HEARING OFFICER, CAREER SERVICE BOARD  
CITY AND COUNTY OF DENVER, COLORADO  
Appeal No. 43-14

DECISION AND ORDER

THE MATTER OF THE APPEAL OF:

BERNIE A. ARAGON, Appellant,

vs.

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS, TRAFFIC ENGINEERING DEPARTMENT,  
and the City and County of Denver, a municipal corporation, Agency.

The hearing in this appeal was held on Nov. 21, 2014 before Hearing Officer Valerie McNaughton. Appellant was present and was represented by Jordan Porter, Esq. Assistant City Attorney Jennifer Jacobson represented the Agency in the appeal. The Agency called Paula Mitchell, Steve Brendlinger, Crissy Fanguelio, Steven Hersey, and Bryan Moore. Appellant testified on his own behalf and presented the testimony of Edward Ortiz and Ernest Armijo.

I. STATEMENT OF THE APPEAL

Appellant Bernie Aragon appealed his dismissal from his position as Traffic Operations Technician 1, and raised claims of whistleblower and retaliation. The whistleblower claim was withdrawn at the commencement of the hearing. The parties stipulated to Agency Exhibits 1 - 12. and Appellant's Exhibits A, C, E-K, and N. Exhibit D was admitted at hearing.

II. FINDINGS OF FACT

Appellant Bernie Aragon has been a city employee in various technical positions for the past thirteen years. Since 2010, Appellant has served in the Signs and Markings unit of the Traffic Engineering Department at Public Works, where his duties were to install, maintain and repair traffic control signs and pavement markings. (Exh. 1-3.)

On May 28, 2014, Appellant's supervisor Steve Brendlinger received a report that there were inappropriate images on a shared computer located in a common area at the Traffic Engineering Services building at 5440 Roslyn Street. The computer was sent to the Denver Sheriff's Department for a forensic examination to determine if it contained any image that would be a violation of criminal law, such as child pornography. Two days later, Brendlinger met with his staff to inform them about the investigation, and to warn them not to use city computers to access inappropriate images. (Brendlinger, 11/21/14, 9:48 am.)
On June 14th, Major Bryan Moore reported on the results of his investigation. He concluded that there were no criminal violations. He did however find almost 1200 images he believed might violate city policy. Those images were located under the user profiles of seven employees within Traffic Operations, one of which was no longer employed at the Agency. (Exh. 5.) Moore selected the images based on whether they would "raise an eyebrow of someone walking in" if they looked at the computer screen. (Moore, 12:54 pm.)

Three employees were responsible for accessing 95% of the selected images. On the basis of the computer findings, disciplinary proceedings were begun on the six current employees. The employee with the largest number of downloads - 500 - was allowed to resign in lieu of termination on the day of his pre-disciplinary meeting. The second highest user had 377 downloads, but had recently resigned for unrelated reasons. (Exh. F.) The third highest user, with 257 downloads, was terminated after the disciplinary process. (Exh. G.) The next highest user was Appellant, with 40 images viewed for about 36 minutes on two days in November, 2013. (Exhs. 6, 7.) The remaining three employees were associated with fewer than ten images each, and had no previous discipline. Those employees all received written reprimands. (Exhs. I - L.)

During the Aug. 6, 2014 pre-disciplinary meeting attended by Director of Traffic Operations Steve Hersey and Appellant's supervisor, Appellant admitted the allegations in the pre-disciplinary letter. He argued however that he did not recall seeing or signing a computer use policy, and said 90% of the employees use Facebook at work. He stated that Brendlinger told the staff on May 28, 2014 that from that day forward, anyone caught doing anything on the computer would be disciplined. Appellant told the group that as a result, he had not logged onto the computer since that day. Appellant said he believed the allegations were in retaliation for his June 23, 2014 complaint against his supervisor for violence in the workplace. (Exh. 10.)

