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GENERAL EQUITY
CASE PROCESSING

By: Patricia Schiripo
Deputy Attorney General

SUPERIOR COURT OF NEW JERSEY
CHANCERY DIVISION,
BERGEN COUNTY
DOCKET NO. BER- _____

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

Plaintiffs,

v.

TAPAH, LIMITED LIABILITY COMPANY
D/B/A COMFORT SUITES MAHWAH; AND
JOHN DOES 1-10, individually and as owners,
officers, directors, shareholders, founders,
managers, agents, servants, employees,
representatives and/or independent contractors of
TAPAH, LIMITED LIABILITY COMPANY
D/B/A COMFORT SUITES MAHWAH; 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 consumed or used to preserve, protect, or sustain the life, health, 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 Tapah, Limited Liability Company, d/b/a Comfort Suites Mahwah (“Comfort Suites Mahwah” or “Defendant”) engaged in price gouging in the sale of hotel rooms. In so doing, Comfort Suites Mahwah 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, 8-11, 8-13 and/or 8-109. Venue is proper in Bergen County, pursuant to Rule 4:3-2, because it is the county in which Comfort Suites Mahwah has conducted business.

5. On September 25, 2006, Comfort Suites Mahwah was established as a limited liability company in the State. Upon information and belief, at all relevant times, Comfort Suites Mahwah has maintained a business address of 220 1311 Route 17, Mahwah, New Jersey 07430. Comfort Suite Mahwah's registered agent is Mahmood Reza Hashemi ("Hashemi"), who maintains a mailing address of 49 Carrell Road, Randolph, New Jersey 07879.

6. Upon information and belief, Hashemi is the Managing Member of Comfort Suites Mahwah.

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 Comfort Suites Mahwah 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 seventy (70) rooms, fifty-seven (57) of which Defendant charged above the amount permitted by statute (collectively, "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:

Room number	Date	Highest Rate
101	October 25	\$124.99
102	October 24	\$95.00
103	October 25	\$124.99
106	October 24	\$124.99
108	October 22	\$106.69
114	October 21	\$114.00
116	October 25	\$116.39
118	October 24	\$95.00
119	October 24	\$119.99
120	October 25	\$124.99
122	October 22	\$109.99
123	October 22	\$109.99
124	October 22	\$101.00
125	October 22	\$109.99
126	October 25	\$124.99
128	October 22	\$109.99
129	October 23	\$119.99
132	October 22	\$109.99
201	October 22	\$119.99
202	October 22	\$119.99
203	October 25	\$124.99
205	October 19	\$119.00
206	October 24	\$114.99
208	October 25	\$114.99
210	October 19	\$79.20
211	October 26	\$102.00
212	October 22	\$119.99
213	October 23	\$119.99
214	October 23	\$107.99
215	October 20	\$99.00
216	October 22	\$119.99
218	October 19	\$89.00
219	October 26	\$89.99
220	October 25	\$105.00
222	October 19	\$89.99
224	October 21	\$104.00
225	October 22	\$109.00
226	October 23	\$124.99
228	October 23	\$89.99
229	October 23	\$124.99
301	October 24	\$129.99

302	October 24	\$119.99
305	October 22	\$95.00
306	October 22	\$99.99
307	October 24	\$109.99
308	October 24	\$124.99
312	October 21	\$91.20
315	October 20	\$71.20
316	October 26	\$99.00
320	October 21	\$99.99
321	October 19	\$95.00
322	October 22	\$109.00
323	October 20	\$89.00
324	October 20	\$89.00
325	October 22	\$90.00
326	October 22	\$109.99
328	October 20	\$71.20

26. Following the Governor Christie's Declaration of the State of Emergency at 11:30 a.m. on October 27, 2012, there was a sharp percentage increase in the price of the Covered Rooms as consumers who had been displaced by Sandy sought shelter and basic essentials. These increases far exceeded ten percent (10%) more than the highest prices previously charged for any of the Covered Rooms during the period of October 19, 2012 through October 26, 2012 (the week leading up to the State of Emergency). In fact, some increases exceeded two hundred percent (200%).

27. During the period of October 27, 2012 through November 7, 2012 ("Emergency Period"), there were four hundred seventy-three (473) instances in which the Defendant charged above the amount permitted by N.J.S.A. 56:8-109.

28. During the Emergency Period, the Defendant rented the following rooms at rates above the amount permitted by N.J.S.A. 56:8-109.

