

Garcia v 11 Hoyt Prop. Owner, L.P.

2024 NY Slip Op 33443(U)

September 10, 2024

Supreme Court, Kings County

Docket Number: Index No. 519169/2021

Judge: Devin P. Cohen

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Supreme Court of the State of New York
County of Kings

Index Number 519169/2021
Seqs. 001

Part LL1M

DECISION/ORDER

LUZ MARINA BERNATE GARCIA,

Recitation, as required by CPLR §2219 (a), of the papers considered in the review of this Motion

Plaintiff,

Papers Numbered

against

Notice of Motion and Affidavits Annexed	<u> </u>
Order to Show Cause and Affidavits Annexed.	<u> 1 </u>
Answering Affidavits	<u> 2 </u>
Replying Affidavits	<u> </u>
Exhibits	<u> Var </u>
Other	<u> </u>

11 HOYT PROPERTY OWNER, L.P.,

Defendants.

Upon the foregoing papers, Joshua W. Skillman, Esq., P.C. (Skillman)'s order to show cause (OSC) to be relieved as counsel (Seq. 001) is decided as follows:

Generally, an attorney is permitted to withdraw as counsel upon “such notice . . . as the court may direct,” after a reasonable “showing that good cause exists to end the attorney client relationship” and that the motion is not being made as a tactic to delay a hearing or trial (CPLR 321 [b] [2]; *Matter of Cassini*, 182 AD3d 13, 40 [2d Dept 2020]; *see also Rivardeneria v New York City Health and Hospitals Corp.*, 306 AD2d 394 [2d Dept 2003]). “The decision to grant or deny permission for counsel to withdraw lies within the discretion of the trial court” (*Bank of Am., N.A. v Chadha*, 214 AD3d 695, 695 [2d Dept 2023]). Break-downs of the attorney-client relationship, failure of cooperation by a client, and actions or requests by clients that would cause the attorney to violate the Rules of Professional Conduct by continuing representation, among other reasons, serve as good cause for ending the attorney-client relationship (*see Farage v Ehrenberg*, 124 AD3d 159, 165 [2d Dept 2014]; *see also Green v Gasparini*, 24 AD3d 505 [2d Dept 2005]).

Here, Skillman served the instant OSC upon the plaintiff individually and upon defense counsel as directed by the court. Plaintiff individually did not oppose the motion. The note of issue has not been filed and the case is not on the trial calendar. However, defendant filed written opposition to this motion.

As an initial matter, it is not clear that defendant has standing to oppose plaintiff's counsel's motion, as the motion is made against the plaintiff individually, not the defendant, and defendant would not be "aggrieved" as defined by the Appellate Division if this motion were granted (*see Mixon v TBV, Inc.*, 76 AD3d 144, 156–157 [2d Dept 2010]). Moreover, defendants do not actually state opposition to Skillman withdrawing as counsel *per se*, but rather objects to the justification Skillman has offered for withdrawal, objects to Skillman's request to disclose additional information *in camera* if it is required and demands that the relief requested be conditioned upon the exchange of attorney-client communications and attorney records.

Defendant is incorrect that allowing Skillman to provide additional details or information *in camera* is impermissible. "Where withdrawal may be accomplished simply on the basis of counsel's statement that professional considerations require it, no more should be disclosed" (NYS Bar Ethics Opinion 1057 [6/5/2015] at ¶ 14). Where withdrawal cannot be so accomplished, the court may conduct an *in camera* hearing to assess the validity of counsel's request (*id.* at ¶ 15). This practice is permitted to "prevent a party from being prejudiced by the application of counsel to withdraw" (*ISC Holding AG v Nobel Biocare Investments, N.V.*, 759 F Supp 2d 289, 294 [SDNY 2010] [*aff'd sub nom. ISC Holding AG v Nobel Biocare Fin. AG*, 688 F3d 98 (2d Cir 2012)]). "A judge may initiate or consider any *ex parte* communications when authorized by law to do so" (NY Rules of Chief Administrative Judge § 100.3 [e]).

However, notwithstanding the propriety of an *in camera* showing, Skillman represented to the court in its moving papers and in the presence of opposing counsel that communication with the client had broken down completely and made it impossible for counsel to continue to represent plaintiff. This reason satisfies the “good cause” standard for attorney withdrawal.

The remainder of defendant’s papers are essentially requests for discovery of attorney-client communications and other seemingly privileged information. Making affirmative discovery requests in the opposition papers to a motion to be relieved as counsel is procedurally improper for at least two reasons. First, the request is made without the notice ordinarily required by a motion requesting affirmative relief (CPLR 2215; *see Fried v Jacob Holding, Inc.*, 110 AD3d 56 [2d Dept 2013]). Second, even if the court were inclined, *arguendo*, to treat the request as a cross-motion in an exercise of discretion, there is no properly executed discovery instrument for the court to enforce (*see* CPLR 3102).

Finally, defendant’s request is improper insofar as it asks the court to condition Skillman’s withdrawal on a breach of client confidence and/or of a violation of attorney-client privilege. Rule 1.6 (a) prohibits attorneys from “knowingly [revealing] confidential information to the disadvantage of a client or the for the advantage of the lawyer or a third person” absent 1) the consent of the client; 2) the disclosure is “impliedly authorized to advance the best interest of the client”; or 3) the disclosure is permitted by Rule 1.6 (b). None of the permissions in Rule 1.6 (b) apply here. Moreover, attorney-client privilege can only be waived by the client and generally survives the termination of the attorney-client relationship—Skillman is therefore prohibited from revealing confidential or privileged information without the consent of the client (*see* CPLR 4503).

Therefore, Skillman's OSC to be relieved as counsel is granted upon the individual plaintiff's default. The action is stayed until November 10, 2024, although the stay shall end earlier if plaintiff retains new counsel (*Wells Fargo Bank, N.A. v Kurian*, 197 AD3d 173 [2d Dept 2021]). This determination is made without prejudice to any legitimate discovery rights parties may have in this or any other properly commenced action.

Counsel shall serve this order upon Luz Marina Bernate Garcia by the same means as the underlying OSC within 10 days of the notice of entry, and upon opposing counsel via NYSCEF.

Conclusion

Skillman's OSC to be relieved (Seq. 001) is granted.

This constitutes the decision and order of the court.

September 10, 2024

DATE



DEVIN P. COHEN
Justice of the Supreme Court