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Honorable Ronald B. Leighton

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
WESTERN WASHINGTON
AT TACOMA DIVISION

MAJOR MARGARET WITT,

Plaintiff,

v.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF
THE AIR FORCE; ET AL.,

Defendants.

No. C06-5195 RBL

MOTION FOR PROTECTIVE
ORDER PROHIBITING
INTERFERENCE WITH NON-
PARTY WITNESSES BY
DEFENDANTS

NOTE ON MOTION CALENDAR:
MAY 7, 2010

ORAL ARGUMENT REQUESTED

I. INTRODUCTION

Counsel for Plaintiff has interviewed and would like to continue interviewing current and former Air Force personnel who we believe have information that is relevant to this litigation. Not with standing the fact that the Defendants have unfettered access to these non-party fact witnesses, Defendants take the position that Plaintiff must first obtain permission from Air Force counsel before speaking with any current or former Air Force employees. Pursuant to this position, Air Force counsel have instructed Air Force personnel that they may not speak with Plaintiff’s counsel about Air Force information unless an appropriate Department of Defense (“DoD”) official has authorized communication on that matter. Defendants rely upon DoD

1 regulations that are inapplicable to litigation in federal court where, as here, the federal
2 government is a party. Further, no Federal Rule of Civil Procedure authorizes a party to impose
3 burdensome conditions on opposing counsel attempting to interview non-party fact witnesses.
4 Indeed, the Washington Rules of Professional Conduct prohibit such behavior by attorneys.
5 Instructing non-party fact witnesses not to speak with opposing counsel unless a DoD official has
6 authorized the interview violates RPC 3.4(a) and 8.4(d). Accordingly, Plaintiff moves for a
7 protective order pursuant to Fed. R. Civ. P. 26(c) to prevent further interference with Plaintiff's
8 factual investigation and to seek a curative instruction in writing to current unit members
9 informing them that unit members may voluntarily speak with Plaintiff's counsel without Air
10 Force permission and without fear of adverse employment consequences. Plaintiff has conferred
11 in good faith with Defendants pursuant to the Court's September 2, 2009 Minute Order
12 Regarding Discovery and Depositions, but was unable to resolve the matter without court
13 intervention.

14 15 **II. FACTS**

16 During the course of discovery, Plaintiff's counsel has interviewed and seeks to continue
17 interviewing current and former Air Force personnel who are familiar with issues that are
18 relevant to the pending litigation. (Declaration of James E. Lobsenz (Dkt. No. 68), ¶ 2;
19 Declaration of Sher Kung, ("Kung Decl."), ¶ 2.) The Ninth Circuit ordered a remand of this case
20 so that the record could be developed and in so doing, stated the following:

21 The Air Force attempts to justify the policy by relying on congressional findings
22 regarding "unit cohesion" and the like, but that does not go to whether the
23 application of DADT specifically to Major Witt significantly furthers the
24 government's interest and whether less intrusive means would achieve
25 substantially the government's interest. Remand is therefore necessary for the
26 district court to develop the record on Major Witt's substantive due process claim.

Witt v. Department of the Air Force, 27 F.3d 806, 821 (9th Cir. 2008).

1 Central to Plaintiff's case is her contention that prior to Major Witt's suspension in 2004,
2 several gay and lesbian individuals served in the 446th Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron (AES)
3 for many years; that their sexual orientation was well known to members of the 446th AES; and
4 that no one was bothered by this fact; and that unit morale, discipline and cohesion did not suffer
5 as a result. Plaintiff also contends that currently several gay and lesbian individuals serve in the
6 446th AES; that their sexual orientation is well known to members of the 446th; and that no one is
7 bothered by this fact; that unit morale, discipline and cohesion does not suffer as a result; and
8 accordingly, that the reinstatement of Major Witt, a known lesbian, will not negatively impact
9 unit morale, cohesion or discipline.

