

E-FILED

FEBRUARY 08, 2022

KIM MORRISON

CHELAN COUNTY CLERK

**STATE OF WASHINGTON
CHELAN COUNTY SUPERIOR COURT**

STATE OF WASHINGTON,

Plaintiff,

v.

OPERATION VETERANS
ASSISTANCE & HUMANITARIAN
AID, also doing business as
VETERANS WAREHOUSE and
VETERANS THRIFT STORE, a
nonprofit corporation; and THELBERT
MARION LAWSON JR., in his
individual capacity and as a member of
the marital community of THELBERT
MARION LAWSON JR. and KAREN
JEAN MONROE,

Defendants.

NO. **22-2-00091-04**

COMPLAINT

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The State of Washington, by and through its undersigned attorneys, brings this action against Operation Veterans Assistance & Humanitarian Aid, also doing business as Veterans Warehouse and Veterans Thrift Store (OVAHA), and Thelbert Marion Lawson Jr. (Thelbert Lawson Jr.) to enforce the Washington Law Against Discrimination (WLAD), RCW 49.60, for subjecting OVAHA employees and members of the public to sexual harassment and other discrimination on the basis of sex.

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3. Pursuant to RCW 4.12.020 and RCW 4.12.025, venue properly lies in Chelan County as the violations alleged in this Complaint were committed by Defendants OVAHA and Thelbert Lawson Jr. in whole or in part in Chelan County, Washington, and OVAHA's principal business address in Washington is located in Chelan County, Washington, at 1219 North Wenatchee Avenue, Wenatchee, Washington 98801.

4. Plaintiff is the State of Washington.
5. The Attorney General is the chief legal adviser to the State. The Attorney General's powers and duties include acting in state court on matters of public concern. The Attorney General is authorized to commence this action pursuant to RCW 43.10.030(1).

7. Defendant Thelbert Lawson Jr. and Karen Jean Monroe are a married couple and reside in Chelan County, Washington.

8. Defendant Thelbert Lawson Jr. and Karen Jean Monroe incorporated OVAHA under the Washington Nonprofit Corporation Act, RCW 24.03, on or about July 1, 2013. Defendant Thelbert Lawson Jr. served as an initial director of OVAHA's board of directors and is OVAHA's Chief Executive Officer.

9. At all relevant times, OVAHA has been a registered Washington nonprofit

1 corporation doing business in Washington State and having eight (8) or more employees.

2 10. At all relevant times, OVAHA has been an “employer” within the meaning of the
3 WLAD, RCW 49.60.040(11).

4 11. OVAHA’s thrift stores are “place[s] of public resort, accommodation,
5 assemblage, or amusement” within the meaning of the WLAD, RCW 49.60.040(2).

6 IV. ALLEGATIONS

7 A. OVAHA’s Thrift Store Operations in Washington State

8 12. OVAHA operates two thrift stores, Veterans Warehouse Thrift Store located at
9 1219 North Wenatchee Avenue in Wenatchee, Washington, and Veterans Thrift Store located at
10 908 North Colorado Street, in Kennewick, Washington. Both thrift stores employ Washington
11 residents to help operate the stores, including by working as cashiers, accepting donations at the
12 store, sorting and cleaning donations, organizing the store, and picking up donations at donor
13 homes.

14 13. In addition to its employees, OVAHA relies on volunteers to carry out its stated
15 mission. OVAHA solicits volunteers through its website, where it states that it “offers an
16 opportunity for community members and Veterans to volunteer their time, energy, goods, and
17 monies, . . . to pay back, acknowledge and honor the service of our Veterans, and the sacrifice
18 of their families.”¹ According to OVAHA, “[v]olunteers are the lifeblood of our organization.”²

19 14. OVAHA has benefited from thousands of volunteer hours from hundreds of
20

21
22 ¹ *Long Term Mission, Veterans Thrift Store – Wenatchee*,
23 <https://www.vetsthiftstore.org/long-term-mission> (last visited on February 6, 2022). When
visited on February 7, 2022, the website was no longer online; a screenshot of the webpage is
attached as Exhibit A.

