

OCT 29 2021

STATE OF OHIO
OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL
CONSUMER PROTECTION SECTION
CONSUMER PROTECTION SECTION
PUBLIC INSPECTION FILE

IN THE MATTER OF:

Michael Williams dba
Williams Brothers
255 Sherman St.
Lisbon, OH 44432

)
)
) DOCKET NO. 589787
)
)

ASSURANCE OF VOLUNTARY COMPLIANCE

This Assurance of Voluntary Compliance ("Assurance") is entered into this 15th of October 2021, by Dave Yost, Attorney General of the State of Ohio ("Attorney General"), and Michael Williams dba Williams Brothers ("Supplier"). For purposes of this Assurance, "Supplier" means Michael Williams, individually, and as the owner/operator of the online seller entity known as Williams Brothers, as well as his officers, partners, managers, successors or assigns and all persons acting in concert or participation with him, directly or indirectly, through any corporate device, partnership, association and affiliation.

WHEREAS, the Attorney General, having reasonable cause to believe that Supplier Michael Williams dba Williams Brothers has engaged in acts and practices which violate the Consumer Sales Practices Act ("CSPA"), R.C. 1345.01 *et seq.*, the Valentine Act, Ohio's antitrust law, R.C. 1331.01 *et seq.*, and having authority to investigate the Supplier pursuant to R.C. 1345.06, R.C. 1331.16, and the common law of the State of Ohio, the Attorney General has conducted an investigation pursuant to the authority granted him, and;

WHEREAS, the Attorney General may, pursuant to R.C. 1345.06(F) enter into and accept an Assurance of Voluntary Compliance, and;

WHEREAS, this Assurance of Voluntary Compliance is an Assurance in writing by Supplier of his intent to conduct his business in a manner designed to comply with all provisions

of the CSPA, R.C. 1345.01, *et seq.*, its Substantive Rules, O.A.C. 109:4-3-01 *et seq.*, and the provisions of the Valentine Act, R.C. 1331.01 *et seq.*, and;

WHEREAS, Supplier, desiring to comply with all aspects of the CSPA and the Valentine Act, hereby voluntarily enters into this Assurance with the Attorney General.

NOW THEREFORE, in consideration of the mutual promises and conditions set forth herein, the parties hereto **AGREE** as follows:

1. The "Effective Date" shall mean the date indicated on the first page of this Assurance.
2. By accepting this written Assurance, the Attorney General agrees to terminate the current investigation of Michael Williams dba Williams Brothers, and his business practices and actions occurring on or before the Effective Date of this Assurance.
3. By giving this written Assurance, Supplier agrees to comply with all terms of this Assurance and to conduct business in compliance with all applicable Ohio laws, including without limitation, the CSPA, together with its substantive rules, and the Valentine Act.

BACKGROUND AND STATEMENT OF FACTS

4. Michael Williams is an online seller of masks, hand sanitizer, hand soap, and other products, who resides at 255 Sherman St., Lisbon, Ohio 44432.
5. At all relevant times, Michael Williams owned and operated an online Amazon store under the name Williams Brothers.
6. On November 18, 2020, Michael Williams registered the business Williams Brothers Wholesale, LLC and he now operates his online store through this business.

7. Michael Williams dba Williams Brothers is a "supplier" as that term is defined in R.C. 1345.01(C) as he has been, at all times relevant herein, engaged in the business of effecting consumer transactions by selling masks, hand sanitizer, and other products to individuals in the State of Ohio for purposes that were primarily personal, family or household within the meaning specified in R.C. 1345.01(A).
8. Supplier operates an online business in which he acquires a variety of products and resells those products to the general public via the online platform Amazon.
9. In early 2020, COVID-19, a highly communicable and dangerous contagion, arrived in the United States and began to spread.
10. In the face of these developments, Ohioans and people across the nation became increasingly frightened.
11. This fear prompted many citizens to bolster their personal supplies of products they believed might be needed and/or in short supply if the crisis continued to worsen to pandemic levels. Those products included masks and hand sanitizer.
12. In February 2020, hand sanitizer products could still be purchased from retailers such as Home Depot and Sherwin Williams with no significant increase in price over the price charged in January 2020.
13. Supplier purchased large amounts of these products from retailers with the intention to resell them online via Amazon.
14. In the aggregate, mass purchases of these items by Supplier and others who sought to resell necessary pandemic-related products led to a shortage of the products, driving up demand.

15. Supplier purchased face masks, sanitizer and soap products from various retailers and re-sold these products online at prices between 119.2%-840.9% over the average sales price charged for similar items sold in January 2020.
16. By way of example, in January 2020, before COVID-19 created a statewide and national crisis, the average sales price for a 10-pack of 3M respirator masks sold on Amazon was \$19.87. Supplier sold this item for an average of \$46.37 in the February-March 2020 timeframe.
17. By way of example, a six pack of 8 oz. Germ-X pump-bottle sanitizer sold for an average sale price of \$13.74 in January 2020 and Supplier sold this item for an average price of \$114.99.
18. Supplier committed unfair, deceptive, and unconscionable acts and practices in violation of R.C. 1345.02 and R.C. 1345.03 by selling masks, hand sanitizer, and hand soap products at substantially increased prices during the national health crisis.
19. Supplier committed unconscionable acts and practices in violation of R.C. 1345.03(A), as set forth in R.C. 1345.03(B)(5), by requiring consumers to enter into transactions which Supplier knew were substantially one-sided in his favor.
20. Supplier committed and carried out unreasonable restrictions in trade and commerce and increased the price of merchandise in violation of R.C. 1331.01(C) and R.C. 1331.04, by acquiring and artificially manipulating the available supplies of masks, hand sanitizer, and other products, and combining with and utilizing an online platform to offer it for sale at artificially inflated anticompetitive levels during a national health crisis.

