#### IN THE SUPREME COURT OF PENNSYLVANIA

OFFICE OF DISCIPLINARY COUNSEL, : No. 2465 Disciplinary Docket No. 3

Petitioner : No. 43 DB 2018

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v. : Attorney Registration No. 77632

ERIC WILLIAM WASSEL, : (Luzerne County)

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Respondent

### <u>ORDER</u>

### PER CURIAM

**AND NOW**, this 9<sup>th</sup> day of May, 2018, upon consideration of the Recommendation of the Three-Member Panel of the Disciplinary Board, the Joint Petition in Support of Discipline on Consent is granted, and Eric William Wassel is suspended on consent from the Bar of this Commonwealth for a period of two years. The suspension is stayed in its entirety, and he is placed on probation for a period of two years, subject to the following conditions:

- 1. Respondent shall not engage in conduct that is in violation of any federal, state or local statute or ordinance that provides for a possible sentence of imprisonment;
- 2. Respondent shall report to the Office of Disciplinary Counsel if he is charged with violations of any federal, state or local statute or ordinance that provides for a possible sentence of imprisonment;
- 3. Respondent shall not engage in conduct that is a violation of the Pennsylvania Rules of Professional Conduct or the Pennsylvania Rules of Disciplinary

Enforcement; more specifically, Respondent has escrowed the diverted funds

regardless of his view or the merits of the dispute;

4. Respondent shall litigate the fee dispute with Fellerman & Ciarimboli Law Firm

in good faith and comply with the terms of any settlement or final judgment; and

5. Respondent shall not engage in conduct that is in violation of the

corresponding Rules of Professional Conduct in any other state where he obtains

or maintains a law license.

Further, Respondent shall pay the costs incurred by the Disciplinary Board in the

investigation and prosecution of this matter. See Pa.R.D.E. 208(g).

A True Copy Patricia Nicola As Of 5/9/2018

Chief Clerk Supreme Court of Pennsylvania

OFFICE OF DISCIPLINARY COUNSEL,

Petitioner,

43 DB 2018

No. DB 201

٧.

Attorney Reg. No. 77632

ERIC WILLIAM WASSEL,

Respondent

(Luzerne County)

# JOINT PETITION IN SUPPORT OF DISCIPLINE ON CONSENT PURSUANT TO Pa. R.D.E. 215(d)

Petitioner, Office of Disciplinary Counsel ("ODC"), by Paul J. Killion, Chief Disciplinary Counsel, and Anthony A. Czuchnicki, Disciplinary Counsel, and Respondent, Eric William Wassel, and Respondent's counsel, Robert H. Davis, Jr., Esquire, file this Joint Petition in Support of Discipline on Consent under Rule 215(d) of the Pennsylvania Rules of Disciplinary Enforcement (hereinafter "Pa. R.D.E.") and respectfully state and aver the following:

1. Petitioner, whose principal Office is located at the Pennsylvania Judicial Center, 601 Commonwealth Avenue, Suite 2700, P.O. Box 62485, Harrisburg, PA 17106, is invested, pursuant to Pa. R.D.E. 207, with the power and the duty to investigate all matters involving alleged misconduct of an attorney admitted to practice law in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and to prosecute all disciplinary proceedings brought in accordance with the various provisions of the aforesaid Rules.

FILED 3/20/2018

The Disciplinary Board of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania

- 2. Respondent, Eric William Wassel, was born on April 5, 1970, was admitted to practice law in Pennsylvania on May 29, 1996, has a registered public address of 126 Main Street, Pittston, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, 18640, and is subject to the disciplinary jurisdiction of the Disciplinary Board of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania.
  - 3. Respondent is represented by Robert H. Davis, Jr., Esquire, in this matter.

