IN THE MATTER OF THE CLAIM

* BEFORE NICOLAS ORECHWA,

OF MARGUERITE E. DENNIS.

* ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE

CLAIMANT

* THE MARYLAND OFFICE

AGAINST THE MARYLAND HOME

• OF ADMINISTRATIVE HEARINGS

IMPROVEMENT GUARANTY FUND

FOR THE ALLEGED ACTS OR

OMISSIONS OF RAMON ESPIN,

TA RAMON & SONS

OAH No.: LABOR-HIC-02-21-14314

CONTRACTORS, LLC,

* MHIC No.: 19 (75) 1098

RESPONDENT

PROPOSED DECISION

STATEMENT OF THE CASE
ISSUES
SUMMARY OF THE EVIDENCE
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PROPOSED CONCLUSIONS OF LAW
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STATEMENT OF THE CASE

On April 2, 2020, Marguerite Dennis (Claimant) filed a claim (Claim) with the Maryland Home Improvement Commission (MHIC) Guaranty Fund (Fund), under the jurisdiction of the Department of Labor (Department), for reimbursement of \$28,131.00 in actual losses allegedly suffered as a result of a home improvement contract with Ramon Esplin, trading as Ramon & Sons Contractors, LLC (Respondent). Md. Code Ann., Bus. Reg. §§ 8-401 through 8-411 (2015). On or about May 28, 2021, the MHIC forwarded the matter to the Office of Administrative Hearings (OAH) for a hearing.

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I held a hearing on August 16, 2021, at the OAH in Rockville, Maryland. Bus. Reg. §§ 8-407(a), 8-312. Shara Hendler, Assistant Attorney General, Department, represented the Fund. The Claimant represented herself. The Respondent did not appear.

After waiting fifteen minutes for the Respondent or the Respondent's representative to appear, I proceeded with the hearing. Applicable law permits me to proceed with a hearing in a party's absence if that party fails to attend after receiving proper notice. Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR) 28.02.01.23A. On June 25, 2021, the OAH provided a Notice of Hearing (Notice) to the Respondent by United States mail first class, postage prepaid, return receipt requested. COMAR 09.08.03.03A(2); COMAR 28.02.01.05C(1). The Notice stated that a hearing was scheduled for August 16, 2021, at 10:00 a.m., at the OAH in Rockville, Maryland. The Notice further advised the Respondent that failure to attend the hearing might result in "a decision against you."

The United States Postal Service did not return the Notice to the OAH and the OAH received the green return receipt indicating the Respondent received the Notice. The Respondent did not notify the OAH of any change of mailing address, email address or phone number.

COMAR 28.02.01.03E. The Respondent made no request for postponement prior to the date of the hearing. COMAR 28.02.01.16. I determined that the Respondent received proper notice, and I proceeded to hear the captioned matter. COMAR 28.02.01.05A, C.

The contested case provisions of the Administrative Procedure Act, the Department's hearing regulations, and the Rules of Procedure of the OAH govern procedure in this case. Md. Code Ann., State Gov't §§ 10-201 through 10-226 (2014 & Supp. 2020); COMAR 09.01.03; and COMAR 28.02.01.

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ISSUES

- 1. Did the Claimant sustain an actual loss compensable by the Fund as a result of the Respondent's acts or omissions?
 - 2. If so, what is the amount of the compensable loss?

SUMMARY OF THE EVIDENCE

Exhibits

I admitted the following exhibits on the Claimant's behalf:

- Clmt. Ex. 1 Two Home Depot receipts and an online printout, various dates;
- Clmt. Ex. 2 Complaint form, February 27, 2019;1
- Clmt. Ex. 3 Home Depot receipt and Home Depot Invoice, various dates;
- Clmt. Ex. 4 Invoice from J.M. Contractors, Inc., April 10, 2020;
- Clmt. Ex. 5 Proposal from the Respondent, July 23, 2018;
- Clmt. Ex. 6 Written Statement from the Claimant, undated.

