Instructions For Claims Under the Family and Medical Leave Act*

Numbering of FMLA Instructions

* These instructions and associated commentary address the Family & Medical Leave Act as amended through 2019. In 2020, as part of the federal response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Congress passed the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, 116 P.L. 127, 2020 Enacted H.R. 6201, 116 Enacted H.R. 6201, 134 Stat. 178, which included the Emergency Family and Medical Leave Expansion Act as well as the Emergency Paid Sick Leave Act. Since the Emergency FMLA, effective from April 1, 2020 until December 31, 2020, departs in significant respects from the "permanent" FMLA, these instructions do not purport to apply to claims under that statute.

10.4.4 Liquidated Damages

10.4.5 Nominal Damages

10.0 FMLA Introductory Instruction

Model

In this case the Plaintiff _____ has made a claim under the Family and Medical Leave Act, a Federal statute that prohibits an employer from interfering with or discriminating against an employee's exercise of the right granted in the Act to a period of unpaid leave [because of a serious health condition] [where necessary to care for a family member with a serious health condition] [because of the birth of a son or daughter] [because of the placement of a son or daughter with the employee for adoption or foster care].

Specifically, [plaintiff] claims that [describe plaintiff's claim of interference, discrimination, retaliation].

[Defendant] denies [describe defenses]. Further, [defendant] asserts that [describe any affirmative defenses].

I will now instruct you more fully on the issues that you must address in this case.

Comment

Referring to the parties by their names, rather than solely as "Plaintiff" and "Defendant," can improve jurors' comprehension. In these instructions, bracketed references to "[plaintiff]" or "[defendant]" indicate places where the name of the party should be inserted.

The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993, 29 U.S.C. § 2601, et seq., ("FMLA") was enacted to provide leave for workers whose personal or medical circumstances require that they take time off from work in excess of what their employers are willing or able to provide. *Victorelli v. Shadyside Hosp*., 128 F.3d 184, 186 (3d Cir. 1997) (citing 29 C.F.R. § 825.101). The Act is intended "to balance the demands of the workplace with the needs of families . . . by establishing a minimum labor standard for leave" that lets employees "take reasonable leave for medical reasons, for the birth or adoption of a child, and for the care of a child, spouse or parent who has a serious health condition." *Churchill v. Star Enters.*, 183 F.3d 184, 192 (3d Cir. 1999) (quoting 29 U.S.C. § 2601(b)(1), (2)).

The FMLA guarantees eligible employees 12 weeks of leave in a 1-year period following certain events: a serious medical condition; a family member's serious illness; the arrival of a new son or daughter; or certain exigencies arising out of a family member's service in the armed forces. 29 U.S.C. § 2612(a)(1). During the 12 week leave period, the employer must maintain the employee's group health coverage. § 2614(c)(1). Leave must be granted, when "medically necessary," on an intermittent or part-time basis. § 2612(b)(1). Upon the employee's timely return,

the employer must reinstate the employee to his or her former position or an equivalent, § 2614(a)(1), so long as the employee is able to perform the essential functions of that position.[1] The Act makes it unlawful for an employer to "interfere with, restrain, or deny the exercise of" these rights, § 2615(a)(1); to "discharge or in any other manner discriminate against any individual for opposing any practice made unlawful by [the FMLA]," § 2615(a)(2); and to retaliate against those who file charges, give information, or testify in any inquiry related to an assertion of rights under the Act, § 2615(b).[2] Violators are subject to payment of certain monetary damages and appropriate equitable relief, § 2617(a)(1). The Act provides for liquidated (double) damages where wages or benefits have been denied in violation of the Act, unless the defendant proves to the court that the violation was in good faith.

Special Provisions Concerning Servicemembers

The 2008 amendments to the FMLA added provisions concerning leave relating to service in the armed forces. *See* Pub. L. No. 110-181, Div. A, Title V, § 585, Jan. 28, 2008, 122 Stat. 129. As further amended in 2009,[3] Section 2612(a)'s list of leave entitlements includes leave "[b]ecause of any qualifying exigency (as the Secretary shall, by regulation, determine) arising out of the fact that the spouse, or a son, daughter, or parent of the employee is on covered active duty (or has been notified of an impending call or order to covered active duty) in the Armed Forces." 29 U.S.C. § 2612(a)(1)(E). The 2008 amendments also created an entitlement to servicemember family leave: "Subject to section 2613 of this title, an eligible employee who is the spouse, son, daughter, parent, or next of kin of a covered servicemember shall be entitled to a total of 26 workweeks of leave

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[1] "The FMLA does not require 'an employer to provide a reasonable accommodation to an employee to facilitate his return to the same or equivalent position at the conclusion of his medical leave.'" *Macfarlan v. Ivy Hill SNF, LLC*, 675 F.3d 266, 271 (3d Cir. 2012) (quoting *Rinehimer v. Cemcolift, Inc.*, 292 F.3d 375, 384 (3d Cir. 2002)). Thus, a plaintiff asserting a violation of Section 2614(a)(1) must "establish not only that he was not returned to an equivalent position but also that he was able to perform the essential functions of that position." *Rinehimer*, 292 F.3d at 384. *See also Budhun v. Reading Hosp. & Med. Ctr*., 765 F.3d 245, 249, 254 (3d Cir. 2014) (holding that a reasonable jury could find that the plaintiff was able to perform the essential function of typing despite using only seven digits, where plaintiff's doctor placed no restrictions on her (other than use of a splint), where plaintiff had previously completed her work in a fraction of the required time, and where her co-worker used the "hunt and peck" method for typing); 29 C.F.R. § 825.216(c) ("If the employee is unable to perform an essential function of the position because of a physical or mental condition … the employee has no right to restoration to another position under the FMLA. The employer's obligations may, however, be governed by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), as amended. *See* § 825.702 ….").

[2] As of spring 2016, 29 C.F.R. § 825.220(c) states: "The Act's prohibition against interference prohibits an employer from discriminating or retaliating against an employee or prospective employee for having exercised or attempted to exercise FMLA rights."

[3] *See* the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010, Pub. L. No. 111-84, October 28, 2009, 123 Stat 2190.

during a 12-month period to care for the servicemember. The leave described in this paragraph shall only be available during a single 12-month period." *Id.* § 2612(a)(3). And the amendments added a combined leave total where leave is taken under both subsection (a)(1) and subsection (a)(3): "During the single 12-month period described in paragraph (3), an eligible employee shall be entitled to a combined total of 26 workweeks of leave under paragraphs (1) and (3). Nothing in this paragraph shall be construed to limit the availability of leave under paragraph (1) during any other 12-month period." *Id.* § 2612(a)(4).

These Instructions and Comments were drafted prior to the adoption of the 2008 amendments. The Committee has attempted to indicate places where the amendments provide a different framework for service-related leaves. When litigating cases involving service-related leaves, practitioners should review with care the FMLA's provisions so as to note the special FMLA provisions relating to such leaves.

Employers Covered by the FMLA[4]

A covered employer under the Act is one engaged in commerce or in an industry affecting commerce who employs 50 or more employees for each working day during each of 20 or more calendar workweeks in the current or preceding calendar year. 29 U.S.C. § 2611(4)(A)(i); 29 C.F.R. § 825.104(a).

29 U.S.C. § 2611(4)(A)(iii) provides that the term "employer" "includes any 'public agency', as defined in section 203(x) of this title." 29 U.S.C. § 203(x) defines "public agency" to include, inter alia, state and local governments. *Nevada Department of Human Resources v. Hibbs*, 538 U.S. 721 (2003), upheld Congress's power (under Section 5 of the Fourteenth Amendment) to abrogate state immunity from suit for claims arising from the FMLA provision entitling covered employees to take unpaid leave "[i]n order to care for the spouse, or a son, daughter, or parent, of the employee, if such spouse, son, daughter, or parent has a serious health condition," 29 U.S.C. § 2612(a)(1)(C). But in *Coleman v. Court of Appeals of Maryland*, 566 U.S. 30 (2012), five Justices voted to strike down Congress's attempt to abrogate state immunity from suit for claims arising from Section 2612(a)(1)(D), which provides for unpaid leave when the employee himself or herself has "a serious health condition." *See id.* at 1338 (plurality opinion); *id.* at 1338-39 (Scalia, J., concurring in the judgment).

29 U.S.C. § 2611(4)(A)(ii)(I) provides that the term "employer" encompasses "any person who acts, directly or indirectly, in the interest of an employer to any of the employees of such employer." The Court of Appeals has held that this provision grounds individual liability for supervisors acting on behalf of covered employers: "[A]n individual is subject to FMLA liability when he or she exercises 'supervisory authority over the complaining employee and was responsible in whole or part for the alleged violation' while acting in the employer's interest."

[4] Much of the following analysis of the FMLA is adapted from the Comment to the Eighth Circuit Jury Instructions on FMLA claims, Instruction 5.80.

Haybarger v. Lawrence Cnty. Adult Prob. & Parole, 667 F.3d 408, 417 (3d Cir. 2012) (quoting *Riordan v. Kempiners*, 831 F.2d 690, 694 (7th Cir. 1987)). The *Haybarger* court held that this liability extends to supervisors in public agencies. *See id*. at 410, 415.

Employees Eligible for Leave

Not all employees are entitled to leave under the FMLA. Before an employee can take leave under the Act, the following eligibility requirements must be met: he or she must have been employed by the employer for at least 12 months and must have worked at least 1,250 hours during the previous 12-month period. 29 U.S.C. § 2611(2)(A). *See Erdman v. Nationwide Ins. Co.*, 582 F.3d 500, 504-06 (3d Cir. 2009) (discussing how to calculate the number of hours worked during the relevant period). Spouses who are both eligible for FMLA leave and are employed by the same covered employer may be limited by the employer to a combined total of 12 weeks of leave during any 12-month period if the leave is taken 1) for the birth of the employee's son or daughter or to care for that newborn; 2) for placement of a son or daughter for adoption or foster care, or to care for the child after placement; or 3) to care for the employee's parent. 29 C.F.R. § 825.120(a)(3). 29 U.S.C. § 2612(f)(2) sets special provisions concerning servicemember family leaves taken by spouses employed by the same employer.

Family Members Contemplated by the FMLA

Employees are also eligible for leave when certain family members – his or her spouse, son, daughter, or parent – have serious health conditions. The FMLA defines "spouse" as "a husband or wife, as the case may be." 29 U.S.C. § 2611(13). As of spring 2016, the relevant DOL regulation provides:

> For purposes of this definition, husband or wife refers to the other person with whom an individual entered into marriage as defined or recognized under state law for purposes of marriage in the State in which the marriage was entered into or, in the case of a marriage entered into outside of any State, if the marriage is valid in the place where entered into and could have been entered into in at least one State. This definition includes an individual in a same-sex or common law marriage that either:
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> > (1) Was entered into in a State that recognizes such marriages; or
> >
> > (2) If entered into outside of any State, is valid in the place where entered into and could have been entered into in at least one State.

29 C.F.R. § 825.122(b).

Under the FMLA, a son or daughter means a biological, adopted or foster child, a stepchild, a legal ward, or a child of a person standing in loco parentis, who is either under age 18, or who is age 18 or older but is incapable of self-care because of a mental or physical disability. 29 U.S.C.

§ 2611(12); 29 C.F.R. § 825.122(d). Persons with "in loco parentis" status under the FMLA include those who had day-to-day responsibility to care for and financially support the employee when the employee was a child. 29 C.F.R. § 825.122(d)(3). "Incapable of self-care" means that the individual requires active assistance or supervision to provide daily self-care in three or more of the activities of daily living or instrumental activities of daily living. 29 C.F.R. § 825.122(d)(1). "Activities of daily living" include adaptive activities such as caring appropriately for one's grooming and hygiene, bathing, dressing and eating. *Id*. "Instrumental activities of daily living" include cooking, cleaning, shopping, taking public transportation, paying bills, maintaining a residence, using telephones and directories, using a post office, etc. *Id*. "Physical or mental disability" means a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of an individual. 29 C.F.R. § 825.122(d)(2). These terms are defined in the same manner as they are under the Americans with Disabilities Act. *Id*.

"Parent" means "the biological parent of an employee or an individual who stood in loco parentis to an employee when the employee was a son or daughter." 29 U.S.C. § 2611(7). As the regulations further explain, "[p]arent means a biological, adoptive, step or foster father or mother, or any other individual who stood in loco parentis to the employee when the employee was a son or daughter as defined in paragraph (d) of this section. This term does not include parents 'in law.' " 29 C.F.R. § 825.122(c).

Leave for Birth, Adoption or Foster Care

The FMLA permits an employee to take leave because of the birth of the employee's son or daughter and to care for the child, and/or because of the placement of a son or daughter with the employee for adoption or foster care. 29 U.S.C. § 2612(a); 29 C.F.R. § 825.100(a). The right to take leave under the FMLA applies equally to male and female employees. A father as well as a mother can take family leave for the birth, placement for adoption, or foster care of a child. 29 C.F.R. § 825.112(b). Circumstances may require that the FMLA leave begin before the actual date of the birth of a child or the actual placement for adoption of a child. For example, an expectant mother may need to be absent from work for prenatal care, or her condition may make her unable to work. 29 C.F.R. § 825.120(a).

For methods of determining the amount of leave, see 29 C.F.R. § 825.200.

What Constitutes a "Serious Health Condition?"

The FMLA constitutes remedial legislation that must be construed broadly, including the term "serious health condition." *See Bonkowski v. Oberg Industries, Inc.*, 787 F.3d 190 (3d Cir. 2015) (quoting *Stekloff v. St. John's Mercy Health Systems*, 218 F.3d 858, 862 (8th Cir. 2000)). For discussion of this term, see Instruction and Comment 10.2.1.

Certification of Medical Leave

The FMLA does not require an employee, in the first instance, to provide a medical certification justifying a leave for a serious health condition. But it does allow the employer to demand such a certification. The basic framework for such certifications is set by statute. *See* 29 U.S.C. § 2613(a) (authorizing employer to require that employee provide certification in support of leave request); *id*. § 2613(b) (describing contents that render a certification sufficient); *id*. § 2613(c) (authorizing employer to require a second opinion under certain circumstances); *id*. § 2613(d) (providing for "[r]esolution of conflicting opinions"); *id*. § 2613(e) (authorizing employer to "require . . . subsequent recertifications on a reasonable basis"); *id*. § 2613(f) (addressing certifications relating to service in the Armed Forces). As of spring 2016, the regulations fleshing out the certification mechanism can be found at 29 C.F.R. §§ 825.305 – 825.313. "If the employer determines that a certification is either incomplete or insufficient, it may deny the requested leave on the basis of an inadequate certification. But it may only do so if it has 'provide[d] the employee with seven calendar days (unless not practicable under the particular circumstances despite the employee's diligent good faith efforts) to cure any such deficiency.' " *Hansler v. Lehigh Valley Hosp. Network*, 798 F.3d 149, 153 (3d Cir. 2015) (quoting 29 C.F.R. § 825.305(c)). For a discussion of the employer's right to request a medical certification that an employee can return from leave to work without medical restrictions, see *Budhun v. Reading Hosp. & Med. Ctr*., 765 F.3d 245, 252-55 & n.4 (3d Cir. 2014) (discussing medical certification); *see also* Comment 10.1.1 (discussing *Budhun*).

Certification related to active duty or call to active duty

29 U.S.C. § 2613(f) provides: "An employer may require that a request for leave under section 2612(a)(1)(E) of this title be supported by a certification issued at such time and in such manner as the Secretary may by regulation prescribe. If the Secretary issues a regulation requiring such certification, the employee shall provide, in a timely manner, a copy of such certification to the employer."

Ministerial exception

With respect to claims for wrongful termination, the First Amendment's religion clauses give rise to an affirmative defense that "bar[s] the government from interfering with the decision of a religious group to fire one of its ministers." *Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church & Sch. v. EEOC*, 565 U.S. 171, 181, 195 n.4 (2012) (foreclosing a retaliation claim under the Americans with Disabilities Act). *See also Our Lady of Guadalupe School v. Morrissey-Berru,* 140 S. Ct. 2049 (2020) (foreclosing discrimination claims under the Age Discrimination in Employment Act and ADA). There is little doubt that the exception applies to other federal and state antidiscrimination statutes regardless of whether the adverse action is based on religious or secular concerns.

However, neither *Hosanna-Tabor* nor *Our Lady of Guadalupe* involved claims relating to terms and conditions of employment as opposed to the selection and retention of "ministers." Thus, the application of those decisions to the FMLA is unclear. *See also Petruska v. Gannon Univ.*, 462

F.3d 294, 308 n.11 (3d Cir. 2006) (noting that the Court was not deciding whether the ministerial exception would bar claims for hostile work environment sexual harassment). For further discussion of the ministerial exception, see Comment 5.0.