10 To prepare for trial, counsel for Plaintiff has contacted non-party witnesses who have
11 personal knowledge about whether Major Witt's presence in the 446th AES interfered with unit
12 morale or unit cohesion, how members of her unit reacted to her suspension and discharge, how
13 members of her unit react to the idea of her reinstatement, and whether unit members currently
14 serve with gay and lesbian servicemembers and their reaction to such service. (Kung Decl. ¶ 6.)
15 More than one current unit member of the 446th has expressed fear and hesitation in talking with
16 Plaintiff's counsel because the Air Force instructed the unit members not to speak with
17 Plaintiff's counsel without Air Force permission. (Kung Decl. ¶ 4.) Another current unit
18 member is reluctant to testify because s/he fears repercussions from his/her supervisors for
19 speaking with Plaintiff's counsel. (Kung Decl. ¶ 5.)

20 Plaintiff's counsel has also asked former and current unit members questions about their
21 interaction with other units while on deployment. Based on deposition testimony and discovery
22 responses, Plaintiff anticipates that Defendants intend to argue at trial that a known lesbian,
23 Major Witt, cannot be allowed to serve in the 446th AES because she may deploy overseas and
24 come in contact with other American servicemembers who do not wish to serve with a known
25 American gay or lesbian servicemember. (Col. Mary E. Walker Dep. (Ex. D of Declaration of
26 Sarah Dunne ("Dunne Decl.") 147:3-150:3 (government questions about deployment); Capt. Jill

1 Robinson Dep. (Ex. E of Dunne Decl.) 69:17-70:12 (same); MSgt. Leah Crawford (Ex. F of
2 Dunne Decl.) 31:3-25 (same); *see also* Defs.’ Supplemental Objections and Resps. to Plaintiff’s
3 Interrogatory No. 12 (Ex. F of Dunne Decl.) at 3-4 (same)). Plaintiff intends to rebut this
4 evidence by establishing that American servicemembers already serve overseas with several
5 NATO allies (Britain and Canada, among others) who permit gay and lesbian individuals to
6 serve openly, and that current members of the 446th have deployed overseas and not experienced
7 any negative impact on morale or unit cohesion because of a current unit member’s sexual
8 orientation. In the course of gathering evidence on these points, we have asked and will ask
9 servicemembers about any deployment overseas and whether they served with gay and lesbian
10 members. We will not ask any questions that are privileged or that could impact national
11 security. (Kung Decl. ¶ 7.) Specifically, we will not ask any questions about where specific
12 personnel were deployed overseas or the nature or length of their mission. (*Id.*)

13 On April 14, 2010, Plaintiff received a letter from the Government stating that DoD
14 regulations prohibit Plaintiff’s counsel from contacting current or former Air Force employees to
15 obtain information relevant to the present litigation unless Air Force counsel provide their
16 consent. (April 14, 2010 Letter from Government (“April 14 Letter”) (Dunne Decl. Ex. A at 5).
17 The letter quoted the regulations as stating that “DoD [including Air Force] personnel may only
18 produce, disclose, release, comment upon, or testify concerning those matters that were specified
19 in writing and properly approved by the appropriate DoD official.” (Dunne Decl. Ex. A at 6
20 (quoting 32 C.F.R. § 97.6(c)(2))). The April 14 letter continued, “[i]n light of these provisions,
21 Air Force counsel has reminded employees of the need to comply with these procedures before
22 official information can be released.” (Dunne Decl. Ex. A at 6). The letter defined “official
23 information” broadly to include things such as “[p]ersonal observations by Air Force personnel
24 of the morale, support, or fitness of any particular Air Force personnel.” (Dunne Decl. Ex. A at 5
25 (quoting Air Force Instruction (“AFI”) 51-301, ¶ 9.2.6.5.)). At least some, if not all, of the
26

1 information that Plaintiff seeks from Air Force personnel will be considered “official
2 information.” (Kung Decl. ¶¶ 2-3, 6.)

