

THE STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA  
In The Supreme Court

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APPEAL FROM THE  
WORKERS' COMPENSATION COMMISSION

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Court of Appeals Case No. 2012-206507  
Op. No. 5171, filed September 4, 2013

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Carolyn M. Nicholson, Claimant, ..... Petitioner,

vs.

S.C. Dep't of Social Services, Employer, and  
State Accident Fund, Carrier, Defendants, ..... Respondents.

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PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI

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Kathryn Williams  
Kathryn Williams, P.A.  
619 North Main Street  
P.O. Box 10693  
Greenville, SC 29603  
(864) 235-6254  
Attorney for Petitioner

Other Counsel of Record:

L. Brenn Watson, Esq.  
Zachary M. Smith, Esq.  
Willson, Jones, Carter & Baxley, P.A.  
872 S. Pleasantburg Dr.  
Greenville, SC 29607  
(864) 527-3292  
Attorney for Respondents

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## CERTIFICATE OF COUNSEL

Counsel for petitioner certifies that the Petition for Rehearing was made and finally ruled upon by the Court of Appeals on January 24, 2014.

### QUESTION PRESENTED

- I. Whether the Court of Appeals erred in ruling Nicholson's fall did not arise out of her employment and in introducing fault into a no-fault system?

### STATEMENT OF THE CASE

Carolyn Nicholson fell when her shoe stuck on the carpet as she was walking to a meeting while working for the South Carolina Department of Social Services. The Department of Social Services ("DSS") and its insurance carrier, State Accident Fund, admit Nicholson fell at work but deny that the fall constitutes a compensable injury by accident under the Workers' Compensation Act.

By order dated April 26, 2011, the single Commissioner determined that Nicholson fell when her shoe scuffed the carpet as she was walking to a meeting with a stack of files in her hands; however, he found that the claim was not compensable. (R. pp. 17-26) The Appellate Panel of the Full Commission reversed and found the claim compensable. (R. pp. 1-16)

DSS appealed to the Court of Appeals. In a split decision, the Court reversed the Commission and found Nicholson's injuries did not arise out of her employment since "the carpet on which [she] tripped and fell was not a hazard, a special condition, or peculiar to her employment." (Appendix, pp. 54-67)

Nicholson petitioned for rehearing and suggested a rehearing *en banc*. (Appendix, pp. 68-86) However, again in split decisions, the Court of Appeals denied both the petition for rehearing and the suggestion for rehearing *en banc*. (Appendix, pp. 91-94)

This case involves a question of exceptional importance because the Court of Appeals' decision introduces fault into the no-fault system fundamental to workers' compensation. Nicholson also draws the Court's attention to another case currently pending before the Court involving substantially similar issues, Judy Marie Barnes v. Charter 1 Realty, Appellate Case No. 2012-212389. The Court granted the Petition for Writ of Certiorari in that case on November 20, 2013, and the case remains in the briefing process. This Court may wish to expedite this case and hear it with Barnes.

#### STATEMENT OF FACTS

Nicholson was employed by DSS for about 20 years and worked in the child protective services area as a supervisor of investigations. (R. p. 49, lines 4-23) On February 26, 2009 she was preparing for an in-house audit of her files. She left her office carrying a stack of files for the meeting and was walking down the hall when "the friction from my foot caught me and I fell, files and all, [onto] my left side." (R. p. 51, line 4-p. 52, line 13) She stated that her leg did not give way, that she is in good health; and had not any previous problems with her legs giving way. (R. p. 52, lines 14-19) Nicholson was asked specifically what she thought caused her to fall, and she answered as follows:

Q. So, what is it that you think caused you to fall?

A. Friction from the carpet.

Q. Did your foot get stuck?

A. Yes, from the friction. As I went to walk, the friction from the carpet just grabbed me and I fell.

(R. p. 52, lines 20-24)

## ARGUMENT

I. **The Court of Appeals erred in ruling Nicholson's fall did not arise out of her employment.**

The Workers' Compensation Act provides that "[i]n order to be entitled to workers' compensation benefits, the employee must show he or she sustained 'injury by accident arising out of and in the course of employment.'" Owings v. Anderson Co. Sheriff's Dep't, 315 S.C. 297, 299, 433 S.E.2d 869, 871 (1993); S.C. Code Ann. § 42-1-160 (2009). The dispute here centers on whether the injury arose out of employment.