Potential overlap between ADA reasonable-accommodation claims and FMLA claims

Regulations and caselaw recognize the possibility that the same facts might (in certain circumstances) ground both a reasonable-accommodation claim under the Americans With Disabilities Act and a claim under Family and Medical Leave Act. "If an employee is a qualified individual with a disability within the meaning of the ADA, the employer must make reasonable accommodations, etc., barring undue hardship, in accordance with the ADA. At the same time, the employer must afford an employee his or her FMLA rights. ADA's 'disability' and FMLA's 'serious health condition' are different concepts, and must be analyzed separately." 29 C.F.R. § 825.702(b). "[A] request for FMLA leave may qualify, under certain circumstances, as a request for a reasonable accommodation under the ADA." *Capps v. Mondelez Glob., LLC*, 847 F.3d 144, 156-57 (3d Cir. 2017) (upholding grant of summary judgment to defendant because, "even assuming, *arguendo*, that Capps' requests for intermittent FMLA leave constituted requests for a reasonable accommodation under the ADA as well, Mondelez continued to approve Capps' requested leave, and indeed, Capps took the requested leave," with the result that "Capps received the accommodation he asked for").

10.1.1 Elements of an FMLA Claim— Interference With Right to Take Leave Model

[Plaintiff] claims that [defendant] interfered with [his/her] right to take unpaid leave from work under the Family and Medical Leave Act.

To prevail on this claim, [plaintiff] must prove all of the following by a preponderance of the evidence:

First: [Plaintiff] [or a family member as defined by the Act] had a [specify condition].[5]

Second: This condition was a "serious health condition," defined in the statute as an illness, injury, impairment or physical or mental condition that involves either 1) inpatient care in a hospital or other care facility, or 2) continuing treatment by a health care provider.[6]

Third: [Plaintiff] gave appropriate notice of [his/her] need to be absent from work. "Appropriate notice" was given where,

> [if [plaintiff] could foresee the need for leave, [he/she] notified [defendant] at least 30 days before the leave was to begin][7]
>
> [if [plaintiff] could not foresee the need for leave, [plaintiff] notified the defendant as soon as practicable after [he/she] learned of the need for leave].

[Plaintiff] was required to timely notify [defendant] of the need for leave, but [plaintiff] was not required to specify that the leave was sought under the Family and Medical Leave Act, nor was [plaintiff] required to mention that Act in the notice. Nor was

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[5] The Act also covers leave due to the birth of a son or daughter, the placement of a son or daughter with the employee for adoption or foster care, or certain exigencies arising out of a family member's service in the armed forces. If such a ground raises disputed questions of fact for the jury to decide, the instruction can be altered accordingly. For example, with respect to leave due to active duty of a family member the instruction's discussion of notice would require alteration. *See* 29 U.S.C. § 2612(e)(3).

[6] If the court wishes to give a more detailed instruction on the term "serious health condition," one is provided in 10.2.1.

[7] This language may require tailoring, because the statute specifies somewhat different treatment of the notice of foreseeable leave depending on the type of reason for the leave. *See* 29 U.S.C. § 2612(e)(1) (notice where need "is foreseeable based on an expected birth or placement"); *id.* § 2612(e)(2) (notice where need "is foreseeable based on planned medical treatment"); *id.* § 2612(e)(3) (notice where need arises from exigency caused by specified person's military service).

[plaintiff] required to provide the exact dates or duration of the leave requested. [Moreover, [plaintiff] was not required to give [defendant] a formal written request for anticipated leave. Simple verbal notice is sufficient.] The critical question for determining "appropriate notice" is whether the information given to [defendant] was sufficient to reasonably apprise it of [plaintiff's] request to take time off for a serious health condition.

Fourth: [Defendant] interfered with the exercise of [plaintiff's] right to unpaid leave. Under the statute, "interference" can be found in a number of ways, including:

[Include any of the following factors raised by the evidence]

1) terminating employment;[8]

2) refusing to allow an employee to return to his or her job, or to an equivalent position, upon return from leave;[9]

3) ordering an employee not to take leave or discouraging an employee from taking leave;[10] and

4) failing to provide an employee who gives notice of the need for a leave a written notice detailing the specific expectations and obligations of the employee and explaining any consequences of a failure to meet these obligations.

[However, interference cannot be found simply because [defendant] imposes reporting obligations for employees who are on leave. For example, an employer does not interfere with an employee's right to take leave by establishing a policy requiring all employees to call in to report their whereabouts while on leave. The Family and Medical Leave Act does not prevent employers from ensuring that employees who are on leave do not abuse their leave.]

I instruct you that you do not need to find that [defendant] intentionally interfered with [plaintiff's] right to unpaid leave. The question is not whether [defendant] acted with bad intent,

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[8] Whether termination constitutes interference under the FMLA depends on the circumstances. In *Ross v. Gilhuly*, 755 F.3d 185 (3d Cir. 2014), the Court of Appeals held that termination *after the end of FMLA leave and the employee's return to work* did not count as interference. *See Ross*, 755 F.3d at 192 ("Because Ross received all of the benefits to which he was entitled by taking leave and then being reinstated to the same position from which he left … he fails to make a prima facie showing of interference ….").

[9] If there is a dispute on whether the plaintiff was restored to an equivalent position, the court may wish to use Instruction 10.2.2 to instruct the jury more fully on what is a substantially equivalent position under the statute.

[10] Where an employee complains solely of an employer's *unsuccessful* attempt to discourage the taking of FMLA leave, it appears that no FMLA interference claim arises. See the Comment for a discussion of *Fraternal Order of Police v. City of Camden*, 842 F.3d 231, 245-46 (3d Cir. 2016).

but rather whether [plaintiff] was entitled to a leave and [defendant] interfered with the exercise of that leave.

[Affirmative Defense:

However, your verdict must be for [defendant] if [defendant] proves, by a preponderance of the evidence, that [plaintiff] would have lost [his/her] job even if [he/she] had not taken leave. For example, if [defendant] proves that [plaintiff]'s position was going to be eliminated even if [she/he] would not have been on leave, then you must find for [defendant]**].**

Comment

29 U.S.C. § 2615(a)(1) provides that "[i]t shall be unlawful for any employer to interfere with, restrain, or deny the exercise of or the attempt to exercise, any right provided under [the FMLA]." Claims brought under § 2615(a)(1) are denominated "interference" claims. A plaintiff asserting an FMLA claim must prove that "(1) he or she was an eligible employee under the FMLA; (2) the defendant was an employer subject to the FMLA's requirements; (3) the plaintiff was entitled to FMLA leave; (4) the plaintiff gave notice to the defendant of his or her intention to take FMLA leave; and (5) the plaintiff was denied benefits to which he or she was entitled under the FMLA." *Ross v. Gilhuly*, 755 F.3d 185, 191-92 (3d Cir. 2014) (quoting *Johnson v. Cmty. Coll. of Allegheny Cnty.*, 566 F. Supp. 2d 405, 446 (W.D. Pa. 2008)).[11] The first two of the elements listed in *Ross* (eligible employee~~,~~ and covered employer) are discussed in Comment 10.0.

The court in *Parker v. Hahnemann University Hospital,* 234 F. Supp. 2d 478, 483 (D.N.J. 2002), provides helpful background on the gravamen of a claim brought under § 2615(a)(1):

> The first theory of recovery under the FMLA is the entitlement, or interference, theory. It is based on the prescriptive sections of the FMLA which create substantive rights for eligible employees. Eligible employees are entitled to up to twelve weeks of unpaid leave per year because of a serious health condition, a need to care for a close family member with a serious health condition, or a birth, adoption, or placement in foster care of a child. An employee is also entitled to intermittent leave when medically necessary, 29 U.S.C. § 2612(b), and to return

[11] The Court of Appeals has also stated a two-element test for an interference claim: "an employee 'only needs to show that [1] he was entitled to benefits under the FMLA and [2] that he was denied them.'" *Budhun v. Reading Hosp. & Med. Ctr.*, 765 F.3d 245, 252 (3d Cir. 2014) (alterations in original) (quoting *Callison v. City of Phila.*, 430 F.3d 117, 119 (3d Cir. 2005)). "[T]he first four elements of [*Ross*'s] longer test largely collapse into the first element of the *Callison* formulation because in order to be entitled to benefits, an employee must be eligible for FMLA protections and leave, work for a covered employer, and provide sufficient notice." *Budhun*, 765 F.3d at 252 n.2.

> after a qualified absence to the same position or to an equivalent position, 29 U.S.C. § 2614(a)(1). . . .
>
> An employee can allege that an employer has violated the FMLA because she was denied the entitlements due her under the Act. 29 U.S.C. § 2615(a)(1). In such a case, the employee only needs to show she was entitled to benefits under the FMLA and that she was denied them. She does not need to show that the employer treated other employees more or less favorably and the employer cannot justify its action by showing that it did not intend it or it had a legitimate business reason for it. The action is not about discrimination; it is about whether the employer provided its employees the entitlements guaranteed by the FMLA.

See also Callison v. City of Philadelphia, 430 F.3d 117, 119 (3d Cir. 2005) (no showing of discrimination is required for an interference, as that claim is made if the employee shows "that he was entitled to benefits under the FMLA and that he was denied them."); *Ross*, 755 F.3d at 192 (noting that the plaintiff need not show disparate treatment; that the defendant does not avoid liability by showing a legitimate business purpose; and that the *McDonnell Douglas* burden-shifting scheme is not necessary because FMLA interference claims concern interference rather than discrimination).

Because the issue in interference claims is not discrimination but interference with an entitlement, courts have found that the plaintiff is not required to prove intentional misconduct. *See, e.g., Lichenstein v. Univ. of Pittsburgh Med. Ctr.,* 691 F.3d 294 (3d Cir. 2012).

An interference claim is predicated on the employer's denial of a statutory entitlement, but the statute does not expressly limit the ways in which interference may occur. *Cf. Muldrow v. City of St. Louis*, 144 S. Ct. 967 (2022) (Title VII suit may be brought when the plaintiff suffers some harm in a term or condition of employment). But an FMLA plaintiff must identify the benefit to which he or she is entitled under the statute and establish that the employer failed to provide that benefit or otherwise sought to discourage the use of FMLA leave. The examples listed in the Instructions are the most common benefits which may be denied or discouraged, but others are possible. In any case, the instructions should be clear as to the claimed entitlement and the employer's wrongful conduct.

Affirmative Defense Where Employee Would Have Lost the Job Even if Leave Had Not Been Taken

After taking a qualified leave, the employee is generally entitled to reinstatement in the same or a substantially equivalent job. However, this is not the case if the employee would have lost her job even if she had not taken leave. As the court put it in *Parker*, "the FMLA does not give the employee on protected leave a bumping right over employees not on leave." 234 F. Supp. at 486.

The *Parker* court considered which party had the burden of proof on whether the employee would have lost her job even if she had not taken leave. The court noted that Department of Labor regulations interpreting the FMLA place the burden of proof on the employer. 29 C.F.R. § 825.216(a)(1). The Court of Appeals appears to have adopted the approach that places the burden on the defendant to prove that the plaintiff would have lost her job even if she hadn't taken FMLA leave. *See Lichtenstein*, 691 F.3d at 312 ("UPMC … can defeat Lichtenstein's claim if it can demonstrate that Lichtenstein was terminated for reasons 'unrelated to' her exercise of rights."). Accordingly, the instruction places the burden of proof on the defendant to show that the plaintiff would have lost her job even if she had not taken leave.

The Meaning of "Interference"

"[F]iring an employee for [making] a valid request for FMLA leave may constitute interference with the employee's FMLA rights as well as retaliation against the employee." *Erdman v. Nationwide Ins. Co.*, 582 F.3d 500, 509 (3d Cir. 2009); *see also Budhun v. Reading Hosp. & Med. Ctr.*, 765 F.3d 245, 256 (3d Cir. 2014) ("[A]n employee's leave need not have been approved by his or her employer in order for an employee to invoke rights under the act because an employee can state an interference claim even if his or her leave is *never* approved." (citing 29 C.F.R. § 825.220(b))). *Compare Lichtenstein*, 691 F.3d at 312 n.25 (stating that "[i]t is not clear … that *Erdman* necessarily guarantees that plaintiffs have an automatic right to claim interference where, as here, the claim is so clearly redundant to the retaliation claim," but not deciding that question); *Ross v. Gilhuly*, 755 F.3d 185, 192 (3d Cir. 2014) (holding that termination *after the end of FMLA leave and the employee's return to work* did not count as interference); *Capps v. Mondelez Glob., LLC*, 847 F.3d 144, 156 (3d Cir. 2017) (citing *Ross* and holding that "[u]nder the specific circumstances in this case" termination after employee's return from FMLA leave did not give rise to an FMLA interference claim).

29 C.F.R. § 825.220(b) defines "interference" as including "not only refusing to authorize FMLA leave, but discouraging an employee from using such leave." The Court of Appeals has adopted the view that unsuccessful attempts to discourage leave do not constitute interference. In *Fraternal Order of Police v. City of Camden*, 842 F.3d 231, 245 (3d Cir. 2016), the plaintiff based his FMLA-interference claim on the fact that, though he was approved for (and took) FMLA leave to care for his mother, he was "warned that he was using too much leave"; "placed in the 'Chronic Sick Category' " and warned of eventual future discipline; and "visited … at home while he was on leave." *Fraternal Order of Police*, 842 F.3d at 245. The Court of Appeals, noting that the plaintiff relied both on 29 C.F.R. § 825.220(b) and on *Shtab*, rejected the plaintiff's arguments on two grounds. First, it held that the level of discouragement was insufficient to constitute interference. *See Fraternal Order of Police*, 842 F.3d at 246 ("Camden officials only visited Officer Holland once while he was on leave, and we agree that this was minimally intrusive.… Camden's actions … were not beyond the limitations the FMLA places on employers attempting to manage their workplaces…."). Second, the Court of Appeals stressed that the FMLA authorizes no remedy unless the plaintiff has been harmed by the defendant's conduct. *See id*. ("Officer

Holland does not allege he was actually denied FMLA leave. In fact, he concedes that he was able to take time off to care for his mother.").

As the preceding discussion suggests, the FMLA does not prohibit reasonable attempts by the employer to protect against abuses in taking leave. Thus, in *Callison v. City of Philadelphia,* 430 F.3d 117, 121 (3d Cir. 2005), the employer imposed a requirement on all employees taking sick leave that they "notify the appropriate authority or designee when leaving home and upon return" during working hours. The plaintiff argued that the call-in requirement constituted interference with his FMLA leave, which he interpreted as a right to be "left alone." *Id.* But the court disagreed, stating that the FMLA does not prevent employers "from ensuring that employees who are on leave from work do not abuse their leave." *Id.* Bracketed material in the instruction is consistent with the *Callison* decision.

The Court of Appeals addressed interference with the employee's right to return to work in *Budhun v. Reading Hosp. & Med. Ctr.*, 765 F.3d 245 (3d Cir. 2014). Viewing the facts in the light most favorable to Budhun, the Court of Appeals held that Budhun invoked her right to return by stating in an August 12 email that she would return on August 16 and by attaching a doctor's note stating that she had no restrictions. *See id.* at 249, 252. The fact that the doctor's note spoke only in general terms (and did not address Budhun's ability to perform specific tasks) did not make the certification inadequate, because Budhun's employer had not included (in its individualized FMLA notice to Budhun) "a list of essential functions" for Budhun's job. *Id*. at 253. Moreover, a subsequent equivocation by the doctor (stating that Budhun should instead be off work until September 8) did not alter the analysis because that statement post-dated the employer's directive to Budhun "that she could not return to work until she had full use of all ten fingers." *Id.* (The *Budhun* court was applying 29 C.F.R. § 825.312 as it stood in 2010, *see Budhun*, 765 F.3d at 251 n.1; the version in effect as of spring 2016 is materially similar.)

Employers are permitted to consider an employee's FMLA absence when allocating performance bonuses. Thus, in *Sommer v. Vanguard Group,* 461 F.3d 397, 401 (3d Cir. 2006), the court held that the employer was not liable for interference under the FMLA when it refused to award the plaintiff a full annual bonus payment under its Partnership Plan, but instead awarded him a payment prorated on the basis of the time he was absent on FMLA leave. Parsing the FMLA regulations, the Court differentiated between a bonus program based upon "production," and a bonus plan dependent upon the absence of an occurrence–such as a bonus for no absences or no injuries. The FMLA permits employers to consider an FMLA absence in assessing productivity; it does not, however, allow an employer to deny benefits that are based on an absence of an occurrence. The *Sommer* Court found that the employer's partnership plan was a performance plan, because awards were contingent on performance of a certain number of hours per year.

