

JEFFREY S. CHIESA
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF NEW JERSEY
Division of Law
124 Halsey Street - 5th Floor
P.O. Box 45029
Newark, New Jersey 07101
Attorney for Plaintiffs

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SUPERIOR COURT OF NJ
SOMERSET COUNTY

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CIVIL DIVISION

By: Alina Wells
Deputy Attorney General

Labinot A. Berlajolli
Special Deputy Attorney General

Per

11/20/12

RAKESH SARLOFF

SUPERIOR COURT OF NEW JERSEY
CHANCERY DIVISION,
WARREN COUNTY
DOCKET NO. WRN - C-16016-12

JEFFREY S. CHIESA, Attorney General of the
State of New Jersey, and ERIC T. KANEFISKY,
Acting Director of the New Jersey Division of
Consumer Affairs,

Plaintiffs,

v.

OM DUTT, LLC D/B/A AMERICA'S BEST
VALUE INN; AND JOHN DOES 1-10,
individually and as owners, officers, directors,
shareholders, founders, managers, agents, servants,
employees, representatives and/or independent
contractors of OM DUTT, LLC D/B/A
AMERICA'S BEST VALUE INN; and XYZ
CORPORATIONS 1-10,

Defendants.

Civil Action

COMPLAINT

Plaintiffs Jeffrey S. Chiesa, Attorney General of the State of New Jersey ("Attorney General"), with offices located at 124 Halsey Street, Fifth Floor, Newark, New Jersey, and Eric T. Kanefsky, Acting Director of the New Jersey Division of Consumer Affairs ("Director"), with

offices located at 124 Halsey Street, Seventh Floor, Newark, New Jersey, by way of Complaint state:

PRELIMINARY STATEMENT

1. During emergencies and major disasters, such as hurricanes, tropical storms, earthquakes, fires and floods, some merchants have taken unfair advantage of consumers by greatly increasing prices for certain merchandise, which are consumed or used as a direct result of an emergency or which are consumed or used to preserve, protect, or sustain the life health or safety or comfort of persons or their property, a practice commonly known as "price gouging." When a declared state of emergency results in abnormal disruptions of the market, the New Jersey Legislature has found it in the public interest that excessive and unjustified price increases in the sale of certain merchandise, price gouging, be prohibited. See N.J.S.A. 56:8-109.

2. On October 27 2012, just prior to Tropical Storm Sandy ("Sandy") reaching the State of New Jersey ("State" or "New Jersey"), Governor Chris Christie ("Governor Christie") declared a State of Emergency. In the wake of the State of Emergency, defendant OM Dutt, LLC d/b/a America's Best Value Inn ("America's Best Value Inn" or "Defendant") engaged in price gouging in the sale of hotel rooms. In so doing, America's Best Value Inn committed numerous violations of the New Jersey Consumer Fraud Act, N.J.S.A. 56:8-1 et seq. ("CFA").

PARTIES AND JURISDICTION

3. The Attorney General is charged with the responsibility of enforcing the CFA. The Director is charged with the responsibility of administering the CFA on behalf of the Attorney General.

4. By this action, the Attorney General and Director (collectively, "Plaintiffs") seek injunctive and other relief for violations of the CFA. Plaintiffs bring this action pursuant to their authority under the CFA, specifically N.J.S.A. 56:8-8, 56:8-11, 56:8-13 and/or 56:8-109. Venue is proper in Warren County, pursuant to R. 4:3-2, because it is the county in which America's Best Value Inn has conducted business.

5. On July 27, 2011, America's Best Value Inn was established as a limited liability corporation in the State. Upon information and belief, at all relevant times, America's Best Value Inn has maintained a business address of 1311 Route 22 West, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865. America's Best Value Inn registered agent is Rakesh Shroff ("Shroff"), who maintains a mailing address of 1311 Route 22 West, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865.

6. Upon information and belief, Shroff is the General Manager of the America's Best Value Inn hotel operated by Defendant.

7. John and Jane Does 1 through 10 are fictitious individuals meant to represent the owners, officers, directors, shareholders, founders, managers, agents, servants, employees, and/or representatives of America's Best Value Inn who have been involved in the conduct that gives rise to this Complaint, but are heretofore unknown to Plaintiffs. As these defendants are identified, Plaintiffs shall amend the Complaint to include them.