The phrase 'arising out of' refers to the origin of the cause of the accident. 'An injury arises out of employment when there is apparent to the rational mind, upon consideration of all the circumstances, a causal relationship between the conditions under which the work is to be performed and the resulting injury.'

Clade v. Champion Lab., 330 S.C. 8, \_\_\_, 496 S.E.2d 856, 857 (1998).

The Court of Appeals focused on definitions of "arising out of" that exclude injuries from a hazard to which a worker "would be equally exposed apart from the employment" and require the source of the injury to be a risk "peculiar to the work and not common to the neighborhood." These definitions appeared in South Carolina case law in 1944 when this Court quoted at length from a 1913 decision by the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts defining the "arising out of" requirement. See Eagle v. South Carolina Elec. & Gas Co., 205 S.C. 423,

32 S.E.2d 240 (1944), quoting In Re Employers' Liability Assurance Corp., 102 N.E. 697 (Mass. 1913)(also known as McNicol's Case).

It (the injury) arises "out of" the employment, when there is apparent to the rational mind upon consideration of all the circumstances, a causal connection between the conditions under which the work is required to be performed and the resulting injury. Under this test, if the injury can be seen to have followed as a natural incident of the work and to have been contemplated by a reasonable person familiar with the whole situation as a result of the exposure occasioned by the nature of the employment, then it arises "out of" the employment. But it excludes an injury which cannot fairly be traced to the employment as a contributing proximate cause and which comes from a hazard to which the workmen would have been equally exposed apart from the employment. The causative danger must be peculiar to the work and not common to the neighborhood. It must be incidental to the character of the business and not independent of the relation of master and servant. It need not have been foreseen or expected, but after the event it must appear to have had its origin in a risk connected with the employment, and to have flowed from that source as a rational consequence.

Eagle, 32 S.E.2d at 242-43: While the Eagle decision did not turn on this language from the Massachusetts court, it introduced the language into South Carolina's jurisprudence.

However, some years after the In Re Employers' Liability Assurance Corp. decision, the Massachusetts court itself abandoned this language. In Caswell's Case, the court held that "[a]n injury arises out of the employment if it arises out of the nature, conditions, obligation or incidents of the employment; in other words, out of the employment looked at in any of its aspects." Caswell's Case, 26 N.E.2d 328, 330 (Mass. 1940):

Unquestionably, the injury was received in the course of his employment. The only other requirement is that the injury be one "arising out of" his employment. **It need not arise out of the nature of the employment. An injury arises out of the employment if it arises out of the nature, conditions,**

**obligations or incidents of the employment; in other words, out of the employment looked at in any of its aspects.** Thom or Simpson v. Sinclair, [1907] A.C. 127, 142, 143. An employee who, in the course of his employment, is hurt by contact with something directly connected with his employment, receives a personal injury arising out of his employment, even though the force that caused the contact was not related to his employment. Thom or Simpson v. Sinclair, [1917] A.C. 127, 134-136. Lord Atkin, in Brooker v. Thomas Borthwick & Sons (Australasia), Ltd. [1933] A.C. 669, 677, stated the principle thus: "If a workman is injured by some natural force such as lightning, the heat of the sun, or extreme cold, which in itself has no kind of connection with employment, he cannot recover unless he can sufficiently associate such injury with his employment. This he can do if he can show that the employment exposed him in a special degree to suffering such an injury. **But if he is injured by contact physically with some part of the place where he works, then, apart from questions of his own misconduct, he at once associates the accident with his employment and nothing further need be considered. So that if the roof or walls fall upon him, or he slips upon the premises, there is no need to make further inquiry as to why the accident happened.**"

Id. (emphasis added)

This Court embraced this change by quoting approvingly from Caswell's Case in its decision in Jordan v. Dixie Chevrolet, 218 S.C. 73, 61 S.E.2d 654 (1950). The Court noted that this was "the more modern" view and that Caswell's Case

is a landmark in Massachusetts law as it avoided the paralyzing effect of the earlier decision in McNicol's Case requiring 'peculiar' exposure, and 'denial of compensation for common risks.' . . . 'Under such a broad definition, as well as under narrower rules, it is not necessary that the injury be one which ought to have been foreseen or expected. Even unusual or extraordinary consequences of the employment may well be compensable. The risk insured is not only the foreseeable one, but the risk which, after the event, can be seen to have its origin the nature, conditions, obligations, or incidents of the employment.'

