

Case No. SC95759

IN THE SUPREME COURT OF MISSOURI

STATE OF MISSOURI EX REL. CAESARS
ENTERTAINMENT OPERATING CO., INC., ET AL.,

Appellants

v.

MISSOURI COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS, ET AL.,

Respondents

APPELLANTS' SUBSTITUTE BRIEF

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

JURISDICTIONAL STATEMENT 1

STATEMENT OF FACTS 5

POINTS RELIED ON..... 8

ARGUMENT 11

Standard of Review for all Claims 11

Analysis 12

 I. THE CIRCUIT COURT ERRED IN DISMISSING APPELLANTS’
 PETITION FOR PRELIMINARY AND PERMANENT WRIT OF
 MANDAMUS BECAUSE RESPONDENTS MCHR AND
 DIRECTOR HAD A MINISTERIAL DUTY TO DETERMINE
 THEIR JURISDICTION TO ISSUE A RIGHT TO SUE LETTER
 AND TO DISMISS ANY OF GLEASON’S UNTIMELY CLAIMS,
 IN THAT GLEASON’S CHARGE OF DISCRIMINATION
 INCLUDED UNTIMELY CLAIMS. 12

 II. THE CIRCUIT COURT ERRED IN DISMISSING APPELLANTS’
 PETITION FOR PRELIMINARY AND PERMANENT WRIT OF
 MANDAMUS BECAUSE MANDAMUS WAS APPROPRIATE
 PURSUANT TO RSMo. § 213.085.2, § 536.150, AND FARROW
 V. SAINT FRANCIS MED. CTR., 407 S.W.3D 579 (MO. BANC
 2013), IN THAT APPELLANTS SOUGHT REVIEW OF

RESPONDENTS’ ISSUANCE OF A RIGHT TO SUE LETTER
ON GLEASON’S UNTIMELY CLAIMS..... 20

III. THE CIRCUIT COURT ERRED IN FINDING THAT
APPELLANTS PRESERVED THEIR RIGHT TO RAISE THE
ISSUE IN ANY SUBSEQUENT CIVIL ACTION BY RAISING
THE TIMELINESS ISSUE BEFORE THE MCHR BECAUSE
FARROW V. SAINT FRANCIS MED. CTR., 407 s.w.3D 579 (MO.
BANC 2013) MANDATES THAT THE PROPER PROCEDURE
FOR CHALLENGING THE MCHR’S ISSUANCE OF A RIGHT
TO SUE LETTER ON UNTIMELY CLAIMS IS BY SEEKING
JUDICIAL REVIEW OF THE MCHR’S ADMINISTRATIVE
ACTION, IN THAT SUCH PROCESS IS PRESCRIBED BY
RSMo. § 213.085.2 AND § 536.150..... 24

CONCLUSION26

CERTIFICATE OF COMPLIANCE.....27

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE28

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

	Page(s)
Cases	
<i>City of St. Joseph v. Vill. of Country Club,</i>	
163 S.W.3d 905, 907 (Mo. banc 2005).....	11
<i>Crocker v. Crocker,</i>	
126 S.W.3d 724 (Mo. Ct. App. 2008).....	11
<i>Farrow v. Saint Francis Med. Ctr.,</i>	
407 S.W.3d (Mo. banc 2013).....	7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 24, 25
<i>Forlong Cos., Ins. v. City of Kansas City,</i>	
189 S.W.3d 157 (Mo. banc 2006).....	9, 20
<i>Gleason v. Caesar’s Entertainment Operating Company, LLC, et al.,</i>	
Case No. 14CY-CV08742	19
<i>Grissom v. First Nat. Ins. Agency,</i>	
364 S.W.3d 728 (Mo. Ct. App. S.D. 2012).....	8, 14
<i>Halloran v. Houlihan’s Restaurants, Inc.,</i>	
2013 WL 3353870 (W.D. Mo. July 3, 2013).....	8, 14
<i>Hodges v. Northwest Airlines, Inc.,</i>	
990 F.2d 1030 (8th Cir. 1993)	8, 15
<i>Igoe v. Dep’t of Labor and Indus. Relations of State of Mo.,</i>	
152 S.W.3d 284 (Mo. 2005)	8, 16

Lemay Fire Prot. Dist. v. St. Louis County,
340 S.W.3d 292 (Mo. App. E.D. 2011) 11, 23

Nat’l R.R. Passenger Corp. v. Morgan,
536 U.S. 101 (2002)..... 8, 15

Pollock v. Wetterau Food Dist. Group,
11 S.W.3d 754 (Mo. Ct. App. E.D. 1999) 8, 14

*Public School Retirement System of School Dist. of Kansas City v. Missouri
Comm’n on Human Rights*,
188 S.W.3d 35 (Mo. Ct. App. W.D. 2006)..... 8, 9, 17, 18, 20, 21

State ex rel. Ashby Road Partners, LLC v. State Tax Commission,
297 S.W.3d 80 (Mo. banc 2009)..... 2

State ex rel. Martin Erb v. Missouri Comm’n on Human Rights,
77 S.W.3d 600 (Mo. banc 2002)..... 9, 21, 23

State ex rel. Missouri Public Defender Com’n v. Waters,
370 S.W.3d 592 (Mo. banc 2012)..... 10, 23

State ex rel. Tivol Plaza, Inc. v. Missouri Commission on Human Rights,
No. WD78477 (Mo. App. W.D. April 12, 2016) (*en banc*) 1

Thompson v. Western Southern Life Assur. Co.,
82 S.W.3d 203 (Mo. Ct. App. E.D. 2002) 8, 14