# SPECIFIC FACTUAL ADMISSIONS AND RULES OF PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT VIOLATED

- 4. Relative to this Petition, Respondent was employed by three different firms in the Scranton area, beginning in 1999: Anzalone Law Offices ("ALO"); O'Malley & Langan ("O&L"); and Fellerman & Ciarimboli ("F&C").
- 5. A short time after beginning his tenure at ALO, Respondent was diagnosed with a serious medical condition; this condition remained stable for more than a decade.
- 6. After 12 years at ALO, in or about 2011, circumstances outside of Respondent's control prompted his departure from the firm on amicable terms; he retained several clients who he continued to represent following the departure.
  - 7. Thereafter, Respondent became employed with O&L in January 2012.
- 8. When becoming associated with O&L, Respondent had an agreement with O&L to handle the representation of prior clients outside the scope of his employment with O&L.
- 9. During his employment at O&L, Respondent's medical condition significantly worsened, requiring treatment and careful monitoring thereafter.
- 10. After approximately nine months at O&L, Respondent became concerned that O&L would be downsizing. Worried about his medical condition and the loss of health

benefits should his employment be terminated, Respondent was recruited for employment with F&C, and accepted a position there.

- 11. During his departure from O&L, Respondent notified his clients of his departure from the firm and, after receiving permission from O&L to retain the clients he brought with him to the firm, Respondent brought those clients with him to F&C; Respondent parted with O&L on amicable terms.
- 12. During employment discussions with F&C, the parties orally agreed that Respondent could retain his migrating clientele, and that he would not split any attorneys' fees obtained from the migrating clients with F&C.
- 13. In furtherance of that understanding, Respondent utilized a separate IOLTA Account, which was outside F&C's control, to deposit any migrating clients' fiduciary funds which came into Respondent's possession.
- 14. This IOLTA Account was not created during or after the employment negotiations with F&C; the IOLTA Account was established after Respondent left ALO.<sup>1</sup>
- 15. During employment discussions with F&C, it was also orally agreed that Respondent would receive a 30% rainmaker<sup>2</sup> fee for every new client he brought to F&C.
- 16. In furtherance of that understanding, Respondent did, in fact, refer multiple clients to F&C over the course of his employment, and was paid the 30 percent rainmaker fee until his termination.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Respondent established a solo practice for a very brief period, approximately 2 months, before accepting employment at O&L.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> A "rainmaker" is the colloquial term for a person who generates income for a business or organization by brokering deals or attracting clients or funds.

- 17. F&C did not provide Respondent with a written employment agreement or even a letter upon his hiring which would have confirmed the parties' mutual understanding of Respondent's employment.
  - 18. Respondent worked for F&C for three years beginning in 2012.
- 19. In 2014, Respondent was entitled to an \$80,000 bonus; however, F&C did not distribute his bonus for approximately four months. This delay by F&C caused strain on Respondent's working relationship at the firm.
- 20. Thereafter, Respondent diverted funds from new clients to his separate IOLTA Account, rather than forwarding them to F&C.
- 21. On occasion, Respondent also referred potential clients to outside counsel and personally accepted the referral fees from outside counsel, which F&C averred was improper, but which has not been established by any written agreement.
- 22. Respondent was terminated from his employment in November 2015 for "job performance."
  - 23. On March 15, 2016, F&C filed its complaint with ODC.
- 24. In its complaint to ODC, F&C acknowledged the oral employment agreement which permitted Respondent to retain some of his clientele; however, F&C disputed the *specific* number of clients to which the agreement pertained.
- 25. F&C also did not dispute that Respondent's oral employment agreement entitled him to rainmaker fees for cases he brought to F&C.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Were this matter to proceed to a hearing, Respondent would testify that he believes he was terminated from his position because F&C was having financial problems and was trying to avoid having not to pay him his rainmaker fees for pending matters which were soon to be concluded, and would equal over \$200,000. Respondent would further testify that the cases involving the rainmaker fees have since resolved, and the fees for said rainmakers totaling in excess of \$200,000 have not been paid to Respondent to date.

