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SENATE BILL NO. 259

Offered January 10, 2024

Prefiled January 9, 2024

A *BILL to amend and reenact §§ 8.01-267.1 and 40.1-27.3 of the Code of Virginia, relating to civil actions filed on behalf of multiple persons; award of damages in action for employer retaliation.*

Patrons—Surovell and Bagby

Referred to Committee for Courts of Justice

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of Virginia:

- 1. That §§ 8.01-267.1 and 40.1-27.3 of the Code of Virginia are amended and reenacted as follows: § 8.01-267.1. Standards governing consolidation, etc., and transfer.**

On motion of any party, a circuit court may enter an order *certifying a class* or joining, coordinating, consolidating or transferring civil actions as provided in this chapter upon finding that:

1. Separate civil actions brought by (i) six or more plaintiffs or (ii) a plaintiff on behalf of multiple similarly situated persons involve common questions of law or fact and arise out of the same transaction, occurrence, or series of transactions or occurrences;

2. The common questions of law or fact predominate and are significant to the actions; and

3. The order (i) will promote the ends of justice and the just and efficient conduct and disposition of the actions, and (ii) is consistent with each party's right to due process of law, and (iii) does not prejudice each individual party's right to a fair and impartial resolution of each action.

Factors to be considered by the court include, but are not limited to, (i) the nature of the common questions of law or fact; (ii) the convenience of the parties, witnesses, and counsel; (iii) the relative stages of the actions and the work of counsel; (iv) the efficient utilization of judicial facilities and personnel, *including the number of potential class members*; (v) the calendar of the courts; (vi) the likelihood and disadvantages of duplicative and inconsistent rulings, orders, or judgments; (vii) the likelihood of prompt settlement of the actions without the entry of the order; and (viii) as to joint trials by jury, the likelihood of prejudice or confusion; and (ix) *the interests of justice, including access to justice.*

The court may organize and manage the *certified class* or combined litigation and enter further orders consistent with the right of each party to a fair trial as may be appropriate to avoid unnecessary costs, duplicative litigation, or delay and to assure fair and efficient conduct and resolution of the litigation, including orders that organize the parties into groups with like interest; appoint counsel to have lead responsibility for certain matters; allocate costs and attorney fees to separate issues into common questions that require treatment on a consolidated basis and individual cases that do not; and stay discovery on the issues that are not consolidated.

§ 40.1-27.3. Retaliatory action against employee prohibited.

A. An employer shall not discharge, discipline, threaten, discriminate against, or penalize an employee, or take other retaliatory action regarding an employee's compensation, terms, conditions, location, or privileges of employment, because the employee:

1. Or a person acting on behalf of the employee in good faith reports a violation of any federal or state law or regulation to a supervisor or to any governmental body or law-enforcement official;

2. Is requested by a governmental body or law-enforcement official to participate in an investigation, hearing, or inquiry;

3. Refuses to engage in a criminal act that would subject the employee to criminal liability;

4. Refuses an employer's order to perform an action that violates any federal or state law or regulation and the employee informs the employer that the order is being refused for that reason; or

5. Provides information to or testifies before any governmental body or law-enforcement official conducting an investigation, hearing, or inquiry into any alleged violation by the employer of federal or state law or regulation.

B. This section does not:

1. Authorize an employee to make a disclosure of data otherwise protected by law or any legal privilege;

2. Permit an employee to make statements or disclosures knowing that they are false or that they are in reckless disregard of the truth; or

3. Permit disclosures that would violate federal or state law or diminish or impair the rights of any person to the continued protection of confidentiality of communications provided by common law.

C. A person who alleges a violation of this section may bring a civil action in a court of competent

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59 jurisdiction within one year of the employer's *final* prohibited retaliatory action. The court may order as
60 a remedy to the employee ~~(i)~~ an injunction to restrain continued violation of this section, ~~(ii)~~ and the
61 court or jury may order (i) the reinstatement of the employee to the same position held before the
62 retaliatory action or to an equivalent position; and ~~(iii)~~ (ii) compensation for lost wages, benefits, and
63 other remuneration, together with interest thereon, as well as reasonable attorney fees and costs. *The*
64 court or jury may award treble damages upon a finding that such violation of this section was willful.
65 **2. That the Supreme Court of Virginia shall promulgate rules no later than November 1, 2024,**
66 **governing the certification of a class or the joining, coordinating, consolidating, or transferring of**
67 **civil actions pursuant to this act. Such rules shall be no more restrictive in permitting class actions**
68 **than those contained in Rule 23 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure.**
69 **3. That the first enactment of this act shall become effective on January 1, 2025.**