After Appellant left the meeting, the participants discussed their findings and the possible penalties. Based on Appellant's admission, they found that Appellant had violated the rules cited in the pre-disciplinary letter. Mr. Hersey concluded from Appellant's remarks that he had failed to take responsibility for his conduct, and observed, "I can see we're going to see this gentleman again". As a result, Mr. Hersey expressed his belief that termination was the most appropriate penalty. (Brendlinger, 9:55 am.) Brendlinger concurred without additional comment. (Mitchell, 9:06 am.) Thereafter, Director of Transportation Crissy Fanganello reviewed their conclusion to ensure that it was consistent with other disciplinary decisions made for similar infractions, and approved the decision to terminate. City Engineer Lesley Thomas, Chief Operating Officer George Delaney, and Agency Manager Jose Cornejo also reviewed the decision and approved it. (Mitchell, 9:10 am.)

At hearing, Appellant testified that he recognized the images as those he had accessed on the city computer. (Exh. 7.) He said some were pop-up advertisements or status photos from Facebook. Appellant admitted going to a website showing women with tattoos in order to decide where he wanted to put his next tattoo. (Exhs. 7-16, 7-33.) All the employees would get on the computer to play solitaire or check their bank account, and about 80% of the workers used Facebook. One employee used to wait for co-workers to step away from the computer, and would add Facebook status updates he thought were funny. One such message he left on Appellant's computer was, "I'm
gay." Other employees confirmed that this would happen frequently. (Armijo, 2:54 pm; Ortiz, 3:14 pm.) There was no testimony that the individual also accessed inappropriate photographs while on their user profiles. That employee left the Agency sometime in 2013. Appellant testified he was not aware of the city's computer policy, and was not shown the images he was accused of accessing until after the pre-disciplinary meeting. (Appellant, 1:46 pm.)

As to his retaliation claim, Appellant testified that Brendlinger persuaded management to terminate him for a small number of computer infractions in order to punish him for filing a complaint against him that June. (Appellant, 1:32 pm.) He explained that Mr. Brendlinger had created a hostile work environment for him since receiving a citizen complaint involving Appellant. On June 14, 2014, a Saturday, Appellant was working overtime with a crew assigned to mark a crosswalk. A woman waving a camera yelled at the crew and threw their cones out of the work area, loudly complaining that they were spraying material onto her parked car. Appellant was holding a torch, and told the woman not to get any closer or she may get her feet burned. The woman filed a complaint that singled out Appellant as the "agitator".

When Brendlinger heard about this incident the following Monday, he was convinced that the Mayor would hear of it and there would be an investigation. Brendlinger immediately assembled his staff to ask for details about the incident. Appellant volunteered that the woman's version of the incident was "not how it went." Brendlinger became frustrated, and told them he needed answers. Appellant responded with a smirk. Brendlinger then directed his anger at Appellant. Brendlinger told Appellant he was "a real piece of work (and) a sorry excuse for an employee". He angrily informed the entire staff that Appellant had been fired from the Wastewater division and that he (Brendlinger) had rescued him and given him another chance. He asked Appellant why he was so disgruntled. Appellant replied, "(m)aybe it's because of the snow duty situation". Brendlinger advised him to "let it go". He told the group that they should not associate with Appellant, and that he was on the way "out the door". He then instructed Appellant to come to his office. Appellant became concerned, and asked for a representative to accompany him. During their meeting in the office, Brendlinger continued to berate Appellant. Appellant responded that he felt threatened, and asked Brendlinger for a complaint form. Brendlinger told him not to "go down that road", but he eventually gave Appellant the form as well as contact information for both Human Resources and the Safety Officer. (Brendlinger, 9:44.)

Appellant felt humiliated by the attack. For several days afterward, his co-workers teased him by repeating Brendlinger's comments and accusations. (Exh. C-4.) On June 18th, Appellant filed a complaint based on the June 14th incident. A week later, the investigation sustained several of his allegations. (Exh. 12.) As a result, the Director of Transportation counseled Brendlinger about his conduct. (Brendlinger, 9:24 am; Fanganello, 11:12 am; Appellant, 1:17 pm.)

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1. In 2010, Appellant had been denied permission to be excused from snow duty. (Appellant, 1:23 pm.)
Appellant also testified about earlier events that affected his relationship with Mr. Brendlinger. Appellant was hired in 2001 by the Parks and Recreation Department as a Utility Worker. He filed a grievance in 2002, and was fired shortly thereafter for leaving a work site. That action was reversed, and Appellant accepted Brendlinger’s offer of a transfer to Public Works. For years, Appellant and Brendlinger got along well, as both belonged to the same gym and shared an interest in vintage cars. Appellant volunteered for snow duty in 2009, but asked to be removed from the list in 2010. That request was refused. Thereafter, things “turned bad.” Mr. Brendlinger led Appellant to believe he would be selected as crew supervisor, but that position was given to another employee. Appellant was also twice denied permission to attend a safety class that is required for promotion. (Appellant, 1:12 pm.)