- 26. However, F&C asserts that Respondent could not refer clients to other attorneys or personally accept a referral fee, taking the position that F&C had a right to first refusal as well as an entitlement to any referral fee.
  - 27. There is no writing evincing any such agreement.
- 28. Shortly after terminating Respondent, F&C undertook investigation and discovered that Respondent had diverted fees from some clients, and had also referred cases and accepted referral fees.
  - 29. F&C claimed entitlement to all such fees.
- 30. On December 14, 2016, Respondent, through his counsel Kevin Toth, Esquire, provided an informal memorandum to F&C, prepared for purposes of settling the matter, which detailed the funds to which F&C might have a potential claim.<sup>4</sup>
  - 31. The parties failed to settle their dispute.
- 32. On March 8, 2017, F&C filed a writ of summons against Respondent to collect fees which it alleged were due to the firm.<sup>5</sup>
- 33. On March 16, 2017, Respondent provided a second informal memorandum to F&C, indicating that he believed he was entitled to rainmaker fees which would fully offset any amounts that were due to F&C.6

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> This informal memorandum included a variety of additional matters which F&C had not included in its complaint to ODC; it was provided to ODC two months later in response to Respondent's Answer to ODC's Request for Statement of Position ("Form DB-7").

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> As previously indicated, Respondent's employment with F&C was terminated in November 2015. Termination occurred four months prior to F&C filing the complaint with ODC, and sixteen months prior to filing the writ of summons. It should also be noted that to date, approximately twelve additional months have passed, yet a civil complaint has not been filed against Respondent in that matter, even though F&C's complaint to ODC was significantly detailed and could have served as a template for a civil complaint, with little modification.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> While Respondent acknowledges that any alleged "offset" does not justify his misconduct, nor does it mitigate the seriousness of the misconduct, ODC is cognizant of the fact that this counterclaim could impact the credibility of ODC's witnesses and confuse the issue, were this matter to proceed to a hearing.

- 34. During ODC's investigation, Respondent was forthcoming with ODC regarding the extent of his misconduct, as well as any potential claims F&C could make against him for fees.
- 35. In addition to Respondent's full cooperation, it is noted that he has no prior disciplinary record and has been an actively involved member of the Luzerne County Bar Association, including serving on its Executive Committee.
- 36. During its investigation, ODC determined that none of the funds in dispute were client funds, and all client funds held by Respondent at all points in time were properly maintained.
- 37. Were this matter to proceed to a hearing, Respondent would testify to his understanding of his oral employment agreement.
- 38. Regarding former clients, Respondent would testify that his oral employment agreement permitted him to retain *all* former clients that he had previously provided services to, prior to accepting employment at F&C.
- 39. Regarding any allegedly improper referrals, Respondent would testify that he was unaware of F&C's referral policy, and that he had no ill intent in referring cases to outside counsel without first discussing the matter with F&C, as evidenced by the fact that his referral fees, which totaled 30%, would have been approximately the same as his rainmaker fee through F&C.
- 40. Respondent would also testify that the matters which were referred to outside counsel were outside of F&C's practice area and/or geographic locality.

Furthermore, during ODC's investigation, F&C refused to directly answer requests for information about the fees, taking the position that Respondent by his actions forfeited any right to the fees. F&C has neither confirmed nor denied that any attorneys' fees which might be due to Respondent are available and appropriately escrowed pursuant to the Rules of Professional Conduct.

- 41. Respondent does, however, admit to diverting fees in three matters totaling approximately \$7,200.
- 42. In good faith compliance with RPC 1.15(f), Respondent has escrowed the diverted funds to which F&C has claims, regardless of the fact that it is his position that he is entitled to significantly more in fees from F&C.
- 43. Respondent agrees that these funds will remain in escrow until the dispute with F&C is concluded.
- 44. Furthermore, while employed at F&C, Respondent had three matters which later settled to which F&C was entitled to a fee pursuant to its fee agreement; the clients in these matters elected to remain with Respondent regardless of his termination from F&C. Respondent has distributed the appropriate funds to F&C for those cases.

### **DISCIPLINARY RULE VIOLATIONS**

- 45. Respondent admits to violating the following Rules of Professional Conduct in this matter:
  - a. RPC 1.15(d) Upon receiving Rule 1.15 Funds or property which are not Fiduciary Funds or property, a lawyer shall promptly notify the client or third person, consistent with the requirements of applicable law;
  - b. RPC 1.15(e) [A] lawyer shall promptly deliver to the client or third person any property, including but not limited to Rule 1.15 Funds, that the client or third person is entitled to receive and, upon request by the client or third person, shall promptly render a full accounting regarding the property ...; and
  - c. RPC 8.4(c) It is professional misconduct for a lawyer to ... engage in conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit or misrepresentation.