8. XYZ Corporations 1 through 10 are fictitious corporations meant to represent any additional corporations who have been involved in the conduct that gives rise to this Complaint, but are heretofore unknown to Plaintiffs. As these defendants are identified, Plaintiffs shall amend the Complaint to include them.

GENERAL ALLEGATIONS COMMON TO ALL COUNTS:

A. Sandy and Executive Order No. 104 Declaring a State of Emergency

9. In late October 2012, Sandy was approaching New Jersey.

10. Hurricanes and tropical storms have the potential to cause severe weather conditions, including heavy rains, high winds, main stream and river flooding, and progressing runoff that may threaten homes and other structures, and endanger lives in the State.

11. On October 27, 2012 at approximately 11:30 a.m., due to the approach of Sandy, Governor Christie issued Executive Order No. 104, which immediately declared a State of Emergency in New Jersey ("State of Emergency").

12. Upon information and belief, on October 28, 2012, President Obama signed an emergency disaster declaration for New Jersey.

13. Upon information and belief, Governor Christie ordered the evacuation of all New Jersey barrier islands by 4:00 p.m. on October 28, 2012.

14. Upon information and belief, on October 29, 2012, Sandy made landfall in New Jersey. At that time, Sandy had been categorized as a tropical storm, and resulted in severe weather conditions of an unprecedented magnitude, including enormous storm surges, devastating winds and widespread flooding throughout the State.

15. Upon information and belief, while moving ashore at Atlantic City, Sandy brought winds in excess of 80 miles per hour, and heavy rainfall that reached almost 12 inches.

16. Sandy resulted in severe wind and water damage, among other things, to the New Jersey shoreline, homes and businesses.

17. Sandy produced winds that toppled trees and downed power lines throughout New Jersey, causing widespread power outages that affected at least 2.4 million households and countless businesses.

18. In several municipalities, particularly those along the New Jersey coast, residents were forced to evacuate their homes which, in many instances, were completely destroyed.

19. In other areas, severe flooding and power outages left New Jersey residents at least temporarily homeless.

20. Many displaced residents did not have the ability to stay with family or friends or chose not to stay in temporary shelters.

21. Residents thus resorted to seeking shelter at hotels or other places of lodging.

22. Upon information and belief, at least thirty-four (34) New Jersey residents have died as a result of Sandy.

B. Defendant's Business Generally

23. At all relevant times, Defendant has been engaged in the advertisement, offering for sale and/or sale of hotel accommodations to consumers in the State and elsewhere.

24. At all relevant times, Defendant's inventory of hotel rooms included approximately 8 rooms with king-sized beds (4 non-smoking and 4 smoking) ("King Rooms"), 16 non-smoking rooms with two (2) queen-sized beds ("Double Queen Non-Smoking Rooms") and 12 smoking rooms with two (2) queen-sized beds ("Double Queen Smoking Rooms") (collectively, the "Covered Rooms").

C. Defendant's Excessive Hotel Room Prices

25. During the period immediately prior to the State of Emergency, October 19, 2012 through October 26, 2012, the highest rates charged by Defendant for the Covered Rooms were as follows:

Type of Room	Date	Highest Rate
King Room	October 19	\$90
Double Queen Non-Smoking Room	October 24	\$300
Double Queen Smoking Room	October 24	\$120

26. Following the Governor's Declaration of a State of Emergency at 11:30 a.m. on October 27, 2012, there was a sharp percentage increase in the price of many of the rooms in the hotel as consumers who had been displaced by the storm sought shelter and basic essentials. These increases exceeded ten percent over the highest prices previously charged for any of the Covered Rooms during the period of October 19 to 26, 2012 (the week leading up to the State of Emergency).

27. During the period of October 27, 2012 through November 5, 2012 (the "Emergency Period"), there were thirty (30) instances in which the Defendant charged above the amount permitted by statute.