Tisch v. DST Systems, Inc.,
368 S.W.3d 245 (Mo. App. W.D. 2012)..... 9, 14

United States Dept. of Veterans Affairs v. Boresi,

396 S.W.3d 356 (Mo banc 2013)..... 2, 3

Wallingsford v. City of Maryland,

287 S.W.3d 682 (Mo. banc 2009)..... 9, 14

Statutes

Mo. Rev. Stat. § 213.030(7) 9, 13, 16

Mo. Rev. Stat. § 213.075.1 9, 12

Mo. Rev. Stat. § 213.085.2 9, 10, 20, 21, 24, 25

Mo. Rev. Stat. § 536.150 9, 10, 20, 24, 25

Mo. Rev. Stat. § 536.150.1 10, 21, 24

Mo. Rev. Stat. §213.111.1 7, 9, 10, 15, 17, 18, 22, 25

Regulations

8 C.S.R. 60-2.025(7)(B) 9, 13

8 C.S.R. 60-2.025(9)..... 9, 14

Constitutional Provisions

Missouri Constitution Article V, Section 10 4

Rules

Missouri Supreme Court Rule 83.02 3

Missouri Supreme Court Rule 83.04 4

Missouri Supreme Court Rule 84.06(b) 27

Missouri Supreme Court Rule 84.06(c)..... 27

Missouri Supreme Court Rule 94 1, 3, 6

JURISDICTIONAL STATEMENT

Caesars Entertainment Operating Company, Inc. (f/k/a Harrah's Operating Co., Inc.), Harrah's North Kansas City LLC, Patrick Espinoza, and Chris Wilson (collectively "Harrah's") appeal from an April 27, 2015, Judgment entered by the Honorable Patricia S. Joyce in the Cole County Circuit Court dismissing (after the issuance and service of summonses) Harrah's Petition for Preliminary and Permanent Writs of Mandamus for failure to state a claim upon which relief may be granted.

On April 19, 2016, the Missouri Court of Appeals Western District dismissed Harrah's appeal because the circuit court failed to follow the writ of mandamus procedures set forth in Missouri Supreme Court Rule 94 (the "Harrah's Opinion"). In so doing, the Court of Appeals relied on its earlier 6-5 *en banc* split decision in a factually similar, parallel case, *State ex rel. Tivol Plaza, Inc. v. Missouri Commission on Human Rights*, No. WD78477 (Mo. App. W.D. April 12, 2016) (*en banc*) (the "Tivol Opinion"). Harrah's Opinion, p. 3-4. In pertinent part, the Court of Appeals in this case noted that, in *Tivol*,

because the circuit court had issued a summons rather than a preliminary order in mandamus at the outset of the case, the Court lacked authority to consider the employer's appeal; instead, the employer's remedy following the circuit court's denial of relief was to file an original writ petition in a higher court. The majority in *Tivol* stated that, "while we have the discretion to hear appeals on the merits in cases in which the circuit court issues a summons rather

than a preliminary order, as an intermediate appellate court charged with the duty to enforce the Supreme Court Rules, we do not believe it is our place to continually excuse compliance with the procedural rules written by the Missouri Supreme Court.” Slip op. at 7. *Tivol* also held that a petition for writ of mandamus was not the appropriate vehicle to seek review of the timeliness of an employee’s administrative complaint, because mandamus was available only to enforce “ministerial duties” where the relator “has a clear, unequivocal, specific right to a thing claimed,” while “[t]imeliness is an issue that can require extensive investigation” of complex factual circumstances. *Id.* at 8. Based on these conclusions, *Tivol* dismissed the employer’s appeal.

Harrah’s Opinion, p. 3-4.

The Court of Appeals’ decisions in this case and *Tivol* alike are inconsistent with the opinions rendered by this Court in *State ex rel. Ashby Road Partners, LLC v. State Tax Commission*, 297 S.W.3d 80, 83-84 (Mo. banc 2009) and *United States Dept. of Veterans Affairs v. Boresi*, 396 S.W.3d 356, 358-359 (Mo. banc 2013). In *Ashby*, this Court specifically found, in the parallel context of a writ of prohibition proceeding, that an appeal is not precluded where a circuit court violates procedure by issuing a summons rather than a preliminary order. *Ashby*, 297 S.W.3d at 84 (holding that, where a summons rather than a preliminary order is issued, relators are ‘entitled to appeal, on the merits, the circuit court’s judgment denying their petition in prohibition’).

Similarly, in *Boresi*, this Court noted that, while a trial court's use of a summons in lieu of a preliminary order in mandamus violates Rule 94.04:

An appeal will lie from the denial of a writ petition when a lower court has issued a preliminary order in mandamus but then denies a permanent writ. ***Likewise, when the lower court issues a summons, the functional equivalent of a preliminary order, and then denies a permanent writ, appellate review is available.***

Boresi, 396 S.W.3d at 358-359 (emphasis added) (internal citations omitted).

Despite this Court's binding precedent regarding the availability of appellate review where the circuit court issues a summons in lieu of a preliminary writ of mandamus and subsequently reaches a determination on the merits of the writ, the Court of Appeals has taken an increasingly hardline stance in contravention of these opinions.

Due to these inconsistencies and the resulting issues, Harrah's filed their Application for Transfer to the Supreme Court of Missouri pursuant to Missouri Supreme Court Rule 83.02 on May 4, 2016. Respondents Missouri Commission on Human Rights and its Executive Director, Alisa Warren, Ph.D. ("Director") (collectively "MCHR"), also filed an application for transfer to this Court. Both requests for transfer were denied on May 31, 2016.