Jordan, 61 S.E.2d at 657. It is apparent from Jordan that the purpose in moving away from the more restrictive definition of “arising out of” was that workers’ compensation laws were intended to be free of the fault-based determinations of tort law and that the “peculiarity” requirement of In Re Employers’ Liability Assurance Corp. improperly required this search for fault. See Jordan, 61 S.E.2d 657-660.

The reason for the shift in definitions is that the “peculiar to the work and not common to the neighborhood” language sounds reasonable but proves unworkable and restrictive. Under the Court of Appeals’ reasoning, a happenstance injury—a scuffed trip-and-fall—on a level floor is not compensable because level floors are common outside the workplace. By the same reasoning, a fall down stairs will not be compensable; stairs exist outside of the workplace and are common to the neighborhood. Similarly, a chef or restaurant worker who accidentally cuts herself while working will not be compensated because knives exist outside the workplace and are common to the neighborhood. The possibilities are endless, and such outcomes are contrary to the purpose of the Workers’ Compensation Act, as the courts noted in Caswell’s Case and Jordan. It does not matter that the injury is not the employer’s fault. What matters is that the injury has a reasonable and rational connection to the employee’s work. That connection exists here. Ms. Nicholson was injured while she was trying to do her work.

While the case on which the Court of Appeals relies in its underlying decision, Douglas v. Spartan Mills, 245 S.C. 265, 140 S.E.2d 173 (1965), refers to In Re Employers’ Liability Assurance Corp. and does not mention the change in the law found in Caswell’s Case or Jordan, neither the language quoted in Jordan nor the broadening of the “arising out of” requirement found therein has been reversed or expressly disfavored by any subsequent South Carolina decision. And, as noted in Jordan, it is this broader definition that fits within the stated purposes

of our Workers' Compensation Act.

Under this broader language of Caswell's Case and Jordan, the injury in the present case is compensable, as the fall occurred well within the conditions, obligations or incidents of the employment. Walking across the carpet and scuffing her shoe on the carpet were natural incidents of the work and a result of the exposure occasioned by the employment. As in Jordan, it is not necessary that the more remote cause of the injury, the carpet, be peculiar to the work under South Carolina law following Jordan. The focus should not be on whether something caused the fall but rather on whether the fall was connected to employment. The risk here clearly had its origin the nature, conditions, obligations, or incidents of the employment. The employment brought Nicholson in contact with the risk. The Commission's determination that the injury here was compensable should have been affirmed.

**II. The Court of Appeals erred in introducing fault into the no-fault system fundamental to workers' compensation.**

The Court of Appeals' decision in this case introduces fault and premises liability concepts into a system where fault has no place. The express purpose of workers' compensation is the absence of such fault-based determinations. It is vitally important to distinguish a "causal connection" to employment from the concept of causation as developed and applied in tort law.

Professor Larson in his treatise, Workers' Compensation Law, § 3.06 (2005), discusses this important distinction at length. Larson reminds us that, "[i]t is instantly apparent that 'arising out of the employment' does not mean exactly the same thing as 'legally caused by the employment.'" Id. He distinguishes the phrases by noting, "proximate cause or legal cause is out of place in compensation law, because, as developed in tort law, it is a concept that is itself thoroughly suffused with the idea of fault; that is, it is a theory of causation designed to bring

about a just result when starting from an act containing some element of fault.” Id

