

**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
WESTERN DISTRICT OF TENNESSEE
CIVIL DIVISION**

ANGELA WOODS, individually
and on behalf of all others
similarly situated,

Plaintiff,

v.

Case No.:

THE HERSHEY COMPANY,
A Foreign Profit Corporation,

Defendant.

CLASS ACTION COMPLAINT

Plaintiff, Angela Woods (“Plaintiff”), hereby files this Class Action Complaint against Defendant, The Hershey Company (“Defendant”), alleging that Defendant failed to provide her and the putative class adequate notice of their right to continued health care coverage under the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1985 (“COBRA”).

1. Defendant, the plan sponsor of the Health Plan (“Plan”), has repeatedly violated ERISA by failing to provide participants and beneficiaries in the Plan with adequate notice, as prescribed by COBRA, of their right to continue their health insurance coverage following an occurrence of a “qualifying event” as defined by the statute.

2. Defendant’s COBRA notice violates 29 C.F.R. § 2590.606–4(b)(4)(viii) because it fails to include a termination date for COBRA coverage if elected. The notice also violates COBRA because it fails to sufficiently identify the Plan Administrator.

3. Because Defendant’s COBRA notice omits several critical information items, it collectively violates 29 C.F.R. § 2590.606–4(b)(4), which requires the plan administrator of a

group-health plan to provide a COBRA notice “written in a manner calculated to be understood by the average plan participant.” Without information on *when* COBRA coverage ends, and *who* is the Plan Administrator, the notice is not written in a manner calculated to be understood by the average plan participant.

4. As a result of these violations, which threaten Class Members’ ability to maintain their health coverage, Plaintiff seeks statutory penalties, injunctive relief, attorneys’ fees, costs and expenses, and other appropriate relief as set forth herein and provided by law.

JURISDICTION AND VENUE

5. Venue is proper in the United States Court for the Western District of Tennessee, because the events giving rise to these claims arose in this district.

6. Plaintiff is a Tennessee resident, resides in this district and was a participant in the Plan prior to her termination, a qualifying event within the meaning of 29 U.S.C. § 1163(2).

7. Defendant is a foreign corporation with its headquarters in Hershey, Pennsylvania and employed more than 20 employees who were members of the Plan in each year from 2014 to 2018. Defendant is the Plan sponsor within the meaning of 29 U.S.C. §1002(16)(B), and the administrator of the Plan within the meaning of 29 U.S.C. § 1002(16)(A). The Plan provides medical benefits to employees and their beneficiaries, and is an employee welfare benefit plan within the meaning of 29 U.S.C. § 1002(1) and a group health plan within the meaning of 29 U.S.C. § 1167(1).

FACTUAL ALLEGATIONS

COBRA Notice Requirements

8. The COBRA amendments to ERISA included certain provisions relating to continuation of health coverage upon termination of employment or another “qualifying event”

as defined by the statute.

9. Among other things, COBRA requires the plan sponsor of each group health plan normally employing more than 20 employees on a typical business day during the preceding year to provide “each qualified beneficiary who would lose coverage under the plan as a result of a qualifying event ... to elect, within the election period, continuation coverage under the plan.” 29 U.S.C. § 1161. (Emphasis added).

10. Notice is of enormous importance. The COBRA notification requirement exists because employees are not presumed to know they have a federally protected right to continue healthcare coverage subsequent to a qualifying event.

11. COBRA further requires the administrator of such a group health plan to provide notice to any qualified beneficiary of their continuation of coverage rights under COBRA upon the occurrence of a qualifying event. 29 U.S.C. § 1166(a)(4). This notice must be “[i]n accordance with the regulations prescribed by the Secretary” of Labor. 29 U.S.C. § 1166(a).