On June 15, 2016, Harrah's and the MCHR filed their Applications for Transfer in this Court pursuant to Missouri Supreme Court Rule 83.04. Harrah's and the MCHR's applications were granted on August 23, 2016.

This Court has jurisdiction to hear this case pursuant to Article V, Section 10 of the Missouri Constitution as this Court ordered transfer after opinion by the Missouri Court of Appeals Western District. *See* Mo. Const. Art. V, § 10 (amended 1976); *see also* Mo. Sup. Ct. R. 83.04.

STATEMENT OF FACTS

Harrah's North Kansas City LLC hired Rebecca Gleason as a Sales Manager at its North Kansas City property in October 2009. [*Legal File* (hereinafter, "*LF*") 7.] On or about July 16, 2012, Gleason's employer changed to Caesars Entertainment Operating Company, Inc. (all appellants are referred to as "Harrah's"), although she continued to report to her same supervisor, Patrick Espinoza, and perform the same duties at the same location. [*LF* 7.] Gleason's employment was terminated on November 1, 2012, after she submitted a false request for reimbursement and lied about her conduct during the resulting investigation. [*Id.*]

More than a year later, on or about November 27, 2013, Gleason dually filed a charge of discrimination with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and the MCHR. [*LF* 7-8.] The Charge alleges sex discrimination and retaliation in violation of the MHRA. [*LF* 8.] Specifically, the Charge contains two categories of allegations:

a. Claims related to Gleason's 2012 employment and termination –

Gleason claims she was harassed and discriminated against on the basis of her gender in 2012, that she complained about the alleged harassment and discrimination, and that she was terminated on November 1, 2012 in retaliation for her complaint(s); and

b. Claims related to June 2013 unemployment proceedings –

Gleason claims her 2012 gender harassment and discrimination complaint

to the Company was a contributing factor in Harrah's opposition to her claim for unemployment benefits on June 5 and June 18, 2013.

[*Id.*] The alleged wrongful acts in category (a) above occurred on or before November 1, 2012, more than 390 days prior to Gleason filing her Charge on November 27, 2013.

[*Id.*]

On January 16, 2014, Harrah's delivered a letter to the MCHR (1) objecting to the MCHR's jurisdiction over untimely claims (i.e. any claims relating to alleged wrongful acts occurring prior to May 31, 2013, which is the date 180 days prior to the filing of Gleason's Charge on November 27, 2013), (2) objecting to the issuance of a Right to Sue notice related to untimely claims, and (3) requesting that the MCHR administratively close the matter with respect to any untimely claims. [*LF* 8-9.] On June 19, 2014, the MCHR issued Gleason a Right to Sue notice with no finding related to "probable cause," no distinction between timely and untimely allegations or claims, and no determination as to the MCHR's jurisdiction. [*LF* 9.]

On July 17, 2014, Harrah's filed their Petition for Preliminary and Permanent Writs of Mandamus in the Circuit Court of Cole County, Missouri, requesting that the trial court issue preliminary and permanent writs of mandamus against the MCHR and Director, "ordering the MCHR and Director to withdraw and vacate the January 19, 2014 Right to Sue Notice with respect to any claims based upon alleged MHRA violations occurring prior to May 31, 2013, and for such other relief as the Court deems proper." [*LF* 5-18.] On July 30, 2014, the circuit court issued summonses to the MCHR and Director, rather than preliminary orders in mandamus as required by Supreme Court Rule

94. On October 3, 2014, the MCHR and Director filed a motion to dismiss, arguing Harrah’s failed to state a claim because they “cannot establish either that the Commission was required to determine its jurisdiction over specific claims prior to issuing the right to sue letter or that [Harrah’s] was prejudiced by the issuance of the letter.” [LF 37-49.] On April 27, 2015, the circuit court granted the motion to dismiss, concluding the Commission was required by §213.111.1, RSMo to issue a right to sue letter without separately determining the timeliness of Gleason’s administrative complaint, because 180 days had elapsed since she filed the complaint and Gleason requested the right to sue letter. [LF 59-65.] The judgment also concluded that *Farrow v. Saint Francis Med. Ctr.*, 407 S.W.3d at 579 (Mo. banc 2013), on which Harrah’s relied, was distinguishable, because Harrah’s raised the timeliness issue before the Commission, and therefore, “properly preserved in any subsequent litigation” between Gleason and Harrah’s, Harrah’s “defense that some (or all) of Gleason’s claims are untimely.” [Id.]

Concerned that the circuit court’s findings were inconsistent with this Court’s mandate in *Farrow*, Harrah’s appealed the circuit court’s dismissal.

POINTS RELIED ON

I. THE CIRCUIT COURT ERRED IN DISMISSING APPELLANTS' PETITION FOR PRELIMINARY AND PERMANENT WRIT OF MANDAMUS BECAUSE RESPONDENTS MCHR AND DIRECTOR HAD A MINISTERIAL DUTY TO DETERMINE THEIR JURISDICTION TO ISSUE A RIGHT TO SUE LETTER AND TO DISMISS ANY OF GLEASON'S UNTIMELY CLAIMS, IN THAT GLEASON'S CHARGE OF DISCRIMINATION INCLUDED UNTIMELY CLAIMS.