3 Section 301 of Title V of the United States Code and *United States ex rel. Touhy v.*
4 *Ragen*, 340 U.S. 462, 468 (1951) authorize and provide authority respectively for each federal
5 agency to promulgate regulations and procedures governing the release of agency information.
6 The regulations for each agency – often referred to as *Touhy* regulations – promote the “smooth
7 functioning of government operations” and ensure employee resources are not “commandeered”
8 by private litigants in lawsuits not involving the United States as a party. *Exxon Shipping Co. v.*
9 *U. S. Dep’t of Interior*, 34 F. 3d 774, 779 & n.4 (9th Cir. 1994); *see also Boren Oil Co. v.*
10 *Downie*, 873 F.2d 67, 70 (4th Cir. 1989) (noting that the policy behind the *Touhy* regulations is
11 “to conserve governmental resources where the United States is not a party”). Section 301 of
12 Title V expressly states that “[t]his section does not authorize withholding information from the
13 public or limiting the availability of records to the public.” Pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 301, the DoD
14 promulgated 32 C.F.R. §§97.1-.6, DoD Directive 5405.2, and Air Force Instruction (AFI) 51-
15 301, Chapter 9. These regulations, directive and instruction constitute the DoD and Air Force
16 specific *Touhy* regulations.

17 On April 19, 2010, Plaintiff’s counsel responded to the Government citing to controlling
18 Ninth Circuit authority holding that *Touhy* regulations did not apply to cases, such as this one,
19 where the federal government is a party. (April 19 Letter from Sarah Dunne (“April 19 Letter”)
20 (Dunne Decl. Ex. B at 8.) Because the DoD *Touhy* regulations did not apply, Plaintiff’s counsel
21 further noted that the Air Force counsel’s instruction to employees that they could not reveal any
22 official information to Plaintiff’s counsel without Air Force permission ran afoul of the Federal
23 Rules of Civil Procedure and the Washington Rules of Professional Conduct (RPC). (Dunne
24 Decl. Ex. B at 9.) To remedy the violations of the RPCs and prevent future violations, Plaintiff’s
25 counsel asked that Defendants instruct Air Force counsel to issue a curative instruction to Air
26 Force employees in writing, stating that unit members do not need permission to speak

1 voluntarily with Plaintiff’s counsel and that unit members will not suffer adverse employment
2 consequences by speaking with Plaintiff’s counsel. (Dunne Decl. Ex B at 9.)

3 On April 21, 2010, the Government responded in writing by reiterating that the
4 Government can place conditions on informal witness interviews involving former or current Air
5 Force employees pursuant to the DoD *Touhy* regulations. (April 21 Letter from Government
6 (Dunne Decl. Ex. C at 11). The parties then conducted a meet and confer by telephone on April
7 21 in an attempt to resolve the issue, but were unsuccessful. (Dunne Decl. ¶ 10.)

8 9 **III. ARGUMENT**

10 Plaintiff seeks a protective order to ensure that Plaintiff can continue to exercise its
11 ability to conduct discovery, including interviews of Air Force employees on non-privileged
12 matters relevant to this litigation without government interference. District courts have broad
13 latitude to grant protective orders which protect a party from annoyance, embarrassment,
14 oppression, or undue burden or expense. *See* Fed. R. Civ. P. 26(c)(1). The Supreme Court held
15 that courts have “broad discretion [] to decide when a protective order is appropriate and what
16 degree of protection is required.” *Phillips v. General Motors Corp.*, 307 F.3d 1206, 1211 (9th
17 Cir. 2002) (citing *Seattle Times Co. v. Rhinehart*, 467 U.S. 20, 36 (1984)). Rule 26(c) authorizes
18 a district court to grant a protective order where “good cause” is shown. *See San Jose Mercury*
19 *News, Inc. v. U.S. Dist. Ct.*, 187 F.3d 1096, 1103 (9th Cir. 1999).

20 **A. Defendants’ Actions Are Not Supported By Law Or Precedent**

21 To support their assertion that Plaintiff must receive Defendant Air Force’s permission to
22 contact *any current or former* Air Force employees while Defendants on the other hand may
23 have unlimited access to non-party witnesses, Defendants cite three regulations: 32 C.F.R. §
24 97.6, DoD Directive 5405.2, and Air Force Instruction 51-301, chapter 9. (Dunne Decl. Ex. A at
25 5). These regulations indeed purport to require litigants to obtain DoD permission and comply
26 with DoD procedures (i.e., put in writing to the government the nature of the testimony or

1 information sought) before DoD will determine, in its discretion, whether to withhold or release
2 limited information in response to the written request. *See, e.g.*, 32 C.F.R. § 97.6(c). The
3 regulations were promulgated pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 301 and *United States ex rel. Touhy v.*
4 *Ragen*, 340 U.S. 462 (1951). *See* 32 C.F.R. § 97.6(c)(2); DoD Directive 5405.2, ¶ 6.3.2; AFI 51-
5 301, ¶ 9.5.