Notice Requirements

Both the employee and the employer have notice obligations under the FMLA. The Court of Appeals has described the employer's notice obligations thus:

> The FMLA requires employers to provide employees with both general and individual notice about the FMLA. To meet the general notice requirements, an employer must post a notice of FMLA rights on its premises. *See* § 2619(a). Because employers have some discretion in the way FMLA policies are implemented, employers must also include information regarding the employer's FMLA policies in a handbook or similar publication. *See* 29 CFR § 825.300.
>
> In addition, regulations issued by the Department of Labor require that an employer give employees individual written notice that an absence falls under the FMLA, and is therefore governed by it. 29 CFR § 825.208; *Conoshenti v. Public Serv. Elec. & Gas Co.*, 364 F.3d 135, 142 (3d Cir. 2004) ("the regulations require employers to provide employees with individualized notice of their FMLA rights and obligations."). Thus, once an employer is on notice that an employee is taking FMLA-qualifying leave, the employer must: (1) within five business days notify the employee of his or her eligibility to take FMLA leave, 29 C.F.R. § 825.300(b)(1); (2) notify the employee in writing whether the leave will be designated as FMLA leave, 29 C.F.R. § 825.300(d)(1); (3) provide written notice detailing the employee's obligations under the FMLA and explaining any consequences for failing to meet those obligations, § 825.300(c)(1); and (4) notify the employee of the specific amount of leave that will be counted against the employee's FMLA leave entitlement, § 825.300(d)(6).

Lupyan v. Corinthian Colls. Inc., 761 F.3d 314, 318 (3d Cir. 2014).

The statute sets out the employee's notice obligations in cases where the need for leave is foreseeable. *See* 29 U.S.C. § 2612(e).[12] As of spring 2016, regulations setting out the employee's notice obligations in cases where the need is unforeseeable are codified at 29 C.F.R. § 825.303. "How the employee's notice is reasonably interpreted is generally a question of fact, not law." *Lichtenstein*, 691 F.3d at 303. The Court of Appeals emphasized in *Sarnowski v. Air Brooke Limousine, Inc.,* 510 F.3d 398, 402 (3d Cir. 2007), that the employee notice requirement is to be flexibly applied. The court observed that the notice need not be in writing, and that "employees may provide FMLA qualifying notice before knowing the exact dates or duration of the leave they will take." The *Sarnowski* court concluded that the critical question for the employee's attempt to notify is "whether the information imparted to the employer is sufficient to reasonably apprise it of the employee's request to take time off for a serious health condition." *See also Lichtenstein*, 691 F.3d at 305 ("The regulations state that if an employee's initial notice reasonably apprises the employer that FMLA may apply, it is the employer's burden to request additional information if necessary."). The Instruction contains language that is consistent with this liberal interpretation of the FMLA notice requirement.

[12] The 2008 amendments added a special provision concerning notice for leave due to active duty of a family member. *See* 29 U.S.C. § 2612(e)(3).

Consequences of Employer's Failure to Comply With the Notice Requirement

In *Ragsdale v. Wolverine World Wide, Inc*., 535 U.S. 81, 90 (2002), the Court invalidated a regulation promulgated by the Department of Labor which had provided that if the employer does not give proper notice, the employee's leave could not be counted against the 12-week FMLA period. In that case, the employee took a 30 week leave, and the employer had not given proper notice that the leave would count against her FMLA entitlement. Under the terms of the regulation, this meant that the employee would be entitled to 12 more weeks of leave after the 30 already taken. *Id.* The Court held that the regulation was beyond the Secretary of Labor's authority, because it was not sufficiently tied to the interests protected by the FMLA:

> The challenged regulation is invalid because it alters the FMLA's cause of action in a fundamental way: It relieves employees of the burden of proving any real impairment of their rights and resulting prejudice. . . . [The regulation] transformed the company's failure to give notice -- along with its refusal to grant her more than 30 weeks of leave -- into an actionable violation of § 2615. This regulatory sleight of hand also entitled Ragsdale to reinstatement and backpay, even though reinstatement could not be said to be "appropriate" in these circumstances and Ragsdale lost no compensation "by reason of" Wolverine's failure to designate her absence as FMLA leave. By mandating these results absent a showing of consequential harm, the regulation worked an end run around important limitations of the statute's remedial scheme.

Id. at 90-91.

The Court of Appeals has emphasized that the Supreme Court, while invalidating the regulation at issue in *Ragsdale*, did not question the validity of the regulations setting out the FMLA notice requirements. *Conoshenti v. Public Service Electric & Gas Co.*, 364 F.3d 135, 143 (3d Cir. 2004). The *Conoshenti* court noted that the regulations require "employers to provide employees with individualized notice of their FMLA rights and obligations" by designating leave as FMLA-qualifying, and giving notice of the designation to the employee. *Id.* at 142. Moreover, each time the employee requests leave, the employer must, within a reasonable time "provide the employee with written notice detailing the specific expectations and obligations of the employee and explaining any consequences of a failure to meet these obligations." *Id.* (quoting 29 C.F.R. § 825.301(b)(1), (c)). The plaintiff in *Conoshenti* alleged that the employer's failure to give proper notice under the regulations interfered with his ability to exercise his right to an FMLA leave. *Id.* Specifically, had he received the proper notice, he would have been able to make an informed decision about structuring his leave and would have structured it, and his plan of recovery, in such a way as to preserve the job protection afforded by the FMLA. *Id. at* 142-43. The Court of Appeals concluded that "this is a viable theory of recovery," and in doing so addressed the defendant's argument that any reliance on the notice provisions in the regulations was prohibited by *Ragsdale*. *Id.* at 143. The court stated that the *Ragsdale* Court "expressly noted that the validity of notice requirements of the regulations themselves was not before it. Accordingly, *Ragsdale* is not

dispositive of anything before us." *Id.*; *see also Lupyan*, 691 F.3d at 321, 323 (holding that employer could not rely on "mailbox rule" to obtain summary judgment based on its assertion that it mailed individual FMLA notice to plaintiff, because "evidence sufficient to nullify the presumption of receipt under the mailbox rule may consist solely of the addressee's positive denial of receipt, creating an issue of fact for the jury"; and further holding that plaintiff established a material question of fact on her interference claim by asserting "that, had she known her leave fell under the FMLA, she would have expedited her return and rejoined CCI before she exhausted her twelve weeks of leave and was effectively terminated").

However, *Ragsdale* did support the court of appeals' more recent conclusion that a prior version of 29 C.F.R. § 825.110(d) – which provided, at the relevant time, that "[i]f the employer fails to advise the employee whether the employee is eligible prior to the date the requested leave is to commence, the employee will be deemed eligible" – was invalid. *Erdman v. Nationwide Ins. Co.*, 582 F.3d 500, 506 (3d Cir. 2009). The Court of Appeals further explained that this holding was "consistent with the recent amendment to § 825.110, which removed the remedial eligibility provision in light of [*Ragsdale*'s] pronouncement that a remedial eligibility provision in 29 C.F.R. § 825.700 was invalid for similar reasons." *Id.* at 507.

Consequences of Employer's Failure to Permit Cure of Certification

> A plaintiff can state an interference claim under Section 2615(a)(1) based on the employer's failure to comply with regulations permitting the employee to cure an incomplete or insufficient medical certification:Just like employers must advise their employees of their rights under the Act, 29 C.F.R. § 825.300, they also must advise their employees of deficiencies in their medical certifications and provide them with an opportunity to cure, *id*. § 825.305(c). These modest burdens imposed on employers help ensure that employees are equipped with at least basic information about the Act's requirements and have an opportunity to exercise their rights in a meaningful way. And to encourage employer compliance, the regulations provide injured employees with a cause of action for interference. *See* 29 C.F.R. § 825.220(b) ("Any violations of the Act or of these regulations constitute interfering with, restraining, or denying the exercise of rights provided by the Act.").

Hansler v. Lehigh Valley Hosp. Network, 798 F.3d 149, 157 (3d Cir. 2015); *see also id*. at 156 ("Assuming that she can prove she was denied benefits to which she was otherwise entitled, Hansler may premise her interference claim on these alleged regulatory violations.").

10.1.2 Elements of an FMLA Claim — Discrimination — Mixed-Motive Model

[Plaintiff] claims that [he/she] was discriminated against for exercising the right to unpaid leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act. In order for [plaintiff] to recover on this discrimination claim against [defendant], [plaintiff] must prove that [defendant] intentionally discriminated against [plaintiff]. This means that [plaintiff] must prove that [his/her] taking leave was a motivating factor[13] in [defendant's] decision to [describe action] [plaintiff].

To prevail on this claim, [plaintiff] must prove all of the following by a preponderance of the evidence:

First: Plaintiff [or a family member as defined by the Act] had a [specify condition].[14]

Second: This condition was a "serious health condition," defined in the statute as an illness, injury, impairment or physical or mental condition that involves either 1) inpatient care in a hospital or other care facility, or 2) continuing treatment by a health care provider.[15]

Third: [Plaintiff] gave appropriate notice of [his/her] need to be absent from work. "Appropriate notice" was given where,

> [if [plaintiff] could foresee the need for leave, [he/she] notified [defendant] at least 30 days before the leave was to begin]
>
> [if [plaintiff] could not foresee the need for leave, [plaintiff] notified the defendant as soon as practicable after [he/she] learned of the need for leave].

[Plaintiff] was required to timely notify [defendant] of the need for leave, but [plaintiff] was not required to specify that the leave was sought under the Family and Medical Leave Act, nor was [plaintiff] required to mention that Act in the notice. Nor was [plaintiff] required to provide the exact dates or duration of the leave requested. [Moreover,

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[13] See the Comment for discussion of the choice between the phrases "motivating factor" and "negative factor."

[14] The Act also covers leave due to the birth of a son or daughter, the placement of a son or daughter with the employee for adoption or foster care, or certain exigencies arising out of a family member's service in the armed forces. If such a ground raises disputed questions of fact for the jury to decide, the instruction can be altered accordingly. For example, with respect to leave due to active duty of a family member the instruction's discussion of notice would require alteration. *See* 29 U.S.C. § 2612(e)(3).

[15] If the court wishes to give a more detailed instruction on the term "serious health condition," one is provided in 10.2.1.

[plaintiff] was not required to give [defendant] a formal written request for anticipated leave. Simple verbal notice is sufficient.] The critical question for determining "appropriate notice" is whether the information given to [defendant] was sufficient to reasonably apprise it of [plaintiff's] request to take time off for a serious health condition.

Fourth: [Plaintiff] [was not reinstated in [his/her] job upon return from leave] [was not placed in a substantially equivalent position upon [his/her] return from leave][16] [was terminated after returning from leave] [was demoted after returning from leave].[17]

Fifth: [Plaintiff's] taking leave was a motivating factor in [defendant's] decision [not to reinstate, to terminate, etc.] [plaintiff].

Although [plaintiff] must prove that [defendant] acted with the intent to discriminate, [plaintiff] is not required to prove that [defendant] acted with the particular intent to violate [plaintiff's] federal rights.

In showing that [plaintiff's] taking leave was a motivating factor for [defendant's] action, [plaintiff] is not required to prove that the leave was the sole motivation or even the primary motivation for [defendant's] decision. [Plaintiff] need only prove that [his/her] taking leave played a motivating part in [defendant's] decision even though other factors may also have motivated [defendant].

[For use where defendant sets forth a "same decision" affirmative defense:[18]

If you find in [plaintiff's] favor with respect to each of the facts that [plaintiff] must prove, you must then decide whether [defendant] has shown that [defendant] would have made the same decision with respect to [plaintiff's] employment even if there had been no motive to discriminate on the basis of [plaintiff's] having taken leave. Your verdict must be for [defendant] if [defendant] proves by a preponderance of the evidence that [defendant] would have treated [plaintiff] the same even if [plaintiff's] leave had played no role in the employment decision.**]**

Comment

[16] If there is a dispute on whether the plaintiff was restored to an equivalent position, the court may wish to use Instruction 10.2.2 to instruct the jury more fully on what is a substantially equivalent position under the statute.

[17] See Comment for a discussion of adverse employment actions under the FMLA.

[18] The Committee uses the term "affirmative defense" to refer to the burden of proof, and takes no position on the burden of pleading the same-decision defense. See the Comment for discussion of the applicability of the same-decision defense to FMLA retaliation-for-exercise claims.

The nature of claims concerning retaliation for exercise of FMLA rights

The claims treated in Instructions 10.1.2 and 10.1.3 allege "retaliation" for the exercise of the right to take unpaid leave under the FMLA. "The [FMLA's] prohibition against interference prohibits an employer from discriminating or retaliating against an employee or prospective employee for having exercised or attempted to exercise FMLA rights." 29 C.F.R. § 825.220(c).[19] Although two decisions of the Court of Appeals reference the statute itself as the basis for retaliation-for-exercise claims,[20] in five other cases the Court of Appeals has explained that it views such claims as arising under the regulation:

> [R]etaliation for taking an FMLA leave does not come within the literal scope of the sections of the FMLA directed to retaliation: § 2615(a)(2), making it unlawful to retaliate "against any individual for opposing any practice made unlawful by the [FMLA]," and § 2615(b), making it unlawful to retaliate against any individual for participating in any inquiry or proceeding related to the FMLA….
>
> The Ninth Circuit, we believe appropriately, has predicated liability in such situations on [29 C.F.R.] § 825.220(c) …, which is found in a section implementing § 2615(a) of the statute [which] makes it unlawful to interfere with, restrain or deny any FMLA right…. [T]here is no challenge here to the validity of § 825.220(c).
>
> Even though 29 C.F.R. § 825.220(c) appears to be an implementation of the "interference" provisions of the FMLA, its text unambiguously speaks in terms of "discrimination" and "retaliation," and we shall, of course, apply it in a manner consistent with that text.

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[19] The distinction between interference claims and retaliation-for-exercise claims may sometimes blur. *See Erdman v. Nationwide Ins. Co.*, 582 F.3d 500, 509 (3d Cir. 2009) (noting that "it is not clear whether firing an employee for requesting FMLA leave should be classified as interference with the employee's FMLA rights, retaliation against the employee for exercising those rights, or both," and concluding that "firing an employee for [making] a valid request for FMLA leave may constitute interference with the employee's FMLA rights as well as retaliation against the employee"); *Hansler v. Lehigh Valley Hosp. Network*, 798 F.3d 149, 158-59 (3d Cir. 2015) (reversing dismissal of complaint and reasoning that plaintiff had stated both an interference claim and a retaliation-for-exercise claim concerning the same events).

[20] In *Callison v. City of Philadelphia,* 430 F.3d 117, 119 (3d Cir. 2005), the court, in dictum, cited 29 U.S.C. §§ 2615(a)(1) and 2615(a)(2) and 29 C.F.R. § 825.220(c) as providing authority for retaliation-for-exercise claims. Further, the Court of Appeals has cited Section 2615(a)(2) as the basis for such claims, *see Lupyan v. Corinthian Colleges Inc*., 761 F.3d 314, 318 (3d Cir. 2014) (employees "can … sue under 29 U.S.C. § 2615(a)(2), if an employer retaliates against an employee for exercising her FMLA rights").

Conoshenti v. Pub. Serv. Elec. & Gas Co., 364 F.3d 135, 146 n.9 (3d Cir. 2004) (applying a prior version of the regulation). *See also Lichtenstein v. Univ. of Pittsburgh Med. Ctr.*, 691 F.3d 294, 301 (3d Cir. 2012) ("Although neither [Section 2615(a)(1) nor Section 2615(a)(2)] expressly forbids employers from terminating employees 'for having exercised or attempted to exercise FMLA rights,' a Department of Labor regulation has interpreted the sum of the two provisions as mandating this result. *See* 29 C.F.R. § 825.220(c)."); *Erdman v. Nationwide Ins. Co.*, 582 F.3d 500, 508 (3d Cir. 2009) (noting and following *Conoshenti*'s reliance on the regulation); *Budhun v. Reading Hosp. & Med. Ctr.*, 765 F.3d 245, 256 (3d Cir. 2014) ("FMLA retaliation claims are rooted in the FMLA regulations. *Erdman*, 582 F.3d at 508. They prohibit an employer from 'discriminating or retaliating against an employee or prospective employee for having exercised or attempted to exercise FMLA rights.' 29 C.F.R. § 825.220(c)."). *Compare Hansler v. Lehigh Valley Hosp. Network*, 798 F.3d 149, 158 (3d Cir. 2015) (citing both Section 2615(a)(2) and 29 C.F.R. § 825.220(c) as authority for a retaliation-for-exercise claim). Most recently, the Court of Appeals has upheld Section 825.220(c)'s creation of the retaliation-for-exercise claim as "a reasonable interpretation of § 2615(a)(1)." *Egan v. Delaware River Port Authority*, 851 F.3d 263, 271 (3d Cir. 2017). *See also id.* at 270 n.3 (describing the relationship between the "interference" and the "retaliation" provisions).