III. ANALYSIS

The Agency bears the burden to establish the asserted violations of the Career Service Rules by a preponderance of the evidence, and to show that termination was within the range of discipline that can be imposed under the circumstances. Department of Institutions v. Kinchen, 886 P.2d 700 (Colo. 1994). Appellant is the “proponent of the order” on his retaliation claim and thus bears the burden of proof on that issue. In re Gallo, 63-09, 3 (3/17/11); citing CRS § 24-4-105(7).

A. VIOLATION OF DISCIPLINARY RULES

1. Neglect of duty under CSR § 16-60 A.

In order to prove a violation of this rule, an agency must prove an employee failed to perform a job duty he knew he was obligated to perform. In re Serna, CSB 39-12, 3-4 (2/28/14); In re Compos, CSB 56-08 (6/18/09).

The Agency alleges that Appellant neglected his duties during the 36 minutes he spent online accessing images in November, 2013. (Exh. 6.) Appellant argues that he was on his lunch break on Nov. 1st, and had not yet clocked in on Nov. 5th when he accessed the images. (Exhs. 6, 11.) The decision-maker conceded that the times indicated in the forensic report could have been Appellant’s lunch hour and before work, and that use of the internet while not on the clock is permitted. (Hersey, 1:27 am.) The Agency therefore did not establish by a preponderance of the evidence that Appellant neglected any job duty by his use of the internet at the stated times on Nov. 1 and 5, 2013.

2. Unauthorized operation of city equipment, CSR § 16-60 D.

In the context of this disciplinary appeal, the plain meaning of this rule prohibits only unauthorized operation of city equipment, including the internet. The city’s electronic communications policy contained in CSR § 15-80 addresses a different facet of the same subject, and therefore the rules should be read in pari materia to ensure both are accorded their intended meaning. Walgreen Co. v. Charnes, 819 P.2d 1039 (Colo. 1991).
The Agency alleges that Appellant operated a city computer in a manner that was unauthorized by virtue of his accessing images that were obscene, pornographic, vulgar or profane under city policy. (Exhs. 3, 4.) However, the issue under this rule is whether his operation of the computer was unauthorized. The nature of the material accessed during that operation is controlled by another city policy.

The evidence is uncontested that the computer was in a common area known as "the Lion's Den", and that employees regularly used it for both business and personal uses, including its internet functions. The Director of Traffic Operations who was the decision-maker in this case admitted that employees are permitted to download images such as cars during their lunch breaks. (Hersey, 11:27 am.) Moreover, the Executive Order cited in the disciplinary letter specifically permits:

Limited, occasional, or incidental use of electronic and communication devices and services for personal, non-business purposes . . . so long as it is of a reasonable duration and frequency, does not interfere with the employee's performance of job duties, and is not in support of a personal business.

Executive Order (E.O.) 16, § 2.3(c). Exh. 3-2.)

The Agency presented no evidence that Appellant's mere use of the computer or internet was unauthorized. Its allegations of misuse of the computer and internet by accessing improper images are not related to this rule violation, but must be considered under CSR § 16-60 Y, below. The Agency did not submit proof that Appellant's use of the computer on the two days in question was impermissible under any of the limitations contained in E.O. 16, 2.3(c). The Agency therefore failed to prove that Appellant violated this rule by evidence that he operated a shared computer for a total of 36 minutes on two days in November, 2013.

3. Conduct which violates city rules, laws or other legal authority, CSR § 16-60 Y

This disciplinary rule prohibits an employee from violating city rules, laws or other legal authority. Here, Appellant is charged with violating Executive Order 16's prohibition against using city equipment to retrieve or store obscene, pornographic or vulgar communications, or intentionally visit defined types of Internet sites. (Exh. 3-2.) Executive Order 16 is enforced under the disciplinary rules by CSR. § 15-82, which is incorporated by reference into the city's Information Technology Acceptable Use policy, Memorandum No. 16A. (Exh. 3-6.)