28. During the Emergency Period, the Defendant rented sixteen (16) King Rooms, for which the pre-emergency high rate was \$90, at rates above the amount permitted by statute. These instances are as follows:

Date	# of Rooms	Highest Rate During the Emergency Period	Percentage Increase
October 31	1	\$100	11.1%
November 1	2	\$125	38.8%
November 1	1	\$150	66.6%
November 1	1	\$193	114.4%
November 2	1	\$100	11.1%
November 2	1	\$115	27.7%
November 2	1	\$125	38.8%
November 2	1	\$150	66.6%
November 3	1	\$100	11.1%
November 3	1	\$115	27.7%
November 3	1	\$125	38.8%
November 4	3	\$100	11.1%
November 4	1	\$115	27.7%

29. During the Emergency Period, the Defendant rented eight (8) Double Queen Non-Smoking Rooms, for which the pre-emergency high rate was \$300, at rates above the amount permitted by statute. These instances are as follows:

Date	# of Rooms	Highest Rate During the Emergency Period	Percentage Increase
November 1	1	\$520	73.3%
November 2	1	\$385	28.3%
November 5	5	\$350	16.6%
November 5	1	\$438	46%

30. During the Emergency Period, the Defendant rented six (6) Double Queen Smoking Rooms, for which the pre-emergency high rate was \$120, at rates above the amount permitted by statute. These instances are as follows:

Date	# of Rooms	Highest Rate During the Emergency Period	Percentage Increase
November 1	2	\$200	66.6%
November 1	2	\$180	50%
November 2	1	\$150	25%
November 5	1	\$350	191.6%

31. In all, Defendants rented a total of thirty (30) of the Covered Rooms at rates above the amount permitted by statute.

COUNT I

**VIOLATION OF THE CFA (N.J.S.A. 56:8-109) BY DEFENDANT
(EXCESSIVE PRICES DURING EMERGENCIES)**

32. Plaintiffs repeat and reallege the allegations contained in paragraphs 1 through 31 as if more fully set forth herein.

33. The CFA defines “merchandise” as including “any objects, wares, goods, commodities, services or anything offered, directly or indirectly to the public for sale.” N.J.S.A. 56:8-1(c). Merchandise includes hotel rooms.

34. At all relevant times, Defendant has been engaged in the advertisement, offering for sale and/or sale of merchandise within the meaning of N.J.S.A. 56:8-1(c), specifically hotel accommodations.

35. The CFA states:

It shall be an unlawful practice for any person to sell or offer to sell during a state of emergency or within 30 days of the termination of a state of emergency, in the area for which the state of emergency has been declared, any merchandise which is consumed or used as a direct result of an emergency or which is consumed or used to preserve, protect, or sustain the life, health, safety or comfort of person or their property for a price that constitutes an excessive price increase.

[N.J.S.A. 56:8-109.]

36. At all relevant times, Defendant has been engaged in the advertisement, offering for sale and/or sale of merchandise consumed or used as a direct result of an emergency and/or which is consumed or used to preserve, protect, or sustain the life, health, safety or comfort of person or their property within the meaning of N.J.S.A. 56:8-109, specifically hotel accommodations.

37. An “excessive price increase” means:

A price that is excessive as compared to the price at which the consumer good or service was sold or offered for sale by the seller in the usual course of business immediately prior to the state of emergency. A price shall be deemed excessive if:

(1) The price exceeds by more than 10 percent the price at which the good or service was sold or offered for sale by the seller in the usual course of business immediately prior to the state of emergency, unless the price charged by the seller is attributable to additional costs imposed by the seller’s supplier or other costs of providing the good or service during the state of emergency.

(2) In situations where the increase in price is attributable to additional costs imposed by the seller’s supplier or additional costs of providing the good or services during the state of emergency, the price presents an increase of more than 10 percent in the amount of markup from cost, compared to the markup customarily applied by the seller in the usual course of business immediately prior to the state of emergency.

[N.J.S.A. 56:8-108]

38. After Sandy made landfall in New Jersey and within thirty (30) days after the State of Emergency had been declared, Defendant sold hotel rooms at prices more than 10 percent higher than for the period immediately prior to the State of Emergency, which constitutes an excessive price increase.

39. By offering for sale and/or selling hotel accommodations at prices constituting an excessive price increase, Defendant has engaged in unlawful practices in violation of the CFA, specifically N.J.S.A. 56:8-109.

40. Each instance of Defendant offering for sale and/or selling hotel accommodations at a price constituting an excessive price increase constitutes a separate violation of the CFA, N.J.S.A. 56:8-109.