The claims treated in Instructions 10.1.2 and 10.1.3 are distinct from claims of retaliation for actions such as complaining about discrimination, testifying in discrimination proceedings, and the like, which are comparable to the retaliation claims brought under other statutes, such as Title VII. A separate instruction for these forms of retaliation, analogous to retaliation claims brought under other employment discrimination statutes, is found at 10.1.4.

Availability of a mixed-motive framework for FMLA claims

Prior to the Supreme Court's decisions in *University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center v. Nassar*, 570 U.S. 338 (2013), and *Gross v. FBL Financial Services, Inc*., 557 U.S. 167 (2009), courts had stated that FMLA discrimination/retaliation claims were subject to the basic mixed-motive/pretext delineation applied to employment discrimination claims brought under Title VII. *See generally Conoshenti v. Public Service Electric & Gas Co.,* 364 F.3d 135, 147 (3d Cir. 2004) (applying the *Price Waterhouse* framework in an FMLA discrimination case).

The court in *Miller v. Cigna Corp*., 47 F.3d 586, 597 (3d Cir. 1995) (en banc), an ADEA case, distinguished "mixed motive" instructions from "pretext" case instructions as follows:

> Only in a "mixed motives" . . . case is the plaintiff entitled to an instruction that he or she need only show that the forbidden motive played a role, i.e., was a "motivating factor." Even then, the instruction must be followed by an explanation that the defendant may escape liability by showing that the challenged action would have been taken in the absence of the forbidden motive. . . . In all other . . . disparate treatment cases, the jury should be instructed that the plaintiff may meet his or her

> burden only by showing that age played a role in the employer's decisionmaking process and that it had a determinative effect on the outcome of that process.

To the extent that *Miller* held that a mixed-motive framework is available in ADEA cases, it was overruled by *Gross v. FBL Financial Services, Inc.*, 557 U.S. 167 (2009). In *Gross*, the Supreme Court rejected the use of a mixed-motive framework for claims under the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA). *Id.* at 180. The *Gross* Court reasoned that it had never held that the *Price Waterhouse* mixed-motive framework applied to ADEA claims; that the ADEA's reference to discrimination "because of" age indicated that but-for causation is the appropriate test; and that this interpretation was bolstered by the fact that when Congress in 1991 provided the statutory mixed-motive framework codified at 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-5(g)(2)(B), that provision was not drafted so as to cover ADEA claims. *Id.* at 174.

In 2013, the Supreme Court applied similar reasoning in holding that the mixed-motive proof framework is unavailable for Title VII retaliation claims. *See Nassar*, (2013) ("Title VII retaliation claims must be proved according to traditional principles of but-for causation, not the lessened causation test stated in [42 U.S.C.] § 2000e–2(m). This requires proof that the unlawful retaliation would not have occurred in the absence of the alleged wrongful action or actions of the employer."). The *Nassar* Court reasoned that Congress legislated against a background tort principle of "but for" causation, *Nassar*, 570 U.S. at 347; that Title VII's retaliation provision uses the word "because," which is incompatible with a mixed-motive test, *id.* at 352; that Congress would have structured the statutory framework differently had it wished to encompass Title VII retaliation claims among those eligible for the statutory mixed-motive test set forth in 42 U.S.C. '§ 2000e-2(m) and 2000e-5(g)(2)(B), *id.* at 353; that policy considerations support a restrictive approach to the standards of proof for retaliation claims, *id.* at 356-358; and that the "careful balance" that Congress set in the Civil Rights Act of 1991 forecloses the use of the *Price Waterhouse* mixed-motive test for Title VII retaliation claims, *id.* at 362.

It was initially unclear what effect, if any, *Gross* and *Nassar* would have on existing precedents recognizing a mixed-motive FMLA theory. *See Lichtenstein*, 691 F.3d at 302 (noting but not deciding this question); *Capps v. Mondelez Glob., LLC*, 847 F.3d 144, 151 n.5 (3d Cir. 2017) (noting the question, citing *Lichtenstein*, and holding that the plaintiff had failed to adduce evidence sufficient to trigger a mixed-motive analysis (if such an analysis remained available)). In *Egan v. Delaware River Port Authority*, 851 F.3d 263 (3d Cir. 2017), the Court of Appeals held that FMLA retaliation-for-exercise claims are grounded in 29 C.F.R. § 825.220(c); that the regulation authorizes mixed-motive claims; and that because "§ 825.220(c) is entitled to controlling deference under Chevron, … a mixed-motive jury instruction is available for FMLA retaliation[-for-exercise] claims." *Egan*, 851 F.3d at 274. Under *Egan*, a litigant need not adduce direct evidence of discrimination in order to obtain a mixed-motive instruction in an FMLA retaliation-for-exercise case. *Id.* Rather, if a litigant requests a mixed-motive instruction, the court should "determine[] whether there [is] evidence from which a reasonable jury could conclude that the [defendant] had legitimate and illegitimate reasons for its employment decision and that [the plaintiff's] use of FMLA leave was a negative factor in the employment decision." *Id.* at 275.

As noted, the court in *Egan* partially rested its holding on deference due to the regulation under *Chevron U.S.A., Inc. v. Natural Resources Defense Council, Inc.*, 468 U.S. 837 (1984). The Supreme Court overruled *Chevron* in *Loper Bright Enterprises v. Raimondo,* 144 S.Ct. 2244 (2024). Despite this, the regulation remains in effect until it is either revoked or challenged and overruled.

"Negative factor" versus "motivating factor"

The regulation on which FMLA retaliation-for-exercise claims are founded uses the term "negative factor," in contrast to the Instruction's use of the term "motivating factor." The regulation states that "employers cannot use the taking of FMLA leave as a negative factor in employment actions, such as hiring, promotions or disciplinary actions…." 29 C.F.R. § 825.220(c). Relying on this provision, the *Egan* court also referred repeatedly to the mixed-motive theory as involving the question of whether the exercise of FMLA rights was a "negative factor." *Egan*, 851 F.3d at 272. Users may wish to consider whether to revise the Instruction to use the term "negative factor" in order to track these authorities closely. But there are at least two counter-arguments.

First, the regulation and the Instruction are structured differently. The regulation focuses generically on "employment actions," whereas Instruction 10.1.2 refers specifically to the *adverse* action taken by a particular defendant. In the context of the Instruction, saying that the exercise of FMLA rights was a *negative* factor could be confusing. Jurors might well interpret "negative" correctly – to mean, a factor that operated adversely to the plaintiff's interests – but they might instead misinterpret "negative" to mean a factor that weighed *against* the defendant's adverse employment decision. Assuming that "negative factor" (as the regulation employs that term) means "a factor weighing in favor of an adverse employment decision," the term "motivating factor" would seem to be a useful translation for purposes of the Instruction, and "negative factor" might actually cause juror confusion.

Second, there is a potential cost to using terminology that is unique to FMLA claims. The term "motivating factor" appears in the model instructions for mixed-motive claims under other statutory schemes. *See* Instruction 5.1.1 (employing the term "motivating factor" for mixed-motive Title VII claims); Instruction 7.1 (same, for mixed-motive Section 1983 equal-protection claims); Instruction 9.1.1 (same, for mixed-motive ADA claims); *see also* Instruction 7.4 (using the term "motivating factor" in instruction for Section 1983 First-Amendment-retaliation claims). It is possible that some cases will involve both mixed-motive FMLA retaliation-for-exercise claims and mixed-motive claims under another statutory scheme (such as the ADA); in such a case, using "negative factor" for one type of claim and "motivating factor" for the other type could be confusing.

Adverse Employment Action

Instruction 10.1.2's list of adverse employment actions is not exhaustive. "An 'adverse employment action' is an action that 'alters the employee's compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment, deprives him or her of employment opportunities, or adversely affects his or her status as an employee.' " *Budhun v. Reading Hosp. & Med. Ctr*., 765 F.3d 245, 257 (3d Cir. 2014) (quoting *Robinson v. City of Pittsburgh*, 120 F.3d 1286, 1300 (3d Cir. 1997)). *Cf. Muldrow v. City of St. Louis*, 144 S. Ct. 967 (2024) (considering the relationship between Title VII retaliation cases and Title VII discrimination cases in terms of the requisite showing of harm).

In terms of the harm caused by a violation, *Muldrow* deals with Title VII, which is framed in terms of prohibiting discrimination in "terms or conditions of employment." The FMLA, as construed in 29 C.F.R. § 825.220(c), prohibits discrimination for exercise of FMLA rights but does not expressly limit the ways in which such discrimination may occur. The regulation does state that "employers cannot use the taking of FMLA leave as a negative factor in employment actions, such as hiring, promotions or disciplinary actions."

"Same Decision" Affirmative Defense

Mixed-motive discrimination claims are typically subject to a "same-decision defense" – *i.e*., that the defendant would have made the same decision even absent the discriminatory motive. For Title VII mixed-motive discrimination claims, the same-decision defense limits remedies rather than providing a defense to liability. *See* Comment 5.1.1; *see also* 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-2(m) (providing that "an unlawful employment practice is established when the complaining party demonstrates that race, color, religion, sex, or national origin was a motivating factor for any employment practice, even though other factors also motivated the practice"); *id*. § 2000e-5(g)(2)(B) (limiting remedies under Section 2000e-2(m), in a case where the defendant "demonstrates that [it] would have taken the same action in the absence of the impermissible motivating factor," to declaratory relief, certain injunctive relief, and certain attorney's fees and costs). Noting that the Americans with Disabilities Act borrows enforcement and remedial provisions from Title VII, Comment 9.1.1 takes the view that the same-decision defense similarly limits remedies for mixed-motive claims under the ADA.[21] By contrast, the model instructions set out the same-decision defense as a defense to liability for mixed-motive claims under Section 1981 and Section 1983. *See* Instruction 7.1 (mixed-motive Section 1983 equal-protection claims); *see also* Instruction 7.4 (setting out same-decision defense as defense to liability for Section 1983 First-Amendment-retaliation claims). The difference arises because pre-1991 caselaw recognized the same-decision defense as a defense to liability for mixed-motive claims, *see, e.g*., *Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins*, 490 U.S. 228, 258 (1989) (plurality opinion), but Congress altered that landscape in 1991 with respect to Title VII claims. For Title VII claims, the Civil Rights Act of 1991 modified the *Price Waterhouse* framework so that the same-decision defense limits remedies

[21] Comment 9.1.1 explains: "The ADA explicitly relies on the enforcement tools and remedies described in 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-(5). *See* 42 U.S.C. § 12117(a). Therefore, a plaintiff in a 'mixed-motives' case under the ADA is not entitled to damages if the defendant proves that the adverse employment action would have been made even if disability had not been a motivating factor."

rather foreclosing liability. The model instructions reflect the view that the framework set by the 1991 amendments governs Title VII and ADA claims, but not Section 1983 equal-protection claims.

The Court of Appeals has not discussed the application of the same-decision defense to mixed-motive FMLA retaliation-for-exercise claims, and the regulation that is regarded as creating those claims (29 C.F.R. § 825.220(c)) makes no mention of the defense either. Instruction 10.1.2 reflects an assumption that the *Price Waterhouse* approach applies, so that the same-decision defense, if established, forecloses liability.

Notice Requirements

For a discussion of notice requirements pertinent to FMLA claims, see the commentary to Instruction 10.1.1.

Serious Health Condition

For a discussion of the term "serious health condition" see Instruction and Comment 10.2.1.

Animus of Employee Who Was Not the Ultimate Decisionmaker

For a discussion of the Court's treatment in *Staub v. Proctor Hosp.*, 562 U.S. 411 (2011), of the animus of an employee who was not the ultimate decisionmaker, see Comment 5.1.7. *Staub* concerned a statute that used the term "motivating factor," and it is unclear whether the ruling in *Staub* would extend to mixed-motive claims under statutes (such as the FMLA) that do not contain the same explicit statutory reference to discrimination as a "motivating factor."

10.1.3 Elements of an FMLA Claim— Discrimination —Pretext

Model

In this case [plaintiff] is alleging that [he/she] was discriminated against for exercising the right to unpaid leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act. In order for [plaintiff] to recover on this discrimination claim against [defendant], [plaintiff] must prove that [defendant] intentionally discriminated against [plaintiff]. This means that [plaintiff] must prove that [his/her] exercise of the right to take leave was a determinative factor in [defendant's] decision to [describe action] [plaintiff].

To prevail on this claim, [plaintiff] must prove all of the following by a preponderance of the evidence:

First: [Plaintiff] [or a family member as defined by the Act] had a [specify condition].[22]

Second: This condition was a "serious health condition", defined in the statute as an illness, injury, impairment or physical or mental condition that involves either 1) inpatient care in a hospital or other care facility, or 2) continuing treatment by a health care provider.[23]

Third: [Plaintiff] gave appropriate notice of [his/her] need to be absent from work. "Appropriate notice" was given where,

> [if [plaintiff] could foresee the need for leave, [he/she] notified [defendant] at least 30 days before the leave was to begin]
>
> [if [plaintiff] could not foresee the need for leave, [plaintiff] notified the defendant as soon as practicable after [he/she] learned of the need for leave].

[Plaintiff] was required to timely notify [defendant] of the need for leave, but [plaintiff] was not required to specify that the leave was sought under the Family and Medical Leave Act, nor was [plaintiff] required to mention that Act in the notice. Nor was [plaintiff] required to provide the exact dates or duration of the leave requested. [Moreover, [plaintiff] was not required to give [defendant] a formal written request for anticipated

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[22] The Act also covers leave due to the birth of a son or daughter, the placement of a son or daughter with the employee for adoption or foster care, or certain exigencies arising out of a family member's service in the armed forces. If such a ground raises disputed questions of fact for the jury to decide, the instruction can be altered accordingly. For example, with respect to leave due to active duty of a family member the instruction's discussion of notice would require alteration. *See* 29 U.S.C. § 2612(e)(3).

[23] If the court wishes to give a more detailed instruction on the term "serious health condition," one is provided in 10.2.1.

leave. Simple verbal notice is sufficient.] The critical question for determining "appropriate notice" is whether the information given to [defendant] was sufficient to reasonably apprise it of [plaintiff's] request to take time off for a serious health condition.

Fourth: [Plaintiff] [was not reinstated in [his/her] job upon return from leave] [was not placed in a substantially equivalent position upon [his/her] return from leave][24] [was terminated after returning from leave] [was demoted after returning from leave].[25]

Fifth: [Plaintiff's] taking leave was a determinative factor in [defendant's] decision to [describe adverse employment action].

Although [plaintiff] must prove that [defendant] acted with the intent to discriminate, [plaintiff] is not required to prove that [defendant] acted with the particular intent to violate [plaintiff's] federal civil rights. Moreover, [plaintiff] is not required to produce direct evidence of intent, such as statements admitting discrimination. Intentional discrimination may be inferred from the existence of other facts.

You should weigh all the evidence received in the case in deciding whether [defendant] intentionally discriminated against [plaintiff]. [For example, you have been shown statistics in this case. Statistics are one form of evidence that you may consider when deciding whether a defendant intentionally discriminated against a plaintiff. You should evaluate statistical evidence along with all the other evidence.]

[Defendant] has given a nondiscriminatory reason for its [describe defendant's action]. If you believe [defendant's] stated reason and if you find that the [adverse employment action] would have occurred because of defendant's stated reason regardless of [plaintiff's] taking leave, then you must find for [defendant]. If you disbelieve [defendant's] stated reason for its conduct, then you may, but need not, find that [plaintiff] has proved intentional discrimination. In determining whether [defendant's] stated reason for its actions was a pretext, or excuse, for discrimination, you may not question [defendant's] business judgment. You cannot find intentional discrimination simply because you disagree with the business judgment of [defendant] or believe it is harsh or unreasonable. You are not to consider [defendant's] wisdom. However, you may consider whether [plaintiff] has proven that [defendant's] reason is merely a cover-up for discrimination.

Ultimately, you must decide whether [plaintiff] has proven that [his/her] taking leave under the Family Medical Leave Act was a determinative factor in [defendant's employment decision.] "Determinative factor" means that if not for [plaintiff's] taking leave, the [adverse employment action] would not have occurred.

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[24] If there is a dispute on whether the plaintiff was restored to an equivalent position, the court may wish to use Instruction 10.2.2 to instruct the jury more fully on what is a substantially equivalent position under the statute.

[25] See Comment for a discussion of adverse employment actions under the FMLA.