Farrow v. Saint Francis Med. Ctr., 407 S.W.3d 579 (Mo. banc 2013)

Grissom v. First Nat. Ins. Agency, 364 S.W.3d 728, 731 (Mo. Ct. App. S.D. 2012)

Halloran v. Houlihan's Restaurants, Inc., 2013 WL 3353870, *4-5 (W.D. Mo. July 3, 2013)

Hodges v. Northwest Airlines, Inc., 990 F.2d 1030 (8th Cir. 1993)

Igoe v. Dep't of Labor and Indus. Relations of State of Mo., 152 S.W.3d 284, 287 (Mo. 2005)

Nat'l R.R. Passenger Corp. v. Morgan, 536 U.S. 101 (2002)

Pollock v. Wetterau Food Dist. Group, 11 S.W.3d 754, 763 (Mo. Ct. App. E.D. 1999)

Public School Retirement System of School Dist. of Kansas City v. Missouri Comm'n on Human Rights, 188 S.W.3d 35 (Mo. Ct. Appl. W.D. 2006)

Thompson v. Western Southern Life Assur. Co., 82 S.W.3d 203, 206 (Mo. Ct. App. E.D. 2002)

Tisch v. DST Systems, Inc., 368 S.W.3d 245 (Mo. App. W.D. 2012)

Wallingsford v. City of Maryland, 287 S.W.3d 682, 685 (Mo. banc 200)

Mo. Rev. Stat. § 213.030(7)

Mo. Rev. Stat. § 213.075.1

Mo. Rev. Stat. § 213.111.1

8 C.S.R. 60-2.025(7)(B)

8 C.S.R. 60-2.025(9)

II. THE CIRCUIT COURT ERRED IN DISMISSING APPELLANTS' PETITION FOR PRELIMINARY AND PERMANENT WRIT OF MANDAMUS BECAUSE MANDAMUS WAS APPROPRIATE PURSUANT TO MO. REV. STAT. § 213.085.2, § 536.150, AND *FARROW V. SAINT FRANCIS MED. CTR.*, 407 S.W.3D 579 (MO. BANC 2013), IN THAT APPELLANTS SOUGHT REVIEW OF RESPONDENTS' ISSUANCE OF A RIGHT TO SUE LETTER ON GLEASON'S UNTIMELY CLAIMS.

Farrow v. Saint Francis Med. Ctr., 407 S.W.3d 579 (Mo. banc 2013)

Forlong Cos., Ins. v. City of Kansas City, 189 S.W.3d 157, 165 (Mo. banc 2006)

Public School Retirement System of School Dist. of Kansas City v. Missouri Comm'n on Human Rights, 188 S.W.3d 35 (Mo. Ct. Appl W.D. 2006)

State ex rel. Martin Erb v. Missouri Comm'n on Human Rights, 77 S.W.3d 600 (Mo. banc 2002)

State ex rel. Missouri Public Defender Com'n v. Waters, 370 S.W.3d 592, 598 (Mo. banc 2012)

Mo. Rev. Stat. § 213.085.2

Mo. Rev. Stat. § 213.111.1

Mo. Rev. Stat. § 536.150.1

III. THE CIRCUIT COURT ERRED IN FINDING THAT APPELLANTS PRESERVED THEIR RIGHT TO RAISE THE ISSUE IN ANY SUBSEQUENT CIVIL ACTION BY RAISING THE TIMELINESS ISSUE BEFORE THE MCHR BECAUSE *FARROW V. SAINT FRANCIS MED. CTR.*, 407 S.W.3D 579 (MO. BANC 2013) MANDATES THAT THE PROPER PROCEDURE FOR CHALLENGING THE MCHR'S ISSUANCE OF A RIGHT TO SUE LETTER ON UNTIMELY CLAIMS IS BY SEEKING JUDICIAL REVIEW OF THE MCHR'S ADMINISTRATIVE ACTION, IN THAT SUCH PROCESS IS PRESCRIBED BY MO. REV. STAT. § 213.085.2 AND § 536.150.

Farrow v. Saint Francis Med. Ctr., 407 S.W.3d 579 (Mo. banc 2013)

Mo. Rev. Stat. § 213.085.2

Mo. Rev. Stat. § 213.111.1

Mo. Rev. Stat. § 536.150.1

ARGUMENT

Standard of Review for all Claims

This Court reviews *de novo* a circuit court's judgment dismissing an action for failure to state a claim. *Crocker v. Crocker*, 126 S.W.3d 724, 726 (Mo. Ct. App. 2008). "A motion to dismiss a petition for writ of mandamus for failure to state a cause of action, like any motion to dismiss for failure to state a claim is solely a test of the adequacy of the relator's petition." *Lemay Fire Prot. Dist. v. St. Louis County*, 340 S.W.3d 292, 294 (Mo. App. E.D. 2011). All facts alleged in the pleading are assumed to be true and those facts are to be construed liberally in favor of the plaintiff. *Id.* Statutory construction is also a matter of law to which appellate courts apply their independent judgment. *Crocker*, 126 S.W.3d at 726 (*citing City of St. Joseph v. Vill. Of Country Club*, 163 S.W.3d 905, 907 (Mo. banc 2005)).

Analysis

I. THE CIRCUIT COURT ERRED IN DISMISSING APPELLANTS' PETITION FOR PRELIMINARY AND PERMANENT WRIT OF MANDAMUS BECAUSE RESPONDENTS MCHR AND DIRECTOR HAD A MINISTERIAL DUTY TO DETERMINE THEIR JURISDICTION TO ISSUE A RIGHT TO SUE LETTER AND TO DISMISS ANY OF GLEASON'S UNTIMELY CLAIMS, IN THAT GLEASON'S CHARGE OF DISCRIMINATION INCLUDED UNTIMELY CLAIMS.