In 2011, Appellant consented to be bound by the city's Information Technology Acceptable Use policy by signing it. (Exh. 4.) Although Appellant first testified that he believed his signature was only required so he would be allowed to use city computers, he later admitted that he got that impression because he did not get a copy of the policy and was not encouraged to read it. Instead, he was told to sign it and "get back to work." (Appellant, 2:23 pm.)
It is clear from all the evidence that Appellant had a basic understanding that viewing erotica on city computers is not permitted. At the pre-disciplinary meeting, Appellant admitted both the allegations and rule violations. By that admission, Appellant revealed that he understood those rules. (Exh. 10.) At the hearing, Appellant stated that at the time he "thought it was okay because everyone was doing that." (Appellant, 2:09 pm. He compared the images found under his user name to those of the other employees, and concluded that "their images were pretty nasty compared to mine." (Appellant, 1:50 pm.) Nonetheless, Appellant concedes his images were likewise in violation of city policy, and that he feels "very bad" about his conduct. (Appellant, 2:15 pm.) He testified that he hoped he would "be okay" and just "get written up" after Brendlinger told them on May 30th not to use the computer in the way in the future.

Rule 15-82 forbids an employee from "knowingly transmitting, retrieving or storing any communication that is ... (d)erogatory to any individual or group (or) obscene", in relevant part. In 1973, the Supreme Court held that material may be subject to state regulations as obscene without violating the constitutional free speech guarantee if it meets three criteria: (1) The average person, applying local community standards and viewing the work in its entirety, must find that it appeals to the prurient interest; (2) the work must describe or depict sexual conduct or excretory functions in an obviously offensive way, and; (3) the work as a whole must lack "serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value". Miller v. California, 413 US 15, 24 (1973). The evidence presented consists in large part of pictures of scantily-clad women in suggestive poses. The investigator conceded that the pictures may have been from Facebook, as Appellant has stated. (Moore, 1:00 pm.) Hersey admitted at hearing that the pictures contain no full nudity, and I do not find their depiction of sexual themes to be obviously offensive under the Miller test.

In any event, an employer may impose greater limits on an employee's conduct in the workplace based on organizational needs and values. To that end, the city policies at issue here also prohibit knowing retrieval of vulgar, not just obscene, communications. The word "vulgar" is defined as "making explicit and offensive reference to sex or bodily functions". Oxford Online Dictionary, retrieved 12/30/14. No less an authority than the U.S. Supreme Court has long recognized that vulgar material is met by a lesser standard of offensiveness than that required to prove obscenity. Swearingen v. U.S., 161 US 446 (1896). The images at issue feature partial nudity in a manner that appeals to a prurient interest.

The city policy also prohibits accessing material that is derogatory to a group or individual. (Exh. 3-2.) One of the images, a photo-shopped picture of Hillary Clinton in a very revealing top, is derogatory to an individual, the former U.S. Secretary of State. (Exh. 7-5.) Thus, accessing the images violates Executive Order 16's prohibition against material that is vulgar or derogatory to an individual. For the same reasons, the images violate the Information Technology Acceptable Use policy proscribing access to internet sites containing vulgar material. (Exhs. 3-2, 3-8.) The Agency therefore established that Appellant violated § 16-60 Y by his breach of Executive Order 16 and related city rules.
B. DEGREE OF PENALTY

The level of discipline under the Career Service Rules must be based on both the nature of the offense and the amount believed necessary to correct the behavior. CSR § 16-20.

The Agency established that Appellant violated the city's policies governing internet use by accessing vulgar and derogatory pictures. It imposed termination based both on Appellant's previous receipt of a 60-day suspension, and its conclusion that lesser discipline would not correct the situation. It based the latter on its finding that Appellant sought to avoid responsibility for his admitted conduct by denying he signed the policy and claiming his supervisor told staff that only future violations would be disciplined. He also claimed that he was being targeted for filing a complaint against his supervisor. (Exh. 10.)