I admitted no exhibits on the Respondent's behalf.

I admitted the following exhibits on the Fund's behalf:

- Fund Ex. 1 Hearing Order, May 17, 2021;
- Fund Ex. 2 OAH hearing notice, June 25, 2021;
- Fund Ex. 3 Claim form, April 2, 2021;
- Fund. Ex. 4 The Respondent's MHIC licensing history, undated.

¹ The Fund's May 17, 2021 hearing order references a May 29, 2020 Claim form. (Fund Ex. 1). The Claim form in evidence from the Fund is dated, April 2, 2020. (Fund Ex. 3). There is no Claim form in evidence dated May 29, 2020. Based on the Claim form in evidence, I find the April 2, 2020 Claim form to be the operative Claim form before me. I admitted this February 27, 2019 "Complaint form" into evidence at the Claimant's request without objection from the Fund.

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Testimony

The Claimant testified and did not present other witnesses.

The Respondent and the Fund presented no testimony.

PROPOSED FINDINGS OF FACT

I find the following facts by a preponderance of the evidence:

- 1. At all times relevant to the subject of this hearing, the Respondent was a licensed home improvement contractor under MHIC license number 5495352.
- The Claimant owns a residence located at 11428 Symphony Woods Lane in Silver
 Spring, Maryland (the Residence).
- 3. The Claimant and the Respondent entered into two contracts. The first contract dated July 25, 2018, concerned the interior and exterior of the Residence and amounted to \$53,500.00 (Contract 1). The second contract dated July 27, 2018, concerned the basement of the Residence and amounted to \$28,000.00 (Contract 2 and collectively "the Contracts"). The Claimant paid the Respondent the total price under the Contracts of \$81,500.00.
- 4. The Respondent failed to properly install floors and bathroom tiles. He purchased an improperly sized door for the shower.
 - 5. The Respondent did not complete the work under the Contracts.
- 6. The Claimant paid another MHIC licensed contractor, JM Contractors Inc. (JM) \$5,185.00 to complete work under the Contracts. To replace the improperly installed floors would cost the Claimant \$19,622.00. The Claimant spent a total of \$1,264.23 for supplies to repair or complete the Respondent's work under the Contracts:

DISCUSSION

In this case, the Claimant has the burden of proving the validity of the Claim by a preponderance of the evidence. Bus. Reg. § 8-407(e)(1); Md. Code Ann., State Gov't

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§ 10-217 (2014); COMAR 09.08.03.03A(3). To prove a claim by a preponderance of the evidence means to show that it is "more likely so than not so" when all the evidence is considered. Coleman v. Anne Arundel Cty. Police Dep't, 369 Md. 108, 125 n.16 (2002).

An owner may recover compensation from the Fund "for an actual loss that results from an act or omission by a licensed contractor." Bus. Reg. § 8-405(a); see also COMAR 09.08.03.03B(2) ("The Fund may only compensate claimants for actual losses . . . incurred as a result of misconduct by a licensed contractor."). "[A]ctual loss' means the costs of restoration, repair, replacement, or completion that arise from an unworkmanlike, inadequate, or incomplete home improvement." Bus. Reg. § 8-401.

Claimant's case

The Claimant bought the Residence in unlivable condition. A friend recommended the Claimant hire the Respondent to restore the Residence to habitability. In the beginning, the Claimant had so much confidence in the Respondent she paid him the entire amount due under the Contracts. The Respondent commenced, but did not complete the work under the Contracts. Further, some of the work he did complete, he completed in a substandard manner. The Respondent improperly installed the kitchen floor tiles too far apart. This allowed grime to accumulate between the tiles and attract insects. The Respondent failed to properly install the tiles in walls of the basement bathroom resulting in an irregular wall surface. The Respondent bought a sixty-inch door for the basement shower for a fifty-nine-inch door space.

