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Clerk of the Superior Court

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SUPERIOR COURT OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA
COUNTY OF ALAMEDA

EMA BELL,

Plaintiff,

vs.

TELEBRANDS CORP., WALMART,
INC.,

Defendants.

Case No.:

RC 21102433

**COMPLAINT FOR CIVIL PENALTIES AND
INJUNCTIVE RELIEF**

**(Violation of Health & Safety Code § 25249.5 et
seq.)**

Plaintiff Ema Bell ("Plaintiff"), by and through her attorneys, alleges the following cause
of action in the public interest of the citizens of the State of California.

BACKGROUND OF THE CASE

1. Plaintiff brings this representative action on behalf of all California citizens to
enforce relevant portions of Safe Drinking Water and Toxic Enforcement Act of 1986, codified at
the Health and Safety Code § 25249.5 et seq ("Proposition 65"), which reads, in relevant part,
"[n]o person in the course of doing business shall knowingly and intentionally expose any
individual to a chemical known to the state to cause cancer or reproductive toxicity without first
giving clear and reasonable warning to such individual ...". Health & Safety Code § 25249.6.

2. This complaint is a representative action brought by Plaintiff in the public interest
of the citizens of the State of California to enforce the People's right to be informed of the health
hazards caused by exposure to di(2-ethylhexyl) phthalate (DEHP), a toxic chemical found in
hanging bag organizers sold and/or distributed by defendant Telebrands Corp. ("Telebrands") and
defendant Walmart, Inc. ("Walmart") (collectively, the "Defendants") in California.

1 3. DEHP is a harmful chemical known to the State of California to cause cancer and
2 reproductive toxicity. On January 1, 1988, the State of California listed DEHP as a chemical known
3 to the State to cause cancer and it has come under the purview of Proposition 65 regulations since
4 that time. Cal. Code Regs. Tit. 27, § 27001(c); Health & Safety Code §§ 25249.8 & 25249.10(b).
5 On October 24, 2003, the State of California listed DEHP as a chemical known to cause
6 reproductive toxicity.

7 4. Proposition 65 requires all businesses with ten (10) or more employees that operate
8 within California or sell products therein to comply with Proposition 65 regulations. Included in
9 such regulations is the requirement that businesses must label any product containing a Proposition
10 65-listed chemical with a “clear and reasonable” warning before “knowingly and intentionally”
11 exposing any person to any such listed chemical.

12 5. Proposition 65 allows for civil penalties of up to \$2,500.00 per day per violation
13 for up to 365 days (up to a maximum civil penalty amount per violation of \$912,000.00) to be
14 imposed upon defendants in a civil action for violations of Proposition 65. Health & Safety Code
15 § 25249.7(b). Proposition 65 also allows for any court of competent jurisdiction to enjoin the
16 actions of a defendant which “violate or threaten to violate” the statute. Health & Safety Code §
17 25249.7.

18 6. Plaintiff alleges that Defendants distribute and/or offer for sale in California,
19 without a requisite exposure warning, hanging bag organizers (the “Products”) that expose persons
20 to DEHP.

21 7. Defendants’ failure to warn consumers and other individuals in California of the
22 health hazards associated with exposure to DEHP in conjunction with the sale and/or distribution
23 of the Products is a violation of Proposition 65 and subjects Defendants to the enjoinder and civil
24 penalties described herein.

25 8. Plaintiff seeks civil penalties against Defendants for their violations of Proposition
26 65 in accordance with Health and Safety Code § 25249.7(b).

27 9. Plaintiff also seeks injunctive relief, preliminarily and permanently, requiring
28 Defendants to provide purchasers or users of the Products with required warnings related to the

1 dangers and health hazards associated with exposure to DEHP pursuant to Health and Safety Code
2 § 25249.7(a).

3 10. Plaintiff further seeks a reasonable award of attorney's fees and costs.

4 **PARTIES**

5 11. Plaintiff is a citizen of the State of California acting in the interest of the general
6 public to promote awareness of exposures to toxic chemicals in products sold in California and to
7 improve human health by reducing hazardous substances contained in such items. She brings this
8 action in the public interest pursuant to Health and Safety Code § 25249.7(d).

9 12. Defendant Telebrands, through its business, effectively imports, distributes, sells,
10 and/or offers the Products for sale or use in the State of California, or it implies by its conduct that
11 it imports, distributes, sells, and/or offers the Products for sale or use in the State of California.
12 Plaintiff alleges that defendant Telebrands is a "person" in the course of doing business within the
13 meaning of Health & Safety Code sections 25249.6 and 25249.11.

14 13. Defendant Walmart, through its business, effectively imports, distributes, sells,
15 and/or offers the Products for sale or use in the State of California, or it implies by its conduct that
16 it imports, distributes, sells, and/or offers the Products for sale or use in the State of California.
17 Plaintiff alleges that defendant Walmart is a "person" in the course of doing business within the
18 meaning of Health & Safety Code sections 25249.6 and 25249.11.