Appellant argues that termination was not reasonably related to the seriousness of the offense, given the fact that Appellant had accessed significantly fewer images than the two other employees who were removed from employment based on the same type of conduct. He also claims that his 40 images were less "nasty" than those accessed by the three worst offenders. In comparing the images of all four employees, I find that those in Appellant's profile are indeed less offensive and numerous than those of the other employees who were separated. (Exhs. 7, E - G.) However, one of those employees had no previous discipline, and another had only a written reprimand. The Director of Transportation reviewed the discipline in light of other discipline imposed for similar offenses. I cannot conclude that the Agency's decision to terminate for Appellant's use of the internet to access vulgar images is clearly excessive, given Appellant's previous disciplinary history and his apparent lack of remorse for the conduct. See Weeks v. City and County of Denver, 10CA1408 (Colo.App. 2011)(unpublished). cert denied, 2012SC53 (2012).

C. RETALIATION CLAIM

Appellant asserts that the Agency terminated him to punish him for filing a complaint against his supervisor. The Career Service Rules prohibit a supervisor from retaliating against an employee for reporting harassment or discrimination. CSR § 15-106. Retaliation is established by evidence that an employee engaged in protected activity, and thereafter suffered adverse action as a result of taking that action. In re Gallo, CSB 63-09. 3 (3/17/11), citing Montes v. Vail Clinic, 497 F.3d 1160, 1176 (10th Cir. 2007.)

Appellant proved that he engaged in protected activity by filing a complaint on June 18th against Brendlinger for the June 14th verbal attack. About a month later, Brendlinger served Appellant with a pre-disciplinary letter, which culminated in Appellant's termination. The evidence therefore establishes a prima facie claim of retaliation.

The deciding issue is whether the complaint, rather than Appellant's misconduct,

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2 The evidence is unclear whether Appellant's complaint against Brendlinger was filed as a grievance under Rule 18 or a complaint under Rule 15. For purposes of the retaliation claim, I need not resolve this issue since both are protected activities under § 15-106.
caused the termination. Appellant argues that circumstantial evidence indicates it did. It is undisputed that his complaint in June was followed six weeks later by his termination. In addition, Appellant's images were far less numerous and offensive than those accessed by the other employee who was fired. Appellant viewed 40 vulgar images during work breaks. Employee # 104929 accessed 257 images, many of which are much more offensive than those viewed by Appellant, and did so during work hours. (Exhs. 7, G.)

However, there are notable differences in the disciplinary postures of Appellant and Employee # 104929. Appellant had one serious prior disciplinary infraction of a 60-day suspension in 2010, while Employee # 104929 had a single written reprimand after 21 years with the city. Appellant admitted the misconduct but offered defenses rather than contrition at the pre-disciplinary meeting. The Agency concluded based on his statements that "we will be seeing this gentleman (Appellant) again." In contrast, Employee # 104929 expressed shame, sorrow, and a plea for another chance based on his belief that termination would end his marriage. Nonetheless, both employees were terminated by two different supervisors for misconduct that was like in type but different in volume and severity. (Exh. G, H.)

There is no mathematically precise method to calculate a disciplinary penalty. The rules require an agency to consider several factors in deciding upon appropriate discipline to "correct the situation and achieve the desired behavior ". Among them are past discipline and the circumstances related to the possibilities for rehabilitation and correction of misconduct. CSR § 16-20. Here, the director evaluated Appellant's attitude at the pre-disciplinary meeting and concluded that he would continue to present a disciplinary challenge to the Agency, a conclusion that was supported by Appellant's prior serious discipline. Under all the relevant circumstances, I have found that termination was not clearly erroneous or arbitrary.

Appellant claims that Brendlinger exercised his influence as a member of management to press for termination, motivated by Appellant's recent complaint against him. He supports that argument by the evidence that Brendlinger recommended termination to Hersey after learning of Appellant's complaint, and his recommendation as the supervisor was accepted by management.

Four top managers weighed in on the termination decision after Hersey presented his recommendation. All agreed it was consistent with other Agency actions for similar offenses. There is no evidence that Brendlinger had special influence with management that would have caused it to disregard their usual disciplinary practices as a favor to Brendlinger. If anything, Brendlinger's recent counseling by Fanganello indicates the system was acting in an even-handed manner for both employees and supervisors. At hearing, Brendlinger readily acknowledged that he was wrong to lose his temper at a staff meeting and to attack Appellant's reputation as a coach and an employee in front of his peers. Hersey, rather than Brendlinger, made the decision, and upper management made a separate determination that the discipline was in line with the Agency's prior enforcement of its rules.