6 The Ninth Circuit and other courts have widely recognized, however, that regulations
7 promulgated under *Touhy*, including the principal regulation cited by Defendants here, 32 C.F.R.
8 § 97.6, are not applicable in cases where the United States is a party to the legal proceeding.
9 *Exxon Shipping Co.*, 34 F. 3d at 779 & n.4, 5 (holding that *Touhy* regulations do not apply when
10 the U.S. is a party to the litigation); *Alexander v. F. B. I.*, 186 F.R.D. 66, 70 & n.2 (D. D.C. 1998)
11 (holding that plaintiffs need not follow 32 C.F.R. § 97.6 in their efforts to elicit testimony from
12 DoD employees); *United States v. The Boeing Co.*, 189 F.R.D. 512, 517-18 (S.D. Ohio 1999)
13 (holding that 32 C.F.R. § 97.1 *et seq.* “should not apply where the Government is a party to the
14 litigation”). As the Supreme Court stated, “[j]udicial control over the evidence in a case cannot
15 be abdicated to the caprice of executive officers.” *United States v. Reynolds*, 345 U.S. 1 (1953).
16 Indeed, this “would create a significant separation of powers problem.” *Alexander*, 186 F.R.D.
17 at 70. Thus, when the federal government is a party, *Touhy* regulations do not apply and the
18 United States “is placed in the same position as a private litigant” subject to the Federal Rules of
19 Civil Procedure. *Exxon Shipping Co.*, 34 F.3d at 776 n.4; *Boeing Co.*, 189 F.R.D. at 517 (same).

20 Put simply, Defendants have no valid basis in law for their assertion that they may, at
21 their discretion, condition or prevent Plaintiff from speaking with current or former Air Force
22 employees. Nothing in the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure authorizes a party to impose
23 burdensome conditions on another party relating to discovery concerning non-party fact
24 witnesses. Indeed, courts have specifically held there is no compelling reason to permit the
25 federal government to impose different procedures for discovery (i.e., *Touhy* regulations) than
26 the ones outlined in the Rules of Civil Procedure. *In re Bankers Trust Co.*, 61 F.3d 465, 470-71

1 (6th Cir. 1995) (finding no reason “to discard the relatively straightforward discovery methods
2 outlined in the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure simply because the Federal Reserve has
3 attempted to mandate a different procedure”). Moreover, the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure
4 “strongly favor full discovery.” *Exxon Shipping Co.*, 34 F.3d at 779 (citing Rule 26(b)(1) for the
5 principle that parties may obtain discovery regarding any matter that leads to non-privileged,
6 relevant evidence).

7 The underlying statute pursuant to which agency *Touhy* regulations were promulgated, 5
8 U.S.C. § 301, plainly states that it “does not authorize *withholding* information from the public
9 or *limiting* the availability of records to the public.” 5 U.S.C. § 301 (2006) (emphasis added).
10 The Ninth Circuit and other federal courts have repeatedly held that 5 U.S.C. § 301 does not
11 authorize a federal agency to withhold or limit discovery, testimony, or documents in federal
12 litigation unless protected by a privilege or consistent with the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure.
13 *See, e.g., Exxon Shipping Co.*, 34 F.3d at 777-78; *Houston Bus. J., Inc. v. U.S. Dep’t of the*
14 *Treasury*, 86 F.3d 1208, 1212 (D.C. Cir. 1996) (same); *The Boeing Co.*, 189 F.R.D. at 516-17
15 (same); *Alexander*, 186 F.R.D. at 69-70 (same).

16
17 **B. Washington Rules of Professional Conduct Prohibit Counsel from Interfering with
18 Non-Party Witness Interviews By Opposing Counsel**

19 Given that the *Touhy* DoD regulations do not apply when the United States is a party,
20 Defendants have no authority to require Air Force counsel “consent” before Plaintiff’s counsel
21 may conduct ex parte interviews with current and former Air Force employee non-party
22 witnesses. *See* (Dunne Decl. Ex. A at 5) (stating that Plaintiff counsel’s communications with
23 current and former Air Force employees is “inappropriate” unless Air Force counsel have
24 “consent[ed]” to such interviews first). Indeed, Washington ethical rules governing attorney
25 conduct prohibit such interference as detailed below.