19 **VENUE AND JURISDICTION**

20 14. Venue is proper in the County of Alameda because one or more of the instances of
21 wrongful conduct occurred, and continue to occur in this county and/or because Defendants
22 conducted, and continue to conduct, business in the County of Alameda with respect to the
23 Products.

24 15. This Court has jurisdiction over this action pursuant to California Constitution
25 Article VI, § 10, which grants the Superior Court original jurisdiction in all causes except those
26 given by statute to other trial courts. Health and Safety Code § 25249.7 allows for the enforcement
27 of violations of Proposition 65 in any Court of competent jurisdiction; therefore, this Court has
28 jurisdiction over this lawsuit.

16. This Court has jurisdiction over Defendants because each defendant is either a citizen of the State of California, has sufficient minimum contacts with the State of California, is registered with the California Secretary of State as foreign corporations authorized to do business in the State of California, and/or has otherwise purposefully availed itself of the California market. Such purposeful availment has rendered the exercise of jurisdiction by California courts consistent and permissible with traditional notions of fair play and substantial justice.

STATUTORY BACKGROUND

17. The people of the State of California declared in Proposition 65 their right “[t]o be informed about exposures to chemicals that cause cancer, birth defects, or other reproductive harm.” (Section 1(b) of Initiative Measure, Proposition 65.)

18. To effect this goal, Proposition 65 requires that individuals be provided with a “clear and reasonable warning” before being exposed to substances listed by the State of California as causing cancer or reproductive toxicity. H&S Code § 25249.6 states, in pertinent part:

No person in the course of doing business shall knowingly and intentionally expose any individual to a chemical known to the state to cause cancer or reproductive toxicity without first giving clear and reasonable warning to such individual...

19. An exposure to a chemical in a consumer product is one “which results from a person’s acquisition, purchase, storage, consumption or other reasonably foreseeable use of a consumer good, or any exposure that results from receiving a consumer service.” (27 CCR § 25602, para (b).) H&S Code § 25603(c) states that “a person in the course of doing business ... shall provide a warning to any person to whom the product is sold or transferred unless the product is packaged or labeled with a clear and reasonable warning.”

20. Pursuant to H&S Code § 25603.1, the warning may be provided by using one or more of the following methods individually or in combination:¹

a. A warning that appears on a product's label or other labeling.

¹ Alternatively, a person in the course of doing business may elect to comply with the warning requirements set out in the amended version of 27 CCR 25601, *et.seq.* as amended on August 30, 2016, and operative on August 30, 2018.

b. Identification of the product at the retail outlet in a manner which provides a warning. Identification may be through shelf labeling, signs, menus, or a combination thereof.

c. The warnings provided pursuant to subparagraphs (a) and (b) shall be prominently placed upon a product's labels or other labeling or displayed at the retail outlet with such conspicuousness, as compared with other words, statements, designs, or devices in the label, labeling or display as to render it likely to be read and understood by an ordinary individual under customary conditions of purchase or use.

d. A system of signs, public advertising identifying the system and toll-free information services, or any other system that provides clear and reasonable warnings.

21. Proposition 65 provides that any “person who violates or threatens to violate” the statute may be enjoined in a court of competent jurisdiction. (H&S Code § 25249.7.) The phrase “threaten to violate” is defined to mean creating “a condition in which there is a substantial probability that a violation will occur.” (H&S Code § 25249.11(e).) Violators are liable for civil penalties of up to \$2,500.00 per day for each violation of the Act (H&S Code § 25249.7) for up to 365 days (up to a maximum civil penalty amount per violation of \$912,000.00).

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

22. On January 1, 1988, the State of California listed DEHP as a chemical known to the State to cause cancer and it has come under the purview of Proposition 65 regulations since that time. Cal. Code Regs. Tit. 27, § 27001(c); Health & Safety Code §§ 25249.8 & 25249.10(b). On October 24, 2003, the State of California listed DEHP as a chemical known to cause reproductive toxicity. In summary, the Listed Chemical was listed under Proposition 65 as a chemical known to the State to cause cancer and reproductive toxicity.

23. The consumer exposures that are the subject of this Complaint result from dermal absorption. Users can be exposed to DEHP by dermal absorption through direct skin contact with the Products during routine use when the Products are manipulated with bare hands. DEHP from the Products can absorb to the surface of the interior contents placed in the Products that are subsequently handled, worn, or held in direct contact with skin resulting in dermal exposure to

1 DEHP. Finally, while mouthing of the Products does not seem likely, some amount of exposure
2 through ingestion can occur by touching the Products with subsequent touching of the user's hand
3 to mouth.

4 24. Defendants have manufactured, processed, marketed, distributed, offered to sell
5 and/or sold the Products in California since at least August 19, 2020. The Products continue to be
6 distributed and sold in California without the requisite warning information.

7 25. At all times relevant to this action, Defendants have knowingly and intentionally
8 exposed users and/or consumers of the Products to DEHP without first giving a clear and
9 reasonable exposure warning to such individuals.

