of Right to Sue is attached as Exhibit A).

#### GENERAL ALLEGATIONS

- 9. **WASHBURN** began her employment with the Defendant in July 2019, and was employed as the Fire Marshal.
- 10. **WASHBURN** always performed her assigned duties in a professional manner and was very well qualified for her position.
- 11. **WASHBURN**, by virtue of her gender, is a member of a protected class.
- 12. Beginning in about January 2020, when Chief Dewitt was promoted, **WASHBURN** started being subjected to disparate treatment due to her gender.
- 13. **WASHBURN**'s supervisors undermined her authority, disregarded her rank and chain of command, spoke to her with disrespect, were dismissive, and refused to evaluate her performance objectively.
- 14. The critiques against **WASHBURN** are for what males are praised for (i.e. a male leader is described as assertive but a female leader doing the same thing is described as abrasive and difficult or a "bitch").
  - 15. **WASHBURN**'s pedigree is impeccable, as was her performance.

- 16. After several unfair performance reviews, **WASHBURN** filed written complaints of gender discrimination on or about August 4, 2022, August 17, 2022 and August 24, 2022.
- 17. The Defendant then hired a defense law firm to "investigate" WASHBURN's allegations, and WASHBURN participated in the investigation and reiterated her complaints of gender discrimination; but rather than properly investigate, the investigator turned the tables and made disparaging comments against WASHBURN in his December 19, 2022 report.
- 18. The Defendant terminated **WASHBURN**'s employment on January 24, 2023.
- 19. **WASHBURN** was terminated due to her gender and in retaliation for lodging complaints of gender discrimination.
  - 20. The Defendant has violated Title VII and the FCRA.

# COUNT I - VIOLATION OF TITLE VII OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964, GENDER DISCRIMINATION

- 21. Plaintiff incorporates by reference Paragraphs 1-20 of this Complaint as though fully set forth below.
- 22. **WASHBURN** is a female and as such, is a member of a protected class.

- 23. At all material times, **WASHBURN** was an employee and the Defendant was her employer covered by and within the meaning of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1963, 42 U.S.C §2000e.
- 24. **WASHBURN** was, and is, qualified for the positions that she held with the Defendant.
- 25. **WASHBURN** has endured disparate treatment while employed with the Defendant, thereby altering the terms and conditions of her employment.
- 26. The acts, failures to act, practices and policies of the Defendant set forth above constitute intentional discrimination on the basis of **WASHBURN**'s gender in violation of Section 703 of Title VII, 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-2.
- 27. As a direct and proximate result of the violations of 42 U.S.C. § 2000e et seq. as referenced and cited herein, **WASHBURN** has lost benefits and privileges of her employment and has been substantially and significantly injured in her career path.
- 28. As a direct and proximate result of the violations of 42 U.S.C. § 2000e et seq. as referenced and cited herein, and as a direct and proximate result of the prohibited acts perpetrated against her, **WASHBURN** is entitled to all relief necessary to make her whole as provided for under 42 USC § 2000e et seq.
- 29. As a direct and proximate result of the Defendant's actions, **WASHBURN** has suffered damages, including but not limited to, a loss of employment opportunities, loss of past and future employment income and fringe

benefits, humiliation, and non-economic damages for physical injuries, mental and emotional distress.

30. **WASHBURN** has exhausted her administrative remedies and this count is timely brought.

**WHEREFORE**, Plaintiff requests trial by jury of all issues so triable as of right, and:

- i. Back pay and all other benefits, perquisites and other compensation for employment which plaintiff would have received had she maintained her position with the Defendant, plus interest, including but not limited to lost salary and bonuses;
- ii. Front pay, including raises, benefits, insurance costs, benefits costs, and retirement benefits;
- iii. Reimbursement of all expenses and financial losses Plaintiff has incurred as a result of Defendant's actions;
- iv. Reasonable attorney's fees plus costs;
- v. Compensatory damages, and;
- vi. Such other relief as this Court shall deem appropriate.