24 ² *GET INVOLVED, Veterans Thrift Store – Wenatchee*, [vetsthiftstore.org/get-](https://www.vetsthiftstore.org/get-involved)
25 [involved](https://www.vetsthiftstore.org/get-involved) (last visited on February 6, 2022). When visited on February 7, 2022, the website was
no longer online; a screenshot of the webpage is attached as Exhibit B.

1 volunteers since it was founded in 2013.³ By donating their time and energy to OVAHA,
2 Washington residents enjoy the advantages and privileges of a place of public accommodation.

3 **B. OVAHA CEO Thelbert Lawson Jr.’s Sexual Harassment of Female Employees**

4 15. At all relevant times, CEO Thelbert Lawson Jr. has been a corporate officer of
5 OVAHA and has served as a manager at both of OVAHA’s thrift store locations. At all relevant
6 times, Thelbert Lawson Jr. acted within the scope of his duties and in the interest of OVAHA,
7 as a corporate officer and manager of OVAHA.

8 16. As a corporate officer and manager of OVAHA, Thelbert Lawson Jr. oversaw
9 operations at OVAHA’s thrift stores and had the authority to hire employees, make job
10 assignments, set work schedules, set wages, and promote, demote, and/or fire employees.
11 OVAHA’s thrift store employees refer to Thelbert Lawson Jr. as the “owner” of OVAHA’s thrift
12 stores.

13 17. From at least July 2020 to at least November 2021, OVAHA and Thelbert
14 Lawson Jr. subjected female employees at OVAHA’s Wenatchee and Kennewick thrift stores to
15 unlawful discrimination on the basis of sex, including quid pro quo sexual harassment and/or
16 severe, pervasive, and unwelcome sexual conduct that gave rise to a hostile work environment.
17 The sexual conduct was carried out by Thelbert Lawson Jr. The conduct included, but is not
18 limited to, the following:

- 19 a. Touching female employees without their permission, including on the back,
20 shoulders, legs, arms, and buttocks;
21 b. Leading female employees into enclosed areas, including his office, and
22 making sexually explicit comments;
23 c. Making sexually charged and unwelcome comments, including about his

24
25 ³ See, e.g., Operation Veterans Assistance & Humanitarian Aid, 2019 Form 990 –
26 Return of Organization Exempt From Income Tax, *available at*
<https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/462963942/202011899349300846/full>.

1 genitalia, female employees' and customers' appearance, size, clothing, and
2 bodies, including their buttocks and breasts;

3 d. Making overt, sexual gestures toward female employees, including staring at
4 their buttocks and their groin area;

5 e. Making sexual comments and asking female employees to go with him to
6 hotels or to the store's basement;

7 f. Regularly commenting about female employees' sex lives, their need to have
8 more sex, how he would like to have sex with them, and what he would do if
9 he had sex with them;

10 g. Requesting that female employees walk in front of him and staring at their
11 buttocks;

12 h. Requesting that female employees watch pornographic material with him;

13 i. Requesting that female employees expose their bodies; and

14 j. Requesting dates and sexual acts, including in exchange for job security, to
15 avoid workplace discipline, and/or for store benefits.

16 18. Thelbert Lawson Jr.'s sexual misconduct was unwelcome. OVAHA employees
17 who experienced it report feeling uncomfortable, stressed, afraid, and/or sick.

18 19. Thelbert Lawson Jr.'s sexual misconduct often occurred in the presence of other
19 female employees and/or customers.

20 20. Victims of Thelbert Lawson Jr.'s sexual misconduct complained of his behavior
21 to OVAHA's President, Karen Jean Monroe, and managers and/or supervisors at OVAHA's
22 thrift stores. Although employees reported Thelbert Lawson Jr.'s conduct, OVAHA took no
23 reasonable steps to investigate or take corrective action, and did not reprimand or stop Thelbert
24 Lawson Jr.'s sexual misconduct.

