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10	UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT	
11	CENTRAL DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA	
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14 15	SHARON L. WATSON,	Case No. 2:19-cv-4149
16	Plaintiff,	COMPLAINT FOR
17	V.	DISCRIMINATION IN VIOLATION OF TITLE I OF THE AMERICANS
18	LOS ANGELES COUNTY	WITH DISABILITIES ACT, 42
19	DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL	U.S.C. §§ 12111-12117; SECTION 504 OF THE REHABILITATION ACT
20	HEALTH, JONATHAN SHERIN (in his individual capacity),	OF 1973, 29 U.S.C. § 794; AND THE
21		CALIFORNIA FAIR EMPLOYMENT AND HOUSING ACT, CAL. GOV'T
22	Defendants.	CODE § 12940(a)
23		DEMAND FOR JURY TRIAL
2425		

- 1. Sharon Watson, a blind Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW), brings this action against her employer, the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health ("LAC-DMH" or "the County"), and its Director of Mental Health, because they force her to use an electronic and information technology system, the Integrated Behavioral Health Information System ("IBHIS") that is not accessible to her as a person who relies on screen reader assistive technology, and refuses to provide a qualified reader to assist her.
- 2. Through their use of discriminatory electronic and information technology and refusal to engage in good faith in an interactive process to reasonably accommodate Ms. Watson's blindness, with the result that she is not effectively accommodated, Defendants violate Ms. Watson's rights under Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act, 42 U.S.C. § 12111-12117 ("ADA"), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 29 U.S.C. § 794 ("Section 504"), and the California Fair Employment and Housing Act, Cal. Gov't Code § 12940(a) ("FEHA").

JURISDICTION

- 3. This is primarily an action for declaratory and injunctive relief and damages pursuant to the ADA and Section 504. This Court therefore has subject matter jurisdiction over this action pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1331.
- 4. Pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1367, this Court has supplemental jurisdiction over Plaintiff's pendent state claims for injunctive relief and damages under FEHA.

VENUE

5. Pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1391(b)(2) and 1391(c), venue is proper in the District in which this Complaint is filed because Defendant's discriminatory conduct occurred within this District and continues to occur within this District.

PARTIES

6. Plaintiff Sharon Watson, LCSW, was born blind in one eye as a result of

retinopathy of prematurity and became fully blind in both eyes at age twenty. Her medical condition substantially limits her major life activity of seeing. Ms. Watson works for the County as a Psychiatric Social Worker II, providing therapy and other services for the County's mental health consumers at the East San Gabriel Valley Mental Health Center in Covina, California. Ms. Watson resides in Claremont, California.

- 7. Defendant Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health ("LAC-DMH"), with a budget of approximately \$2.4 billion, is the largest county-operated mental health department in the United States, directly operating programs in more than 85 sites, with headquarters at 550 South Vermont Avenue, Los Angeles, California 90020. It is a local government agency that receives both state and federal financial assistance. It is also an employer. More than 4,000 employees, including Ms. Watson, work for LAC-DMH.
- 8. Jonathan Sherin, MD, Ph.D was appointed by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors as the County's Director of Mental Health effective November 1, 2016. In this role, he leads LAC-DMH.

ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURES

- 9. In September of 2018 and again in December of 2018, Plaintiff filed a charge with the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission ("EEOC"), cross-filed with the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing ("DFEH"), alleging LAC-DMH's ongoing failure to make reasonable accommodation or provide effective communication and denying Ms. Watson, because of her disability, employment opportunities for which she is qualified to perform the essential duties.
- 10. On January 15, 2019, Ms. Watson received a letter indicating that the County Board of Supervisors' County Equity Oversight Panel had received a County Policy of Equity Complaint filed on Ms. Watson's behalf. By telephone on January 18, 2019, Ms. Watson explained to a staff member of the County Intake

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17. In 2014, the County launched the Integrated Behavioral Health Information System ("IBHIS"), a clinical, administrative, and financial electronic and information technology system, to coordinate behavioral health services.

- 18.In developing, procuring, maintaining, or using electronic or information technology, the County, as a recipient of California state financial assistance, is required by California state law to comply with the accessibility requirements of Section 508 of the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and regulations implementing that act. Cal. Gov't Code § 7405(a); see also Cal. Gov't Code § 11135(b) (applying California's stronger state prohibitions and protections to entities covered by Section 11135). The Section 508 requirements, developed by the United States Access Board, were published in the Federal Register on December 21, 2000. See 36 C.F.R. §§ 1194.1 and 1194, Appendices A, C, and D. As of 2019, IBHIS still does not comply with Section 508 requirements.
- 19. Disabled employees such as Ms. Watson, who rely on screen reader technology, cannot use IBHIS independently because it does not comply with existing accessibility standards.
- 20. Tasks that require use of IBHIS comprise a significant portion of each work day for Ms. Watson.
- 21. Because she is blind and is prevented from using her screen reader technology with IBHIS, Ms. Watson must rely on human assistance for every aspect of using **IBHIS**, from reading and interpreting its screens and forms and cues, to reading and writing substantive clinical information within those forms. Since the launch of IBHIS in 2014, Ms. Watson can no longer independently schedule, plan, and document services; access and communicate clinical information; review other clinicians' work; or make requests for time off or overtime, among other tasks that require employees to use IBHIS.