“One of the purposes of the Workmen's Compensation Act is to protect and partially compensate employees who are injured while engaged in the regular course of their employment irrespective of mishap, independent of the injury itself, and/or negligence on the part of either the employee or employer.” Layton v. Hammond-Brown-Jennings Co., 190 S.C. 425, 3 S.E.2d 492, 496 (1939). “The American concept of workmen's compensation is founded upon recognition of the advisability, from the standpoint of society as well as of employer and employee, of discarding the common law idea of tort liability in the employer-employee relationship and of substituting therefor the principle of liability on the part of the employer, regardless of fault ....” Case v. Hermitage Cotton Mills, 236 S.C. 515, 115 S.E.2d 57, 65 (1960). Negligence and contributory negligence are of no consequence in workers' compensation cases. Jordon, supra. at 656; Allsep v. Daniel Const. Co., 216 S.C. 268, 57 S.E.2d 427 (1950).

The right to compensation benefits depends on one simple test: Was there a work-connected injury? Negligence, and, for the most part, fault, are not in issue and cannot affect the result. **Let the employer's conduct be flawless in its perfection, and let the employee's be abysmal in its clumsiness, rashness and ineptitude; if the accident arises out of and in the course of the employment, the employee receives an award. Reverse the positions, with a careless and stupid employer and a wholly innocent employee and the same award issues.** Thus, the test is not the relation of an individual's personal quality (fault) to an event, but the relationship of an event to an employment. **The essence of applying the test is not a matter of assessing blame, but of marking out boundaries.**

Larson, Workers' Compensation Law, § 1.03 (2005).

Here, the Court has introduced fault into the equation by erroneously requiring some fault or hazard in the flooring in order to find a trip or fall on a level floor compensable. To the

contrary, as often stated in workers' compensation law, it is the unexpected result of work activity that is the compensable injury. Pee v. AVM, Inc., 352 S.C. 167, 573 S.E.2d 785 (2002).

This Court in Pee specifically stated:

Under § 42-1-160, a claimant is entitled to benefits for an "injury by accident arising out of and in the course of employment." In Layton v. Hammond-Brown-Jennings Co., 190 S.C. 425, 3 S.E.2d 492 (1939), we interpreted for the first time the meaning of "injury by accident" under the newly enacted Workman's Compensation Act. We noted that two lines of cases had evolved in other jurisdictions: some jurisdictions, including North Carolina upon which our Act is modeled, held there must be some unusual or unlooked-for mishap resulting in injury to constitute an accident; other jurisdictions held no mishap was required for an accident so long as there was an unexpected injury occurring while the employee was performing his usual duties in his customary manner. **We chose the latter definition, focusing on the unexpected nature of the injury rather than requiring that the event causing the injury be unexpected.** This definition of accident as an unexpected injury has been reiterated in a long line of cases. See, e.g., Colvin v. E.I. DuPont De Nemours Co., 227 S.C. 465, 88 S.E.2d 581 (1955) (injury by accident is an injury occurring unexpectedly without the prior occurrence of any external event of an accidental nature); Hiers v. Brunson Const. Co., 221 S.C. 212, 70 S.E.2d 211 (1952) (injury by accident is an injury that is accidental in that it is unforeseen and unexpected).<sup>3</sup>

3 In Hiers, we noted the policy reason for adopting such a definition: **If [the injury] results from the conditions under which the work is carried on, there is no reason why it should not be held compensable.** In such case, it is one of the casualties of business; and it is the purpose of the compensation statutes to place the burden of casualties upon the business and not upon the unfortunate employee. [Hiers,] 70 S.E.2d at 221.

As we more recently stated, "in determining whether something constitutes an injury by accident the focus is not on some specific event, but rather on the injury itself." Stokes v. First Nat'l Bank, 306 S.C. 46, 50, 410 S.E.2d 248, 250 (1991). Further, an injury is unexpected, bringing it within the category of accident, if the *worker* did not intend it or expect it would result from what he was doing. Colvin, 227 S.C. at 468-69, 88 S.E.2d at 582 (emphasis

added). Therefore, if an injury is unexpected from the worker's point of view, it qualifies as an injury by accident.