25 21. As a result of Thelbert Lawson Jr.'s intentional sexual misconduct and OVAHA's
26 failure to take investigative and/or corrective action, the working conditions at OVAHA's thrift

1 stores became intolerable and forced several OVAHA employees to quit their employment with
2 OVAHA.

3 22. Upon information and belief, OVAHA's board of directors is comprised of
4 Thelbert Lawson Jr.'s family and friends. Thelbert Lawson Jr.'s father, Thelbert Lawson Sr., and
5 mother, Linda Lawson, serve on OVAHA's board of directors.

6 23. The conduct alleged herein was objectively and subjectively intolerable and
7 unwelcome.

8 24. Washington residents who are employees, past employees, and persons
9 associated with them have been injured by OVAHA's and Thelbert Lawson Jr.'s sexual
10 harassment. Such persons may have suffered pecuniary and/or nonpecuniary injuries because of
11 the conduct alleged herein.

12 **C. OVAHA Retaliated Against Employees Opposing Thelbert Lawson Jr.'s Misconduct**

13 25. Rather than stop Thelbert Lawson Jr.'s behavior, OVAHA and Thelbert Lawson
14 Jr. took adverse employment action, including but not limited to, assigning more difficult job
15 duties to, increasing scrutiny of, making accusations against, rescheduling hours of, denying
16 overtime payments to, and threatening the employment of, at least one employee who rejected,
17 opposed, and/or was perceived to have opposed or taken steps to oppose Thelbert Lawson Jr.'s
18 unwelcome sexual conduct. These actions would dissuade a reasonable person from engaging in
19 protected activity.

20 26. Upon information and belief, after learning that OVAHA employees were
21 potentially consulting an attorney about Thelbert Lawson Jr.'s conduct, Thelbert Lawson Jr. held
22 at least one staff meeting at OVAHA's thrift store in Wenatchee where he threatened employees'
23 employment if they spread "rumors" about him. These actions would dissuade a reasonable
24 person from engaging in protected activity.

25 27. Washington residents who are employees, past employees, and persons
26 associated with them have been injured by OVAHA's and Thelbert Lawson Jr.'s retaliation.

1 Such persons may have suffered pecuniary and/or nonpecuniary injuries because of the unlawful
2 conduct alleged herein.

3 **D. Thelbert Lawson Jr.'s Sexual Harassment of Members of the Public at OVAHA**

4 28. Thelbert Lawson Jr.'s sexual misconduct was not limited to OVAHA's
5 employees. OVAHA, through Thelbert Lawson Jr., subjected members of the public, including
6 a female volunteer, to sexual harassment and/or assault at OVAHA's thrift store locations.

7 29. In 2021, Thelbert Lawson Jr. was convicted for assault for one of these incidents.
8 Shortly after his conviction, OVAHA posted Thelbert Lawson Jr.'s appeal bail. As a result,
9 Thelbert Lawson Jr.'s jail sentence was stayed and he continued to sexually harass OVAHA
10 employees.

11 30. OVAHA, through Thelbert Lawson Jr.'s actions, denied full enjoyment of
12 OVAHA's thrift stores to members of the general public on the basis of sex, including through
13 sexual harassment and/or assault.

14 31. Washington residents who are volunteers, patrons, and persons associated with
15 them have been injured by OVAHA's and Thelbert Lawson Jr.'s discriminatory conduct. Such
16 persons may have suffered pecuniary and/or nonpecuniary injuries because of the unlawful
17 conduct alleged herein.

18 **V. FIRST CAUSE OF ACTION**

19 **(Violation of the WLAD—Sexual Harassment)**

20 32. The State realleges and incorporates by reference the allegations set forth in each
21 of the preceding paragraphs of this Complaint.