When the Respondent did not return prior to completing work, the Claimant called to follow up. The Respondent promised to "send someone." Neither the Respondent nor anyone on his behalf appeared to complete the work. Realizing the Respondent harbored no intention to complete the work, the Claimant hired JM, a MHIC licensed contractor, to complete the

 $^{^{2}}$ \$53,500.00 + \$28,000.00 = \$81,500.00.

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Respondent's work under the Contracts. The Claimant entered into a contract with JM for \$7,245.00 (JM Contract). (Clmt. Ex. 4.) However, \$2,060.00 of the items in the JM Contract concerned items not contained in Contract 1 and Contract 2.³ In addition to hiring JM, the Respondent obtained an estimate from Harry Borden, a MHIC licensed contractor, to replace the substandard floors the Respondent installed (Borden Estimate). The Borden Estimate amounted to \$19,622.00. The Claimant also paid \$522.24 for new bathroom tile (to repair the Respondent's substandard bathroom tile installation) and \$741.99 to obtain a properly sized shower door. (Clmt. Ex. 1)

Analysis

I find the Claimant met her burden to prove the Respondent abandoned the contract and that the work he did complete under the contract was substandard. The Claimant testified consistently as to all aspects of her case. While she did not support certain testimony with documentation (the cost of the bathroom tiles and the Borden Estimate), I found she testified credibly as to those elements of her case. Further, the Claimant candidly testified as to certain items JM performed which neither Contract 1 nor Contract 2 included. When asked why she did not question the Respondent about the gaps in the tiles, the Claimant credibly testified that the Respondent covered the tiles with protective paper. She did not remove the paper until after she determined he abandoned the contract. The Respondent did not appear to refute any of the Claimant's testimony. The Fund cross-examined the Claimant and, in closing, accepted her testimony in providing its recommendation.

Having found eligibility for compensation I must determine the amount of the Claimant's actual loss and the amount, if any, that the Claimant is entitled to recover. The Fund may not

³ At the hearing, the Claimant testified as to the specific line items in the JM Contract which were outside the scope of Contract 1 and Contract 2. Those line items totaled \$2,060.00.

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compensate a claimant for consequential or punitive damages, personal injury, attorney fees, court costs, or interest. Bus. Reg. § 8-405(e)(3); COMAR 09.08.03.03B(1). MHIC's regulations provide three formulas to measure a claimant's actual loss, depending on the status of the contract work.

In this case, the Respondent performed some work under the Contract, and the Claimant has retained (JM) and intends to retain (Harry Borden) to complete or remedy that work.

Accordingly, the following formula appropriately measures the Claimant's actual loss:

If the contractor did work according to the contract and the claimant has solicited or is soliciting another contractor to complete the contract, the claimant's actual loss shall be the amounts the claimant has paid to or on behalf of the contractor under the original contract, added to any reasonable amounts the claimant has paid or will be required to pay another contractor to repair poor work done by the original contractor under the original contract and complete the original contract, less the original contract price. If the Commission determines that the original contract price is too unrealistically low or high to provide a proper basis for measuring actual loss, the Commission may adjust its measurement accordingly.

COMAR 09.08.03.03B(3)(c).

The Claimant paid \$5,185.00⁵ to JM to repair and complete items under the Contracts with the Respondent. The Claimant will pay \$19,622.00 under the Borden Estimate to repair and replace the floors the Respondent failed to properly install. The Claimant paid \$741.99 for a proper shower door and \$522.24 for new tiles for the bathroom. This amounts to \$26,071.39 as the cost to complete the work under the Contracts. The cost of the Contracts amounts to \$81,500.00.

⁴ The Claimant did not provide documentation she paid this amount to the Respondent. As noted above I found the Claimant's testimony credible based upon her demeanor and her testimony's consistency with the documentation in evidence. *Pryor v. State*, 195 Md. App. 311, 329 (2010) (internal citations omitted) ("A fact-finder is free to believe part of a witness's testimony, disbelieve other parts of a witness's testimony, or to completely discount a witness's testimony."); *Md. Bd. of Physicians v. Elliott*, 170 Md. App. 369, 387-89 (2006) (A finder-of-fact is authorized to determine the credibility of a witness's testimonial evidence based on the witness's demeanor.). The Fund did not challenge the Claimant's credibility on this or other testimony she failed to support with documentation.