Pee v. AVM, Inc., 352 S.C. 167, 170-71, 573 S.E.2d 785, 787 (2002). Stated succinctly, “no slip, fall or other fortuitous event or accident in the cause of the injury is required; the unexpected result or industrial injury is itself the compensable accident.” Sigmon v. Dayco Corp., 316 S.C. 260, 262, 449 S.E.2d 497, 498 (1994). See also Sturkie v. Ballenger Corp., 268 S.C. 536, 235 S.E.2d 120 (1977); Creech v. Ducane Co., 320 S.C. 559, 467 S.E.2d 114 (Ct. App. 1996); Clade v. Champion Lab., 330 S.C. 8, 496 S.E.2d 856 (1998); Pee v. AVM, Inc., 344 S.C. 162, 543 S.E.2d 232 (Ct. App. 2001). In these cases and Jordan, the law is clear: so long as there is apparent to the rational mind, upon consideration of all the circumstances, a causal relationship between the conditions under which the work is to be performed and the resulting injury, the injury arises out of the employment. The focus should not be on the cause of the fall but on the connection of the fall to the employment.

Here, Nicholson was clearly undertaking her work activities at the time she tripped and fell. Her activities at the time of her trip and fall were incidental to and consistent with her employment and arose from an aspect of her job, specifically the requirement that she attend her meeting. When all the circumstances here are considered, the causal relationship between the work Nicholson was performing and her injury is abundantly apparent. Her injury arose out of her employment. Fault – whether on her part, the employers part, or even in the flooring – is not relevant.

The illogical result of the Court's decision in this case is perhaps best illustrated by the comparison with our appellate court decisions regarding the personal comfort doctrine. This doctrine has been consistently used to supply the “arising out of” requirement to bring such

activities as eating, drinking, seeking relief from discomfort, and even smoking within the purview of workers' compensation. See e.g. Mack v. Post Exchange, 207 S.C. 258, 35 S.E.2d 838 (1945); Osteen v. Greenville Co. School Dist., 333 S.C. 43, 508 S.E.2d 21 (1998). Under the Court's opinion in this case, we are left with the unjustifiable result that had Nicholson been on her way to the bathroom at the time of her injury, compensation would have been allowed under the personal comfort doctrine; but since she was engaged in actual productive work activity, compensation is denied.

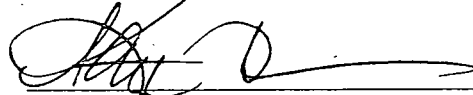
The Court of Appeals' decision reversing the Workers' Compensation Commission's ruling is contrary to previous decisions of this Court. The Court should grant the Petition for Writ of Certiorari.

### CONCLUSION

The Court of Appeals' decision reversing the Workers' Compensation Commission's ruling overlooks or misapprehends settled law concerning the "arising out of" employment requirement and erroneously introduces fault into the no-fault workers' compensation system. The Court of Appeals' decision is contrary to previous decisions of this Court. This is a matter of exceptional importance as the Court of Appeals' published decision will be used by the members of the Workers' Compensation Commission, workers' compensation defense attorneys, and workers' compensation insurance adjusters to deny benefits for any and all falls at work and demand proof of some fault on the part of the employer or employer's premises. Further, it is not difficult to see how this decision could be used to argue for a showing of fault in a wide number of situations beyond falls where the injury could arguably have occurred in some setting outside the place of employment. The importance of this issue to the workers' compensation bar

cannot be overstated due to the significant change in the law it represents. The Court should grant the Petition for Writ of Certiorari.

Respectfully submitted,



Kathryn Williams (SC Bar #6140)

Kathryn Williams, P.A.

P.O. Box 10693

Greenville, SC 29603

(864) 235-6254

Attorney for Petitioner

Date:

2/19/14

THE STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA  
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**MOTION TO EXPEDITE AND CONSOLIDATE**

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Kathryn Williams  
Kathryn Williams, P.A.  
P.O. Box 10693  
Greenville, S.C. 29603  
(864) 235-6254  
Attorney for Petitioner

Other Counsel of Record:

L. Brenn Watson, Esq.  
Zachary M. Smith, Esq.  
Willson, Jones, Carter & Baxley, P.A.  
872 S. Pleasantburg Dr.  
Greenville, SC 29607  
(864) 527-3292  
Attorney for Respondents