12. The relevant regulations prescribed by the Secretary of Labor concerning notice of continuation of coverage rights are set forth in 29 C.F.R. § 2590.606-4 as follows:

(4) The notice required by this paragraph (b) shall be written in a manner calculated to be understood by the average plan participant and shall contain the following information:

(i) The name of the plan under which continuation coverage is available; and the name, address and telephone number of the party responsible under the plan for the administration of continuation coverage benefits;

(ii) Identification of the qualifying event;

(iii) Identification, by status or name, of the qualified beneficiaries who are recognized by the plan as being entitled to elect continuation coverage with respect to the qualifying event, and the date on which coverage under the plan will terminate (or has terminated) unless continuation coverage is elected;

(iv) A statement that each individual who is a qualified beneficiary with respect to the qualifying event has an independent right to elect continuation coverage, that a covered employee or a qualified beneficiary who is the spouse of the covered employee (or was the spouse of the covered employee on the day before the qualifying event occurred) may elect continuation coverage on behalf of all other qualified beneficiaries with respect to the qualifying event, and that a parent or legal guardian may elect continuation coverage on behalf of a minor child;

(v) An explanation of the plan's procedures for electing continuation coverage, including an explanation of the time period during which the election must be made, and the date by which the election must be made;

(vi) An explanation of the consequences of failing to elect or waiving continuation coverage, including an explanation that a qualified beneficiary's decision whether to elect continuation coverage will affect the future rights of qualified beneficiaries to portability of group health coverage, guaranteed access to individual health coverage, and special enrollment under part 7 of title I of the Act, with a reference to where a qualified beneficiary may obtain additional information about such rights; and a description of the plan's procedures for revoking a waiver of the right to continuation coverage before the date by which the election must be made;

(vii) A description of the continuation coverage that will be made available under the plan, if elected, including the date on which such coverage will commence, either by providing a description of the coverage or by reference to the plan's summary plan description;

(viii) An explanation of the maximum period for which continuation coverage will be available under the plan, if elected; an explanation of the continuation coverage termination date; and an explanation of any events that might cause continuation coverage to be terminated earlier than the end of the maximum period;

(ix) A description of the circumstances (if any) under which the maximum period of continuation coverage may be extended due either to the occurrence of a second qualifying event or a determination by the Social Security Administration, under title II or XVI of the Social Security Act (42 U.S.C. 401 et seq. or 1381 et seq.) (SSA), that the qualified beneficiary is disabled, and the

length of any such extension;

(x) In the case of a notice that offers continuation coverage with a maximum duration of less than 36 months, a description of the plan's requirements regarding the responsibility of qualified beneficiaries to provide notice of a second qualifying event and notice of a disability determination under the SSA, along with a description of the plan's procedures for providing such notices, including the times within which such notices must be provided and the consequences of failing to provide such notices. The notice shall also explain the responsibility of qualified beneficiaries to provide notice that a disabled qualified beneficiary has subsequently been determined to no longer be disabled;

(xi) A description of the amount, if any, that each qualified beneficiary will be required to pay for continuation coverage;

(xii) A description of the due dates for payments, the qualified beneficiaries' right to pay on a monthly basis, the grace periods for payment, the address to which payments should be sent, and the consequences of delayed payment and non-payment;

(xiii) An explanation of the importance of keeping the administrator informed of the current addresses of all participants or beneficiaries under the plan who are or may become qualified beneficiaries; and

(xiv) A statement that the notice does not fully describe continuation coverage or other rights under the plan, and that more complete information regarding such rights is available in the plan's summary plan description or from the plan administrator.

13. To facilitate compliance with these notice obligations, the United States Department of Labor (“DOL”) has issued a Model COBRA Continuation Coverage Election Notice (“Model Notice”), which is included in the Appendix to 29 C.F.R. § 2590.606-4. A copy of this Model Notice is attached hereto as Exhibit “A.” The DOL website states that the DOL “will consider use of the model election notice, appropriately completed, good faith compliance with the election notice content requirements of COBRA.”

14. In the event that a plan administrator declines to use the Model Notice and fails to

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