10 26. As a proximate result of acts by each defendant, as a person in the course of doing
11 business within the meaning of H&S Code § 25249.11, individuals throughout the State of
12 California, including in Alameda County, have been exposed to DEHP without a clear and
13 reasonable warning on the Products. The individuals subject to the violative exposures include
14 normal and foreseeable users and consumers that use the Products, as well as all others exposed to
15 the Products.

16 **SATISFACTION OF NOTICE REQUIREMENTS**

17 27. On August 19, 2020, Plaintiff gave notice of alleged violation of Health and Safety
18 Code § 25249.6 (the "Notice") to Defendants concerning the exposure of California citizens to
19 DEHP contained in the Products without proper warning, subject to a private action to Defendants
20 and to the California Attorney General's office and the offices of the County District attorneys and
21 City Attorneys for each city with a population greater than 750,000 persons wherein the herein
22 violations allegedly occurred.

23 28. The Notice complied with all procedural requirements of Proposition 65 including
24 the attachment of a Certificate of Merit affirming that Plaintiff's counsel had consulted with at
25 least one person with relevant and appropriate expertise who reviewed relevant data regarding
26 DEHP exposure, and that counsel believed there was meritorious and reasonable cause for a private
27 action.

1 29. After receiving the Notice, and to Plaintiff's best information and belief, none of
2 the noticed appropriate public enforcement agencies have commenced and diligently prosecuted a
3 cause of action against Defendants under Proposition 65 to enforce the alleged violations which
4 are the subject of the Notice.

5 30. Plaintiff is commencing this action more than sixty (60) days from the date of the
6 Notice to Defendants, as required by law.

7 **FIRST CAUSE OF ACTION**

8 **(By Plaintiff against Defendants for the Violation of Proposition 65)**

9 31. Plaintiff hereby repeats and incorporates by reference paragraphs 1 through 30 of
10 this Complaint as though fully set forth herein.

11 32. Defendants have, at all times mentioned herein, acted as distributor, and/or retailer
12 of the Product.

13 33. The Products contain DEHP, a hazardous chemical found on the Proposition 65 list
14 of chemicals known to be hazardous to human health.

15 34. The Product does not comply with the Proposition 65 warning requirements.

16 35. Plaintiff, based on her best information and belief, avers that at all relevant times
17 herein, and at least since August 19, 2020, continuing until the present, that Defendants have
18 continued to knowingly and intentionally expose California users and consumers of the Product to
19 DEHP without providing required warnings under Proposition 65.

20 36. The exposures that are the subject of the Notice result from the purchase,
21 acquisition, handling and recommended use of the Products. Consequently, the primary route of
22 exposure to these chemicals is through dermal absorption. Users can be exposed to DEHP by
23 dermal absorption through direct skin contact with the Products during routine use when the
24 Products are manipulated with bare hands. DEHP from the Products can absorb to the surface of
25 the interior contents placed in the Products that are subsequently handled, worn, or held in direct
26 contact with skin resulting in dermal exposure to DEHP. Finally, while mouthing of the Products
27 does not seem likely, some amount of exposure through ingestion can occur by touching the
28 Products with subsequent touching of the user's hand to mouth.

1 37. Plaintiff, based on her best information and belief, avers that such exposures will
2 continue every day until clear and reasonable warnings are provided to purchasers and users or
3 until this known toxic chemical is removed from the Products.

4 38. Defendants have knowledge that the normal and reasonably foreseeable use of the
5 Products exposes individuals to DEHP, and Defendants intend that exposures to DEHP will occur
6 by its deliberate, non-accidental participation in the importation, distribution, sale and offering of
7 the Products to consumers in California

8 39. Plaintiff has engaged in good faith efforts to resolve the herein claims prior to this
9 Complaint.

10 40. Pursuant to Health and Safety Code § 25249.7(b), as a consequence of the above
11 described acts, Defendants are liable for a maximum civil penalty of \$2,500 per day per violation.

12 41. Pursuant to Health and Safety Code § 25249.7(a), this Court is specifically
13 authorized to grant injunctive relief in favor of Plaintiff and against Defendants.

14 **PRAYER FOR RELIEF**

15 WHEREFORE, Plaintiff demands judgment against Defendants and requests the following
16 relief:

17 A. That the court assess civil penalties against each defendant in the amount of \$2,500
18 per day for each violation for up to 365 days (up to a maximum civil penalty amount per
19 violation of \$912,000.00) in accordance with Health and Safety Code § 25249.7(b);

20 B. That the court preliminarily and permanently enjoin Defendants mandating
21 Proposition 65 compliant warnings on the Products;

22 C. That the court grant Plaintiff reasonable attorney's fees and costs of suit, in the
23 amount of \$50,000.00.

24 D. That the court grant any further relief as may be just and proper.

25 Dated: May 17, 2021

BRODSKY SMITH

26 By: _____

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