Other Counsel of Record in Barnes case:

David T. Pearlman, Esq.  
J. Kevin Holmes, Esq.  
Michael J. Jordan, Esq.  
The Steinberg Law Firm, L.L.P.  
P.O. Box 1028  
Goose Creek, SC 29445  
(843) 572-0700  
Attorneys for Petitioner in Barnes

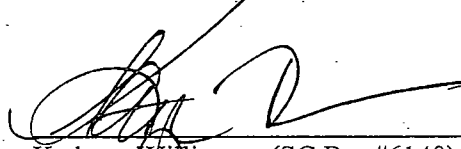
Natalie Byars Fisher, Esq.  
Fisher Law Firm, LLC  
P.O. Box 2484  
Mt. Pleasant, SC 29465  
(843) 352-7334  
Attorneys for Respondent in Barnes

Petitioner Carolyn Nicholson moves the Court to expedite the briefing and decision on her Petition for Writ of Certiorari and the subsequent briefing process and also to hear this case with another similar case currently pending before the Court, Judy Marie Barnes v. Charter 1 Realty, Appellate Case No. 2012-212389. This motion is made on the following grounds:

1. Petitioner is filing her Petitioner for Writ of Certiorari from the decision of the Court of Appeals together with this motion.
2. In this case, the Court of Appeals reversed the Workers' Compensation Commission and found Nicholson's injuries did not arise out of her employment since "the carpet on which [she] tripped and fell was not a hazard, a special condition, or peculiar to her employment."
3. The Court granted the Petition for Writ of Certiorari in Judy Marie Barnes v. Charter 1 Realty, Appellate Case No. 2012-212389, on November 20, 2013, and the case remains in the briefing process.
4. Similar to the Court of Appeals' decision in Nicholson, the Workers' Compensation Commission in Barnes determined that Barnes' injuries did not arise out of her employment since "[t]here was no substance, no object, no debris, or anything else over which the [c]laimant tripped."
5. Due to the similarity in these cases, Nicholson's case should be argued along with Barnes' case in order to conserve Court resources and avoid duplication of efforts.

WHEREFORE, Petitioner prays for an Order expediting the briefing and decision on her Petition for Writ of Certiorari and the subsequent briefing process and also to hear this case with the case currently pending before the Court in Judy Marie Barnes v. Charter 1 Realty, Appellate Case No. 2012-212389.

Respectfully submitted,



Kathryn Williams (SC Bar #6140)

Kathryn Williams, P.A.

P.O. Box 10693

Greenville, S.C. 29603

(864) 235-6254

Attorney for Respondent

Dated

2/19/14

Greenville, South Carolina

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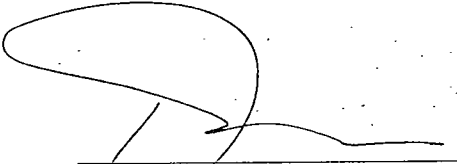
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CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

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This is to certify that the undersigned did cause the **PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI** to be served upon the below-named by mailing a copy as addressed by U.S. Mail, proper postage paid, on the 17<sup>th</sup> day of February, 2014.

The Honorable Jenny Abbott Kitchings  
Clerk of Court  
South Carolina Court of Appeals  
P.O. Box 11629  
Columbia, SC 29211

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Kathryn Williams, P.A.  
P.O. Box 10693  
Greenville, SC 29603  
(864) 235-6254  
Attorney for Petitioner

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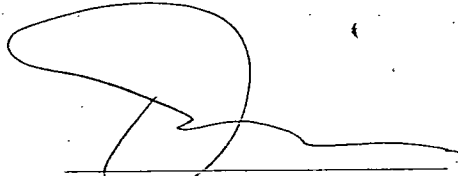
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CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

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This is to certify that the undersigned did cause the **PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI** to be served upon the below-named by mailing a copy as addressed by U.S. Mail, proper postage paid, on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of February, 2014.