In *Farrow v. Saint Francis Med. Ctr.*, 407 S.W.3d 579 (Mo. banc 2013), this Court, in pertinent part, reversed and remanded a circuit court's order granting summary judgment where the plaintiff employee failed to file her charge of discrimination within 180 days of the alleged discriminatory act (or acts) giving rise to her claims under the Missouri Human Rights Act ("MHRA"). *See Farrow*, 407 S.W.3d at 588; *see also* RSMo. § 213.075.1 ("[a]ny person claiming to be aggrieved by an unlawful discriminatory practice may make . . . a verified complaint in writing, within one hundred eighty days of the alleged act of discrimination[.]"). The defendant employer argued, and the circuit court agreed, that the plaintiff was required to file her administrative charge within 180 days of any alleged discriminatory acts as a condition for pursuing those claims in a civil lawsuit. *Farrow*, 407 S.W.3d at 588.

On appeal, plaintiff argued that MCHR's issuance of a right to sue letter was an implicit finding that the MCHR had jurisdiction over her claims and that they were timely

filed. *Id.* Defendant – like Respondents and the circuit court in both this action and in *Tivol* – argued the MCHR has a statutory duty to issue a right to sue notice after 180 days, regardless of whether it has determined that it has jurisdiction over the underlying claim. *Id.* This Court unambiguously disagreed, holding “Defendants argue the Commission had a duty to issue the right to sue letter pursuant to statute regardless of whether it had proper jurisdiction over Farrow’s claims. ***This Court disagrees with Defendants’ contention.***” *Id.* (emphasis supplied).

In reversing the circuit court’s judgment, this Court also noted: (1) that Section 213.030(7) directs the Commission to “receive, investigate, initiate, and pass upon complaints alleging discrimination . . .”; (2) after a charge of discrimination is filed the MCHR’s executive director has an obligation to promptly investigate the charge; and (3) MCHR regulation 8 C.S.R. 60-2.025(7)(B) directs the MCHR to dismiss a charge at any stage for lack of jurisdiction or in the absence of any remedy available to complainant. *Id.* at 588-89. “Hence, the [MCHR] [is] required to determine its own jurisdiction ***even if it [does] not make a decision on the merits of [complainant’s] claims.***” *Id.* at 589 (emphasis supplied). Accordingly, this Court held that when the MCHR exercises its authority to issue a right to sue letter, ***regardless of whether it has completed its investigation***, it has made an implicit finding of timeliness. *Id.*

Here, the circuit court attempted to narrow the scope of *Farrow*’s holding to only those instances where, “[d]efendants took no action whatsoever to challenge the timeliness of [employee’s] complaint while it was pending prior the issuance of right to sue letter, despite having notice of the complaint.” [LF p. 63 (quoting *Farrow*, 407

S.W.3d at 589).] Put differently, the circuit court distinguished *Farrow* from the instant case because Harrah’s challenged the timeliness of Gleason’s allegations in their written position statement to the MCHR pursuant to 8 C.S.R. 60-2.025(9). The circuit court noted, “to interpret *Farrow* to require a relator to bring a writ action in every instance the Commission does not complete its jurisdictional analysis 180-days after receiving a complaint, would be contrary to the text of the [MHRA] and would result in unnecessary and duplicative litigation.” [LF, p. 64.]

The circuit court’s finding that an employer preserves its right to raise timeliness as a defense in civil litigation by raising the issue during the charge phase is an attractive one. For many years employers in MHRA lawsuits routinely asserted challenges to the timeliness of an employee’s administrative charge as a defense in the employee’s subsequent discrimination lawsuit.¹ Similarly, employers under Title VII of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 can raise the timeliness of an administrative charge in the course

¹ See e.g., *Wallingsford v. City of Maryland*, 287 S.W.3d 682, 685 (Mo. banc 2009); *Tisch v. DST Systems, Inc.*, 368 S.W.3d 245, 250-51 (Mo. Ct. App. W.D. 2012); *Halloran v. Houlihan’s Restaurants, Inc.*, 2013 WL 3353870, *4-5 (W.D. Mo. July 3, 2013); *Grissom v. First Nat. Ins. Agency*, 364 S.W.3d 728, 731 (Mo. Ct. App. S.D. 2012); *Thompson v. Western Southern Life Assur. Co.*, 82 S.W.3d 203, 206 (Mo. Ct. App. E.D. 2002; and *Pollock v. Wetterau Food Dist. Group*, 11 S.W.3d 754, 763 (Mo. Ct. App. E.D. 1999).

of litigating an employee’s discrimination lawsuit.² This process streamlines litigation under the MCHR and affords parties the opportunity to resolve more complex questions of timeliness with the benefit of formal discovery and a robust evidentiary record. Conversely, in the wake of *Farrow*, employers facing MHRA litigation have sought extraordinary writs at an increasing rate across Missouri. Such actions are time-consuming, burdensome, and expensive for everyone involved—employers, employees, the circuit courts, and the MCHR. Nonetheless, and while Harrah’s recognizes (and agrees with) the circuit court’s concerns about the time and costs associated with collateral writ litigation, it is difficult to reconcile the circuit court’s Judgment with this Court’s directive in *Farrow*.