26 All counsel litigating cases in the Western District of Washington are subject to the
Washington Rules of Professional Conduct. *See* Local General Rule 2(e)(2) at 2; *Avocent*

1 *Redmond Corp. v. Rose Elecs.*, 491 F. Supp.2d 1000, 1003 (W.D. Wash. 2007) (GR 2(e) governs
2 standards of professional conduct for attorneys practicing before the Western District); *In re*
3 *Cellcyte Genetic Corp. Securities Litigation*, 2008 WL 5000156 *2 (W.D. Wash. Nov. 20, 2008)
4 (same). In addition, attorneys for the U.S. Department of Justice are subject to the state attorney
5 ethical rules and local rules of any federal court before which they appear pursuant to the
6 McDade Amendment, or 28 U.S.C. § 530B(a).

7 Rule 3.4(a) of the Washington Rules of Professional Conduct prohibits a lawyer from
8 obstructing another party's access to evidence and also precludes a lawyer from assisting another
9 person in doing such an act. The Washington Supreme Court has specifically held that opposing
10 counsel may conduct ex parte interviews with non-party witnesses, including current employees.
11 *Wright v. Group Health Hosp.*, 103 Wn.2d 192, 203 (1984); *Jones v. Rabonco, LTD.*, 2006 WL
12 2401270 (W.D. Wash. 2006) (noting that the Washington Supreme Court held that opposing
13 counsel may conduct ex parte interviews with current and former employees). Moreover,
14 Comment [5] to RPC 3.4 explicitly notes that Washington did not adopt the ABA Model Rule
15 3.4(f), that expressly defines circumstances under which counsel may ask employees other than a
16 client to refrain from speaking with opposing counsel, because the Model Rule 3.4(f) would be
17 "inconsistent with Washington law." See Washington Comment [5]; ABA Model Rule 3.4(f)
18 (permitting a lawyer to request an employee or other agent of the client "to refrain from
19 voluntarily giving relevant information to another party"); see also Informal Ethics Opinion No.
20 1020 (Dunne Decl. Ex. H) (opinion of Rules of Professional Conduct Committee that prosecutor
21 cannot discourage witnesses from speaking with defense counsel nor may a prosecutor make his
22 presence a condition of the witness interview).

23 Rule 8.4(d) prohibits "conduct that is prejudicial to the administration of justice." The
24 government's attempt to prohibit non-party fact witness interviews without their consent
25 interferes with the Plaintiff's ability to gather evidence to support her case. Defendants, on the
26 other hand, have not been obstructed in their attempts to gather evidence for trial and have had

1 unfettered access to the non-party fact witnesses. “It is a basic part of the underlying philosophy
2 of the procedure established by the Federal Rules that a trial, rather than being a contest, shall be
3 an endeavor to ascertain the truth and an effort to attain justice.” *Fay v. United States*, 22 F.R.D.
4 28, 31 (E.D.N.Y. 1958). At present, current unit members erroneously believe, because the Air
5 Force counsel has told them so, that they cannot speak voluntarily with Plaintiff’s counsel unless
6 they receive Air Force counsel consent first. The few unit members who have disregarded this
7 instruction have expressed their fear and hesitation in speaking with us because they are doing so
8 without command’s permission. (Kung Decl. ¶ 4.)

9
10 **C. Government Attorneys Cannot Avoid State Ethical Rules By Having Agency
Government Attorneys Provide Instructions That They Themselves Could Not Give.**