⁵ \$7,245.00 total JM Contract minus \$2,060.00 items not covered under the Contracts with the Respondent = \$5,185.00.

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Thus, under the formula, I calculate the actual loss as follows: \$81,500.00 (the amount the Claimant paid to the Respondent under the Contracts) plus \$26,071.39 (the total cost to complete the work under the Contracts) minus \$81,500.00, the total contract price, equals an actual loss of \$26,071.39.

The Business Regulation Article caps a claimant's recovery at \$20,000.00 for acts or omissions of one contractor and provides that a claimant may not recover more than the amount paid to the contractor against whom the claim is filed. Bus. Reg. § 8-405(e)(1), (5); COMAR 09.08.03.03B(4), D(2)(a). In this case, the Claimant's actual loss of \$26,071.39 exceeds \$20,000.00. Therefore, the Claimant's recovery is limited to \$20,000.00. Bus. Reg. § 8-405(e)(1); COMAR 09.08.03.03D(2)(a).

PROPOSED CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

I conclude, as a matter of law, that the Claimant sustained an actual loss of \$26,071.39 as a result of the Respondent's acts or omissions. Md. Code Ann., Bus. Reg. §§ 8-401, 8-405, § 8-407(e)(1) (2015); COMAR 09.08.03.03(A)(3). I further conclude, as a matter of law, that the Claimant is entitled to an award of \$20,000.00 from the Fund. *Id.*; COMAR 09.08.03.03B(3), (4), D(2)(a).