Comment

In *Egan v. Delaware River Port Authority*, 851 F.3d 263 (3d Cir. 2017), the Court of Appeals held that FMLA retaliation-for-exercise claims are grounded in 29 C.F.R. § 825.220(c) and that such claims encompass both pretext and mixed-motive theories. *See Egan*, 851 F.3d at 274.

If a litigant requests a mixed-motive instruction, the court should "determine[] whether there [is] evidence from which a reasonable jury could conclude that the [defendant] had legitimate and illegitimate reasons for its employment decision and that [the plaintiff's] use of FMLA leave was a negative factor in the employment decision"; if so, a mixed-motive instruction is available. *Egan*, 851 F.3d at 275. See Instruction and Comment 10.1.2 for the mixed-motive instruction. Instruction 10.1.3 provides a pretext instruction.

In *Miller v. Cigna Corp.,* 47 F.3d 586 (3d Cir. 1995) (en banc), an ADEA case, the court discussed the proper instruction to be given in a pretext case:

> A plaintiff . . . who does not qualify for a burden shifting instruction under *Price Waterhouse* has the burden of persuading the trier of fact by a preponderance of the evidence that there is a "but-for" causal connection between the plaintiff's age and the employer's adverse action -- i.e., that age "actually played a role in [the employer's decisionmaking] process and had a determinative influence on the outcome" of that process.

Miller, 47 F.3d at 595-96 (quoting *Hazen Paper Co. v. Biggins*, 507 U.S. 604, 610 (1993)). To the extent that *Miller* contemplated the use of the *Price Waterhouse* framework for ADEA claims, it has been overruled by *Gross v. FBL Financial Services, Inc.*, 557 U.S. 167 (2009).

The Court in *Miller* reversed a verdict for the defendant because the trial judge instructed the jury that age must be the "sole cause" of the employer's decision. That standard was too stringent; instead, in a pretext case, "plaintiff must prove by a preponderance of the evidence that age played a role in the employer's decisionmaking process and that it had a determinative effect on the outcome of that process." *Miller*, 47 F.3d at 598; *see also Alifano v. Merck & Co., Inc*., 175 F. Supp. 2d 792, 794 (E.D. Pa. 2001) (applying the *McDonnell-Douglas* analysis to an FMLA claim).

If the plaintiff establishes a prima facie case of discrimination,[26] the burden shifts to the defendant to produce evidence of a legitimate nondiscriminatory reason for the challenged employment action. *St. Mary's Honor Center v. Hicks*, 509 U.S. 502, 506-07 (1993). If the defendant meets its burden of producing evidence of a nondiscriminatory reason for its action, the plaintiff must persuade the jury that the defendant's stated reason was merely a pretext for discrimination, or in some other way prove it more likely than not that discrimination motivated the employer. *Texas Dept. of Community Affairs v. Burdine,* 450 U.S. 248, 253 (1981).[27] The

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[26] *See generally Lichtenstein v. University of Pittsburgh Medical Center*, 691 F.3d 294, 302 (3d Cir. 2012) (applying the *McDonnell Douglas* burden-shifting framework to an FMLA claim and explaining that to make out a prima facie case, the plaintiff must adduce evidence "sufficient to create a genuine factual dispute about each of the three elements of her retaliation claim: (a) invocation of an FMLA right, (b) termination, and (c) causation"); *id*. at 307-09 (applying the causation prong of this test); *Budhun*, 765 F.3d at 257 (holding that a reasonable jury could find an adverse employment action when the employer gave the plaintiff's position to another employee and "told [the plaintiff] to turn in her badge and keys," even though the employer did not formally terminate her at that point); *id.* at 258 (holding that "unusually suggestive timing" could support a finding of causation where the employer "decided to replace [the plaintiff] before her FMLA leave ended" and notified the plaintiff – less than a week after her FMLA leave ended – that she had been replaced).

[27] In *Ross v. Gilhuly*, 755 F.3d 185 (3d Cir. 2014), the Court of Appeals upheld summary judgment for the defendant because the plaintiff had failed to establish pretext. Plaintiff Ross's employer had adopted a "Performance Improvement Plan" (PIP) for Ross before learning that he had cancer. *Id.* at 188-89. After learning of the cancer, the employer extended the timeline for the PIP. *See id*. at 189. Ross took FMLA leave and had surgery. *See id.* After his return, the employer extended the PIP again. *See id*. at 190. Ross then sued, asserting FMLA interference and retaliation claims. *See id.* A little more than two months later, the employer fired Ross, citing insufficient improvement and lack of "fit" for the job. *Id.* Reasoning that "customer feedback, particularly from an important customer who accounts for millions of dollars of revenue, is an obviously valid factor in evaluating performance," the Court of Appeals rejected Ross's argument that such a customer's concerns were an insufficient basis for adopting the PIP. *Id.* at 194. The Court of Appeals also rejected Ross's attempt to argue that the sequence of events showed pretext. *See id.* ("[T]he timing of the alleged retaliatory action must be unusually suggestive of retaliatory motive before a causal link will be inferred." (quoting *Williams v. Philadelphia Hous. Auth. Police Dep't*, 380 F.3d 751, 760 (3d Cir. 2004))). Here, "it was perfectly sensible for Continental to delay the timeline of the PIP to accommodate Ross's FMLA leave[, and t]he fact that Ross was placed on the original PIP based on documented performance problems well before his employer knew he was sick defeats any retaliatory inference based on timing." *Id.*

plaintiff retains the ultimate burden of proving intentional discrimination.[28] *Chipollini v. Spencer Gifts, Inc.,* 814 F.2d 893, 897 (3d Cir. 1987) (en banc) (ADEA case) ("The burden remains with the plaintiff to prove that age was a determinative factor in the defendant employer's decision. The plaintiff need not prove that age was the employer's sole or exclusive consideration, but must prove that age made a difference in the decision."). The factfinder's rejection of the employer's proffered reason allows, but does not compel, judgment for the plaintiff. *See Reeves v. Sanderson Plumbing Products, Inc.,* 530 U.S. 133, 147 (2000) ("In appropriate circumstances, the trier of fact can reasonably infer from the falsity of the explanation that the employer is dissembling to cover up a discriminatory purpose."). The employer's proffered reason can be shown to be pretextual by circumstantial as well as direct evidence. *Chipollini v. Spencer Gifts, Inc.,* 814 F.2d 893 (3d Cir. 1987) (en banc). "To discredit the employer's proffered reason . . . the plaintiff cannot simply show that the employer's decision was wrong or mistaken, since the factual dispute at issue is whether discriminatory animus motivated the employer, not whether the employer is wise, shrewd, prudent or competent." *Keller v. Orix Credit Alliance, Inc.,* 130 F.3d 1101, 1109 (3d Cir. 1997). *See generally Lichtenstein v. University of Pittsburgh Medical Center*, 691 F.3d 294, 309-12 (3d Cir. 2012) (after holding that the plaintiff had made out a prima facie case and that the defendant had offered a legitimate reason for firing the plaintiff, holding that the plaintiff had adduced evidence from which a jury could find pretext); *Hansler v. Lehigh Valley Hosp. Network*, 798 F.3d 149, 159 (3d Cir. 2015) ("Hansler alleges she attempted to invoke her right to leave, she was not advised of deficiencies in her medical certification, she was not provided a cure period, and she was fired a few weeks later as a result of her leave request. Through discovery, Hansler might be able to show that Lehigh Valley had a retaliatory motive and that the stated reason for termination was pretextual.").

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[29] In *Lupyan v. Corinthian Colleges Inc.*, 761 F.3d 314 (3d Cir. 2014), the Court of Appeals vacated the grant of summary judgment to the defendant on the plaintiff's FMLA retaliation claim, holding that the plaintiff had presented evidence from which a jury could find pretext, *see id.* at 325-26. The plaintiff had been told "that she was being terminated from her position at CCI due to low student enrollment, and because she had not returned to work within the twelve weeks allotted for FMLA leave." *Id.* at 317. According to the plaintiff, "this was the first time she had any knowledge that she was on FMLA leave." *Id.* Although the Court of Appeals noted "that Lupyan's employment legally ended upon expiration of her FMLA leave," it held that "Lupyan's return outside of the twelve week window does not preclude her retaliation claim under the circumstances here." *Id.* at 324-25 ("The FMLA's protection against retaliation is not limited to periods in which an employee is on FMLA leave, but encompasses the employer's conduct both during and after the … FMLA leave." (quoting *Hunt v. Rapides Healthcare Sys., LLC*, 277 F.3d 757, 768–69 (5th Cir. 2001))). Noting record evidence that "even if a downturn in enrollment had occurred, it was highly unusual for CCI to respond by terminating Lupyan's position," that the asserted hiring freeze might not actually have existed, and that any hiring freeze would not cover a current employee, the Court of Appeals found a jury question on the issue of pretext. *See id.* at 325.

One type of legitimate nondiscriminatory reason is an employer's honest belief that the employee is misusing FMLA leave. *See Capps v. Mondelez Glob., LLC*, 847 F.3d 144 (3d Cir. 2017). In *Capps*, the employer "met its burden of demonstrating a legitimate, nondiscriminatory justification for Capps' discharge with evidence that Capps was terminated for his misuse of FMLA leave and dishonesty surrounding the leave in violation of Mondelez's policies." *Id*. at 152. To rebut that nondiscriminatory justification, it did not suffice for the plaintiff to show that the employer was mistaken in its belief; rebuttal would have required "evidence indicating that Mondelez did not honestly hold that belief." *Id*. at 155. In a case featuring this type of honest-belief defense, the court should tailor the paragraph of Instruction 10.1.3 that deals with pretext – for example, by revising that paragraph as shown here:

> ———[Defendant] has given a nondiscriminatory reason for its [describe defendant's action]. Specifically, [defendant] states that it [describe defendant's action] because it [specify defendant's honest-belief defense – e.g., "believed that [plaintiff] was misusing her FMLA leave"]. If you find that [defendant] honestly held that belief and if you find that this belief caused the [adverse employment action], then you must find for [defendant]. If you disbelieve [defendant's] stated reason for its conduct, then you may, but need not, find that [plaintiff] has proved intentional discrimination. In assessing [defendant's] explanations for its conduct, the key question is not whether [defendant] was correct in its belief, but rather whether [defendant] honestly held that belief. You cannot find intentional discrimination simply because you conclude that [defendant's] belief was incorrect. You are not to consider [defendant's] wisdom. However, you may consider whether [plaintiff] has proven that [defendant's] reason is merely a cover-up for discrimination.

Adverse Employment Action

Instruction 10.1.3's list of adverse employment actions is not exhaustive. "An 'adverse employment action' is an action that 'alters the employee's compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment, deprives him or her of employment opportunities, or adversely affects his or her status as an employee.'" *Budhun v. Reading Hosp. & Med. Ctr*., 765 F.3d 245, 257 (3d Cir. 2014) (quoting *Robinson v. City of Pittsburgh*, 120 F.3d 1286, 1300 (3d Cir. 1997)). *Cf. Muldrow v. City of St. Louis*, 144 S. Ct. 967 (2024) (considering the relationship between Title VII retaliation cases and Title VII discrimination cases in terms of the requisite showing of harm).

In terms of the harm caused by a violation, *Muldrow* deals with Title VII, which is framed in terms of prohibiting discrimination in "terms or conditions of employment." *Muldrow* 144 S. Ct. at 974. The FMLA, as construed in 29 C.F.R. § 825.220(c), prohibits employers from using "the taking of FMLA leave as a negative actor in employment actions, such as hiring promotions or disciplinary actions." 29 C.F.R. § 825.220(c). Notably, this does not expressly limit the ways in which such discrimination may occur.

Notice Requirements

For a discussion of notice requirements under the FMLA, see the commentary to Instruction 10.1.1.

Serious Health Condition

For a discussion of the term "serious health condition" see Instruction and Comment 10.2.1.

10.1.4 Elements of an FMLA Claim — Retaliation for Opposing Actions in Violation of FMLA

Model

[Plaintiff] claims that [defendant] discriminated against [him/her] because [plaintiff] opposed a practice made unlawful by the Family and Medical Leave Act.

In order to prevail on this claim, [plaintiff] must prove all of the following elements by a preponderance of the evidence:

First: [Plaintiff] [filed a complaint] [instituted a proceeding] [made an informal complaint to her employer[29]] [testified/agreed to testify in a proceeding] asserting rights under the Family and Medical Leave Act.

Second: [Plaintiff] was subjected to a materially adverse action at the time, or after, the protected conduct took place.

Third: There was a causal connection between [describe challenged activity] and [plaintiff's] [describe plaintiff's protected activity].

Concerning the first element, [plaintiff] need not prove the merits of any Family and Medical Leave Act claim, but only that [he/she] was acting under a reasonable,[30] good faith belief that [his/her] [or someone else's] rights under the Family and Medical Leave Act were violated.

Concerning the second element, the term "materially adverse" means that [plaintiff] must show [describe alleged retaliatory activity] was serious enough that it well might have discouraged a reasonable worker from [describe plaintiff's protected activity]. [The activity need not be related to the workplace or to [plaintiff's] employment.]

Concerning the third element, that of causal connection, that connection may be shown in many ways. For example, you may or may not find that there is a sufficient connection through timing, that is [defendant's] action followed shortly after [defendant] became aware of [plaintiff's] [describe activity]. Causation is, however, not necessarily ruled out by a more extended passage of time. Causation may or may not be proved by antagonism shown toward [plaintiff] or a change in demeanor toward [plaintiff].

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[29] See the Comment to this instruction for a discussion of whether informal complaints are protected activity under the Family and Medical Leave Act.

[30] See the Comment for a discussion of the allocation of responsibility for determining the reasonableness of the plaintiff's belief.

Ultimately, you must decide whether [plaintiff's] [protected activity] had a determinative effect on [describe alleged retaliatory activity]. "Determinative effect" means that if not for [plaintiff's] [protected activity], [describe alleged retaliatory activity] would not have occurred.

Comment

The FMLA establishes a cause of action for retaliation that is similar to those provided in other employment discrimination statutes. 29 U.S.C. § 2615(b) provides as follows:

> (b) *Interference with proceedings or inquiries.* It shall be unlawful for any person to discharge or in any other manner discriminate against any individual because such individual –
>
> (1) has filed any charge, or has instituted or caused to be instituted any proceeding, under or related to [the FMLA];
>
> (2) has given, or is about to give, any information in connection with any inquiry or proceeding relating to any right provided under [the FMLA]; or
>
> (3) has testified, or is about to testify, in any inquiry or proceeding relating to any right provided under [the FMLA].

Subsection (b) provides a cause of action that is separate from the type of claim treated in Instructions 10.1.2 and 10.1.3. The claims addressed in Instructions 10.1.2 and 10.1.3 are also referred to as "retaliation" claims, but those claims seek recovery for retaliation against the plaintiff for having exercised the right to unpaid leave. In contrast, the more traditional retaliation claim of subsection (b) is designed to protect those who complain about conduct that is illegal under the FMLA,[31] or who participate in proceedings seeking recovery for illegal activity under the Act. Potentially subsection (b) could protect a person who is not entitled to or never exercised the right to leave, but who complained about or participated in a proceeding to remedy the violation of the FMLA rights of another person.

Protected Activity

The literal terms of 29 U.S.C. § 2615(b) might appear to limit protected conduct to that involved in a formal proceeding — in contrast to the retaliation provisions of other acts (such as

[31] *Kasten v. Saint-Gobain Performance Plastics Corp.*, 563 U.S. 1 (2011), construed the Fair Labor Standards Act's anti-retaliation provision and held that "the statutory term 'filed any complaint' includes oral as well as written complaints within its scope." *Id.* at 4. The Court did not state whether this holding has implications for the interpretation of the phrase "filed any charge" in the FMLA's anti-retaliation provision.

Title VII and the ADEA) which protect informal activity in opposition to prohibited practices under the respective statutes, including informal complaints to an employer.

The Court of Appeals has not yet decided whether there is a cause of action for retaliation under 29 U.S.C. § 2615(b) when an employee has informally opposed an employer's action on the ground that it violates the FMLA. But case law construing similar language in the retaliation provision of the Equal Pay Act indicates that such a provision should be construed broadly so that informal complaints constitute protected activity. *See* the commentary to Instruction 11.1.2.[32] This instruction therefore includes informal complaints as protected activity. *See Sabbrese v. Lowe's Home Centers, Inc*., 320 F. Supp. 2d 311, 324 (W.D. Pa. 2004) (finding a valid retaliation claim when the plaintiff was discharged after informally complaining to the employer about being disciplined for taking leave).[33]

In accord with the retaliation instructions in other Chapters (*see*, *e.g.*, Instruction 5.1.7 concerning Title VII retaliation claims), Instruction 10.1.4 requires a "reasonable, good faith belief" that an FMLA violation occurred. The statute itself does not explicitly require reasonableness and good faith. As of spring 2026, 29 C.F.R. § 825.220(e) provided that "Individuals … are protected from retaliation for opposing (e.g., filing a complaint about) any practice which is unlawful under the Act. They are similarly protected if they oppose any practice which they reasonably believe to be a violation of the Act or regulations." Therefore, Instruction 10.1.4 directs the jury to determine both the good faith and the reasonableness of the plaintiff's belief that an FMLA violation occurred. In cases where the protected nature of the plaintiff's activity is not in dispute, this portion of the instruction can be modified and the court can simply instruct the jury that specified actions by the plaintiff constituted protected activity.

