GOVERNOR'S OFFICE

PENNSYLVANIA HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION

AMANDA VENZIALE, Complainant

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: PHRC CASE NO. 200503787

WHITMAN TRUCK CENTER,
Respondent

FINDINGS OF FACT
CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

OPINION

RECOMMENDATION OF HEARING PANEL
FINAL ORDER

FINDINGS OF FACT *

- 1. The Respondent herein is Whitman Truck Center (hereinafter "Whitman"). (N. T. 22).
- 2. Whitman opened in 2004 as a service station, repair garage and parts retailer at 3540 S. Lawrence Street, Philadelphia, PA. (N. T. 22, 122, 123, 125, 140).
- 3. Whitman was open during the hours of 7:00a.m. to approximately 5:00p.m., however, the truck stop in which Whitman was located was open 24 hours a day. (N. T. 157).
- Whitman was owned by Hasan Alkatawnah. (hereinafter "Alkatawnah").
 (N. T. 122).
- Whitman was a small business employing approximately 5 individuals.
 (N. T. 125).
- 6. The layout of the Whitman facility included an inner and outer office, garage bay and a supply area. (N. T. 28).
- 7. The Complainant herein is Amanda Venziale, (hereinafter "Venziale"), an adult female who for the past five years has strictly practiced the Muslim faith. (N. T. 68)

*To the extent that the Opinion which follows recites facts in addition to those here listed, such facts shall be considered to be additional Findings of Facts. The following abbreviations will be utilized throughout these Findings of Fact for reference purposes:

N. T. Notes of Testimony C.E. Complainant's Exhibit

- 17. While working at Whitman, Alquatin had keys to the office, directed employees to pick up food, conversed with Alkatawnah regarding employee's performance, made a notation on Venziale's time card about the time she purportedly left the workplace and purportedly sent Venziale to get supplies. (N. T. 26, 138, 163, 167, 171).
- 18. While an employee, Venziale had been friendly with the Alkatawnahs and had socialized with them on several occasions. (N. T. 26, 29, 61).
- 19. On one occasion, after Venziale and White were experiencing discord, Venziale called Alquatin to take her to Alkatawnah's house, where she spent the night. (N. T. 30, 62, 103, 136).
- 20. During her employment at Whitman, Venziale made mistakes on invoices, came in late on occasion, was found sleeping at least once, and at times did not return customer's credit cards causing the customer to have to return to retrieve the card. (N. T. 57, 59, 75, 78, 87, 90, 146-147, 153).
- 21. Venziale never received either a verbal or written discipline notice for any job performance issues. (N. T. 30, 88, 90).
- All employees were told to get off their cell phones and find something to do. (N. T. 31).
- 23. Venziale was never told she was in danger of losing her job. (N. T. 31).
- 24. Alkatawnah did not put any of Venziale's purported deficiencies into writing. (N. T. 158).

- 8. At relevant times, Venziale had one child with whom she lived, along with Akil White, (hereinafter "White"), a man Venziale described as her husband under her religion but not a marriage recognized by the government, and White's three young children. (N. T. 51, 68).
- 9. On May 18, 2005, Venziale submitted an employment application to Whitman for a receptionist position. (N. T. 23; CE 1).
- 10. On or about May 18, 2005, Venziale was interviewed and hired by Alkatawnah at \$9.00 per hour for 40 hours per week. (N. T. 23, 24)
- 11. Venziale's supervisor was Alkatawnah. (N. T. 24).
- 12. Subsequently, Venziale was promoted to the position of Office Manager, which entailed coming in earlier to open the facility at 7:00 a.m. and a pay raise to \$10.00 per hour. (N. T. 25, 27).
- 13. At a later date, the method of payment of wages to Venziale was modified to reflect on her paycheck \$7.00 per hour, with the remaining \$3.00 per hour was paid to her in cash. (N. T. 27, 180, 185).
- 14. Alkatawnah testified that he would reduce to writing serious performance issues and violations. (N. T. 126).
- 15. Venziale testified that Alkatawnah had issued written disciplinary warnings to Whitman employees. (N. T. 182).
- 16. Alkatawnah's brother, Tahseen Alquatin, (hereinafter "Alquatin"), although an employee at a New Jersey company Alkatawnah owned, frequently helped out at Whitman. (N.T. 26, 138).

- 25. On the morning of December 30, 2005, Venziale was the first to arrive. (N. T. 56).
- 26. A short while later, Alquatin and Pedro Ramos, another Whitman employee, arrived. (N. T. 33).
- 27. Alquatin sent Ramos to a nearby store to pick up food for everyone. (N. T. 33, 94).
- 28. Sending someone for food in the morning was nearly a daily occurrence.
 (N. T. 33, 94).
- 29. Venziale had begun to work on some invoices, and when she got up at approximately 7:30 a.m. Alquatin pushed her on top of a desk, opened her dress, pulled up her clothes and groped her exposed breasts. (N. T. 34, 35).
- 30. Alquatin also tugged at Venziale's pants repeatedly saying that he just wanted to see. (N. T. 34, 100; CE 3).
- 31. During the ordeal, Venziale resisted and fought Alquatin the entire time. (N. T. 34, 35).
- After a few minutes, Alquatin simply released Venziale.
 (N. T. 34, 84).
- 33. Venziale adjusted her clothes and retreated into the back office, where she attempted to take in what had happened and tried to pull herself together. (N. T. 35-36, 84, 110).
- 34. Before she left the facility, Venziale called home twice and called a friend to relate what had happened. (N. T. 35, 85, 98-99).

- 35. When Venziale arrived home, she was shaken and not herself. (N. T. 99-100).
- 36. White sensed there was something wrong and pressed Venziale to tell him what was wrong. (N. T. 99).
- 37. In tears, Venziale told White that Alquatin had tried to rape her. (N. T. 99, 100, 105).
- 38. Venziale and White agreed that she should go to the police. (N. T. 36, 100-101).
- 39. Venziale then went to the police where she filed a report and gave a statement. (N. T. 37; CE 3).
- 40. Between 9:52a.m. and 11:15a.m, Alquatin placed 27 calls to Venziale's cell phone. (N. T. 40, 41; CE 4).
- 41. Venziale did not answer any of these calls. (N. T. 41).
- 42. The interviewing police officer recommended that Venziale not answer her cell phone. (N. T. 41).
- 43. At approximately 10:41 a.m. that morning, three additional calls were made to White's cell phone by Alquatin. (N. T. 52, 102, 111, 113).
- 44. White did not answer these calls. (N. T. 103).
- 45. At approximately noon, the police called Whitman, advising Alkatawnah of Venziale's allegation. (N. T. 134, 176).
- 46. Alkatawnah testified that he spoke with Alquatin and the other employees, and that everyone denied that anything had happened.
 (N. T. 134-135).

- 47. Feeling that Alkatawnah would never believe her over his brother and that conditions would not improve, Venziale quit. (N. T. 42, 43).
- 48. During an unemployment compensation hearing, Alkatawnah stated, "No way in the world I would believe my brother would do something like that." (N. T. 136-137).
- 49. Whitman had no sexual harassment policy. (N. T. 43, 125).
- 50. After Venziale terminated her employment with Whitman, she sent two or three resumes to prospective employers, reviewed newspaper want ads, and utilized internet job search sites. (N. T. 45-46).
- 51. Approximately six months after leaving Whitman, Venziale secured employment with Disposal Corporation of America, where her beginning salary was greater than the amount she had earned at Whitman. (N. T. 47).
- 52. Venziale incurred certifiable travel expenses in connection with the PHRC claim. (N. T. 48).

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

- The Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission has jurisdiction over the parties and the subject matter of the complaint under the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act (hereinafter "PHRA").
- 2. The parties and the commission have fully complied with the procedural prerequisites to a Public Hearing.
- 3. Venziale is an "individual" within the meaning of the PHRA.
- 4. Whitman is an "employer" within the meaning of Section 4(b) and 5(a) of the PHRA.
- 5. Section 5(a) of the PHRA prohibits employers from discriminating against individuals in their employment because of their sex.
- 6. The Complainant has established by a preponderance of the evidence that Whitman unlawfully discriminated against her in her employment by subjecting her to a hostile work environment and constructively discharging her because of her sex, female.
- 7. Whenever the PHRC concludes that a Respondent has engaged in an unlawful practice, the Commission shall issue a cease and desist order and it may order such affirmative action as, in its judgment, will effectuate the purposes of the PHRA.

OPINION

The case arises on a complaint filed by Amanda Venziale (hereinafter "Venziale") against Whitman Truck company, (hereinafter "Whitman") on or about January 9, 2006, at PHRC Case Number 200503787. In her two count complaint, Venziale generally alleged an incident of sexual harassment on December 30, 2005 subjecting her to a hostile work environment and that the incident caused her constructive termination. Venziale's claims allege that Whitman violated Section 5(a) of the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act of October 27, 1955. P.L. 744, as amended, 43 P.S. §§951 et. seq. (hereinafter "PHRA").

Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (hereinafter "PHRC") staff conducted an investigation and found probable cause to credit Venziale's allegations of discrimination. The PHRC and the parties attempted to eliminate the alleged unlawful practices through conference, conciliation and persuasion. However, those efforts were unsuccessful, and this case was approved for Public Hearing. The Public Hearing was held on December 5, 2007, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, before Panel Chairperson Raquel Otero de Yiengst, and Daniel L. Woodall, Jr., Panel Member. Although three Commissioners had been assigned to hear this case, the parties waived the three Commissioner requirement when one of the assigned Commissioners became ill. The Post-Hearing brief on behalf of the state's interest in the complaint was received on February 21, 2008. Whitman's Post-Hearing brief was received on May 23, 2008.

Initially, with regard to Venziale's claim of sexual harassment, it is clear that Whitman contends that Alquatin did not sexually attack Venziale on December 30, 2005. Fundamentally, during, the Public Hearing before the PHRC, Venziale's testimony was offered regarding her version of what occurred when she and Alquatin were alone in the office on the morning of December 30, 2005. Interestingly, Alquatin's version of events was not offered.

While Whitman's post-hearing brief points to numerous minor discrepancies and inconsistencies regarding Venziale's testimony, the overwhelming fact is that her testimony regarding the highly reprehensible, unsavory encounter on the morning of December 30, 2005 between herself and Alquatin stands unrebutted. Accordingly, rather than being tasked with resolving potentially significant factual disparities, Venziale's version of Alquatin's outrageous conduct that morning shall be accepted as true. Additionally, her strong reactions and the filing of a police report assist us to conclude that her version was credible.

Regarding Venziale's first count, sexual harassment violates the PHRA based on sex. See Human Relations Commission Guidelines on Sexual Harassment. 11 Pa. Bulletin 522 (January 31, 1981); see also Steele v. Offshore Shipbuilding Inc., 867 F. 2d 1311, 1315, 49 FEP Cases 522 (1989).

Generally, sexual harassment can take one of two forms: (1) quid pro quo harassment, in which an employer conditions terms of employment on demands for sexual favors; or (2) hostile work environment harassment, where sexually harassing conduct "has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an

individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment". Meritor Savings Bank v. Vision., 477 U.S. 57, 65 (1986).

Here, Venziale first claims that she was subjected to a hostile work environment when she was physically assaulted by Alquatin. Under Section 5(a) of the PHRA, "It shall be an unlawful discriminatory practice . . . [f]or any employer because of the . . . sex . . . of any individual . . . to otherwise discriminate against such individual . . . with respect to . . . terms, conditions or privileges of employment . . ."

In interpreting the PHRA, Pennsylvania counts have recognized the value of looking to federal court decisions that interpret Title VII. Hoy v. Angelone, 691 A.2d 476 (Pa. 1998), *citing* Kryeski v. Schoff Glass Technologies, 426 Pa. Super 105, 111-12, 626 A.2d 595, 598 (1993) and Allegheny Housing v. PHRC, 516 Pa. 124, 532 A.2d 315 (1987). Given the existence of varied nuances in this case, we find that looking to federal court decisions is particularly helpful regarding Venziale's hostile work environment claim.

In order to establish a *prima facie* case of hostile work environment sexual harassment, the following elements must be proven: (1) that Venziale belongs to a protected group; (2) that she was subjected to unwelcome sexual harassment; (3) that the harassment complained of was based on sex; and (4) that the harassment complained of affected a term, condition or privilege of employment in that the harassment was sufficiently severe or pervasive to alter conditions of her employment and create an abusive working environment. <u>Galloway v. Matagorda County</u>, 81 FEP Case 911, 912 (S.D. Tx. 1999), *citing* Farpella-

Crosby v. Horizon Health Case, 97 F.3d 803, 806, 72 FEP Cases 254 (5th Cir. 1996); Maddin v. GTE of Florida, 80 FEP Cases 739, 742 (M.D. Fla. 1999), citing Sparks v. Pilot Freight Carriers, Inc., 830 F.2d 1554, 1557, 45 FEP Cases 160 (11th Cir. 1987); and Flockart v. Iowa Beef Processors, Inc., 87 FEP Cases 1605, 1618 (N.D. Iowa 2001), citing Beard v. Flying J. Inc., 266 F.3d 792, 797-98 (8th Cir. 2001).

Clearly, Venziale is a female who, we conclude, was subjected to a reprehensible, highly offensive, forcible physical attack visited on her because she is a woman. As such, the first three requisite elements of the *prima facie* showing are established. Regarding whether the single unsavory act visited on Venziale was sufficiently severe, we find that it was. Of course, the sexual harassment complained of need not be both severe and pervasive, one or the other will suffice. Hostetler v. Quality Dining, 83 FEP Cases 513, 521 (7th Cir. 2000), *citing* Smith v. Sheahan, 189 F.3d 529, 533, 80 FEP Cases 1071 (7th Cir. 1999); and Harris v. Forklift Systems, Inc., 510 U.S. 17, 21 (1993).

In considering the totality of the circumstances, <u>Harris v. Forklift Systems</u>, <u>Inc.</u>, 510 U.S. 17, 23, (1993), *See also* <u>Burnett v. Tyco Corporation</u>., 81 FEP Cases 1513, 1515 (6th Cir. 2000); <u>Williams v. General Motors Corp.</u>, 187 F.3d 553, 562 (6th Cir. 1999), we find that Alquatin's conduct was an extremely abusive unwelcome physical contact of an intimate nature. Courts have recognized that one act of harassment can constitute a hostile environment if the act is egregious. <u>Ferris v. Delta Airlines, Inc.</u>, 87 FEP Cases 899, 905 (2nd Cir. 2001); <u>Worth v. Tyes</u>, 87 FEP Cases 994, 1006 (7th Cir. 2001); <u>Smith v.</u>

Sheahan, 189 F. 3d 529 (7th Cir. 1990); <u>DiCenso v. Cisneros</u>, 96 F.3d 1004, 1009 (7th Cir. 1996); and <u>Daniels v. Essex Group, Inc.</u>, 937 F. 2d 1264, 1273-74 & n.4 (7th Cir. 1991). Here, there is no doubt that Alquatin's actions amount to "severe" sexual harassment.

Courts also weigh whether conditions of employment were, sufficiently detrimentally altered by determining if the objectionable environment was both objectively and subjectively offensive. Colon v. Environmental Technologies, Inc., 87 FEP Cases 702, 77 (M.D. Fla. 2001). On this account, Venziale sufficiently demonstrated her subjective belief that her working environment became hostile. She testified that she was both frightened and shocked at Alquatin's behavior. Given the nature of the assault, Venziale's reaction is both understandable and sufficient to establish that to her, her working conditions became significantly altered.

Given the circumstances of the situation, we also find that Alquatin's actions were sufficiently demeaning, invasive, humiliating and threatening so that any reasonable woman would objectively find the working conditions at Whitman to have been poisoned. The gravity of the harassment clearly speaks to an objective severity sufficient to create an objectively hostile work environment that a reasonable person would have found abusive. Accordingly, all elements of the requisite *prima facie* showing have been established.

Next, we must consider whether Whitman should be found liable for Alquatin's act of sexual harassment in Whitman's workplace. To answer this question, different standards are applied depending on the status of the

harasser. When the harasser is a co-worker, normally, an employer can be held liable for conduct the employer knew or should have known about, yet failed to take prompt remedial action. Williamson v. City of Houston, 148 F.3d 462, 464, 77 FEP Cases 613 (5th Cir. 1998), citing Jones v. Flagship, International, 793 F. 2d 714, 720, 41 FEP Cases 358 (5th Cir. 1986). Several courts also note that in co-worker harassment cases, an employer may also be liable if the employer failed to provide a reasonable avenue of complaint should harassment occur. Ferris v. Delta Airlines, Inc., 87 FEP Cases 899, 905 (2nd Cir. 2001), citing Richardson v. New York State Department of Correction Services, 180 F.3d 426, 441, 80 FEP Cases 110 (2nd Cir. 1999); see also Breda v. Wolf Camera, 80 FEP Cases 1852, 1853 (S.D. Ga. 1999), citing Badlam v. Reynolds Metals Co., 46 F. Supp. 2d 187 (N.D. N.Y. 1999).

Here, while we hold that Alquatin performed enough supervisory functions to permit Venziale to consider him a supervisor, even if Alquatin would be found to be merely a co-worker, Whitman's failure to have either a formal or informal sexual harassment policy permits a liability finding because Venziale had no reasonable avenue of complaint. However, under the present circumstances, we find that Alquatin was a supervisor.

Where the harasser is a supervisor, an employer may be held vicariously liable. Faragher v. City of Boca Raton, 524 U.S. 775, 118 S. Ct. 2275, 2292-93 (1998); Burlington Industries, Inc., v. Ellerth, 524 U.S. 724, 118 S. Ct. 2257, 2270 (1998). Accordingly, Whitman may be found liable for the acts of Alquatin.

Next, we turn to Venziale's claim that she was constructively terminated. Here, Venziale, shaken and frightened, left shortly after she was sexually assaulted and did not return. Normally, to establish a constructive termination, a Complainant must prove the working conditions were so intolerable that a reasonable employee in her position would feel compelled to resign. Webb v. Cardiothoracic Surgery Assoc., 76 FEP Cases 1599, 1603 (5th Cir. 1998), citing Faruki v. Parsons S.I.P., Inc., 123 F.3d 315, 319, 75 FEP Cases 18 (5th Cir. 1997). We conclude that, indeed, Alquatin's conduct made Venziale's conditions at Whitman beyond intolerable. Any reasonable person having first been sexually assaulted by the brother of an owner would feel compelled to leave, especially if that person reasonably concluded that the owner would not believe them over the brother.

This is precisely the circumstance present here. Venziale left fully aware that Alkatawnah would never believe her. It turns out, her fears were justified. Alkatawnah stated at an Unemployment Compensation hearing, "No way in the world I would believe my brother would do something like that". (N. T. 136-137). Alkatawnah suggested that after Venziale left, he conducted an investigation. However, he neither wrote anything down nor spoke to Venziale to hear her version of events. Instead, Alkatawnah simply attempted to create after-the-fact justifications to suggest the event never happened and that Venziale was simply leaving before she was fired.

When an employee quits because they reasonably believe there is no chance for fair treatment, there has been a constructive discharge. Howard v.

<u>Burns Brothers</u>, 78 FEP Cases 131, 136 (8th Cir. 1998), *citing* <u>Kimzey v. Wal-Mart Store</u>, Inc., 107 F.3d 568, 574, 73 FEP Cases 87 (8th Cir. 1997). Accordingly, we find that Venziale was constructively terminated.

Turning to consideration of an appropriate remedy, we recognize that the PHRC has broad equitable powers to fashion appropriate relief.

Section 9(f) of the PHRA provides in pertinent part:

If, upon all the evidence at the hearing, the Commission shall find that a respondent has engaged in or is engaging in any unlawful discriminatory practice as defined in this Act, the commission shall state its finding of fact, and shall issue and cause to be served on such respondent an order requiring such respondent to cease and desist from such unlawful discriminatory practice and to take such affirmative action, including, but not limited to, reimbursement of certifiable travel expenses in matters involving the complaint, hiring, reinstatement . . . with or without back pay . . . and any other verifiable, reasonable out-of-pocket expenses caused by such unlawful discriminatory practice . . . as, in the judgment of the Commission, will effectuate the purposes of this act, and including a requirement for report of the manner of compliance.

The function of the remedy in employment discrimination cases is not to punish the Respondent, but simply to make a Complainant whole by returning the Complainant to the position in which she would have been, absent the discriminatory practice. See Albermarle Paper Co., v. Moody, 422 U.S. 405, 10 FEP Cases 1181 (1975); PHRC v. Alto-Reste Park Cemetery Assoc., 306 A. 2d 881 (Pa. 1973).

The first aspect we must consider in making Venziale whole is the issue of the extent of financial losses suffered. When Complainants prove an economic loss, back pay should be awarded absent special circumstances. See Walker v. Ford Motor Co., Inc., 684 F.2d 1355, 29 FEP Cases 1259 (11th Cir. 1982). A

proper basis for calculating lost earnings need not be mathematically precise, but must simply be a "reasonable means to determine the amount [the Complainant] would probably have earned " PHRC v. Transit Casualty Insurance Company, 340 A.2d 624 (Pa. Cmnwlth Ct. 1975), *aff'd.* 387 A.2d 58 (1978). Any uncertainty in an estimation of damages must be borne by the wrongdoer, rather than the victim, since the wrongdoer caused the damages. *See* Green v. USX Corporation, 46 FEP Cases 720 (3rd Cir. 1988).

The post hearing brief on behalf of the complaint acknowledges that by stipulation, the parties agree that, in effect, the back-pay period should end July 26, 2006, the date Venziale secured employment where her earnings exceeded the earnings she would have made had she remained with Whitman. Whitman's post-hearing brief makes no arguments regarding damages issues.

Appendix A, in the post-hearing brief on behalf of the complaint submits calculations covering the period December 30, 2005 through July 26, 2006. Generally, this calculation accurately reflects lost wages at \$400.00 per week for that limited period. Accordingly, Venziale's total lost wages were \$11,826.00. This proposed figure is adopted as an appropriate calculation of lost wages.

Further, the PHRC is authorized to award interest on the back pay award.

<u>Goetz v. Norristown Area School District.</u>, 16 Pa. Cmwlth. Ct. 389, 328, A.2d 579 (1975).

Next, Venziale presented testimony regarding out-of-pocket expenses she incurred during her involvement with this case. Venziale indicated that she traveled to the PHRC Philadelphia regional office four or five times. This trip

involved approximately 20 miles round trip. (100 miles x \$.51 per mile= \$51.00). Additionally, Venziale offered that she paid to park twice for a total parking cost of \$20.00.

An appropriate order follows.

GOVERNOR'S OFFICE

PENNSYLVANIA HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION

AMANDA VENZIALE, Complainant

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PHRC CASE NO. 200503787

WHITMAN TRUCK CENTER, Respondent

RECOMMENDATION OF THE HEARING PANEL

Upon consideration of the entire record in the above-captioned matter, we, the two members of the Hearing Panel, find that the Complainant has proven discrimination in violations of Section 5(a) of the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act. It is, therefore, our joint recommendation that the attached Findings of Fact, Conclusions of Law, and Opinion be approved and adopted. We further recommend issuance of the attached Final Order.

PENNSYLVANIA HUMAN RELAATIONS COMMISSION

By:

Raquel Otero de Yiengst

Chairperson

Daniel L. Woodall, Jr.

Panel Member

COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA GOVERNOR'S OFFICE PENNSYLVANIA HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION

AMANDA VENZIALE, Complainant

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PHRC CASE NO. 200503787

WHITMAN TRUCK CENTER,
Respondent

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FINAL ORDER

ORDERS

1. That Whitman shall cease and desist from discriminating against any employees because of their sex.

2. That Whitman shall pay to Venziale, within 30 days of the effective date of this Order, the lump sum of \$11,826.00, which amount represents wages lost for the period between December 30, 2005 and July 26, 2006.

3. That Whitman shall pay additional interest of 6% per annum on the award, calculated from July 26, 2006 until payment is made.

4. That Whitman shall pay to Venziale, within 30 days of the effective date of this Order, the lump sum of \$71.00, which amount represents certifiable travel expenses incurred by Venziale.

5. That Whitman shall report the means by which it will comply with this Order, in writing to Charles L. Nier, III, PHRC Assistant Chief Counsel, within thirty days of the date of this Order.

PENNSYLVANIA HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION

Stephen A. Glassman

Chairperson

ATTEST:

Dr. Daniel D. Yun

Secretary