### SPECIFIC JOINT RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISCIPLINE

Petitioner and Respondent jointly recommend that the appropriate discipline for

Respondent is a two-year suspension, stayed in its entirety, pending the successful completion of a two-year probation period.

Respondent's probationary period will be subject to the following conditions:

- during this probationary period, Respondent shall not engage in conduct that is in violation of any federal, state, or local statute or ordinance that provides for a possible sentence of imprisonment;
- during this probationary period, Respondent shall report to the Office of Disciplinary Counsel his being charged with violations of any federal, state, or local statute or ordinance that provides for a possible sentence of imprisonment within 20 days of his being charged;
- during this probationary period, Respondent shall not engage in conduct that is in violation of the Pennsylvania Rules of Professional Conduct or the Pennsylvania Rules of Disciplinary Enforcement; and more specifically, Respondent has escrowed the diverted funds regardless of his view of the merits of the dispute;
- 4. Respondent agrees to litigate the fee dispute with F&C in good faith and to comply with the terms of any settlement or final judgment; and
- during this probationary period, Respondent shall not engage in conduct that is in violation of the corresponding Rules of Professional Conduct in any other state wherein he obtains or maintains his law license.

Respondent hereby consents to the discipline being imposed upon him by the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania. Attached to this Petition is Respondent's executed Affidavit required by Pa. R.D.E. 215(d), stating that he consents to the recommended

discipline and including the mandatory acknowledgements contained in Pa. R.D.E. 215(d)(1) through (4).

There is no formulistic approach or *per se* discipline for attorney misconduct. Office of Disciplinary Counsel v. Lucarini, 472 A.2d 186 (Pa. 1983). The Pennsylvania Supreme Court has clearly evidenced that the conversion of firm funds, rather than client funds, is no less egregious an offense. In re Anonymous (Devine), 32 DB 89, 13 D. & C.4th 478 (1992). However, the Court has also explained that discipline is not intended as punishment, but rather to protect the public from unfit attorneys. Office of Disciplinary Counsel v. Keller, 506 A.2d 872 (Pa. 1986). The discipline to be imposed must be determined on a totality of the facts of each individual matter. Lucarini, at 190.

Discipline relating to the misappropriation of funds varies, typically including some form of suspension, but *can* be resolved with lesser suspensions or *private* discipline in *rare* instances. See e.g. Office of Disciplinary Counsel v. Blatt, 54 DB 2005 (consent petition for six-month suspension); see also Office of Disciplinary Counsel v. Muir, 79 DB 2002 (Hearing Committee recommended private discipline; Disciplinary Board modified to three-month suspension which was accepted by the Court). In instances where the respondent-attorney has been cooperative with ODC's investigation and engaged in no deceptive conduct with regards to the investigation, the Board has imposed a suspension of less than one-year and one-day. Compare Office of Disciplinary Counsel v. Rowe, 29 and 90 DB 2006 (Bd. Rpt. 2007) (one-year and one-day suspension), with Office of Disciplinary Counsel v. Le Bon, 115 DB 2000 (Bd. Rpt. 2001) (one-year suspension) and Office of Disciplinary Counsel v. Stander, 96 DB 2014 (consent to one-year suspension, approved by the Board and the Court).

Additional deceptive conduct evidences a lack of remorse. For instance, in Rowe, after misappropriating client fiduciary funds totaling \$9,000, respondent-Rowe tried to cover up his misdeed by "selectively" providing ODC with bank records for only the times which would indicate sufficient funds were available in his IOLTA Account. Comparatively, in Le Bon, respondent-Le Bon readily admitted to his misappropriation of firm funds warranting a suspension of less than one-year and one-day.

F&C likens this matter to <u>In re Anonymous (Fry)</u>, 49 DB 1998 (Pa. 2001).<sup>7</sup> Respondent-Fry initially received a six-month suspension for converting six checks belonging to his firm totaling \$31,500 over a four month period. The Court declined to accept the Board's recommendation of a six-month suspension and instead suspended the attorney for a year and a day. One stark difference between the conduct of respondent-Fry and the present matter, however, is the sheer volume of *provable* misappropriated funds.