Standard for Actionable Retaliation

The Supreme Court in *Burlington N. & S.F. Ry. v. White,* 548 U.S. 53, 68 (2006), held that a cause of action for retaliation under Title VII lies whenever the employer responds to protected

[32] Moreover, it seems possible that a claim of retaliation for informal opposition might be made under 29 U.S.C. § 2615(a)(2), which provides that "[i]t shall be unlawful for any employer to discharge or in any other manner discriminate against any individual for opposing any practice made unlawful by this subchapter."

[33] *Gillispie v. RegionalCare Hosp. Partners Inc*, 892 F.3d 585 (3d Cir. 2018), which interpreted the whistleblower-protection provision in the Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor Act ("EMTALA"), might shed some indirect light on the question whether protected conduct under the FMLA's anti-retaliation provision includes communications made only to the employer and not to an outside authority. In *Gillispie*, the court ruled that the EMTALA provision does extend to purely internal reports, both because the EMTALA provision contains no reference to "official" reports and because a contrary ruling would incentivize employers to fire employees before they had an opportunity to take their report to an outside authority. *Gillispie*, 892 F.3d at 596-97.

activity in such a way "that a reasonable employee would have found the challenged action materially adverse, which in this context means it well might have dissuaded a reasonable worker from making or supporting a charge of discrimination." (citations omitted). The Court elaborated on this standard in the following passage:

> We speak of *material* adversity because we believe it is important to separate significant from trivial harms. Title VII, we have said, does not set forth "a general civility code for the American workplace." *Oncale v. Sundowner Offshore Services, Inc.,* 523 U.S. 75, 80, 118 S. Ct. 998, 140 L. Ed. 2d 201 (1998). An employee's decision to report discriminatory behavior cannot immunize that employee from those petty slights or minor annoyances that often take place at work and that all employees experience. See 1 B. Lindemann & P. Grossman, Employment Discrimination Law 669 (3d ed. 1996) (noting that "courts have held that personality conflicts at work that generate antipathy" and "'snubbing' by supervisors and co-workers" are not actionable under § 704(a)). The anti-retaliation provision seeks to prevent employer interference with "unfettered access" to Title VII's remedial mechanisms. It does so by prohibiting employer actions that are likely "to deter victims of discrimination from complaining to the EEOC," the courts, and their employers. And normally petty slights, minor annoyances, and simple lack of good manners will not create such deterrence. See 2 EEOC 1998 Manual § 8, p. 8-13.
>
> We refer to reactions of a *reasonable* employee because we believe that the provision's standard for judging harm must be objective. An objective standard is judicially administrable. It avoids the uncertainties and unfair discrepancies that can plague a judicial effort to determine a plaintiff's unusual subjective feelings. We have emphasized the need for objective standards in other Title VII contexts, and those same concerns animate our decision here. See, *e.g.*, [*Pennsylvania State Police v.*] *Suders,* 542 U.S., at 141, 124 S. Ct. 2342, 159 L. Ed. 2d 204 (constructive discharge doctrine); *Harris v. Forklift Systems, Inc.,* 510 U.S. 17, 21, 114 S. Ct. 367, 126 L. Ed. 2d 295 (1993) (hostile work environment doctrine).
>
> We phrase the standard in general terms because the significance of any given act of retaliation will often depend upon the particular circumstances. Context matters. . . . A schedule change in an employee's work schedule may make little difference to many workers, but may matter enormously to a young mother with school age children. A supervisor's refusal to invite an employee to lunch is normally trivial, a nonactionable petty slight. But to retaliate by excluding an employee from a weekly training lunch that contributes significantly to the employee's professional advancement might well deter a reasonable employee from complaining about discrimination. Hence, a legal standard that speaks in general terms rather than specific prohibited acts is preferable, for an act that would be immaterial in some situations is material in others.

> Finally, we note that . . . the standard is tied to the challenged retaliatory act, not the underlying conduct that forms the basis of the Title VII complaint. By focusing on the materiality of the challenged action and the perspective of a reasonable person in the plaintiff's position, we believe this standard will screen out trivial conduct while effectively capturing those acts that are likely to dissuade employees from complaining or assisting in complaints about discrimination.

548 U.S. at 68-70 (some citations omitted).

The anti-retaliation provision of Title VII, construed by the Court in *White*, is similar to the FMLA provisions on retaliation.[34] This instruction therefore follows the guidelines of the Supreme Court's decision in *White*.[35]

No Requirement That Retaliation Be Job-Related To Be Actionable

The Supreme Court in *Burlington N. & S.F. Ry. v. White,* 548 U.S. 53, 64 (2006), held that retaliation need not be job-related to be actionable under Title VII. In doing so, the Court rejected authority from the Court of Appeals (and others) requiring that the plaintiff suffer an adverse employment action in order to recover for retaliation. The Court distinguished Title VII's retaliation provision from its basic anti-discrimination provision, which does require an adverse employment action. The Court noted that unlike the basic anti-discrimination provision, which refers to conditions of employment, the anti-retaliation provision is broadly worded to prohibit *any* discrimination by an employer in response to protected activity.

The FMLA anti-retaliation provision is very similar to the Title VII provision construed in

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[34] Like 42 U.S.C. § 2000e–3(a), 29 U.S.C. §§ 2615(a)(2) and (b) use the term "discriminate against" and do not contain language limiting the sort of discrimination denoted by that term. *See* 42 U.S.C. § 2000e–3(a) ("It shall be an unlawful employment practice for an employer to discriminate against any of his employees or applicants for employment … because he has opposed any practice made an unlawful employment practice by this subchapter, or because he has made a charge, testified, assisted, or participated in any manner in an investigation, proceeding, or hearing under this subchapter."); 29 U.S.C. § 2615(a)(2) ("It shall be unlawful for any employer to discharge or in any other manner discriminate against any individual for opposing any practice made unlawful by this subchapter."); 29 U.S.C. § 2615(b) ("It shall be unlawful for any person to discharge or in any other manner discriminate against any individual because such individual" has engaged in specified protected activities).

[35] The Committee has not attempted to determine whether *Thompson v. North American Stainless, LP*, 562 U.S. 170 (2011) – in which the Supreme Court recognized a right of action under Title VII for certain third parties who engaged in no protected activity but were subjected to reprisals based on the protected activities of another employee – provides authority for recognition of similar third-party retaliation claims under the FMLA. For a discussion of *Thompson*, see Comment 5.1.7.

White. Moreover, it not only bars "discharge" but broadly prohibits "any other … discriminat[ion]." 29 U.S.C.A. § 2615(a)(2). Accordingly, this instruction contains bracketed material to cover a plaintiff's claim for retaliation that is not job-related. The instruction does not follow pre-*White* Court of Appeals authority which required the plaintiff in a retaliation claim to prove that she suffered an adverse employment action. *See, e.g., Nelson v. Upsala College*, 51 F.3d 383, 386 (3d Cir. 1995) (requiring the plaintiff in a retaliation case to prove among other things that "the employer took an adverse employment action against her").

It should be noted, however, that damages for emotional distress and pain and suffering are not recoverable under the FMLA. *Lloyd v. Wyoming Valley Health Care Sys*., 994 F. Supp. 288, 291 (M.D. Pa. 1998) . So, to the extent that retaliatory activity is not job-related, it is probably less likely to be compensable under the FMLA than it is under Title VII. For further discussion of *White*, see the Comment to Instruction 5.1.7.

Determinative Effect

Instruction 10.1.4 requires the plaintiff to show that the plaintiff's protected activity had a "determinative effect" on the allegedly retaliatory activity. Prior to 2013, a distinction between pretext and mixed-motive cases had on occasion been recognized as relevant for both Title VII retaliation claims and FMLA claims. For Title VII retaliation claims that proceeded on a "pretext" theory, the "determinative effect" standard applied. *See, e.g., Woodson v. Scott Paper Co.*, 109 F.3d 913, 935 (3d Cir. 1997) (holding that it was error, in a case that proceeded on a "pretext" theory, not to use the "determinative effect" language).

In 2013, the Supreme Court held that the mixed-motive proof framework is unavailable for Title VII retaliation claims. *See Univ. of Tex. Sw. Med. Ctr. v. Nassar*, 570 U.S. 338, 360 (2013) ("Title VII retaliation claims must be proved according to traditional principles of but-for causation, not the lessened causation test stated in [42 U.S.C.] § 2000e–2(m). This requires proof that the unlawful retaliation would not have occurred in the absence of the alleged wrongful action or actions of the employer."). The *Nassar* Court reasoned that Congress legislated against a background tort principle of "but for" causation, *Nassar*, 570 U.S. at 347; that Title VII's retaliation provision uses the word "because," which is incompatible with a mixed-motive test, *id.* at 352; that Congress would have structured the statutory framework differently had it wished to encompass Title VII retaliation claims among those eligible for the statutory mixed-motive test set forth in 42 U.S.C. '§ 2000e-2(m) and 2000e-5(g)(2)(B), *id.* at 353; that policy considerations support a restrictive approach to the standards of proof for retaliation claims, *id.* at 356-358; and that the "careful balance" that Congress set in the Civil Rights Act of 1991 forecloses the use of the *Price Waterhouse* mixed-motive test for Title VII retaliation claims, *id.* at 362.

10.1.4 Retaliation for Opposing Actions in Violation of FMLA

In light of *Nassar* and *Gross v. FBL Financial Services, Inc.*, 557 U.S. 167 (2009),[36] it is unclear whether a mixed-motive framework can appropriately apply to FMLA retaliation claims under Section 2615(b).[37]

Timing

On the relationship between timing and retaliation in FMLA cases, *see, e.g., Sabbrese v. Lowe's Home Centers, Inc*., 320 F. Supp. 2d 311, 324 (W.D. Pa. 2004) ("The court finds that plaintiff met the causal link requirement of his prima facie case by presenting evidence that: (1) he was terminated two weeks after he complained to store management; (2) defendant's management officials gave inconsistent explanations about who authorized his firing; and (3) plaintiff was permitted to continue working after allegedly committing a violation so severe that he could have been immediately terminated.").

[36] In *Gross*, the Supreme Court rejected the use of a mixed-motive framework for claims under the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA). The *Gross* Court reasoned that it had never held that the mixed-motive framework set by *Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins*, 490 U.S. 228 (1989), applied to ADEA claims; that the ADEA's reference to discrimination "because of" age indicated that but-for causation is the appropriate test; and that this interpretation was bolstered by the fact that when Congress in 1991 provided the statutory mixed-motive framework codified at 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-5(g)(2)(B), that provision was not drafted so as to cover ADEA claims.

[37] *Cf. DiFiore v. CSL Behring, LLC*, 879 F.3d 71, 78 (3d Cir. 2018) (holding that a mixed-motive framework is unavailable for False Claims Act retaliation claims because "the language of the FCA anti-retaliation provision uses the same 'because of' language that compelled the Supreme Court to require 'but-for' causation in *Nassar* and *Gross*").

10.2.1 FMLA Definitions — Serious Health Condition

Model

The phrase "serious health condition," as used in these instructions, means an illness, injury, impairment, or physical or mental condition that involves:

Set forth any of the following that are presented by the evidence:

[Inpatient care. Inpatient care means an overnight stay in a hospital, hospice, or residential medical care facility, including any period of incapacity (inability to work, attend school or perform other regular daily activities) due to the serious health condition, treatment therefor, or recovery therefrom, or any later treatment in connection with the inpatient care. For this purpose, "overnight stay" means a stay in a hospital, hospice, or residential medical care facility for a substantial period of time from one calendar day to the next calendar day as measured by the individual's time of admission and time of discharge];

OR

[Incapacity plus treatment, which means a period of incapacity (inability to work, attend school or perform other regular daily activities) of more than three consecutive days, and any later treatment or period of incapacity relating to the same condition, that also involves:

[Insert here the relevant requirement. See Comment for a discussion of the requirements for showing incapacity plus treatment.]];

OR

[Any period of incapacity (inability to work, attend school or perform other regular daily activities) due to pregnancy or for prenatal care];

OR

[A chronic serious health condition. [See Comment for a discussion of the requirements for showing a chronic serious health condition.]];

OR

[A period of incapacity (inability to work, attend school or perform other regular daily activities) which is permanent or long-term due to a condition for which treatment may not be effective. [[The employee or family member] must be under the continuing supervision of a health care provider, even though [the employee or family member] may not be receiving active treatment];

OR

[Any period of absence to receive multiple treatments (including any period of recovery from the treatments) by a health care provider, or by a provider of health care services under orders of, or on referral by, a health care provider, either for restorative surgery after an accident or other injury, or for a condition that would likely result in a period of incapacity (inability to work, attend school or perform other regular daily activities) of more than three consecutive calendar days in the absence of medical intervention or treatment.]

Comment

This instruction can be used if the court wishes to provide the jury with more detailed information on what constitutes a serious health condition than that set forth in Instructions 10.1.1-10.1.3. The FMLA defines "serious health condition" as "an illness, injury, impairment, or physical or mental condition that involves – (A) inpatient care in a hospital, hospice, or residential medical care facility; or (B) continuing treatment by a health care provider." 29 U.S.C. § 2611(11). As of spring 2016, the regulations elaborating this definition are 29 C.F.R. §§ 825.113 – 825.115. Although the Committee will endeavor to update this Comment to reflect subsequent changes in the regulations, readers should keep in mind the need to check for any such changes. *See generally Bonkowski v. Oberg Industries, Inc.*, 787 F.3d 190, 197 (3d Cir. 2015) (discussing the "rather lengthy and complicated history" of the FMLA regulations).

The regulations' definition of "serious health condition" is complicated. It should not be necessary to charge the jury on the all the intricacies of the regulation, both because counsel should be able to reach agreement concerning which details are in dispute, and because some issues are questions of law for the court.[38] Accordingly, some portions of Instruction 10.2.1 simply refer to the relevant portions of the regulation, which are set forth in this Comment.

Inpatient care

29 C.F.R. § 825.114 states: "Inpatient care means an overnight stay in a hospital, hospice, or residential medical care facility, including any period of incapacity as defined in § 825.113(b), or any subsequent treatment in connection with such inpatient care." *See Bonkowski*, 787 F.3d at 206 (holding that "'an overnight stay' under [29 C.F.R.] § 825.114 means a stay in a hospital, hospice, or residential medical care facility for a substantial period of time from one calendar day to the next calendar day as measured by the individual's time of admission and time of discharge");

[38] *See Bonkowski*, 787 F.3d at 203 (holding the meaning of "overnight stay" was a question of law for the court, that it is the court's "obligation to interpret the DOL regulation," and that "[i]t is then the jury's responsibility to dispose of any genuine issues of material fact on the basis of judicial instructions explaining the meaning of" the regulation).

id. at 210 (not deciding what would count as a "substantial period" but suggesting that "a minimum of eight hours would seem to be an appropriate period of time"). 29 C.F.R. § 825.113(b) states: "The term incapacity means inability to work, attend school or perform other regular daily activities due to the serious health condition, treatment therefore, or recovery therefrom."

Incapacity plus treatment

29 C.F.R. § 825.115 provides in part:

> A serious health condition involving continuing treatment by a health care provider includes any one or more of the following:
>
> (a) Incapacity and treatment. A period of incapacity of more than three consecutive, full calendar days, and any subsequent treatment or period of incapacity relating to the same condition, that also involves:
>
> (1) Treatment two or more times, within 30 days of the first day of incapacity, unless extenuating circumstances exist, by a health care provider, by a nurse under direct supervision of a health care provider, or by a provider of health care services (e.g., physical therapist) under orders of, or on referral by, a health care provider; or
>
> (2) Treatment by a health care provider on at least one occasion, which results in a regimen of continuing treatment under the supervision of the health care provider.
>
> (3) The requirement in paragraphs (a)(1) and (2) of this section for treatment by a health care provider means an in-person visit to a health care provider. The first (or only) in-person treatment visit must take place within seven days of the first day of incapacity.
>
> (4) Whether additional treatment visits or a regimen of continuing treatment is necessary within the 30-day period shall be determined by the health care provider.
>
> (5) The term extenuating circumstances in paragraph (a)(1) of this section means circumstances beyond the employee's control that prevent the follow-up visit from occurring as planned by the health care provider. Whether a given set of circumstances are extenuating depends on the facts. For example, extenuating circumstances exist if a health care provider determines that a second in-person visit is needed within the 30-day period, but the health care provider does not have any available appointments during that time period.