For his part, Appellant has been inconsistent in his statements about the Agency's motivation. He testified that his relationship with Brendlinger actually "turned bad" in 2010 based on a number of events. When asked by Brendlinger at the June 14th meeting why
he was "so disgruntled", he replied, "maybe it's because of the snow duty situation".
(Aragon, 1:23 pm.) Appellant claims that after he objected to snow duty, his supervisor
denied him training and a promotion. Appellant chose not to grieve those actions on the
basis of retaliation. After Brendlinger told the staff on June 16th that Appellant was on his
way "out the door, Appellant became concerned that Brendlinger planned to fire him.
However, if Brendlinger had decided to fire Appellant on June 16th, Appellant's June 18th
complaint could not have been the motivating factor in his termination.

Brendlinger agreed that his relationship with Appellant worsened over time. He
testified that at the beginning of their work association in 2004, Brendlinger believed that
Appellant would help him improve his team's work ethic, and so he offered Appellant a
transfer to his unit. He observed that Appellant's attitude worsened over time,
culminating in his negative attitude during the June 16th meeting. Later that day,
Brendlinger received the results of the forensic investigation. (Exh. 5.) Two days later,
Appellant filed his complaint against Brendlinger for his verbal attack during the staff
meeting. Before that occurred, the relationship between the two had already become
strained. At hearing, Brendlinger credibly testified that he did not advocate for Appellant
during the pre-disciplinary meeting because he no longer believed Appellant was an
asset to his unit.

The Agency argues that the discipline was already in progress before the June
18th complaint has been filed, and Brendlinger took no more than an advisory role in the
disciplinary decision after the complaint was filed. The Agency delayed action on
Appellant's discipline until after his complaint against Brendlinger was resolved. The
Agency decided that Hersey rather than Brendlinger should be the decision-maker for
Appellant's discipline to avoid any appearance of retaliation. Brendlinger reports to
Hersey, who in turn reports to Fanganello. Hersey and Fanganello determined that
Brendlinger should be included in Appellant's pre-disciplinary meeting because he was
his direct supervisor and knew the most about the situation, having ordered the
investigation and worked with Appellant for many years. Brendlinger made the final
decision as to the other employee who was terminated, and Hersey made all other
disciplinary decisions. (Exhs. G - K.) As an additional safeguard, Fanganello conducted
a review of the Agency's past discipline to determine whether termination was consistent
with how the Agency had treated this type of offense in the past. She concluded that
the discipline was in keeping with the Agency's past practices. Thus, the Agency took
reasonable steps to insulate Brendlinger from the role of final decision-maker, while
including him at the pre-disciplinary meeting in his capacity as Appellant's direct
supervisor.

It is clear that Brendlinger's 2004 advocacy for Appellant had been replaced over
time with a far less flattering view of Appellant as an employee. I find that this was
caused by a series of negative workplace issues between the two of them that began
four years before Appellant's protected activity. The circumstantial and chronological
evidence demonstrates that the termination was not motivated by Appellant's complaint
against his supervisor.
Order

Based on the foregoing findings of fact and conclusions of law, the following orders are entered:

1. The administrative action imposed on Aug. 12, 2014 is AFFIRMED, and
2. The retaliation claim is DISMISSED.

Dated this 5th day of January, 2015.

Valerie McNaughton
Career Service Hearing Officer

NOTICE OF RIGHT TO FILE PETITION FOR REVIEW

You may petition the Career Service Board for review of this decision, in accordance with the requirements of CSR § 19-60 et seq., within fifteen calendar days after the date of mailing of the Hearing Officer’s decision, as stated in the decision’s certificate of delivery. See Career Service Rules at www.denvergov.org/csa. All petitions for review must be filed with the:

Career Service Board
C/o OHR Executive Director’s Office
201 W. Colfax Avenue, Dept. 412, 4th Floor
Denver, CO 80202
FAX: 720-913-5720
EMAIL: CareerServiceBoardAppeals@denvergov.org

Career Service Hearing Office
201 W. Colfax, 1st Floor
Denver, CO 80202
FAX: 720-913-5995
EMAIL: CSAHearings@denvergov.org.

AND opposing parties or their representatives, if any.
I certify that on January 5, 2015, I delivered a correct copy of this Decision to the following:

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