As a foremost matter, there is no language in *Farrow* supporting the circuit court’s finding that an employer’s objections to the timeliness of the administrative charge are preserved when raised at the earliest opportunity—*i.e.*, while the charge is pending before the MCHR. Instead, *Farrow* appears to have recognized that a meaningful distinction can be made between “completing an investigation” as contemplated by RSMo. § 213.111.1³ and “completing a jurisdictional analysis,” or, more to the point, “completing

² See *e.g.*, *Nat’l R.R. Passenger Corp. v. Morgan*, 536 U.S. 101 (2002); *Hodges v. Northwest Airlines, Inc.*, 990 F.2d 1030 (8th Cir. 1993).

³ In pertinent part, RSMo. § 213.111.1 requires that, “[i]f, after one hundred eighty days from the filing of a complaint . . . the commission has not completed its administrative processing and the person aggrieved so requests in writing, the commission *shall* issue to

a determination of the timeliness of a complainant's claims." *Farrow*, 407 S.W.3d at 589.

Nonetheless, the MCHR argues, despite its obligation to "receive, investigate, initiate, and pass upon complaints alleging discrimination in employment[.]" (*See* RSMo. § 213.030(7)), it has "very limited resources" and must determine "which few cases to investigate thoroughly in order to proceed with its own hearing and determination of the claims." *Igoe v. Dep't of Labor and Indus. Relations of State of Mo.*, 152 S.W.3d 284, 287 (Mo. 2005). Given the number of complaints the MCHR receives each year and the fact intensive nature questions of timeliness can implicate, the MCHR contends it cannot make a determination of every issue related to its jurisdiction, including questions of timeliness, before issuing a right to sue letter in every case.

While Harrah's is sympathetic to the various obstacles the MCHR faces, Harrah's is compelled to follow the directives contained within this Court's analysis of the MCHR's ministerial obligations and duties:

Section 213.030(7) **directs** the Commission to "receive, investigate, initiate, and pass upon complaints alleging discrimination..." After the filing of the complaint, the Commission's executive director **shall** investigate **promptly** the complaint. Section 213.075.3. Commission regulation 8 C.S.R. 60-2.025(7)(B) **directs** the Commission to dismiss or close a complaint at any

the person claiming to be aggrieved a letter indicating his or her right to bring a civil action within ninety days of such notice[.]"

stage for lack of jurisdiction or in the absence of any remedy available to the complainant.

Farrow, 407 S.W.3d 588-589 (emphasis supplied).

Alternatively, the MCHR has cited *Public School Retirement System of School Dist. of Kansas City v. Missouri Comm'n on Human Rights*, 188 S.W. 3d 35 (Mo. Ct. App. W.D. 2006) to support its proposition that it is not required to complete a jurisdictional assessment within 180 days of receiving a charge of discrimination and/or prior to issuing a right to sue letter pursuant to § 213.111.1. *Public School Retirement System*, however, is distinguishable from *Farrow*.

In *Public School Retirement System*, the complainant sought a right to sue letter after 180 days had expired since complainant had filed her charge of discrimination. 188 S.W.3d at 38. Complainant subsequently filed a lawsuit alleging age discrimination against her employer. *Id.* In a separate action, the employer sought a writ of mandamus requesting that the circuit court vacate the MCHR's right to sue letter because: (1) the MCHR failed to notify the Public School Retirement System ("PSRS") of complainant's claims; and (2) the MCHR failed to "promptly investigate" the merits of complainant's charge. *Id.* The circuit court denied PSRS's motion for summary judgment and entered an order granting the MCHR's competing motion for summary judgment. *Id.*

The Court of Appeals affirmed the PSRS's right to seek judicial review by way of mandamus of the MCHR's decision to issue a right to sue letter, but found the circuit court properly denied the writ because: (1) PSRS was not prejudiced by the failure of the MCHR to notify the PSRS of the age discrimination complaint; and (2) the MCHR did

not breach a ministerial duty by failing to complete its investigation within 180 days after receipt of complainant's charge. *Id.* at 42-45. Notably, *Public School Retirement System* is silent on the question of whether the MCHR has an obligation to complete a ***jurisdictional assessment*** within 180 days after receipt of a charge of discrimination or prior to issuing a right to sue letter and instead merely affirms the limitations on the MCHR's ministerial obligations required by § 213.111.1.

When properly limited, *Public School Retirement System* can be read in harmony with *Farrow*. However, to the extent *Public School Retirement System* has been interpreted to excuse the MCHR's failure to complete a jurisdictional assessment within 180 days of the filing of a charge, such reasoning is no longer tenable under *Farrow* because, as written, *Farrow* appears to hold that the MCHR has no duty to issue a notice of right to sue letter after 180 days where the MCHR does not have proper jurisdiction over the employee's charge of discrimination. *Farrow*, 407 S.W.3d at 588 (“Defendants argue the Commission had a duty to issue the right to sue letter pursuant to the statute regardless of whether it had proper jurisdiction over Farrow’s claims. This Court disagrees with Defendants’ contention.”)

The MCHR has also claimed Harrah's suffered no prejudice based on the MCHR's ministerial inaction because “Harrah's admit[s] that some of Gleason's claims are timely.” [LF 45-46.] Contrary to this assertion, the prejudice arising from the MCHR's failure to comply with *Farrow* is clear—based on an unauthorized right to sue letter, Gleason was able to bring a lawsuit that included a number of untimely claims

against Harrah's.⁴ The prejudice to Harrah's is compounded by the fact that, but for the relief requested in its Petition, Harrah's would have no other avenue for challenging Gleason's untimely claims.