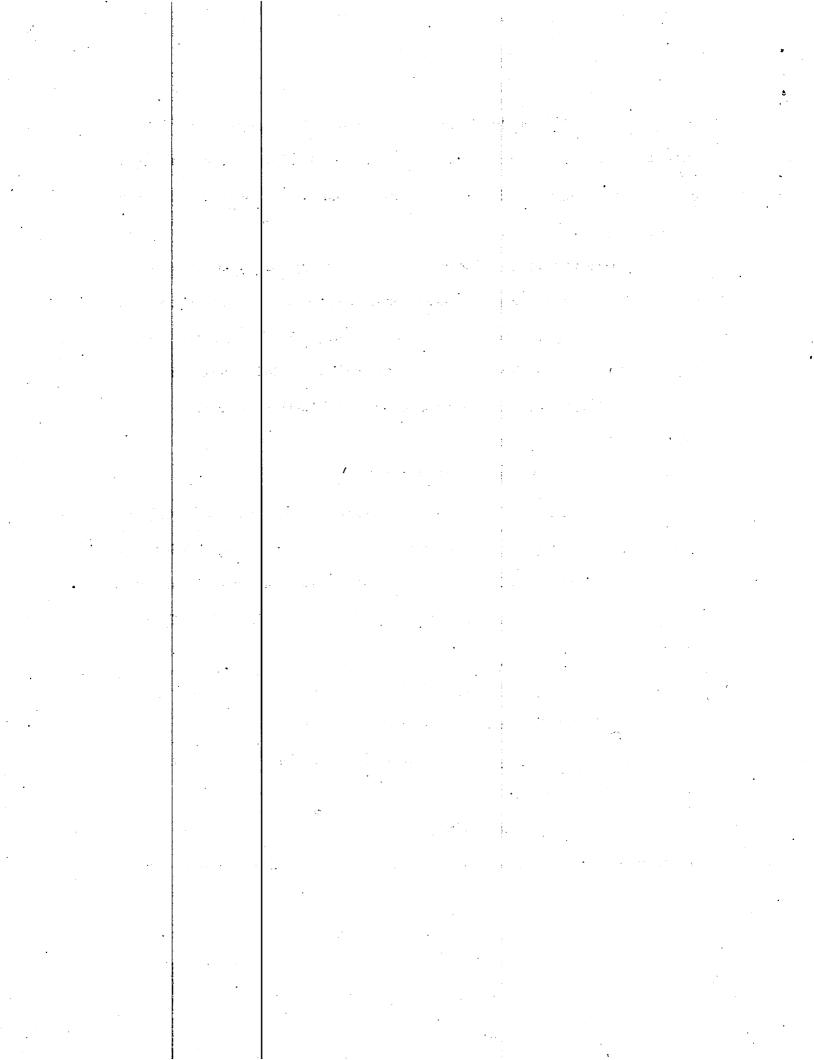
RECOMMENDED ORDER

I RECOMMEND that the Maryland Home Improvement Commission:

ORDER that the Maryland Home Improvement Guaranty Fund award the Claimant \$20,000.00; and

ORDER that the Respondent is ineligible for a Maryland Home Improvement

Commission license until the Respondent reimburses the Guaranty Fund for all monies disbursed



under this Order, plus annual interest of ten percent (10%) as set by the Maryland Home Improvement Commission;⁶ and

ORDER that the records and publications of the Maryland Home Improvement Commission reflect this decision.

September 24, 2021.
Date Decision Issued

Nicolas Orechwa

Nicolas Orechwa
Administrative Law Judge

NO/at . #194265

⁶ See Md. Code Ann., Bus. Reg. § 8-410(a)(1)(iii) (2015); COMAR 09.08.01.20.

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PROPOSED ORDER

WHEREFORE, this 2nd day of February, 2022, Panel B of the Maryland Home Improvement Commission approves the Recommended Order of the Administrative Law Judge and unless any parties files with the Commission within twenty (20) days of this date written exceptions and/or a request to present arguments, then this Proposed Order will become final at the end of the twenty (20) day period. By law the parties then have an additional thirty (30) day period during which they may file an appeal to Circuit Court.

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IN THE MATTER OF THE CLAIM OF MARGUERITE DENNIS AGAINST THE MARYLAND HOME IMPROVEMENT GUARANTY FUND FOR THE ACTS OR OMISSIONS OF RAMON ESPIN AND RAMON & SONS CONTRACTORS, LLC MARYLAND HOME

* IMPROVEMENT COMMISSION

MHIC CASE NO. 19(75)1098

* OAH CASE NO. LABOR-HIC-

* 02-21-14314

FINAL ORDER

This matter was originally heard before an Administrative Law Judge ("ALJ") of the Office of Administrative Hearings ("OAH") on August 16, 2021. Following the evidentiary hearing, the ALJ issued a Proposed Decision on September 24, 2021, concluding that the homeowner, Marguerite Dennis ("Claimant") suffered an actual loss as a result of the acts or omissions of Ramon Espin and Ramon & Sons Contractors, LLC (collectively, "Contractor"). *ALJ Proposed Decision* p. 8. In a Proposed Order dated February 2, 2022, the Maryland Home Improvement Commission ("MHIC" or "Commission") affirmed the Proposed Decision of the ALJ to grant an award of\$20,000.00 from the Home Improvement Guaranty Fund. The Contractor subsequently filed exceptions to the MHIC Proposed Order.

On May 5, 2022, a three-member panel ("Panel") of the MHIC held a remote hearing on the exceptions filed in this matter. The Claimant and Contractor participated without counsel. Assistant Attorney General Hope Sachs appeared at the exceptions hearing on behalf of the Guaranty Fund. The Commission entered the following preliminary exhibits as part of the record of the exceptions hearing without objection: 1) hearing notice; 2) transmittal letter, ALJ Proposed Decision, and MHIC Proposed Order; and 3) Contractor's exceptions. Neither the Claimant nor the Contractor produced a copy of the transcript of the hearing before the ALJ. Therefore, the Panel's review of the record was limited to the preliminary exhibits for the exceptions hearing, the OAH Proposed Decision, and the exhibits offered as evidence at the OAH hearing. COMAR

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09.01.03.09(G) - (I).