There is a significant disparity between the positions of Respondent and his former firm. The complaint filed by F&C alleged this case involved "theft," with F&C claiming entitlement to upwards of \$200,000. This amount appears to constitute the maximum amount F&C could conceivably be entitled to without any calculation of its potential obligations to Respondent. Respondent characterizes the matter as "primarily a fee dispute," particularly when discussing referral fees and attorneys' fees acquired from settlement of migrating clients' cases. Respondent candidly concedes that the firm, if it could prove its claims, *could* be due some portion of approximately \$80,000.8 Moreover,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> F&C is represented by former Disciplinary Counsel.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> This amount does *not* consider Respondent's 30% rainmaker fees, which would reduce the amount F&C might be entitled to closer to \$50,000.

Respondent acknowledges that he engaged in "self-help" relating to three matters totaling \$7,200 and expresses remorse for this misconduct. A significant concern here is that the lack of any written agreement between the parties, coupled with the acknowledged oral authorization that Respondent could retain some clients, puts ODC in the position of making determinations that are best left to the Court of Common Pleas.<sup>9</sup>

Stander is also comparable to the present matter with the diverted funds at issue constituting firm funds; however, a stark distinction between the present matter and Stander is the fact that respondent-Stander was provided a written offer of employment containing the terms of his prospective employment. Respondent-Stander also signed an employment agreement which set forth his obligations to the firm. Although no agreement was reduced to writing regarding respondent-Stander's former clients, his employment agreement explicitly precluded retention of clients separate and apart from the firm.

In the present matter, it was acknowledged by F&C that Respondent would be permitted to retain *some* clients. This type of arrangement appears somewhat atypical of the customary associate attorney position. Notably, Respondent had a similar arrangement with O&LWithout a writing evidencing a clearer understanding between the parties, ODC cannot meet its burden of proof and demonstrate that Respondent misappropriated attorneys' fees relating to *any* migrating client. Further, while Respondent may have referred matters to outside counsel without F&C's consent, without

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> The total amount due to F&C would require a factual determination that F&C's position regarding the oral employment agreement is accurate. The Disciplinary Board, however, is not the appropriate forum to air civil grievances, or to make a factual finding regarding the validity of the parties' oral employment agreement.

any evidence that Respondent had been advised of, or agreed to, F&C's alleged policies, ODC cannot meet its burden and demonstrate that Respondent misappropriated referral fees for any referrals made while in F&C's employ. Regardless, Respondent acknowledges his wrongdoing regarding three matters which began while employed at F&C. Respondent agrees that some form of suspension is warranted. However, the joint recommendation to stay the suspension in its entirety reflects the totality of the circumstances relating to this particular matter. A stayed suspension alerts the public and the profession to Respondent's misconduct. The requirement that Respondent escrow fees, participate in the litigation in good faith, and abide by any settlement or judgment protects F&C's entitlement to the funds. Respondent accepts a longer term of suspension for being granted the opportunity to continue to practice.

In support of Petitioner and Respondent's Joint Recommendation, it is respectfully submitted that additional mitigating circumstances are that:

- Respondent has no record of prior discipline in over two decades of practice;
- Respondent has admitted to engaging in misconduct and violating the charged Rules of Professional Conduct;
- Respondent has a serious medical condition which existed prior to the misconduct;
- 4. Respondent has fully cooperated with ODC's investigation;
- 5. Respondent's employment agreement, as well as F&C's entitlement to funds, is subject to dispute based upon the fact that there is no written confirmation of the parties understanding;

- 6. Respondent has adequately safeguarded funds which remain in dispute;
- Respondent actively pursued settlement of the dispute with F&C;
- 8. Respondent has voluntarily relinquished attorneys' fees to F&C relating to other previously pending matters; and
- 9. Respondent is remorseful for and embarrassed by his conduct and understands he should be disciplined, as evidenced by his consent to receiving a two-year suspension.

The parties respectfully submit that a two-year suspension, stayed in its entirety, pending the successful completion of a two-year probation period, given the facts of the instant matter, is consistent with the above cited disciplinary authority.

WHEREFORE, Petitioner and Respondent respectfully request that pursuant to Pa. R.D.E. 215, a three-member panel of the Disciplinary Board review and approve the above Joint Petition in Support of Discipline on Consent and file its recommendation with the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania in which it is recommended that the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania enter an Order suspending Respondent for two years, stayed in its entirety, pending the successful completion of a two-year probation period, for the conduct set forth herein.