COUNT II

VIOLATION OF THE CFA BY DEFENDANT (UNCONSCIONABLE COMMERCIAL PRACTICES)

41. Plaintiffs repeat and reallege the allegations contained in paragraphs 1 through 40 as if more fully set forth herein.

42. The CFA prohibits:

The act, use or employment by any person of any unconscionable commercial practice, deception, fraud, false pretense, false promise, misrepresentation, or the knowing concealment, suppression, or omission of any material fact with intent that others rely upon such concealment, suppression or omission, in connection with the sale or advertisement of any merchandise or real estate, or with the subsequent performance of such person as aforesaid, whether or not any person has in fact been misled, deceived or damaged thereby...

[N.J.S.A. 56:8-2.]

43. In the operation of its business, Defendant has engaged in the use of unconscionable commercial practices.

44. Defendant has engaged in unconscionable commercial practices and deception including, but not limited to: advertising, offering for sale and/or selling hotel accommodations for the period between October 27, 2012 and October 31, 2012 at prices constituting an

excessive price increase compared to Defendant's prices immediately prior to the State of Emergency.

45. Each unconscionable commercial practice by Defendant constitutes a separate violation of the CFA, N.J.S.A. 56:8-2.

PRAYER FOR RELIEF

WHEREFORE, based upon the foregoing allegations, Plaintiffs respectfully request that the Court enter judgment against Defendant:

- (a) Finding that the acts of Defendant constitute multiple violations of the CFA;
- (b) Permanently enjoining Defendant, along with its agents, employees, representatives, independent contractors, corporations, subsidiaries, affiliates, successors, assigns and all other persons or entities directly under his control, from engaging in, continuing to engage in, or doing any acts or practices in violation of the CFA;
- (c) Directing Defendant to restore to any affected person, whether or not named in this Complaint, any money or real or personal property acquired by means of any practice alleged herein to be unlawful and found to be unlawful, as authorized by the CFA, N.J.S.A. 56:8-8;
- (d) Directing Defendant to pay the maximum statutory civil penalties for each violation of the CFA, in accordance with N.J.S.A. 56:8-13;
- (e) Directing Defendant to pay costs and fees, including attorneys' fees, for the use of the State, as authorized by the CFA, N.J.S.A. 56:8-11 and N.J.S.A. 56:8-19; and
- (f) Granting such other relief as the interests of justice may require.

JEFFREY S. CHIESA
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF NEW JERSEY
Attorney for Plaintiffs

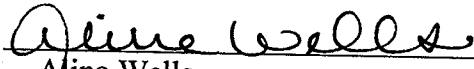
By: Alina Wells
Alina Wells
Deputy Attorney General

Dated: November 20, 2012
Newark, New Jersey

RULE 4:5-1 CERTIFICATION

I certify, to the best of my information and belief, that the matter in controversy in this action involving the aforementioned violations of the CFA, is not the subject of any other action pending in any other court of this State. I further certify, to the best of my information and belief, that the matter in controversy in this action is not the subject of a pending arbitration proceeding in this State, nor is any other action or arbitration proceeding contemplated. I certify that there is no other party who should be joined in this action at this time.

JEFFREY S. CHIESA
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF NEW JERSEY
Attorney for Plaintiffs

By: 
Alina Wells
Deputy Attorney General

Dated: November 29, 2012
Newark, New Jersey

RULE 1:38-7(c) CERTIFICATION OF COMPLIANCE

I certify that confidential personal identifiers have been redacted from documents now submitted to the court, and will be redacted from all documents submitted in the future in accordance with Rule 1:38-7(b).

JEFFREY S. CHIESA
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF NEW JERSEY
Attorney for Plaintiffs

By: Alina Wells
Alina Wells
Deputy Attorney General

Dated: November 20 2012
Newark, New Jersey

DESIGNATION OF TRIAL COUNSEL

Pursuant to R. 4:25-4, Deputy Attorney General Alina Wells is hereby designated as trial counsel for the Plaintiffs in this action.

JEFFREY S. CHIESA
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF NEW JERSEY
Attorney for Plaintiffs

By: Alina Wells
Alina Wells
Deputy Attorney General

Dated: November 20, 2012
Newark, New Jersey