Room number	Number of Days during Emergency Period (October 27 – November 7) where excessive amount charged	Range of Rates Charged During Emergency Period (October 27 – November 7)	Percentage Increase Range
101	11	\$144 - \$199	15% - 59%
102	10	\$129.99 - \$199	36% - 59%
106	9	\$143 - \$189	14% - 51%
108	8	\$143 - \$219	34% - 105%
114	9	\$138 - \$239	21% - 110%
116	6	\$153 - \$199	31% - 71%
118	9	\$143 - \$249	51% - 162%
119	9	\$143 - \$249	19% - 108%
120	9	\$143 - \$189	14% - 51%
122	7	\$124.99 - \$174.99	14% - 59%
123	10	\$138 - \$249	25% - 126%
124	10	\$114 - \$189	13% - 87%
125	10	\$143 - \$270	30% - 145%
126	7	\$189 - \$250	51% - 100%
128	9	\$124.99 - \$199	14% - 81%
129	7	\$199.20 - \$249	66% - 108%
132	7	\$143 - \$189	30% - 72%
201	10	\$153 - \$290	28% - 142%
202	10	\$153 - \$270	28% - 125%
203	10	\$143 - \$249	14% - 99%
205	8	\$165 - \$289	39% - 143%
206	8	\$143 - \$270	24% - 135%
208	5	\$137.70 - \$270.00	20% - 135%
210	10	\$109 - \$239	38% - 202%
211	6	\$199	46% - 95%
212	4	\$153 - \$199	28% - 66%
213	10	\$153 - \$249	28% - 108%
214	10	\$124.99 - \$209.99	16% - 94%
215	7	\$124 - \$249	25% - 152%
216	10	\$153 - \$199.99	28% - 67%
218	10	\$159 - \$199.99	79% - 125%
219	8	\$114 - \$189.99	27% - 111%
220	8	\$169 - \$189	61% - 80%
222	3	\$99.99 - \$189	11% - 110%
224	10	\$143 - \$270	38% - 160%
225	5	\$143 - \$189	31% - 73%
226	9	\$143 - \$261	14% - 109%
228	11	\$111.60 - \$261	24% - 190%

229	9	\$153 - \$229	22% - 83%
301	10	\$153 - \$290	18% - 123%
302	10	\$153 - \$290	28% - 142%
305	10	\$199.20 - \$249	110% - 162%
306	3	\$189	89%
307	4	\$151.20 - \$189.99	37% - 73%
308	6	\$179 - \$189	43% - 51%
312	8	\$119.99 - \$199.99	32% - 119%
315	8	\$129 - \$219	163% - 208%
316	8	\$153 - \$229	55% - 131%
320	10	\$151.20 - \$249	51% - 149%
321	8	\$132.30 - \$199	39% - 109%
322	10	\$143 - \$270	31% - 148%
323	11	\$114 - \$270	28% - 203%
324	10	\$149 - \$189.99	67% - 113%
325	9	\$189.99	110% - 111%
326	9	\$189 - \$189.99	72% - 73%
328	11	\$83.20 - \$189	17% - 165%

29. In all, Defendant rented a total four hundred seventy-three (473) of the Covered Rooms at rates above the amount permitted by N.J.S.A. 56:8-109.

COUNT I

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

30. Plaintiffs repeat and reallege the allegations contained in paragraphs 1 through 29 as if more fully set forth herein.

31. 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.

32. 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.

33. 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.]

34. 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 persons or their property within the meaning of N.J.S.A. 56:8-109, specifically hotel accommodations.

35. 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.]

36. 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 (10%) higher than for the period immediately prior to the State of Emergency, which constitutes an excessive price increase.

37. 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.

38. 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)

39. Plaintiffs repeat and reallege the allegations contained in paragraphs 1 through 38 as if more fully set forth herein.

40. 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.]

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

42. 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 November 7, 2012 at prices constituting an excessive price increase compared to Defendant's prices immediately prior to the State of Emergency.

43. 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

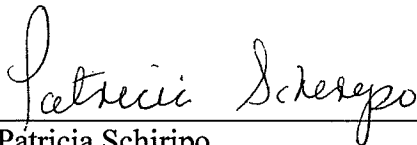
By: 
Patricia Schiripo
Deputy Attorney General

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: 
Patricia Schiripo
Deputy Attorney General

Dated: November 20, 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: Patricia Schiripo
Patricia Schiripo
Deputy Attorney General

Dated: November 20, 2012
Newark, New Jersey

DESIGNATION OF TRIAL COUNSEL

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

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

By: Patricia Schiripo
Patricia Schiripo
Deputy Attorney General

Dated: November 20, 2012
Newark, New Jersey