22 33. Through their actions described above, OVAHA and Thelbert Lawson Jr. have
23 discriminated against female workers in the terms or conditions of employment because of sex,
24 in violation of RCW 49.60.030(1)(a) and RCW 49.60.180(3).
25
26

1 **VI. SECOND CAUSE OF ACTION**

2 **(Violation of the WLAD—Retaliation)**

3 34. The State realleges and incorporates by reference the allegations set forth in each
4 of the preceding paragraphs of this Complaint.

5 35. Through their actions described above, OVAHA and Thelbert Lawson Jr. have
6 discriminated against individuals who opposed unfair or discriminatory employment practices,
7 in violation of RCW 49.60.210(1).

8 **VII. THIRD CAUSE OF ACTION**

9 **(Violation of the WLAD—Constructive Discharge)**

10 36. The State realleges and incorporates by reference the allegations set forth in each
11 of the preceding paragraphs of this Complaint.

12 37. Through their actions described above, OVAHA and Thelbert Lawson Jr. have
13 constructively discharged female workers because of sex, in violation of RCW 49.60.030(1)(a)
14 and RCW 49.60.180(2).

15 **VIII. FOURTH CAUSE OF ACTION**

16 **(Violation of the WLAD—Unfair Practice in a Place of Public Accommodation)**

17 38. The State realleges and incorporates by reference the allegations set forth in each
18 of the preceding paragraphs of this Complaint.

19 39. Through their actions described above, OVAHA and Thelbert Lawson Jr. have
20 denied the full enjoyment of the advantages, facilities, or privileges of a place of public resort,
21 accommodation, assemblage, or amusement on the basis of sex, or committed an act which
22 directly or indirectly results in any distinction, restriction, or discrimination on the basis of sex,
23 in violation of RCW 49.60.030(1)(b) and RCW 49.60.215.

24 **IX. PRAYER FOR RELIEF**

25 40. Wherefore, the State of Washington prays that the Court:
26

- 1 a. Declare that the discriminatory practices of OVAHA and Thelbert Lawson Jr.
2 violate the WLAD;
3 b. Enjoin OVAHA and Thelbert Lawson Jr. from discriminating on the basis of
4 sex in any aspect of employment or retaliating against employees who oppose
5 and/or complain of discriminatory or unfair employment practices;
6 c. Enjoin Thelbert Lawson Jr., from entering any of OVAHA's business
7 premises and prohibit him from managing, operating, or otherwise becoming
8 involved with OVAHA's business decisions and/or operations;
9 d. Award damages or other appropriate monetary relief to each person aggrieved
10 by OVAHA's and Thelbert Lawson Jr.'s discriminatory conduct, in an
11 amount to be proven at trial;
12 e. Award the State the costs of suit including reasonable attorneys' fees; and
13 f. Award such additional relief as the interests of justice may require.
14

15 DATED this 8th day of February, 2022.

16 Respectfully Submitted,

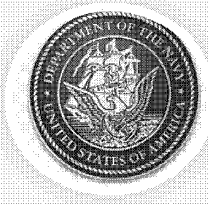
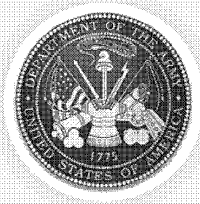
17 ROBERT W. FERGUSON
18 Attorney General

19 

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EXHIBIT A

VETERANS THRIFT STORE-WENATCHEE


[HOME](#)
[LONG TERM MISSION](#)
[CONTACT US](#)
[DONATE](#)
[ONLINE THRIFT STORE](#)

Long Term Mission

Our Corporation was formed to serve the more than 10,000 Veterans of North Central Washington.

We seek to Aid, Empower and Enable Veterans and their families.

We work to help any Veteran and Veteran family in need of support, in any form necessary.

Our Thrift Store was started to serve Veterans and their families, by offering

Furniture, Bedding, Clothing and general necessities to Veterans in need.