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27 28 IBHIS accessible through a technological fix, without avail.

- 23. In the absence of a technological fix, Ms. Watson has focused on addressing the barriers IBHIS poses by requesting a qualified reader: a person able to read effectively, accurately, and impartially using any necessary specialized vocabulary, available throughout the day without delay because his or her sole or prioritized task is to act as an aide to Ms. Watson.
- 24.A reader working with Ms. Watson must communicate a wide range of information involving the specialized vocabulary of Ms. Watson's work. The reader must understand the IBHIS interface and its relationship to Ms. Watson's tasks. When Ms. Watson requests a section of IBHIS from which to obtain information and the information to obtain, the reader must interpret this request, and translate responsive information to speech, including metatextual information like page layout. The reader must speak, requesting any necessary additional instructions, while at the same time listening to receive the next set of instructions, and interpreting any such instructions. Ms. Watson must listen for comprehension and simultaneously consider how to articulate additional instructions.
- 25. An established rapport between Ms. Watson and a qualified reader helps Ms. Watson control for individuality in description and gradually train a reader to intuit her need for certain details or sequences of information. A trained, practiced, and qualified reader increases her productivity by allowing completion of tasks with minimal communication and cognitive overhead, permitting automaticity, confidence, and efficiency unavailable through temporary, rotating assistance.
- 26.Ms. Watson has requested and explained to Defendants her need for the accommodation of a qualified reader on numerous occasions, including to her direct supervisors, orally and in writing, and to Defendant Sherin in a letter dated September 28, 2018.

- 27. Defendants have denied Ms. Watson her requested accommodation. Instead, they force Ms. Watson to rely upon the alternative of a changing roster of temporarily assigned employees with competing responsibilities, available if at all only after a request has been made.
- 28. Few to none of the readers that the County assigns to Ms. Watson have had experience completing the tasks on IBHIS that are part of Ms. Watson's necessary use of the program. Many lacked reading and computer literacy skills, struggling to read and transcribe the necessary, specialized vocabulary of a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. All have been assigned for at most a matter of months, preventing Ms. Watson from benefiting from any proficiency they develop through assisting her. The inadequate qualifications and temporary nature of the readers the County provides add tremendous inefficiency and cognitive load to Ms. Watson's use of IBHIS.
- 29. The County continues to make a reader/scribe available to Ms. Watson only upon her daily, repeated requests. All such aides are unavailable part of the day, every day, forcing Ms. Watson to wait, unable to complete tasks, until assistance becomes available. The County's refusal to assign someone the sole or prioritized task to act as an aide to Ms. Watson forces her to spend significant time simply waiting for a reader to arrive.
- 30. The County's discrimination has injured Ms. Watson's employment opportunities. In June and July 2018, and again in January 2019, Ms. Watson faced discriminatory accusations related to her performance and productivity. Ms. Watson continues to face the threat of poor productivity reviews and related low performance evaluations because she must spend portions of each day simply waiting for the County to assign assistance in response to her requests for a reader to help her with tasks that require use of IBHIS, and because the assistance the County assigns is not effective. The inadequate qualifications and temporary nature of the readers the County provides add tremendous

38. The term reasonable accommodation includes "[m]odifications or adjustments that enable a covered entity's employee with a disability to enjoy equal benefits and privileges of employment as are enjoyed by its other similarly situated employees without disabilities." 29 C.F.R. § 1630.2(o)(1)(iii).

- 39. Reasonable accommodations may include, *inter alia*, making existing facilities used by employees readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities, acquisition or modification of equipment or devices, the provision of qualified readers or interpreters, and other similar accommodations for individuals with disabilities. 42 U.S.C. § 12111(9). Defendants have failed to make the electronic and information technology aspects of LAC-DMH's facilities readily accessible to and usable by Ms. Watson as an employee with a disability.
- 40. Defendants' use of IBHIS further violates the ADA as a method of administration that has the effect of discriminating against and perpetuating discrimination against blind employees through its disparate impact on them. 42 U.S.C. §12112(b)(3). Defendants' use of an inaccessible design within IBHIS, although facially neutral, in fact falls more harshly on blind employees and cannot be justified by business necessity. *See Raytheon Co. v. Hernandez*, 540 U.S. 44 (2003) (defining disparate impact claims under Title I).
- 41. Once an employee requests an accommodation, the employer must engage in an interactive process with the employee to determine the appropriate reasonable accommodation. The interactive process requires (1) direct communication between the employer and employee to explore in good faith the possible accommodations, (2) consideration of the employee's requests, and (3) offering an accommodation that is reasonable and effective. *Zivkovic v. S. Cal. Edison Co.*, 302 F.3d 1080, 1089 (9th Cir. 2002).
- 42.Ms. Watson has requested a qualified reader as an accommodation and auxiliary aide for effective communication. "Qualified reader means a person who is able