11 In its April 21 letter, the Government reiterated its knowledge that “Air Force counsel has
12 reminded” current unit members that they cannot speak to opposing counsel about “official
13 information” without Air Force permission. (Dunne Decl. Ex. C at 11). The Government further
14 asserted that the Department of Justice could not require Air Force counsel to issue a curative
15 instruction. (*Id.* at 13.) This is incorrect. Department of Justice attorneys litigating this case
16 cannot violate or attempt to violate the Washington Rules of Professional Conduct “through the
17 acts of another,” or in this instance Air Force co-counsel. See Rule 8.4(a) (noting that it is
18 professional misconduct for a lawyer to violate or attempt to violate the Rules of Professional
19 Conduct “through the acts of another”). Rule 8.4(a) does not allow Department of Justice
20 attorneys to avoid ethical obligations by claiming they cannot require their client’s in-house
21 attorneys to obey ethical rules. Moreover, while Plaintiff has no knowledge as to why Major
22 Linell Letendre is no longer the Air Force counsel of record for this matter (*see* Dkt. No. 60 at 6),
23 Plaintiff notes that Major Letendre has been a licensed member of the Washington Bar
24 Association since 2001 and therefore subject to the Washington Rules of Professional Conduct.
25 (Dunne Decl. ¶ 11.) Major Letendre’s replacement, Lieutenant Colonel Todi Carnes (*see* Dkt.
26 No. 63 at 12), is not a member of the Washington bar. (Dunne Decl. ¶ 11.) Plaintiff asserts that

1 whether this is a coincidence or not is irrelevant because Rule 8.4(a) requires Department of
2 Justice attorneys to take affirmative steps to ensure that they do not violate the Rules of
3 Professional Conduct, that they do not knowingly assist others who do, and that they cannot do
4 so through acts of another, such as Air Force counsel or personnel.
5

6 **D. Good Cause Exists For Granting A Protective Order**

7 Good cause exists for a protective order. Good cause is shown when “the party seeking
8 protection [carries] the burden of showing specific prejudice or harm will result if no protective
9 order is granted.” *Phillips*, 307 F.3d at 1210-11. If no protective order is granted in this case,
10 Air Force employees will be under the misconception that federal regulations prohibit them from
11 speaking with Plaintiff’s counsel unless a DoD official approves of the interview. As a result,
12 Plaintiff will be hindered in her ability to seek the discovery to which she is lawfully entitled.
13 The discovery will be directly relevant to this litigation, and will include, for example, the effect
14 of the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy on unit cohesion and morale. A protective order requiring
15 Defendants to cure their defective and legally incorrect instruction to Air Force personnel is
16 necessary so that Plaintiff can obtain effective discovery.

17 ///

18 ///

1
2 **IV. CONCLUSION**

3 Plaintiff has shown good cause for a protective order. Plaintiff respectfully asks that the
4 Court grant Plaintiff's motion and enter the Proposed Order.

5
6 DATED this 27th day of April, 2010.

Respectfully submitted,

7 **AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION**
8 **OF WASHINGTON FOUNDATION**

9 By: /s/ Sarah A. Dunne

Sarah A. Dunne, WSBA #34869

Sher Kung, WSBA # 42077

ACLU of Washington Foundation

705 2nd Ave, Suite 300

Seattle, WA 98104

dunne@aclu-wa.org, skung@aclu-wa.org

(206) 624-2184

14 James Lobsenz, WSBA #8787

15 **CARNEY BADLEY SPELLMAN**

700 Fifth Avenue, Suite 5800

16 Seattle, WA 98104

(206) 622-8020

17 lobsenz@carneylaw.com

18 Attorneys for Plaintiff

1 **CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE**

2 I hereby certify that on April 28, 2010, I electronically filed *Plaintiff's Motion for Protective*
3 *Order Prohibiting Interference with Non-Party Witness by Defendant and Proposed Order* with
4 the Clerk of the Court using the CM/ECF system which will send notification of such filing to
5 the following:

6 Peter Phipps
7 peter.phipps@usdoj.gov

8 Marion J. Mittet
9 Jamie.Mittet@usdoj.gov

10 Stephen J. Buckingham
11 Stephen.Buckingham@usdoj.gov

12 Bryan R. Diederich
13 bryan.diederich@usdoj.gov

14 Attorneys for Defendants

15 DATED this 28th day of April, 2010.

16
17
18 AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION OF
19 WASHINGTON FOUNDATION

20 By: /s/ Nina Jenkins
21 Nina Jenkins
22 Legal Program Assistant
23 705 Second Avenue, Suite 300
24 Seattle, WA 98104
25 Tel. (206) 624-2184
26 njenkins@aclu-wa.org