Proceeds from sales of donated goods are invested back into our Veteran Community, whether by providing goods and services, or providing emergency aid.

Veterans and other members of our communities who donate goods to our Thrift Store, provide the means to offer these goods at discounted prices or free of charge, if needed.

It also offers an opportunity for community members and Veterans to volunteer their time, energy, goods, and monies,.....to pay back, acknowledge and honor the service of our Veterans, and the sacrifice of their families.

Our Thrift Store funds all the programs we offer to and for Veterans and their families.

Veterans Warehouse Thrift Store serves as our conduit to the community.

We work to eliminate homelessness of Veterans and others.

We can provide donated cold weather items to survive the extreme cold weather climate of the outdoors in the North Central Washington Area.

We provide local disaster relief to assist community efforts.

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LONG TERM MISSION | VetsThriftStore

THE PROVIDE SOCIAL WELFARE AID TO ASSIST COMMUNITY GROUPS.

We support other community organizations offering betterment to our community.

MISSION STATEMENT

No need is too small and no voice is too quiet to be heard.

We are devoted to provide education, advocacy and all human services needed by Veterans and their families.

"Assisting Veterans in Need"

Operation Veteran's Assistance and Humanitarian Aid

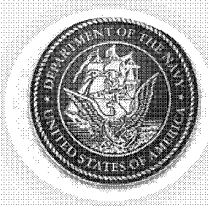
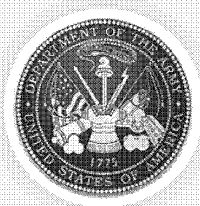
@2013 - a nonprofit organized under the provisions of Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code

1219 North Wenatchee Avenue
Wenatchee, Washington 98801
509-888-7310 or 509-888-7313



EXHIBIT B

VETERANS THRIFT STORE-WENATCHEE


[HOME](#)
[LONG TERM MISSION](#)
[CONTACT US](#)
[DONATE](#)
[ONLINE THRIFT STORE](#)

GET INVOLVED

Volunteers are the lifeblood of our organization.
 They are the base of the community pillar that is the Wenatchee Valley,
 North Central Washington and of our organization.
 We think there are many who want to help, but don't know how to get involved.
 The following page (Volunteer Inquiry) will let us know you are interested in helping,
 what skills you can offer, and what needs you can help us fulfill.

Please take a moment to reflect on what being a volunteer is really all about.
 The quotes below are by some of the most learned and wise members of our civilization.

**"What is the essence of life?
 To serve others and to do good."**

Spoken by Greek philosopher Aristotle over 2300 years ago,
 one of the most ancient quotes about volunteering
 offers proof that giving back to the community is hardly a new concept.

**"You give but little when you give of your possessions.
It is when you give of yourself that you truly give."**

- Kahlil Gibran

"The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others."

— Mahatma Gandhi

"The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away."

— William Shakespeare

"Wherever there is a human being, there is an opportunity for a kindness."

- Seneca

"The smallest act of kindness is worth more than the grandest intention."

-Oscar Wilde

"You make a living by what you get. You make a life by what you give."

-Winston Churchill

"No one is more cherished in this world than someone who lightens the burden of another."

**"If you want to touch the past, touch a rock.
If you want to touch the present, touch a flower.
If you want to touch the future, touch a life."**

**"Volunteering is the ultimate exercise in democracy.
You vote in elections once a year, but when you volunteer,
you vote every day about the kind of community you want to live in."**

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

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GET INVOLVED | VetsThriftStore
- AUTHOR'S UNKNOWN

Won't you consider helping the Veterans and families of our region.
Please complete and send us your Volunteer Inquiry.
We will contact you promptly.

Operation Veteran's Assistance and Humanitarian Aid

@2013 - a nonprofit organized under the provisions of Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code

1219 North Wenatchee Avenue
Wenatchee, Washington 98801
509-888-7310 or 509-888-7313