- to read effectively, accurately, and impartially using any necessary specialized vocabulary." 28 C.F.R. § 35.104.
- 43. The readers that Defendants have provided to Ms. Watson are not qualified readers, as they have lacked the basic qualifications and job descriptions necessary to accommodate Ms. Watson and provide her effective communication.
- 44. Defendants have violated the ADA in that they have not explored in good faith the possible accommodations to address the inaccessibility of IBHIS, not considered Ms. Watson's requests for a qualified reader, and not offered alternatives that are reasonable or effective.
- 45. The interactive process is an ongoing obligation. Defendants are aware or should be aware that its alternative assistance to Ms. Watson is failing. Defendants are therefore under a continuing duty to engage with Ms. Watson's request for a qualified reader. They have not done so and continue not to do so.
- 46. Defendants' conduct constitutes an ongoing and continuous violation of the ADA and its supporting regulations. Unless restrained from doing so, Defendants will continue to violate the ADA. Unless enjoined, Defendants' conduct will continue to inflict injuries for which Plaintiff has no adequate remedy at law.
- 47. Defendants have engaged in intentional discrimination in that they have failed to demonstrate good-faith efforts, in consultation with Ms. Watson, who has informed them that accommodation is needed, to identify and make a reasonable accommodation that would provide her with an equally effective opportunity and would not cause an undue hardship on the operation of business, and Defendants have engaged in a discriminatory practice or practices with malice or with reckless indifference to her federally protected rights. 42 U.S.C. §§ 1981a(a)(3) and (b). Ms. Watson is therefore entitled to compensatory and punitive damages.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

- 48.Ms. Watson re-alleges and incorporates herein all previously alleged paragraphs of the Complaint.
- 49.Ms. Watson is "an individual who has a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more of such person's major life activities," and thus a qualified individual with a disability within the meaning of Section 504. 29 U.S.C. § 705(20)(B) and 29 U.S.C. § 12102.
- 50. Section 504 provides that "no otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States ... shall, solely by reason of his or her disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance." 29 U.S.C. § 794(a).
- 51. Defendant LAC-DMH has received federal financial assistance at all relevant times, including from the Department of Health and Human Services ("HHS"). Section 504 requires the head of every executive agency to promulgate regulations necessary to carry out the Acts. 29 U.S.C. § 794(a). HHS regulations provide that "[n]o qualified person with a disability shall, on the basis of disability, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or otherwise be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity which receives Federal financial assistance." 45 C.F.R. § 84.4(a).
- 52.Defendant LAC-DMH has violated the rights of Ms. Watson under Section 504(a) and its implementing regulations through policies, actions, or inactions with respect to the right to equal participation in programs and activities that it offers that require use of IBHIS. Ms. Watson has suffered harm, as a result of Defendant's discrimination against her on the basis of her disability.
- 53. Section 504 provides that "[t]he remedies, procedures, and rights set forth in title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 ... shall be available to any person aggrieved by

70.Ms. Watson contends that IBHIS is inaccessible in violation of federal and state law. Defendants disagree with her contention.

- 71. Until IBHIS is made independently accessible for assistive technology such as screen readers, Ms. Watson contends that she is entitled to a qualified reader, a person able to read effectively, accurately, and impartially using any necessary specialized vocabulary, available throughout her work day without delay because his or her sole or prioritized task is to act as an aide to Ms. Watson, as a reasonable accommodation and to provide effective communication of information provided through IBHIS. Defendants disagree with Ms. Watson's contention.
- 72. A judicial declaration is necessary and appropriate at this time in order that each of the parties may know their respective rights and duties and act accordingly.

WHEREFORE, Ms. Watson requests relief as set forth below.

RELIEF REQUESTED

Ms. Watson prays for judgment as follows:

- a) A declaration that IBHIS is inaccessible in violation of federal and state law;
- b) A declaration that Ms. Watson is entitled to a qualified reader, a person able to read effectively, accurately, and impartially using any necessary specialized vocabulary, available throughout her work day without delay because his or her sole or prioritized task is to act as an aide to Ms. Watson, and that Defendants' refusal to provide this reasonable modification and auxiliary aide for effective communication discriminates against Ms. Watson on the basis of her disability in violation of federal and state law;
- c) A preliminary and permanent order enjoining Defendants from violating disability discrimination laws in its refusal to make IBHIS independently accessible or provide Ms. Watson a qualified reader to assist during work;
- d) Compensatory and punitive damages against Defendants, jointly and severally,

1	Timothy Elder
2	Attorneys for Plaintiffs
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