The claim in this proceeding relates to two contracts between the parties for extensive improvements to the Claimant's home. The ALJ found that the Contractor's performance under the contract was incomplete and that portions of the work that the Contractor did complete were unworkmanlike. ALJ's Proposed Decision p. 6.

On exception, the Contractor argued that the ALJ erred in finding that its work was incomplete, citing the Claimant's payment of the full contract amount as evidence. The Commission finds no error. The ALJ referenced testimony of the Claimant that she paid the entire contract amount before the Contractor started its performance under the contract. Therefore, the Commission does not find the fact that the Claimant paid the entire contract price to be relevant to whether the Contractor completed the work. The Claimant did not identify any other evidence in the record in support of its argument.

The Contractor also argued that the ALJ erred in finding that its purchase of an incorrectly sized shower door caused the Claimant to suffer an actual loss, asserting that the contracts did not include a shower door. Again, the Commission finds no error. The July 25, 2018, contract expressly provides for the removal and replacement of the shower door in the Claimant's master bathroom. (OAH Hearing Claimant's Exhibit 5.)

Next, the Contractor argued that the ALJ erred in granting the Claimant an award relating to its deficient installation of hardwood floors because (1) the contract did not include flooring on the second floor or in the basement of the Claimant's home and (2) because the floors it installed were damaged by new appliances. The Commission finds no error. The Contractor did not identify, and the Commission did not find, any evidence in the record indicating that the cost to remedy the flooring installation found by the ALJ included flooring on the second floor or in the

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basement or evidence that defects in the flooring were caused by moving appliances.

Finally, the Contractor argued that the ALJ erred in granting an award to the Claimant because the Claimant did not notify it of its alleged deficient performance. The Commission finds no error. First, the Claimant's MHIC complaint (OAH Hearing Claimant's Exhibit 2) and claim (OAH Hearing Guaranty Fund Exhibit 3) gave the Contractor notice of the deficiencies, and the ALJ referenced testimony by the Claimant that she called the Contractor after it had abandoned her project, but the Contractor did not return to the property to address her concerns. ALJ's Proposed Decision p. 5. Second, this proceeding involves a statutory claim against the Home Improvement Guaranty Fund, not a breach of contract claim. The Home Improvement Law does not require that a claimant give their contractor an opportunity to correct a deficient home improvement as a prerequisite to the granting of a Guaranty Fund award. Rather, it provides for the dismissal of a claim if the "claimant unreasonably rejected good faith efforts by the contractor to resolve the claim." Md. Code Ann., Bus. Reg. § 8-405(d). The Commission is not aware of, and the Contractor did not identify any evidence that he made any attempt to resolve the claim, and, it follows, there was no evidence that the Claimant unreasonably rejected any good faith efforts by the contractor to resolve the claim.

Having considered the parties' arguments, the evidence contained in the record, and the ALJ's Recommended Decision, it is this 18th day of May 2022, **ORDERED**:

- A. That the Findings of Fact of the Administrative Law Judge are AFFIRMED;
- B. That the Conclusions of Law of the Administrative Law Judge are AFFIRMED;
- C. That the Proposed Decision and Recommended Order of the Administrative Law Judge is **AFFIRMED**;
- D. That the Claimant is awarded \$20,000.00 from the Maryland Home Improvement Guaranty

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Fund;

- E. That the Contractor shall remain ineligible for a Maryland Home Improvement Commission license until the Contractor reimburses the Guaranty Fund for all monies disbursed under this Order plus annual interest of at least ten percent (10%) as set by the Commission, Md Code Ann., Bus. Reg. §§ 8-410(a)(1)(iii), 8-411(a);
- F. That the records and publications of the Maryland Home Improvement Commission shall reflect this decision; and
- G. Any party has thirty (30) days from the date of this Final Order to appeal this decision to Circuit Court.

Bruce Quackenbush
Chairperson – Panel
Maryland Home Improvement
Commission