Respectfully submitted,

ate: 3/(9\*/ *(§*\*

Bv:

Anthony A. Czuchnick

Disciplinary Counsel

Attorney Registration No. 312620

601 Commonwealth Avenue, Suite 5800

P.O. Box 62675

Harrisburg, PA 17106-2675 Telephone (717) 772-8572 Date: 3-19-18

Ву:

Eric William Wassel
Respondent
Attorney Registration No. 77632
126 Main Street

Pittston, PA 18640

Telephone (570) 855-4879

Robert H. Davis, Jr., Esquire
121 Pine St # 2
Harrisburg, PA 17101

OFFICE OF DISCIPLINARY	COUNSEL
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Petitioner,

No. DB 201

٧.

Attorney Reg. No. 77632

ERIC WILLIAM WASSEL,

(Luzerne County)

Respondent

### **VERIFICATION**

The statements made in the foregoing Joint Petition in Support of Discipline on Consent Pursuant to Pa. R.D.E. 215(d) are true and correct to the best of my knowledge, information, and belief. This statement is made subject to the penalties of 18 Pa. C.S. § 4904 relating to unsworn falsification to authorities.

Date:_	3,	19	118	By:
				–

Anthony A. Czudhnicki

Disciplinary Counsel

Attorney Registration No. 312620

601 Commonwealth Avenue, Suite 5800

P.O. Box 62675

Harrisburg, PA 17106-2675 Telephone (717) 772-8572

Date: <u>3-19-18</u>

Eric William Wassel

Respondent

By:

Attorney Régistration No. 77632

126 Main Street

Pittston, PA 18640

Telephone (570) 855-4879

Robert H. Davis, Jr., Esquire
121 Pine St # 2
Harrisburg, PA 17101

OFFICE OF DISCIPLINARY COUNSEL,

Petitioner,

No. DB 201

٧.

Attorney Reg. No. 77632

ERIC WILLIAM WASSEL,

(Luzerne County)

Respondent

## RESPONDENT'S AFFIDAVIT UNDER RULE 215(d) OF THE PENNSYLVANIA RULES OF DISCIPLINARY ENFORCEMENT

I, Eric William Wassel, Respondent in the above-captioned matter, hereby consent to the imposition of a two-year suspension, stayed in its entirety, pending the successful completion of a two-year probation period, as jointly recommended by the Petitioner, Office of Disciplinary Counsel, and myself, in a Joint Petition in Support of Discipline on Consent and further state:

- 1. My consent is freely and voluntarily rendered; I am not being subjected to coercion or duress; I am fully aware of the implications of submitting the consent;
- 2. I am aware there is presently pending a proceeding involving allegations that I have been guilty of misconduct as set forth in the Joint Petition;
  - 3. I acknowledge that the material facts set forth in the Joint Petition are true;
- 4. I consent because I know that if the charges continued to be prosecuted in the pending proceeding, I could not successfully defend against them; and

I acknowledge that I am fully aware of my right to consult and employ 5. counsel to represent me in the instant proceeding, and have done so.

Eric William Wassel Respondent

Attorney Registration No. 77632

126 Main Street

Pittston, PA 18640

Telephone (570) 855-4879

OFFICE OF DISCIPLINARY COUNSEL,

Petitioner,

No. DB 201

٧.

Attorney Reg. No. 77632

ERIC WILLIAM WASSEL,

(Luzerne County)

Respondent

### **CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE**

I hereby certify that I am this day serving the foregoing document upon all parties of record in this proceeding in accordance with the requirements of Pa. R.A.P. 121.

Electronic Mail, return receipt requested, as follows:

Eric William Wassel c/o Robert H. Davis, Jr., Esquire 121 Pine St # 2 Harrisburg, PA 17101 Ethiclaw45@gmail.com

Date: 3 12 18

Anthony A. Czuchnicki

Disciplinary Counsel

Attorney Registration No. 312620

601 Commonwealth Avenue, Suite 5800

P.O. Box 62675

Harrisburg, PA 17106-2675 Telephone (717) 772-8572