In a case that was controlled by a prior version of the regulations, the Court of Appeals held that "an employee may satisfy her burden of proving three days of incapacitation through a combination of expert medical and lay testimony." *Schaar v. Lehigh Valley Health Services, Inc.*, 598 F.3d 156, 161 (3d Cir. 2010). The Committee has not attempted to determine whether the *Schaar* holding applies with equal force to cases controlled by the current version of the regulations.

Chronic serious health condition

29 C.F.R. § 825.115 provides in part:

> A serious health condition involving continuing treatment by a health care provider includes any one or more of the following:
>
> . . .
>
> (c) Chronic conditions. Any period of incapacity or treatment for such incapacity due to a chronic serious health condition. A chronic serious health condition is one which:
>
> (1) Requires periodic visits (defined as at least twice a year) for treatment by a health care provider, or by a nurse under direct supervision of a health care provider;
>
> (2) Continues over an extended period of time (including recurring episodes of a single underlying condition); and
>
> (3) May cause episodic rather than a continuing period of incapacity (e.g., asthma, diabetes, epilepsy, etc.).

Further provision applicable to pregnancy, prenatal care, and chronic serious health conditions

29 C.F.R. § 825.115(f) provides: "Absences attributable to incapacity under paragraph (b) or (c) of this section qualify for FMLA leave even though the employee or the covered family member does not receive treatment from a health care provider during the absence, and even if the absence does not last more than three consecutive, full calendar days. For example, an employee with asthma may be unable to report for work due to the onset of an asthma attack or because the employee's health care provider has advised the employee to stay home when the pollen count exceeds a certain level. An employee who is pregnant may be unable to report to work because of severe morning sickness."

Other relevant provisions in 29 C.F.R. § 825.113

29 C.F.R. § 825.113(c) defines "treatment." 29 C.F.R. § 825.113(d) excludes certain

conditions from the definition of "serious health condition."

Health care provider

The definitions section of the FMLA (29 U.S.C. §2611(6)) defines "health care provider" as follows:

> 6) *Health care provider.* The term "health care provider" means--
>
> (A) a doctor of medicine or osteopathy who is authorized to practice medicine or surgery (as appropriate) by the State in which the doctor practices; or
>
> (B) any other person determined by the Secretary to be capable of providing health care services.

The relevant regulations concerning persons determined to be capable of providing health care services can be found at 29 C.F.R. § 825.125.

For case law in the Third Circuit construing the statutory term "serious health condition" or related regulations, *see, e.g., Hansler v. Lehigh Valley Hosp. Network,* 785 F.3d 149, 154 n. 3 (3d Cir. 2015)("[W]e will assume here, and [plaintiff] does not argue otherwise, that a condition lasting for one month does not satisfy the 'extended period of time' requirement."); *Victorelli v. Shadyside Hosp.,* 128 F.3d 184, 190 (3d Cir. 1997) ("A factfinder may be able reasonably to find that Victorelli suffers from something more severe than a 'minor ulcer' and as such is entitled to FMLA protection.").

10.2.2 FMLA Definitions — Equivalent Position

Model

[Defendant] claims that after returning from leave, [plaintiff] was placed in a position that was equivalent to the one that [he/she] had before taking leave. [Plaintiff] claims that the new position was not equivalent to the old one. Under the Family and Medical Leave Act, the new position is equivalent to the old one if it is virtually identical in terms of pay, benefits and working conditions, including privileges, "perks" and status. It must involve the same or substantially similar duties and responsibilities, and require substantially equivalent skill, effort, responsibility, and authority. [Plaintiff] must prove by a preponderance of the evidence that the new position was not equivalent to the old one.

Comment

The court may wish to use this instruction if there is a dispute on whether the plaintiff was restored to an equivalent position. The instruction tracks the language of the FMLA regulations at 29 C.F.R. § 825.215(a). *See also* 29 C.F.R. §§ 825.215(b) - (f) (providing further detail on the subject).

10.3.1 FMLA Defense — Key Employee

Model

If you find that [plaintiff] has proved by a preponderance of the evidence that [he/she] was not restored to [his/her] position [or to an equivalent position] after returning from a leave authorized by the Family and Medical Leave Act, you must then consider [defendant's] defense. The Family and Medical Leave Act permits an employer to deny job restoration to a "key employee" when necessary to protect the employer from substantial and grievous economic injury. [Defendant] contends that it had no obligation to restore [plaintiff] to a position because [plaintiff] was a "key employee" and that [describe defendant's action] was necessary to protect [defendant] from substantial and grievous economic injury.

Your verdict must be for [defendant] if [defendant] proves all of the following by a preponderance of the evidence:

First: That [plaintiff] was a "key employee." [Plaintiff] was a "key employee" within the meaning of the Act if [he/she] was a salaried employee who was among the highest paid 10 percent of all the employees employed by [defendant] within 75 miles of [plaintiff's] worksite. The determination of whether [plaintiff] was among the highest paid 10 percent is to be made as of the time [plaintiff] gave notice of the need for leave.

Second: That failing to restore [plaintiff] to [his/her] former job [or an equivalent position] was necessary to prevent substantial and grievous economic injury to the operations of [defendant]. In determining whether or not [defendant's] action was economically justified in this sense, you may consider factors such as whether [plaintiff] was so important to the business that [defendant] could not temporarily do without [plaintiff] and could not replace [plaintiff] on a temporary basis. You may also consider whether the cost of reinstating [plaintiff] after a leave would be substantial.

Third: That [defendant], when it determined that substantial and grievous injury would occur from [plaintiff's] leave, promptly notified [plaintiff] of its intent to deny restoration of [plaintiff's] job, specifying in the notice [defendant's] contention that [plaintiff] was a "key employee" and restoration of [his/her] job after a leave would cause substantial and grievous economic injury to [defendant].

Comment

An employer may deny job restoration to a "key employee" if the denial is necessary to prevent substantial and grievous economic injury to the operations of the employer. 29 U.S.C. § 2614(b) provides as follows:

(b) *Exemption concerning certain highly compensated employees.*

> (1) *Denial of restoration.* An employer may deny restoration . . . if—
>
> > (A) such denial is necessary to prevent substantial and grievous economic injury to the operations of the employer;
> >
> > (B) the employer notifies the employee of the intent of the employer to deny restoration on such basis at the time the employer determines that such injury would occur; and
> >
> > (C) in any case in which the leave has commenced, the employee elects not to return to employment after receiving such notice.
>
> (2) Affected employees. An eligible employee described in paragraph (1) is a salaried eligible employee who is among the highest paid 10 percent of the employees employed by the employer within 75 miles of the facility at which the employee is employed.

For a general discussion of "key employees," see 29 C.F.R. § 825.217. The phrase "substantial and grievous economic injury" covers actions that threaten the economic viability of the employer or lesser injuries that cause substantial long-term economic injury. But minor inconveniences and costs that the employer would experience in the normal course of doing business do not constitute "substantial and grievous economic injury." 29 C.F.R. § 825.218(c).

For a case applying the term "key employee," *see Oby v. Baton Rouge Marriott*, 329 F. Supp. 2d 772, 783 (M.D. La. 2004), where the court granted summary judgment to the employer because the plaintiff was a key employee and the employer had followed the requirements set out in the regulations:

> To deny restoration to a key employee, an employer must determine that restoring the employee to employment will cause substantial and grievous economic injury to the operations of the employer . . . . The regulations do not provide a precise test for the level of hardship or injury to the employer which must be sustained to constitute a substantial and grievous injury. If the reinstatement of a key employee threatens the economic viability of the firm, that would constitute substantial and grievous economic injury. A lesser injury which causes substantial, long-term economic injury would also be sufficient. Minor inconveniences and costs that the employer would experience in the normal course of doing business would certainly not constitute substantial and grievous economic injury.
>
> Plaintiff has not presented any evidence to rebut . . . Columbia Sussex's evidence that it would have suffered substantial and grievous economic injury had it reinstated plaintiff to the position of Executive Housekeeper. In fact, the undisputed evidence shows that plaintiff was relied upon as the Executive Housekeeper at the Baton Rouge Marriott to keep the facilities clean and Columbia

> Sussex's customers happy. In consideration of this reliance, plaintiff was the third highest paid employee at the facility. When plaintiff left, the facility was suffering, and an educated business decision was made to replace plaintiff . . . Defendant had also determined that reinstating plaintiff would cause it substantial and grievous economic injury if it had to pay two Executive Housekeepers $41,000 each.

10.4.1 FMLA Damages — Back Pay — No Claim of Willful Violation

Model

If you find that [defendant] has violated [plaintiff's] rights under the Family and Medical Leave Act, then you must determine the amount of damages that [defendant's] actions have caused [plaintiff]. [Plaintiff] has the burden of proving damages by a preponderance of the evidence.

You must award as actual damages an amount that reasonably compensates [plaintiff] for any lost wages and benefits, taking into consideration any increases in salary and benefits, including pension, that [plaintiff] would have received from [defendant] had [plaintiff's] rights not been violated.

You must award [plaintiff] the amount of [his/her] lost wages and benefits during the period starting [insert date, which will be no more than two years before the date the lawsuit was filed] through the date of your verdict.

You must reduce any award of damages for lost wages and benefits by the amount of the expenses that [plaintiff] would have incurred in making those earnings.

If you award damages for lost wages, you are instructed to deduct from this figure whatever wages [plaintiff] has obtained from other employment during this period. However, please note that you should not deduct social security benefits, unemployment compensation and pension benefits from an award of lost wages.

[You are further instructed that [plaintiff] has a duty to mitigate [his/her] damages--that is [plaintiff] is required to make reasonable efforts under the circumstances to reduce [his/her] damages. It is [defendant's] burden to prove that [plaintiff] has failed to mitigate. So if [defendant] persuades you, by a preponderance of the evidence, that [plaintiff] failed to obtain substantially equivalent job opportunities that were reasonably available to [him/ her], you must reduce the award of damages by the amount of the wages that [plaintiff] reasonably would have earned if [he/she] had obtained those opportunities.]

[In assessing damages, you must not consider attorney fees or the costs of litigating this case. Attorney fees and costs, if relevant at all, are for the court and not the jury to determine. Therefore, attorney fees and costs should play no part in your calculation of any damages.]

[Add the following instruction if the employer claims "after-acquired evidence" of misconduct by the plaintiff:

[Defendant] contends that it would have made the same decision to [describe employment decision] [plaintiff] because of conduct that [defendant] discovered after it made the employment decision. Specifically, [defendant] claims that when it became aware of the [describe the after-discovered misconduct], [defendant] would have made the decision at that point had it not been

made previously.

If [defendant] proves by a preponderance of the evidence that it would have made the same decision and would have [describe employment decision] [plaintiff] because of [describe after-discovered evidence], you must limit any award of lost wages to the date [defendant] would have made the decision to [describe employment decision] [plaintiff] as a result of the after-acquired information.**]**

Comment

"[T]he accrual period for backpay [under the FMLA] is limited by the Act's 2-year statute of limitations (extended to three years only for willful violations), §§ 2617(c)(1) and (2)." *Nevada Dept. of Human Resources v. Hibbs*, 538 U.S. 721, 740 (2003). As the *Hibbs* Court noted, the statute of limitations for recovery under the FMLA is two years, but it is extended to three years if the employer's violation was willful. 26 U.S.C. § 2617(c)(2). The standard for "willfulness" is the same as that applied to the liquidated damages provision in the ADEA, and the statute of limitations provision in the Equal Pay Act, i.e., whether the employer "intentionally or recklessly violated" the employee's statutory rights. *Hoffman v. Professional Med Team,* 394 F.3d 414, 417 (6th Cir. 2005). This instruction is to be used when the plaintiff does not present evidence sufficient to create a jury question on whether the defendant acted willfully. *See* 10.4.2 for an instruction covering a willful violation of the FMLA.

29 U.S.C. § 2617(a)(1) provides the following damages for an employee against an employer who violates the FMLA:

> Any employer who violates [29 U.S.C. § 2615] shall be liable to any eligible employee affected—
>
> (A) for damages equal to—
>
> (i) the amount of—
>
> (I) any wages, salary, employment benefits, or other compensation denied or lost to such employee by reason of the violation; or
>
> (II) in a case in which wages, salary, employment benefits, or other compensation have not been denied or lost to the employee, any actual monetary losses sustained by the employee as a direct result of the violation, such as the cost of providing care, up to a sum equal to 12 weeks (or 26 weeks, in a case involving leave under section 2612(a)(3) of

> this title) of wages or salary for the employee;
>
> (ii) the interest on the amount described in clause (i) calculated at the prevailing rate; and
>
> (iii) an additional amount as liquidated damages equal to the sum of the amount described in clause (i) and the interest described in clause (ii), except that if an employer . . . proves to the satisfaction of the court that the act or omission which violated [Section 2615] was in good faith and that the employer had reasonable grounds for believing that the act or omission was not a violation of [Section 2615], such court may, in the discretion of the court, reduce the amount of the liability to the amount and interest determined under clauses (i) and (ii), respectively[.]

Section 2617(a)(1)(B) authorizes the court to award "such equitable relief as may be appropriate, including employment, reinstatement, and promotion."

In accordance with 29 U.S.C. § 2617(a), the court must double the amount of back pay damages as liquidated damages, unless the defendant persuades the court that the violation was in good faith and that the employer had reasonable grounds for believing that the act or omission was not a violation of the FMLA— in which case the court has the discretion to limit the award to the amount of damages found by the jury.

Attorney Fees and Costs

There appears to be no uniform practice regarding the use of an instruction that warns the jury against speculation on attorney fees and costs. In *Collins v. Alco Parking Corp.*, 448 F.3d 652 (3d Cir. 2006), the district court gave the following instruction:

> You are instructed that if plaintiff wins on his claim, he may be entitled to an award of attorney fees and costs over and above what you award as damages. It is my duty to decide whether to award attorney fees and costs, and if so, how much. Therefore, attorney fees and costs should play no part in your calculation of any damages.

Id. at 656-57. The Court of Appeals held that the plaintiff had not properly objected to the instruction, and, reviewing for plain error, found none: "We need not and do not decide now whether a district court commits error by informing a jury about the availability of attorney fees in an ADEA case. Assuming *arguendo* that an error occurred, such error is not plain, for two reasons." *Id.* at 657. First, "it is not 'obvious' or 'plain' that an instruction directing the jury *not* to consider attorney fees" is irrelevant or prejudicial; "it is at least arguable that a jury tasked with computing damages might, absent information that the Court has discretion to award attorney fees at a later stage, seek to compensate a sympathetic plaintiff for the expense of litigation." *Id.* Second, it is implausible "that the jury, in order to eliminate the chance that Collins might be

awarded attorney fees, took the disproportionate step of returning a verdict against him even though it believed he was the victim of age discrimination, notwithstanding the District Court's clear instructions to the contrary." *Id.*; *see also id.* at 658 (distinguishing *Fisher v. City of Memphis*, 234 F.3d 312, 319 (6th Cir. 2000) and *Brooks v. Cook,* 938 F.2d 1048, 1051 (9th Cir. 1991)).

10.4.2 FMLA Damages — Back Pay — Willful Violation

Model

If you find that [defendant] has violated [plaintiff's] rights under the Family and Medical Leave Act, then you must determine the amount of damages that [defendant's] actions have caused [plaintiff]. [Plaintiff] has the burden of proving damages by a preponderance of the evidence.

You must award as actual damages an amount that reasonably compensates [plaintiff] for any lost wages and benefits, taking into consideration any increases in salary and benefits, including pension, that [plaintiff] would have received from [defendant] had [plaintiff's] rights had not been violated.

[***[Alternative One: For use in cases where the plaintiff asserts back-pay claims based on more than one asserted FMLA violation, and some of those violations occurred earlier than two years prior to the commencement of the lawsuit:]*** In this case, [plaintiff] alleges that [defendant] willfully violated the Family and Medical Leave Act. If [plaintiff] proves to you by a preponderance of the evidence that [defendant's] violation of the Family and Medical Leave Act was willful, then this will have an effect on the damages that you must award. I will explain this effect in a minute, but first I will provide you more information on what it means for a violation to be "willful."]

[***[Alternative Two: For use in cases where all alleged FMLA violations occurred more than two years prior to the commencement of the suit:]*** In this case, [plaintiff] alleges that [defendant] willfully violated the Family and Medical Leave Act. You may only find for [plaintiff] in this case if [plaintiff] proves to you by a preponderance of the evidence that [defendant's] violation of the Family and Medical Leave Act was willful. Let me now give you more information what it means for a violation to be "willful."]