# COUNT II - VIOLATION OF THE FLORIDACIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1992, GENDER DISCRIMINATION

31. Plaintiff incorporates by reference Paragraphs 1-20 of this Complaint as though fully set forth below.

- 32. **WASHBURN** is a female and as such, is a member of a protected class.
- 33. At all material times, **WASHBURN** was an employee and the Defendant was her employer covered by and within the meaning of the FCRA.
- 34. **WASHBURN** was, and is, qualified for the positions that she held with the Defendant.
- 35. **WASHBURN** has endured disparate treatment while employed with the Defendant, thereby altering the terms and conditions of her employment.
- 36. The acts, failures to act, practices and policies of the Defendant set forth above constitute intentional discrimination on the basis of **WASHBURN**'s gender in violation of the FCRA.
- 37. As a direct and proximate result of the violations of the FCRA as referenced and cited herein, **WASHBURN** has lost benefits and privileges of her employment and has been substantially and significantly injured in her career path.
- 38. As a direct and proximate result of the violations of the FCRA as referenced and cited herein, and as a direct and proximate result of the prohibited acts perpetrated against her, **WASHBURN** is entitled to all relief necessary to make her whole as provided for under the FCRA.
- 39. As a direct and proximate result of the Defendant's actions, **WASHBURN** has suffered damages, including but not limited to, a loss of

employment opportunities, loss of past and future employment income and fringe benefits, humiliation, and non-economic damages for physical injuries, mental and emotional distress.

40. **WASHBURN** has exhausted her administrative remedies and this count is timely brought.

**WHEREFORE**, Plaintiff requests trial by jury of all issues so triable as of right, and:

- ii. Back pay and all other benefits, perquisites and other compensation for employment which plaintiff would have received had she maintained her position with the Defendant, plus interest, including but not limited to lost salary and bonuses;
- iii. Front pay, including raises, benefits, insurance costs, benefits costs, and retirement benefits;
- iv. Reimbursement of all expenses and financial losses Plaintiff has incurred as a result of Defendant's actions;
- v. Reasonable attorney's fees plus costs;
- vi. Compensatory damages, and;
- vii. Such other relief as this Court shall deem appropriate.

# <u>COUNT III - VIOLATION OF TITLE VII OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF</u> <u>1964- RETALIATION</u>

- 41. Plaintiff incorporates by reference Paragraphs 1-20 of this Complaint as though fully set forth below.
- 42. **WASHBURN** is a female a person and, as such, is a member of a protected class.
- 43. At all material times, **WASHBURN** was an employee and the Defendant was her employer covered by and within the meaning of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1963, 42 U.S.C §2000e.
- 44. **WASHBURN** was qualified for the positions that she held with the Defendant.
- 45. **WASHBURN** complained to the Defendant about the gender discrimination and retaliation, and the Defendant clearly observed her growing discomfort concerning the same.
- 46. **WASHBURN**'s complaints constitute a protected activity because her complaints were concerning an unlawful activity of the Defendant.
- 47. Said protected activity was the proximate cause of the Defendant's negative employment actions against **WASHBURN**.
- 48. Instead of preventing said treatment, the Defendant retaliated against **WASHBURN**.

- 49. The acts, failures to act, practices and policies of the Defendant set forth above constitute retaliation in violation of Section 703 of Title VII, 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-2.
- 50. As a direct and proximate result of the violations of 42 U.S.C. § 2000e et seq., as referenced and cited herein, **WASHBURN** has lost all of the benefits and privileges of her employment and has been substantially and significantly injured in her career path.
- 51. As a direct and proximate result of the violations of 42 U.S.C. § 2000e et seq., as referenced and cited herein, and as a direct and proximate result of the prohibited acts perpetrated against her, **WASHBURN** is entitled to all relief necessary to make her whole as provided for under 42 USC § 2000e et seq.
- 52. As a direct and proximate result of the Defendant's actions, **WASHBURN** has suffered damages, including but not limited to, a loss of employment opportunities, loss of past and future employment income and fringe benefits, humiliation, and non-economic damages for physical injuries, mental and emotional distress.
- 53. **WASHBURN** has exhausted her administrative remedies and this count is timely brought.