A number of the alleged occurrences included in Gleason's pending lawsuit are facially untimely. [See *LF* 7-8.] Absent a specific jurisdictional determination by the MCHR that the alleged bad acts constitute a "continuing violation" under Missouri law, none of the acts of discrimination alleged in Gleason's Charge occurring more than 180 days preceding her filing of the administrative complaint are timely. For the reasons set forth above, and as set forth in *Farrow*, it is the MCHR's responsibility to make this determination as it relates to **all** of Gleason's claims.

⁴ See *Gleason v. Caesar's Entertainment Operating Company, LLC, et al.*, Case No. 14CY-CV08742, pending in the Circuit Court of Clay County, Missouri.

II. THE CIRCUIT COURT ERRED IN DISMISSING APPELLANTS' PETITION FOR PRELIMINARY AND PERMANENT WRIT OF MANDAMUS BECAUSE MANDAMUS WAS APPROPRIATE PURSUANT TO RSMO. § 213.085.2, § 536.150, AND *FARROW V. SAINT FRANCIS MED. CTR.*, 407 S.W.3D 579 (MO. BANC 2013), IN THAT APPELLANTS SOUGHT REVIEW OF RESPONDENTS' ISSUANCE OF A RIGHT TO SUE LETTER ON GLEASON'S UNTIMELY CLAIMS.

“The law of mandamus is well settled. Mandamus is a discretionary writ, and there is no right to have the writ issued.” *Public School Retirement System of School Dist. of Kansas City*, 188 S.W.3d at 41 (internal citations omitted). “The purpose of the extraordinary writ of mandamus is to compel the performance of a ministerial duty that one charged with the duty has refused to perform.” *Forlong Cos., Ins. v. City of Kansas City*, 189 S.W.3d 157, 165 (Mo. banc 2006). “A litigant asking relief by mandamus must allege and prove that he has a clear, unequivocal, specific right to the thing claimed.” *Id.* at 166.

In pertinent part, the MHRA allows a person “aggrieved by a final decision, finding, rule or order of the [MCHR] [to] obtain judicial review by filing a petition in the circuit court of the county of proper venue within thirty days after the mailing or delivery of notice of the commission’s final decision.” RSMo. § 213.085.2. A right to sue letter issued by the MCHR is a final decision within the meaning of § 213.085.2. *Farrow*, 407 S.W.3d at 590, n. 5 (“The right to sue letter states the Commission made a determination

it is unlikely that it will complete its investigation within the allotted time period. Thus, for all intents and purposes, the Commission has issued a finding regarding its ability to investigate that results in the issuance of the right to sue letter, which in turn terminates the proceedings.”).

The MHRA further directs that judicial review sought under § 213.085.2 must be in the manner provided in RSMo. § 536.150.1. In pertinent part, § 536.150.1 permits “a claimant to seek a writ of mandamus when the procedures set forth in chapter 213 were not followed by the Commission’s executive director.” *Farrow*, 407 S.W.3d at 590 (citing *State ex rel. Martin Erb v. Missouri Comm’n on Human Rights*, 77 S.W.3d 600, 607 (Mo. banc 2002)) (holding that the MCHR has prescribed procedural rules and that, where an aggrieved party makes specific allegations showing the executive director failed to follow those rules, then § 536.150.1 gives that party the right to file a mandamus action to determine whether the executive director’s actions were accomplished under the prescribed procedures and were lawful); *see also*, *Public School Retirement System of School Dist. of Kansas City*, 188 S.W.3d at 41 (holding mandamus would lie where the MCHR’s executive director’s issuance of a right to sue letter was in violation of the MCHR’s prescribed procedures and applicable law).

While § 536.150.1 provides a number of potential mechanisms by which a party can seek judicial review of a final decision by an administrative officer, this Court made clear in *Farrow* that, in the context of challenging the timeliness of complainant’s claims in a charge of discrimination, where (as here) ***the MCHR made no express findings related to the timeliness of a complaint’s claims***, mandamus is the appropriate remedy.

Farrow, 407 S.W.3d at 590 (“Thus, Defendants’ argument that it challenged the timeliness of Farrow’s complaint at the earliest opportunity is unavailing because they had ample opportunity to do so before the Commission issued the right to sue letter ***and in the time between its issuance and the filing of Farrow’s state court action by way of writ of mandamus***”). Accordingly, and contrary to the findings of the circuit court, Harrah’s was required to seek judicial review of the MCHR’s issuance of a right to sue letter and mandamus was the proper method by which to do so.

The MCHR argues mandamus is not an appropriate remedy in the instant case because it was required to issue Gleason her right to sue letter, upon request, after the expiration of 180 days pursuant to § 213.111.1. As set forth in greater detail above, the MCHR’s issuance of a notice of right to sue under § 213.111.1 is limited by its competing ministerial obligation to assess its own jurisdiction over a complainant’s charge of discrimination prior to issuing a right to sue letter.

In this case, the MCHR specifically sought to abdicate its ministerial obligation to complete a jurisdiction analysis prior to issuing Gleason a right to sue letter by explicitly disclosing its ministerial inaction. The MCHR issued Gleason a right to sue letter that included this proviso: “This notice of right to sue is being issued as required by Section 213.111.1, RSMo., because it has been requested in writing 180 days after filing of the complaint. . . . Please note that administrative processing of this complaint, including determinations of jurisdiction, has not been completed.” [*LF*, p. 31.] In accordance with this Court’s express directive in *Farrow*, Harrah’s sought a writ of mandamus compelling the MCHR to vacate the right to sue letter issue to Gleason on June 19, 2014, and

demanding that the MCHR determine whether it has jurisdiction over Gleason's ambiguous allegations which were not timely-filed on their face.