You must find [defendant's] violation of the Family and Medical Leave Act to be willful if [plaintiff] proves by a preponderance of the evidence that [defendant] knew or showed reckless disregard for whether [describe challenged action] was prohibited by the law. To establish willfulness it is not enough to show that [defendant] acted negligently. If you find that [defendant] did not know, or knew only that the law was potentially applicable, and did not act in reckless disregard for whether its conduct was prohibited by the law, then [defendant's] conduct was not willful.

[***[For use with Alternative One:]*** If you find that [defendant's] violation of the Family and Medical Leave Act was willful, then you must award [plaintiff] the amount of [his/her] lost wages and benefits during the period starting [insert date, which will be no more than three years before the date the lawsuit was filed] through the date of your verdict. However, if you find that [defendant's] violation of the Family and Medical Leave Act was not willful, then you must award [plaintiff] the amount of [his/her] lost wages and benefits during the period starting [insert date,

which will be no more than two years before the date the lawsuit was filed] through the date of your verdict.]

[***[For use with Alternative Two:]*** If you find that [defendant's] violation of the Family and Medical Leave Act was willful, then you must award [plaintiff] the amount of [his/her] lost wages and benefits during the period starting [insert date, which will be no more than three years before the date the lawsuit was filed] through the date of your verdict. However, if you find that [defendant's] violation of the Family and Medical Leave Act was not willful, then you must find for [defendant] in this case.]

You must reduce any award of damages for lost wages and benefits by the amount of the expenses that [plaintiff] would have incurred in making those earnings.

If you award damages for lost wages, you are instructed to deduct from this figure whatever wages [plaintiff] has obtained from other employment during this period. However, please note that you should not deduct social security benefits, unemployment compensation and pension benefits from an award of lost wages.

[You are further instructed that [plaintiff] has a duty to mitigate [his/her] damages--that is [plaintiff] is required to make reasonable efforts under the circumstances to reduce [his/her] damages. It is [defendant's] burden to prove that [plaintiff] has failed to mitigate. So if [defendant] persuades you, by a preponderance of the evidence, that [plaintiff] failed to obtain substantially equivalent job opportunities that were reasonably available to [him/ her], you must reduce the award of damages by the amount of the wages that [plaintiff] reasonably would have earned if [he/she] had obtained those opportunities.]

[In assessing damages, you must not consider attorney fees or the costs of litigating this case. Attorney fees and costs, if relevant at all, are for the court and not the jury to determine. Therefore, attorney fees and costs should play no part in your calculation of any damages.]

[Add the following instruction if the employer claims "after-acquired evidence" of misconduct by the plaintiff:

[Defendant] contends that it would have made the same decision to [describe employment decision] [plaintiff] because of conduct that [defendant] discovered after it made the employment decision. Specifically, [defendant] claims that when it became aware of the [describe the after-discovered misconduct], [defendant] would have made the decision at that point had it not been made previously.

If [defendant] proves by a preponderance of the evidence that it would have made the same decision and would have [describe employment decision] [plaintiff] because of [describe after-discovered evidence], you must limit any award of lost wages to the date [defendant] would have made the decision to [describe employment decision] [plaintiff] as a result of the after-acquired information.**]**

Comment

The Family and Medical Leave Act provides recovery for two years of lost wages and benefits if the defendant's violation was non-willful; it extends the recovery of damages to a third year if the defendant's violation was willful. 26 U.S.C. § 2617(c)(2). The standard for "willfulness" is the same as that applied to the liquidated damages provision in the ADEA, and the statute of limitations provision in the Equal Pay Act, i.e., whether the employer "either knew or showed reckless disregard" for the employee's statutory rights. *See Hoffman v. Professional Med Team,* 394 F.3d 414, 417 (6th Cir. 2005) ("the standard for willfulness under the FMLA extended statute of limitations is whether the employer intentionally or recklessly violated the FMLA.").

This instruction is to be used when the plaintiff presents evidence sufficient to create a jury question on whether the defendant willfully violated the FMLA. See Instruction 10.4.1 for the instruction to be used when there is insufficient evidence to create a jury question on willfulness but the plaintiff's claims are nonetheless timely.

29 U.S.C. § 2617(a) provides the following damages for an employee against an employer who violates the FMLA:

> Any employer who violates [29 U.S.C. § 2615] shall be liable to any eligible employee affected—
>
> (A) for damages equal to—
>
> (i) the amount of—
>
> (I) any wages, salary, employment benefits, or other compensation denied or lost to such employee by reason of the violation; or
>
> (II) in a case in which wages, salary, employment benefits, or other compensation have not been denied or lost to the employee, any actual monetary losses sustained by the employee as a direct result of the violation, such as the cost of providing care, up to a sum equal to 12 weeks (or 26 weeks, in a case involving leave under section 2612(a)(3) of this title) of wages or salary for the employee;
>
> (ii) the interest on the amount described in clause (i) calculated at the prevailing rate; and
>
> (iii) an additional amount as liquidated damages equal to the sum of the amount described in clause (i) and the interest described in clause (ii), except that if an employer . . . proves to the satisfaction

> of the court that the act or omission which violated [Section 2615] was in good faith and that the employer had reasonable grounds for believing that the act or omission was not a violation of [Section 2615], such court may, in the discretion of the court, reduce the amount of the liability to the amount and interest determined under clauses (i) and (ii), respectively[.]

Section 2617(a)(1)(B) authorizes the court to award "such equitable relief as may be appropriate, including employment, reinstatement, and promotion."

In accordance with 29 U.S.C. § 2617(a), the court must double the amount of back pay damages as liquidated damages, unless the defendant persuades the court that the violation was in good faith and that the employer had reasonable grounds for believing that the act or omission was not a violation of the FMLA— in which case the court has the discretion to limit the award to the amount of damages found by the jury.

Attorney Fees and Costs

There appears to be no uniform practice regarding the use of an instruction that warns the jury against speculation on attorney fees and costs. In *Collins v. Alco Parking Corp.*, 448 F.3d 652 (3d Cir. 2006), the district court gave the following instruction: "You are instructed that if plaintiff wins on his claim, he may be entitled to an award of attorney fees and costs over and above what you award as damages. It is my duty to decide whether to award attorney fees and costs, and if so, how much. Therefore, attorney fees and costs should play no part in your calculation of any damages." *Id.* at 656-57. The Court of Appeals held that the plaintiff had not properly objected to the instruction, and, reviewing for plain error, found none: "We need not and do not decide now whether a district court commits error by informing a jury about the availability of attorney fees in an ADEA case. Assuming *arguendo* that an error occurred, such error is not plain, for two reasons." *Id.* at 657. First, "it is not 'obvious' or 'plain' that an instruction directing the jury *not* to consider attorney fees" is irrelevant or prejudicial; "it is at least arguable that a jury tasked with computing damages might, absent information that the Court has discretion to award attorney fees at a later stage, seek to compensate a sympathetic plaintiff for the expense of litigation." *Id.* Second, it is implausible "that the jury, in order to eliminate the chance that Collins might be awarded attorney fees, took the disproportionate step of returning a verdict against him even though it believed he was the victim of age discrimination, notwithstanding the District Court's clear instructions to the contrary." *Id.*; *see also id.* at 658 (distinguishing *Fisher v. City of Memphis*, 234 F.3d 312, 319 (6th Cir. 2000) and *Brooks v. Cook,* 938 F.2d 1048, 1051 (9th Cir. 1991)).

10.4.3 FMLA Damages — Other Monetary Damages

Model

The Family and Medical Leave Act provides that if an employee is unable to prove that the employer's violation of the Act caused the employee to lose any wages, benefits or other compensation, then that employee may recover other monetary losses sustained as a direct result of the employer's violation of the Act.

So in this case, if you find that [defendant] has violated [plaintiff's] rights under the Act, and yet you also find that [plaintiff] has not proved the loss of any wages, benefits or other compensation as a result of this violation, then you must determine whether [plaintiff] has suffered any other monetary losses as a direct result of the violation. [Other monetary losses may include the cost of providing the care that gave rise to the need for a leave.] [Plaintiff] has the burden of proving these monetary losses by a preponderance of the evidence.

Under the law, [plaintiff's] recovery for these other monetary damages can be no higher than the amount that [he/she] would have made in wages or salary for a [twelve-week period][39] during her employment. So you must limit your award for these other monetary damages, if any, to that amount. You must also remember that if [plaintiff] has proved damages for lost wages, benefits or other compensation, then you must award those damages only and [plaintiff] may not recover any amount for any other monetary damages suffered as a result of [describe defendant's conduct].

Finally, the Family and Medical Leave Act does not allow [plaintiff] to recover for any mental or emotional distress or pain and suffering that may have been caused by [defendant's] violation of the Act. So I instruct you that you are not to award the plaintiff any damages for emotional distress or pain and suffering.

[In assessing damages, you must not consider attorney fees or the costs of litigating this case. Attorney fees and costs, if relevant at all, are for the court and not the jury to determine. Therefore, attorney fees and costs should play no part in your calculation of any damages.]

Comment

The Family and Medical Leave Act provides that

in a case in which wages, salary, employment benefits, or other compensation have

[39] N.B.: In cases involving servicemember family leave under 29 U.S.C. § 2612(a)(3), the relevant period is 26 weeks rather than 12 weeks.

> not been denied or lost to the employee, any actual monetary losses sustained by the employee as a direct result of the violation, such as the cost of providing care, up to a sum equal to 12 weeks (or 26 weeks, in a case involving leave under section 2612(a)(3) of this title) of wages or salary for the employee [can be recovered by a plaintiff].

29 U.S.C. § 2617(a). An award for these non-wage-related monetary losses is contingent upon the plaintiff's *not* obtaining an award for lost wages. This instruction therefore provides that the jury is to reach the question of monetary losses other than lost wages only if it finds that the plaintiff has not proven damages for lost wages.

The FMLA does not provide for recovery for emotional distress or pain and suffering. See 29 U.S.C. § 2617(a). Although the Court of Appeals has not addressed this issue in a precedential decision, other Courts of Appeals have reached this conclusion. See, e.g., *Farrell v. Tri–Country Metro Transp. Dist of Or.,* 530 F.3d 1023, 1025 (9th Cir.2008); *Brumbalough v. Camelot Care Ctrs., Inc.,* 427 F.3d 996, 1007–08 (6th Cir.2005).

In accordance with 29 U.S.C. § 2617(a), the court must double the amount of any damages under the FMLA, as liquidated damages, unless the defendant persuades the court that the violation was in good faith and that the employer had reasonable grounds for believing that the act or omission was not a violation of the FMLA— in which case the court has the discretion to limit the award to the amount of damages found by the jury.

Attorney Fees and Costs

There appears to be no uniform practice regarding the use of an instruction that warns the jury against speculation on attorney fees and costs. In *Collins v. Alco Parking Corp.*, 448 F.3d 652 (3d Cir. 2006), the district court gave the following instruction: "You are instructed that if plaintiff wins on his claim, he may be entitled to an award of attorney fees and costs over and above what you award as damages. It is my duty to decide whether to award attorney fees and costs, and if so, how much. Therefore, attorney fees and costs should play no part in your calculation of any damages." *Id.* at 656-57. The Court of Appeals held that the plaintiff had not properly objected to the instruction, and, reviewing for plain error, found none: "We need not and do not decide now whether a district court commits error by informing a jury about the availability of attorney fees in an ADEA case. Assuming *arguendo* that an error occurred, such error is not plain, for two reasons." *Id.* at 657. First, "it is not 'obvious' or 'plain' that an instruction directing the jury *not* to consider attorney fees" is irrelevant or prejudicial; "it is at least arguable that a jury tasked with computing damages might, absent information that the Court has discretion to award attorney fees at a later stage, seek to compensate a sympathetic plaintiff for the expense of litigation." *Id.* Second, it is implausible "that the jury, in order to eliminate the chance that Collins might be awarded attorney fees, took the disproportionate step of returning a verdict against him even though it believed he was the victim of age discrimination, notwithstanding the District Court's clear instructions to the contrary." *Id.*; *see also id.* at 658 (distinguishing *Fisher v. City of*

Memphis, 234 F.3d 312, 319 (6th Cir. 2000), and *Brooks v. Cook,* 938 F.2d 1048, 1051 (9th Cir. 1991)).

10.4.4. FMLA Damages — Liquidated Damages

No Instruction

Comment

Punitive damages cannot be recovered under the FMLA. 29 U.S.C. § 2617 provides for a mandatory award of liquidated (double) damages for any award under the FMLA. No instruction is necessary on liquidated damages, however, because there is no issue for the jury to decide concerning the availability or amount of these damages. The court simply doubles the award of damages found by the jury.

It should be noted that 29 U.S.C. § 2617 provides that if the defendant proves that its conduct was in good faith and that it had reasonable grounds for believing that the act or omission was not a violation of the FMLA, the "court may, in the discretion of the court, reduce the amount of the liability to" the amount of damages found by the jury. No instruction is necessary on good faith, either, because the question of good faith in this circumstance is a question for "the court." The jury has no authority to reduce an award of liquidated damages under the FMLA. Although the Court of Appeals has not addressed in a precedential decision the jury's role in reducing the amount of liquidated damages award, at least one district court in the circuit has. *Zawadowicz v. CVS Corp.*, 99 F. Supp. 2d 518, 534 (D.N.J. 2000) (noting that any question of reducing liquidated damages is for the court).

10.4.5 FMLA Damages — Nominal Damages

No Instruction

Comment

Nominal damages are not available under the FMLA. The court in *Walker v. UPS,* 240 F.3d 1268, 1278 (10th Cir. 2003) explained why nominal damages cannot be awarded under the FMLA, in contrast to Title VII, which authorizes an award of nominal damages:

> Because recovery [under the FMLA] is . . . unambiguously limited to actual monetary losses, courts have consistently refused to award FMLA recovery for such other claims as consequential damages (*Nero v. Industrial Molding Corp.*, 167 F.3d 921, 930 (5th Cir. 1999)) and emotional distress damages (*Lloyd v. Wyoming Valley Health Care Sys., Inc*., 994 F. Supp. 288, 291-92 (M.D. Pa. 1998)). Thus *Cianci v. Pettibone Corp*., 152 F.3d 723, 728-29 (7th Cir. 1998) held that a plaintiff had no claim under the FMLA where the record showed that she suffered no diminution of income and incurred no costs as a result of an alleged FMLA violation.
>
> Invoking an attempted analogy to Title VII precedents, Walker argues that nominal damages should be allowed in FMLA cases because, just as under Title VII, nominal damages would allow plaintiffs whose rights are violated but who do not suffer any compensable damages to vindicate those rights. While it is true that recent cases have rejected the "no harm, no foul" argument in the Title VII context *(see, e.g., Hashimoto v. Dalton*, 118 F.3d 671, 675-76 (9th Cir. 1997)), that was not always so.
>
> Before the 1991 amendments to the Civil Rights Act, nominal damages (as well as damages for pain and suffering or punitive or consequential damages) were not available for Title VII violations, because the statute then provided for equitable and declaratory relief alone. Nominal damages became available only after 42 U.S.C. § 1981a ("Section 1981a," which governs damages recoverable in cases brought under Title VII) was amended to allow for compensatory damages in such actions (nominal damages are generally considered to be compensatory in nature).
>
> Walker's attempted argument by analogy fails because of the critical difference in statutory language between [29 U.S.C.] Section 2617(a)(1) and the amended Section 1981a. In contrast to the latter, . . . Section 2617(a)(1) does not provide for compensatory damages in general, but is instead expressly limited to

> lost compensation and other actual monetary losses. Because nominal damages are not included in the FMLA's list of recoverable damages, nor can any of the listed damages be reasonably construed to include nominal damages, Congress must not have intended nominal damages to be recoverable under the FMLA.
>
> We are obligated to honor that intent and therefore to countenance the award of only those elements of damages that Congress has deemed appropriate to redress violations of the FMLA. Because Walker has admittedly suffered no actual monetary losses as a result of UPS' asserted violation of the FMLA and has no claim for equitable relief, she has no grounds for relief under that statute.

See also Lapham v. Vanguard Cellular Systems, Inc., 102 F. Supp. 2d 266, 269 (M.D. Pa. 2000) (while plaintiff had a cause of action for interference, she suffered no wage or other monetary loss, therefore "she cannot obtain relief under the FMLA and her claim must be dismissed."); *Oby v. Baton Rouge Marriott*, 329 F. Supp. 2d 772, 788 (M. D. La. 2004) ("It is clear that nominal damages are not available under the FMLA because the statutory language of the FMLA specifically limits recovery to actual monetary losses.").