**WHEREFORE**, Plaintiff requests trial by jury of all issues so triable as of right, and:

- i. Back pay and all other benefits, perquisites and other compensation for employment which Plaintiff would have received had she maintained her position with the Defendant, plus interest, including but not limited to lost salary and bonuses;
- ii. Front pay, including raises, benefits, insurance costs, benefits costs, and retirement benefits;
- iii. Reimbursement of all expenses and financial losses Plaintiff has incurred as a result of Defendant's actions;
- iv. Reasonable attorney's fees plus costs;
- v. Compensatory damages, and;
- vi. Such other relief as this Court shall deem appropriate.

# COUNT IV - VIOLATION OF THE FLORIDA CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1992-RETALIATION

- 54. Plaintiff incorporates by reference Paragraphs 1-20 of this Complaint as though fully set forth below.
- 55. **WASHBURN** is a female a person and, as such, is a member of a protected class.
- 56. At all material times, **WASHBURN** was an employee and the Defendant was her employer covered by and within the meaning of the FCRA.
- 57. **WASHBURN** was qualified for the positions that she held with the Defendant.

- 58. **WASHBURN** complained to the Defendant about the gender discrimination and retaliation, and the Defendant clearly observed her growing discomfort concerning the same.
- 59. **WASHBURN**'s complaints constitute a protected activity because her complaints were concerning an unlawful activity of the Defendant.
- 60. Said protected activity was the proximate cause of the Defendant's negative employment actions against **WASHBURN**.
- 61. Instead of preventing said treatment, the Defendant retaliated against **WASHBURN**.
- 62. The acts, failures to act, practices and policies of the Defendant set forth above constitute retaliation in violation of the FCRA.
- 63. As a direct and proximate result of the violations of the FCRA, as referenced and cited herein, **WASHBURN** has lost all of the benefits and privileges of her employment and has been substantially and significantly injured in her career path.
- 64. As a direct and proximate result of the violations of the FCRA, as referenced and cited herein, and as a direct and proximate result of the prohibited acts perpetrated against her, **WASHBURN** is entitled to all relief necessary to make her whole as provided for under the FCRA.
- 65. As a direct and proximate result of the Defendant's actions, WASHBURN has suffered damages, including but not limited to, a loss of

employment opportunities, loss of past and future employment income and fringe benefits, humiliation, and non-economic damages for physical injuries, mental and emotional distress.

66. **WASHBURN** has exhausted her administrative remedies and this count is timely brought.

**WHEREFORE**, Plaintiff requests trial by jury of all issues so triable as of right, and:

- i. Back pay and all other benefits, perquisites and other compensation for employment which plaintiff would have received had she maintained her position with the Defendant, plus interest, including but not limited to lost salary and bonuses;
- ii. Front pay, including raises, benefits, insurance costs, benefits costs, and retirement benefits;
- iii. Reimbursement of all expenses and financial losses Plaintiff has incurred as a result of Defendant's actions;
- iv. Reasonable attorney's fees plus costs;
- v. Compensatory damages, and;
- vi. Such other relief as this Court shall deem appropriate.

# **DEMAND FOR JURY TRIAL**

NOW COMES the Plaintiff, JANET WASHBURN, by and through her undersigned attorneys, and demands a jury trial under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 38 on all issues triable of right by a jury in this action.

Respectfully submitted,

Dated: February 7, 2024 /s/ Benjamin H. Yormak

Benjamin H. Yormak Florida Bar Number 71272 Lead Counsel for Plaintiff Yormak Employment & Disability Law 27200 Riverview Center Blvd., Suite 109 Bonita Springs, Florida 34134

Telephone: (239) 985-9691

Fax: (239) 288-2534

Email: byormak@yormaklaw.com

#### Case 2:24-cv-00121 Document 1-1 Filed 02/07/24 Page 1 of 2 PageID 15

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U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division

NOTICE OF RIGHT TO SUE WITHIN 90 DAYS

VIA EMAIL

150 M Street, N.E. Karen Ferguson , EMP, 4CON, Room 9.514 Washington, DC 20530

November 20, 2023

Ms. Janet Washburn c/o Dawn Bernardo, Esquire Yormak Employment & Disability Law 27200 Riverview Center Blvd. Suite 109 Bonita Springs, FL 34134

Re: EEOC Charge Against Bonita Springs Fire Control & Rescue District, et al.