The nature of the relief sought in this case is of particular importance because, "the writ [of mandamus]'s purpose is to execute, not to adjudicate." *Lemay v. Fire Protection Dist.*, 340 S.W.3d 292, 295 (Mo. Ct. App. E.D. 2011). "As a creature of statute, an administrative agency's authority is limited to that given it by the legislature." *State ex rel. Missouri Public Defender Com'n v. Waters*, 370 S.W.3d 592, 598 (Mo. banc 2012).

The particular right to sue letter that the MCHR issued in this case was a clear effort by the MCHR to avoid its obligations imposed by *Farrow*. In seeking mandamus relief, Harrah's sought to force the MCHR to execute its duties and make an affirmative determination about Gleason's claims that were not timely filed. The process invoked by Harrah's was consistent with the directives of *Farrow* and controlling Missouri law. *See e.g. Martin-Erb*, 77 S.W.3d at 607-608 (holding that a failure to follow proper procedures in the exercise of discretion is an abuse of discretion controllable by mandamus and that a circuit court can compel the MCHR's executive director to exercise that discretion).

III. THE CIRCUIT COURT ERRED IN FINDING THAT APPELLANTS PRESERVED THEIR RIGHT TO RAISE THE ISSUE IN ANY SUBSEQUENT CIVIL ACTION BY RAISING THE TIMELINESS ISSUE BEFORE THE MCHR BECAUSE *FARROW V. SAINT FRANCIS MED. CTR.*, 407 S.W.3D 579 (MO. BANC 2013) MANDATES THAT THE PROPER PROCEDURE FOR CHALLENGING THE MCHR'S ISSUANCE OF A RIGHT TO SUE LETTER ON UNTIMELY CLAIMS IS BY SEEKING JUDICIAL REVIEW OF THE MCHR'S ADMINISTRATIVE ACTION, IN THAT SUCH PROCESS IS PRESCRIBED BY RSMO. § 213.085.2 AND § 536.150.

Finally, the circuit court's judgment erroneously found that, by raising timeliness at the earliest opportunity, Harrah's preserved their right to assert timeliness as a defense in the pending civil litigation. [See *LF* 63-64.] This finding appears to conflict with *Farrow*. Accordingly, Harrah's sought this appeal.

In *Farrow*, this Court held that an employer must raise any claims relating to the timeliness of an employee's claims before the MCHR *and* through judicial review under § 536.150.1. *Farrow*, 407 S.W.3d at 589-590. Importantly, and in contravention of the circuit court's Judgment in this case, *Farrow* also held that an employer *could not* raise the issue of timeliness in the underlying discrimination lawsuit. *Id.* More specifically, in *Farrow*, employee argued the untimeliness of a charge of discrimination did not support a dismissal of her discrimination claims. *Id.* at 589. This Court agreed concluding that the only statutory prerequisites a claimant must satisfy to bring a civil action under the

MHRA are those set forth in RSMo. § 213.111.1: (1) an employee must file a charge with the Commission prior to filing a state court action; (2) the Commission must issue a right to sue letter to the claimant; and (3) the state court action must then be filed within ninety days of the issuance of the right to sue, but no later than two years after the alleged cause occurred or its reasonable discovery by the allegedly injured party. *Farrow*, 407 S.W.3d at 591.

By expressly rejecting an expansion of the prerequisites for filing suit under the MHRA to include a requirement that claimants timely file their charges of discrimination, this Court unambiguously established judicial review under § 536.150 as the only permissible method through which an employer can challenge the timeliness of a complainant's charge of discrimination. *Id.* (“The statute does not read, ‘If after one hundred eighty days from the filing of a *timely* complaint . . .’ ***This Court will not reach such a requirement into the plain statutory language***” (emphasis supplied)). Based on the foregoing, Harrah's only remedy for challenging the timeliness of Gleason's claims was to follow the procedures set forth in § 213.085.2 and § 536.150. Until such time as this Court clarifies this issue, the only reasonable conclusion is that the circuit court erred by dismissing Harrah's challenge to the MCHR's issuance of the right to sue letter.

CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, Harrah’s respectfully requests that this Court either: (1) hold unequivocally that Harrah’s timeliness defense to Gleason’s claims are preserved; or (2) reverse the circuit court’s judgment dismissing Harrah’s Petition for Preliminary and Permanent Writ of Mandamus, and remand the case with instructions to the circuit court to issue a writ of mandamus compelling the MCHR to vacate the right to sue letter issued to Gleason on June 19, 2014, and demanding that the MCHR determine whether it has jurisdiction over Gleason’s allegations that are untimely filed on their face.

Respectfully submitted,

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CERTIFICATE OF COMPLIANCE

In compliance with Missouri Supreme Court Rule 84.06(c), counsel for Appellants state that this Appellants' Substitute Brief complies with the provisions of Missouri Supreme Court Rule 84.06(b), in that beginning with the Jurisdictional Statement and concluding with the last sentence before the signature block, Appellants' Substitute Brief contains 5,745 words. The word count was generated by Microsoft Word 2010, and complies with the word limitations contained in Rule 84.06(b). Furthermore, in compliance with Missouri Supreme Court Rule 84.06(c), Appellants' Substitute Brief has been scanned for viruses, and it is virus-free.

/s/ Sarah Jane Preuss

Attorney for Appellant

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I hereby certify that on October 3, 2016, the foregoing APPELLANTS' SUBSTITUTE BRIEF was filed with the Clerk of the Supreme Court of Missouri using the Missouri eFiling System, and service paper copies were sent via U.S. mail, postage prepaid and addressed to the following:

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