COMPLIANCE PROVISIONS

21. Supplier shall not violate the CSPA, R.C. 1345.01, *et seq.*, and specifically shall not engage in unfair, deceptive or unconscionable acts or practices under R.C. 1345.02 and R.C. 1345.03, by inflating the price of goods during times of widespread fear and panic.
22. Supplier shall not violate the Valentine Act, R.C. 1331.01 *et seq.*, and specifically shall not create and carry out unreasonable restrictions in trade or commerce and/or prevent competition in the sale or purchase of merchandise under R.C. 1331.01 and R.C. 1331.04, by removing goods from the stream of commerce for purposes of reselling at anticompetitive levels during times of widespread fear and panic.

GENERAL PROVISIONS

23. By accepting this written Assurance, the Attorney General agrees to terminate his current investigation into Supplier's business practices occurring prior to the Effective Date of this Assurance, relative to Supplier's practices of inflating the sales price of goods during a national health crisis as set forth above.
24. Supplier understands and agrees that this Assurance applies to any related owners, principals, officers, directors, agents, representatives, salespersons, employees, instructors, independent contractors, successors and assigns.
25. This Assurance shall be governed by the laws of the State of Ohio.
26. This Assurance does not constitute an approval by the Attorney General of any of the Supplier's business practices, and the Supplier shall not represent directly or indirectly, or in any way whatsoever, that the Attorney General has sanctioned, condoned or approved any part or aspect of his business practices.

27. This Assurance sets forth the entire agreement between the Attorney General and Supplier and supersedes any and all prior agreements or understandings, whether written or oral, between the parties and/or their respective counsel regarding the subject matter hereof. This Assurance may be amended by written agreement of the Parties, subject to any further requirements under state law.
28. The Parties hereto acknowledge that no other promises, representations, or agreements of any nature have been made or entered into by the Parties. The Parties further acknowledge that this Assurance constitutes a single and entire agreement that is not severable or divisible, except that if any provision herein is found to be legally insufficient or unenforceable, the remaining provisions shall continue in full force and effect.
29. Supplier shall negotiate in good faith, through the Office of the Attorney General, any consumer complaints filed with this Office regarding his conduct occurring prior to the Effective Date of this Assurance, brought by consumers known at the time or discovered after entering into this Assurance.
30. This Assurance constitutes a public record and shall be filed in the Public Inspection File pursuant to R.C. 1345.05(A)(3).
31. This Assurance shall in no way exempt Supplier from any other obligation imposed by law, and nothing contained herein shall relieve him of any legal responsibility for any acts or practices he has engaged in other than those specifically addressed by this Assurance.

32. Nothing in this Assurance shall in any way preclude any investigative or enforcement action(s) against Supplier under any legal authority granted to the Ohio Attorney

General:

- a. With respect to the transactions which are the subject of this enforcement action if the terms of the Assurance are not fully obeyed, or,
- b. With respect to transactions or occurrences which are not the subject of this Assurance.

PAYMENT TO THE STATE

33. As part of the consideration for the termination of this investigation, Supplier shall, upon execution of this Agreement, pay Five Hundred Dollars (\$500.00) to the Attorney General as reimbursement for investigative and administrative costs associated with this matter. This payment shall be placed in the Ohio Attorney General's Consumer Protection Enforcement Fund, for use by the Attorney General as provided in R.C. 1345.51.
34. Supplier shall pay \$100 upon Supplier executing this Assurance and the remaining \$400 within thirty days of execution. This payment shall be made by delivering a certified check or money order, made payable to the "Ohio Attorney General's Office" and containing "Consumer Protection Section" in the memo line, to:

Financial Specialist
Consumer Protection Section
30 E. Broad St., 14th fl.
Columbus, OH 43215

PENALTIES FOR FAILURE TO COMPLY


35. The Attorney General may assert any claim that Supplier has violated this Assurance in a separate civil action to enforce the terms of this Assurance against Supplier and the Court shall apply applicable standards of law to determine damages for any subsequent violations which may include any and all remedies available to the Attorney General pursuant to R.C. 109.81, 1331.03, 1331.06, 1331.08, 1331.11, 1331.99, and 1345.07.
36. Pursuant to R.C. 1345.06(F), this Assurance is not, and shall not be construed as, evidence of any violation by Supplier of the CSPA or its Substantive Rules. Evidence of a violation of an Assurance of Voluntary Compliance, though, is prima-facie evidence of an act or practice in violation of the CSPA, R.C. 1345.01 *et seq.*, if presented after the violation in an action brought pursuant to the CSPA, R.C. 1345.01 *et seq.*

WHEREFORE, the Parties hereto affix their signatures in recognition and acceptance of the terms contained herein and warrant and represent that by affixing their signatures below they have the legal right to do so.

SIGNATURES

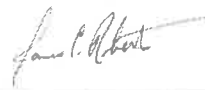
Accepted:

**DAVE YOST
OHIO ATTORNEY GENERAL**

By: 

Brandon C. Duck
Assistant Attorney General
Consumer Protection Section
30 E. Broad St., 14th Floor
Columbus, Ohio 43215
Phone: 614-466-1031
Brandon.Duck@OhioAGO.gov


Date: 10.28.2021

By: 

James Roberts
Principal Assistant Attorney General
Antitrust Section
30 E. Broad St., 26th Floor
Columbus, Ohio 43215
Phone: 614-466-1730
James.Roberts@OhioAGO.gov

Date: 10.28.2021

Accepted:

By: 

Michael Williams,
individually and dba Williams Brothers
255 Sherman St.
Lisbon, OH 44432
Phone: 330-303-6241
Mtwill1171@gmail.com

Date: 10-18-21