No. 510202304554

Dear Ms. Washburn:

Because you filed the above charge with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and more than 180 days have elapsed since the date the Commission assumed jurisdiction over the charge, and no suit based thereon has been filed by this Department, and because you through your attorney have specifically requested this Notice, you are hereby notified that you have the right to institute a civil action under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as amended, 42 U.S.C. 2000e, et seq., against the above-named respondent.

If you choose to commence a civil action, such suit must be filed in the appropriate Court within 90 days of your receipt of this Notice.

The investigative file pertaining to your case is located in the EEOC Miami District Office, Miami, FL.

This Notice should not be taken to mean that the Department of Justice has made a judgment as to whether or not your case is meritorious.

Sincerely,

Kristen Clarke Assistant Attorney General Civil Rights Division

by /s/ Karen L. Ferguson Karen L. Ferguson Supervisory Civil Rights Analyst Employment Litigation Section

cc: Miami District Office, EEOC

Bonita Springs Fire Control & Rescue District, et al.

JS 44 (Rev. 11/15)

# **CIVIL COVER SHEET**

The JS 44 civil cover sheet and the information contained herein neither replace nor supplement the filing and service of pleadings or other papers as required by law, except as provided by local rules of court. This form, approved by the Judicial Conference of the United States in September 1974, is required for the use of the Clerk of Court for the purpose of initiating the civil docket sheet. (SEE INSTRUCTIONS ON NEXT PAGE OF THIS FORM.)

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I. (a) PLAINTIFFS				DEFENDANTS					
JANET WASHBURN, an individual,				BONITA SPRINGS FIRE CONTROL & RESCUE DISTRICT,					
(c) Attorneys (Firm Name, Address, and Telephone Number) Benjamin H. Yormak (239) 985-9691 27200 Riverview Center Blvd., Ste.109 Bonita Springs, FL 34134				County of Residence of First Listed Defendant  (IN U.S. PLAINTIFF CASES ONLY)  NOTE: IN LAND CONDEMNATION CASES, USE THE LOCATION OF THE TRACT OF LAND INVOLVED.  Attorneys (If Known)					
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VIII. RELATED CAS	E(S) (See instructions):	JUDGE			DOCKI	ET NUMBER _			
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United State	ES DISTRICT COURT
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Plaintiff(s) V.	) ) ) ) ) Civil Action No. )
Defendant(s)	)
SUMMONS I	N A CIVIL ACTION
To: (Defendant's name and address)	
are the United States or a United States agency, or an off P. 12 (a)(2) or (3) — you must serve on the plaintiff an a	you (not counting the day you received it) — or 60 days if you ficer or employee of the United States described in Fed. R. Civ. inswer to the attached complaint or a motion under Rule 12 of tion must be served on the plaintiff or plaintiff's attorney,
If you fail to respond, judgment by default will be You also must file your answer or motion with the court.	be entered against you for the relief demanded in the complaint.
	CLERK OF COURT

Signature of Clerk or Deputy Clerk

AO 440 (Rev. 06/12) Summons in a Civil Action (Page 2)

Civil Action No.

### PROOF OF SERVICE

(This section should not be filed with the court unless required by Fed. R. Civ. P. 4 (1))

	This summons for (name	e of individual and title, if any)								
was re	ceived by me on (date)		· 							
	☐ I personally served t	the summons on the indiv	ridual at (place)							
			<u>-</u>	; or						
	☐ I left the summons a	at the individual's residen	ce or usual place of abode with (name)							
	, a person of suitable age and discretion who resides there,									
	on (date), and mailed a copy to the individual's last known address; or									
	☐ I served the summon	ns on (name of individual)		, who is						
	designated by law to accept service of process on behalf of (name of organization)									
			on (date)	; or						
	☐ I returned the summ	ons unexecuted because		; or						
	☐ Other (specify):									
	My fees are \$	for travel and \$	for services, for a total of \$							
	I declare under penalty	of perjury that this inform	mation is true.							
Date:										
			Server's signature							
			Printed name and title							
			Server's address							

Additional information regarding attempted service, etc: