JUDGMENT - 1

### IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF WASHINGTON

JIN ZHU,

Plaintiff,
v.

PLAINTIFF'S MOTION
FOR PARTIAL SUMMARY
JUDGMENT

NORTH CENTRAL
EDUCATIONAL SERVICE
DISTRICT – ESD 171,

Without oral argument
Defendant.

# I. INTRODUCTION & SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT

# A. ESD 171 violated Washington's Public Record Act.

Washington's legislature makes clear that "[t]he people of this state do not yield their sovereignty to the agencies that serve them." RCW 42.56.030. To further that policy our state's legislature passed the Public Records Act - - - a statute that is liberally construed so as to "assure that the public interest will be fully protected" MOTION FOR PARTIAL SUMMARY

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and to deny "public servants the right to decide what is good for the people to know and what is not good for them to know." *Id*.

On January 13, 2014, Jin Zhu made such a public record request to North Central Educational Service District No. 171 (ESD 171) seeking:

[A] copy of North Central ESD's programs (effective prior to June 21, 2012) that encouraged the school districts in North Central Washington to employ minority teachers and/or that aimed to increase minority staff in the NCESD.

Although ESD 171 knowingly possessed an affirmative action Board Policy mandating that ESD 171's superintendent "will ensure that administrative procedures are developed which afford equal employment and promotion for women and minorities" as well as detailed affirmative action Administrative Procedures, ESD 171 did not produce those documents in response to Mr. Zhu's public record request because it "thought he wanted a program." Instead ESD 171 told Mr. Zhu that "Educational Service Districts are not required to have affirmative action programs." At no time did ESD 171 seek clarification from Mr. Zhu as to what he meant by "programs". Yet, Suzanne Reister, ESD 171's Human Resources Executive Director (the individual who responded to Mr. Zhu's public record request) was well aware that ESD 171 possessed affirmative action policies and procedures. It was not until October 29, 2015 - - after Plaintiff filed this lawsuit and received discovery responses from Defendant - - that Mr. Zhu learned of the ESD

171 affirmative action policies and procedures that were unquestionably responsive to his January 13, 2014 pubic record request. And it was not until Ms. Reister's April 19, 2016 deposition when Plaintiff learned that the reason ESD 171 did not give him the affirmative action policy and procedure (in 2014) was because ESD 171 was unclear about what Mr. Zhu meant by the word "programs." ESD 171's after-the-fact claimed ignorance of the meaning of the word "programs" does get it off the hook.

As a matter of law ESD 171's (a) failure to seek clarification from Mr. Zhu as to what he meant by "programs", (b) failure to explain the scope of its record search to Mr. Zhu, and (c) failure to expand the scope of its search to beyond "programs" violates the Public Record Act. The Washington State Supreme Court holds that an agency is required to seek clarification from the requestor (here Mr. Zhu) if the agency (as ESD 171 now admits) is unclear about the nature of the records being requested yet admits that it never asked Mr. Zhu to clarify what he meant by "programs." *Neighborhood All. of Spokane Cty. v. Cty. of Spokane*, 172 Wn.2d 702, 727 (2011)("The request sought public records...and if the agency was unclear about what was requested, it was required to seek clarification.").

# B. ESD 171 violated Washington's Law Against Discrimination.

Washington's legislature states that practices of discrimination "threaten not only the rights and proper privileges of its inhabitants but menace the institutions

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and foundation of a free democratic state" and guarantees the "right to obtain and hold employment without discrimination." RCW 49.60.010; RCW 49.60.030. To that end, employer conduct that intentionally treats individuals differently on account of their race *or* unintentionally disparately impacts those of a certain race through a facially neutral employment practice are illegal. *E-Z Loader Boat Trailers, Inc. v. Travelers Indem. Co.*, 106 Wn.2d 901, 909 (1986). ESD 171 maintains a facially neutral "first come first served" hiring practice that disparately impacted Mr. Zhu, a Chinese-American citizen.

On April 4, 2013, Mr. Zhu applied for a Regional Science Refurbishment Assistant position with ESD 171. Although Mr. Zhu was qualified for the position and the only applicant (out of four) to submit a complete application for the position he was not given that job (or allowed to interview for it) because of ESD 171's unwritten "first come first served" hiring practice. Instead, the job was given to Jesse Swider, a white female, who applied for the job three days before Mr. Zhu but undisputedly did not submit a complete application for the job. Accordingly, ESD 171's "first come first served" hiring practice disparately impacted the employment opportunity for qualified minority applicants. This is evident because Mr. Zhu was the only Chinese-American applicant for the Refurbishment job and also the only applicant who submitted a complete application for the job. As a result, ESD 171's hiring practice is illegal as a matter of law. Indeed, ESD 171 (a) admits that the

practice limits the opportunities of all qualified applicants to compete for job openings; (b) admits that alternatives exist to a "first come first served" practice; (c) admits that the practice does not measure whether applicants for a job can actually do the job; and (d) admits that the only time it used the "first come first served" practice was when Mr. Zhu applied for the Refurbishment job. Accordingly, summary judgment adjudication of Mr. Zhu's disparate impact employment discrimination claim under the Washington Law against Discrimination (WLAD) is appropriate.

Since there are no material issues of fact germane to either of these claims summary judgment adjudication as to the issue of liability is appropriate.

### II. ARGUMENT

### A. MOTION FOR SUMMARY JUDGMENT STANDARD.

Summary judgment is proper when "the pleadings. . . together with the affidavits, if any, show that there is no genuine issue as to any material fact and that the moving party is entitled to judgment as a matter of law." Fed.R.Civ.P. 56(a); Celotex Corp. v. Catrett, 477 U.S. 317, 322 (1986). An issue is "genuine" only if there is a sufficient evidentiary basis on which a reasonable fact finder could find for the nonmoving party and a dispute is "material" only if it could affect the outcome of the suit under the governing law. Anderson, v. Liberty Lobby, Inc., 477 U.S. 242, 248 (1986). Once the moving party has done so, the burden shifts to the

opposing party to set forth specific facts showing there is a genuine issue for trial.

In re Barboza, 545 F.3d 702, 707 (9th Cir. 2008). Additionally, many PRA cases are resolved on summary judgment regarding the adequacy of an agency's search and, "[i]n such situations, the agency bears the burden, beyond material doubt, of showing its search was adequate." Neighborhood All., 172 Wn.2d at 721. Lastly, courts have addressed WLAD disparate impact claims on summary judgment. Fahn v. Cowlitz Cty., 93 Wn.2d 368, 370 (1980).

Since there are no material issues of fact as to Mr. Zhu's PRA and disparate impact claims summary judgment adjudication is appropriate regarding liability.

B. DEFENDANT VIOLATED WASHINGTON'S PUBLIC RECORD ACT BY NOT SEEKING CLARIFICATION FROM MR. ZHU, BY NOT INFORMING MR. ZHU OF THE SCOPE AND ADEQUACY OF ITS SEARCH, AND BY CONDUCTING AN INADEQUATE SEARCH.

ESD 171 silently withheld the records responsive to Mr. Zhu's public record request. ESD 171 now seeks to justify its withholding by claiming it was confused by the meaning of the word "program". But this after-the-fact excuse does not avoid liability under the PRA. If ESD 171 was confused, it had to seek clarification from Mr. Zhu as to what he meant by "programs" and to search widely giving a broad construction in favor of disclosure to the request and, if that search revealed nothing, tell Mr. Zhu where it searched. But ESD 171 chose the route prohibited by the PRA; the agency chose to silently withhold the records until this litigation brought their

withholding to light. The undisputed acts and decisions of ESD 171 violate the PRA as a matter of law.

Washington's Public Record Act is a "strongly worded mandate for broad disclosure of public records" standing for the proposition that complete access to information concerning government conduct "must be assured as a fundamental and necessary precondition to the sound governance of a free society." *Neighborhood All.*, 172 Wn. 2d at 714-715. To that end, the PRA requires agencies "to disclose any public record on request unless it falls within a specific, enumerated exemption" as "virtually every document generated by an agency [is] available to the public unless an exemption applies." *Id.* at 715, 719.

When confronted with a public record request a government agency must make "an adequate search" that is "reasonably calculated to uncover all relevant documents." *Id.* at 719-720. An agency "cannot limit its search to only one record system if there are others that are likely to turn up the information requested." *Id.* at 722. An "adequate response to the initial PRA request where records are not disclosed should explain" both the places searched *and* the adequacy of the search as the "Public Records Act clearly and emphatically prohibits silent withholding by

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> ESD 171 has not raised a PRA exemption defense (or any defense) to Mr. Zhu's

PRA claim. (ECF No. 22, pg. 15)

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agencies of records relevant to a public records request." *Id.* at 722-724. Lastly, when an agency is unclear as to what is requested that agency is "required to seek clarification" from the requester. *Id.* at 727.

Undisputedly, Mr. Zhu made a public record request on January 13, 2014 seeking records regarding ESD 171's programs that encourage the employment of minorities. (SOF  $\P$   $\P$  65 – 66) Undisputedly, ESD 171 received Mr. Zhu's January 13, 2014 request, read the request and, on February 27, 2014 informed Mr. Zhu that "[t]here are no records responsive to your request." (SOF ¶¶ 65-69, 71-72) Undisputedly, the only communication surrounding Mr. Zhu's January 13, 2014 public record request is his January 13, 2014 letter, ESD 171's January 22, 2014 letter seeking an extension, and ESD 171's February 27, 2014 letter. (SOF ¶¶ 65, 69, 71) Undisputedly, ESD 171's February 27, 2014 response to Mr. Zhu's Public Record Request does not, although required under *Neighborhood Alliance*, explain the locations searched and adequacy of the search it made for the records Mr. Zhu requested. (SOF ¶71-72) In fact, at her April 19, 2016, deposition, Ms. Reister still refused to describe the process that ESD 171 went through in determining that no records were responsive to Mr. Zhu's January 13, 2014 public record request even though *Neighborhood Alliance* mandated that ESD 171 should have informed Mr. Zhu about the places it searched when it gave Mr. Zhu its final response to the public record request on February 27, 2014. See Neighborhood Alliance, at 722-724. (SOF)

¶ 78) And, undisputedly, ESD 171 never sought clarification from Mr. Zhu as to what he meant by "programs" even though ESD 171 was "confused" by Mr. Zhu's use of the word "programs" and *Neighborhood Alliance* required ESD 171 to seek such a clarification. (SOF ¶¶ 75-76) For it was not until Mr. Zhu filed this lawsuit and deposed Ms. Reister (the person who responded to Mr. Zhu's January 13, 2014 public record request) that Mr. Zhu learned that ESD 171 was "confused" by his request. (SOF ¶75)

ESD 171's search for documents responsive to Mr. Zhu's January 13, 2014, public record request was also inadequate. Ms. Reister knew what the phrase "public record" meant, knew that Mr. Zhu's January 13, 2014 request was one for public records, acknowledged that ESD 171 possessed written documents relating to employment of minorities at ESD 171, knew that ESD 171 possessed affirmative action policies and procedures, personally accessed those documents numerous times, and knew where those documents were physically located. (SOF ¶ 81 – 84) Ms. Reister had extensive ongoing training regarding the Public Record Act. (SOF ¶ 84) Yet, it was not until Mr. Zhu filed this lawsuit and propounded Request for Production No. 14 to ESD 171 that ESD 171's affirmative action policies and procedures were produced. (SOF ¶ 87; ECF No. 017-1, pg. 6, 9, 15-18 *citing* Plaintiff Request for Production No. 14)

The inadequacy of ESD 171's search in response to Mr. Zhu's January 13, MOTION FOR PARTIAL SUMMARY JUDGMENT - 9

2014, public record request is further illustrated by ESD 171's conduct in this lawsuit. For the same ESD 171 employee (Ms. Reister) who professed confusion about Mr. Zhu's use of the word "programs" in the January 13, 2014 request was the same ESD 171 employee who produced the agency's affirmative action policy and procedure in response to Plaintiff Request for Production No. 14<sup>2</sup> even though neither RFP 14 (and the January 13, 2014 request) used the words "affirmative action." (SOF ¶87) Unquestionably, Ms. Reister had the training, wherewithal, and ability to locate the affirmative action documents in 2014 yet chose not to do so.

Although not material to the liability aspect of this motion (but highly relevant to the issue of damages), the reason why ESD 171 silently withheld its affirmative action policies and procedures from Mr. Zhu in 2014 (all while misleadingly telling Ms. Zhu that such agencies were "not required to have affirmative action

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> RFP No. 14 sought each "policy, practice or procedure that relates to or is associated with discrimination, equal opportunity and/or retaliation that was in effect during January 1st, 2012 to May 1st, 2013." (ECF No. 017-1, pg. 9)

programs"<sup>3</sup>) was because ESD 171 has *never* complied with *any* of the salient parts of those affirmative action policies or procedures and did not want to alert Mr. Zhu, a qualified minority applicant who unsuccessfully sought employment with ESD 171, to the existence of such policies. (SOF ¶72, 88-94)

Accordingly, as a matter of law summary judgment adjudication of Mr. Zhu's Public Record Act claim is appropriate as to the issue of liability.

# C. DEFENDANT'S "FIRST COME FIRST SERVED" HIRING PRACTICE DISPARATELY IMPACTS QUALIFIED MINORITY APPLICANTS.

A plaintiff alleging a WLAD disparate impact claim must establish "that (1) a facially neutral employment practice (2) falls more harshly on a protected class." *Kumar v. Gate Gourmet Inc.*, 180 Wn.2d 481, 503 (2014). WPI 330.02 & WPI 330.03. When "the plaintiff establishes the prima facie case, the burden shifts to the defendant to show that the challenged requirement has a 'manifest relationship' to the position in question." *Shannon v. Pay 'N Save Corp.*, 104 Wn.2d 722, 727 (1985) *abrogated on other grounds by Blair v. Wash. State Univ.*, 108 Wn.2d 558 (1987).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> An agency's dishonesty in responding to a public record request is an aggravating factor in determining PRA damages. *See Zink v. City of Mesa*, 162 Wn. App. 688, 703 (2011).

If the employer meets this burden, "the plaintiff may still prevail by showing that other less discriminatory alternatives can equally serve the employer's legitimate business requirements." *Id*.

Washington courts look to federal court decisions when interpreting the WLAD. *Grimwood v. Univ. of Puget Sound, Inc.*, 110 Wn.2d 355, 361 (1988). To that end, federal disparate impact cases hold that a party seeking to establish disparate impact discrimination "need only demonstrate the lack of objective criteria and a disparity in job promotions." *Hung Ping Wang v. Hoffman*, 694 F.2d 1146, 1148 (9th Cir. 1982). Upon meeting that burden the defendant must either (a) prove "that the plaintiff's statistics are inaccurate and no disparity exists;" or, (b) "that the practice is necessary to the efficient operation of the business." *Id.* (citations omitted). Further, a plaintiff seeking to establish a disparate impact claim need not prove "he would have been the most qualified individual<sup>4</sup> for the jobs nor must he prove discriminatory intent on the part of the" defendant. *Id.* (citations omitted).

# 1. Plaintiff meets his WLAD disparate impact burden of proof.

Regarding WLAD disparate impact element (1), the <u>facially neutral</u> <u>employment practice</u> at issue in this case is ESD 171's "first come first served"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Although it is not Mr. Zhu's burden, ESD 171's records show that Mr. Zhu and Ms. Swider were equally qualified for the Refurbishment job. (SOF ¶ 37)

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hiring practice as it relates to applicants for temporary employment with ESD 171. (SOF ¶¶ 38, 40) ESD 171's "first come first served" practice allows the first person who submits an application for a job opening to go through the entire position selection process regardless of whether that person submitted a complete application. (SOF ¶56) ESD 171's "first come first served" practice further favors individuals who previously worked at ESD 171. (SOF ¶¶57-58, 61)

Regarding WLAD disparate impact element (2), the "first come first served" practice's effect falling on minorities (here Mr. Zhu the Chinese- American applicant for the Regional Science Refurbishment Assistant position) is established as follows. First, four individuals applied for the 2013 Regional Science Refurbishment Assistant position: Mr. Zhu (Chinese) and three other (white) applicants. (SOF ¶¶13, 19, 21, 23, 25, 28) Although Mr. Zhu was the only applicant (of the four) who submitted a complete application that included his cover letter, resume, and letters of recommendation he was not selected for the job nor given the opportunity to go through the selection process ESD 171 afforded Ms. Swider (the successful candidate). (SOF ¶¶ 20, 22, 24, 28, 38) Second, ESD 171's "ethnicity report" (which includes Swider and Celeste Beatty – the white female who replaced Mr. Zhu after Swider quit the Refurbishment job) reflects that nearly 92% of ESD 171's employees who identified themselves by their race, are white and none are Chinese. (SOF ¶¶ 63, 64) Third, the only time ESD 171 has ever used the "first come first served"

practice is when Mr. Zhu applied for the Regional Science Refurbishment position. (SOF ¶51) Unquestionably, application of the "first come first served" policy vis-àvis the Refurbishment job resulted in Mr. Zhu, a minority, not getting the opportunity to fully compete for that job.

### 2. Defendant cannot meet its WLAD disparate impact burden of proof.

Having proved a prima facie disparate impact claim the burden shifts to ESD 171 to prove (a) that plaintiff's statistics are inaccurate and no disparity exists; (b) that the "first come first served" practice is necessary to the efficient operation of its business; and (c) the "first come first served" practice is a professionally accepted means that measures the ability to perform the fundamental requirements of the job. *Hung Ping Wang*, 694 F.2d at 1148; WPI 330.03.

ESD 171 cannot claim that Mr. Zhu's statistics are inaccurate because ESD 171 produced the documents upon which Mr. Zhu bases his claim. (SOF ¶¶63-64) Further, ESD 171 cannot establish that no disparity exits as Mr. Zhu was the sole Chinese applicant for the Regional Science Refurbishment Assistant position but did not get the job (or opportunity to compete for the job by going through the same process afforded the successful white candidate). Nor can ESD 171 claim that "workload", "someone need[ing] to go on emergency leave, someone [getting] injured overnight in a car accident, [or] someone giving birth today" justify use of the "first come first served" practice. (SOF ¶ 43) Because the Regional Science

Refurbishment Assistant position opened on March 28, 2013, and Ms. Swider was not hired until after April 16, 2013, and also was not paid for her work on the Regional Science Refurbishment Assistant position until sometime after May 31, 2013, ESD 171 cannot credibly justify the "first come first serve" application because of "workload" or "emergency" reasons. (SOF ¶¶ 13, 33, 35) Additionally, ESD 171 admits (a) that the "first come first served" practice fails to measure whether all applicants for the job are able to do the job; (b) that it has done no research to determine whether the "first come first served" practice complies with equal opportunity; (c) that it is aware of no other organization that uses a "first come first served" practice; and (d) that the "first come first served" practice is not a professionally accepted practice vis-à-vis hiring permanent employees. (SOF ¶44, 45, 46, 48)

3. Even if Defendant meets it burden of proof Plaintiff still prevails because ESD 171 admits that alternatives to the "first come first served" practice exist.

Assuming arguendo that ESD 171 can establish its "workload" or "emergency" is needed for the "efficient operation" of the entity, Mr. Zhu still prevails because he can prove "other less discriminatory alternatives can equally serve the employer's legitimate business requirements." Shannon, 104 Wn. 2d at 727; WPI 330.03. Here ESD 171 admits that at least two alternatives exist to the "first come first served" practice, including the alternative of allowing more than

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one applicant to go through the entire position selection process. (SOF ¶ 47) Allowing the alternative of more than one applicant going through the entire hiring process would "not have as harsh an impact" on minority applicants especially given:

- ESD 171's admission that the "first come first served" practice might limit the opportunities of other qualified applicants to get the job. (SOF 941)
- ESD 171 has no written policy that sets out the criteria by which some qualified candidates may compete for job openings. (SOF 950, 55
- ESD 171 would not substantively answer the question of whether allowing an individual who does not submit a complete job application (as allowed under the "first come first served" practice given Swider's hiring) comports with its own EEO policy. (SOF ¶52)
- ESD 171 would prefer a candidate who submitted an incomplete application over a candidate who submitted a complete application if the "background" of the applicant (here Mr. Zhu) who did submit a complete application "wasn't satisfactory." (SOF ¶53) Indeed, "[u]se of subjective job criteria . . . . has, in many instances, a disparate impact on minorities." Nanty v. Barrows Co., 660 F.2d 1327, 1334 (9th Cir. 1981) overruled on other grounds by O'Day v. McDonnell Douglas Helicopter Co., 79 F.3d 756 (9th Cir. 1996).
- ESD 171's unwritten practice allows former ESD 171 employees preferential treatment (i.e. Swider and Beatty) but fails to maintain any mechanism that controls its unwritten preferential practice. (SOF ¶57)

ESD 171 represents itself as an "equal opportunity employer", but its "first come first served" hiring practice does not give applicants an equal opportunity to compete for job openings and had an adverse impact on Mr. Zhu, a qualified Chinese applicant who, unlike the white candidate who got the job, actually submitted a complete job application. Summary judgment adjudication regarding the liability aspect of Mr. Zhu's WLAD disparate impact claim is proper with the issue of damages being left for trial.

#### III. CONCLUSION

Mr. Zhu's motion should be granted.

DATED this May 12, 2016.

s/ Matt Crotty

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### **CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE**

I certify that on May 12, 2016 I electronically filed the foregoing with the Clerk of the Court using the CM/ECF system, which will send notification of such filing to those attorneys of record registered on the CM/ECF system. All other parties, if any, shall be served in accordance with the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure.

Dated this May 12, 2016.

/s Matthew Crotty

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