L. Brenn Watson, Esq.  
Zachary M. Smith, Esq.  
Willson, Jones, Carter & Baxley, P.A.  
872 S. Pleasantburg Dr.  
Greenville, SC 29607



Kathryn Williams, P.A.  
P.O. Box 10693  
Greenville, SC 29603  
(864) 235-6254  
Attorney for Petitioner

**RECEIVED**  
FEB 25 2014  
SC Court of Appeals

THE STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA  
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**CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE**


---

This is to certify that the undersigned did cause the **MOTION TO EXPEDITE AND CONSOLIDATE** to be served upon the below-named by mailing a copy as addressed by U.S. Mail, proper postage paid, on the 19<sup>th</sup> day of February, 2014.

L. Brenn Watson, Esq.  
Zachary M. Smith, Esq.  
Willson, Jones, Carter & Baxley, P.A.  
872 S. Pleasantburg Dr.  
Greenville, SC 29607

David T. Pearlman, Esq.  
J. Kevin Holmes, Esq.  
Michael J. Jordan, Esq.  
The Steinberg Law Firm, L.L.P.  
P.O. Box 1028  
Goose Creek, SC 29445

Natalie Byars Fisher, Esq.  
Fisher Law Firm, LLC  
P.O. Box 2484  
Mt. Pleasant, SC 29465

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kathryn Williams', is written over a horizontal line. The signature is stylized with a large loop at the top and a long horizontal stroke at the bottom.

Kathryn Williams, P.A.  
P.O. Box 10693  
Greenville, SC 29603  
(864) 235-6254  
Attorney for Petitioner

**KATHRYN WILLIAMS, P.A.**

ATTORNEYS AT LAW  
POST OFFICE BOX 10693  
GREENVILLE, SC 29603

KATHRYN WILLIAMS  
DONALD E. KAMB, JR.  
ANDREW N. PRICE  
TOM J. ERVIN  
OF COUNSEL

619 N. MAIN STREET  
GREENVILLE, SC 29601  
TELEPHONE (864) 235-6254  
FAX (864) 233-6591

February 19, 2014

The Honorable Daniel E. Shearouse  
Clerk of Court  
Supreme Court of South Carolina  
P.O. Box 11330  
Columbia, SC 29211

Re: **Carolyn M. Nicholson v. S.C. Dep't of Social Services, et al.**  
Court of Appeals Case No. 2012-206507 – Op. No. 5171, filed September 4, 2013

Dear Mr. Shearouse:

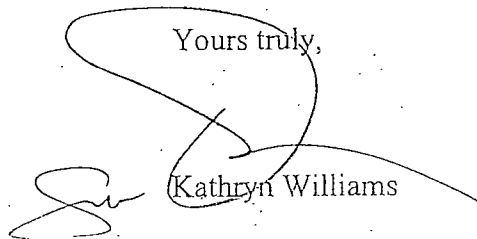
Enclosed herein please find the following items for filing in the above matter:

1. Petition for Writ of Certiorari (original and six copies),
2. Appendix (two copies),
3. Record on Appeal (two copies),
4. Certificate of Service of Petition by mail on Respondent,
5. Certificate of Service of Petition by mail on Clerk of the Court  
of Appeals,
6. Filing fee for Petition (\$100.00),
7. Motion to Expedite and Consolidate with Barnes v. Charter 1 Realty,  
Appellate Case No. 2012-212389,
8. Certificate of Service of Motion by mail on all parties, and
9. Filing fee for Motion (\$25.00).

By copy of this letter, I am serving copies of the documents as set forth above.

Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Yours truly,



Kathryn Williams

KW:d  
Enclosures

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FEB 25 2014

**SC Court of Appeals**

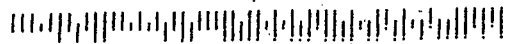
cc: L. Brenn Watson, Esq.  
Zachary M. Smith, Esq.  
Willson, Jones, Carter & Baxley, P.A.  
872 S. Pleasantburg Dr.  
Greenville, SC 29607

David T. Pearlman, Esq.  
J. Kevin Holmes, Esq.  
Michael J. Jordan, Esq.  
The Steinberg Law Firm, L.L.P.  
P.O. Box 1028  
Goose Creek, SC 29445

Natalie Byars Fisher, Esq.  
Fisher Law Firm, LLC  
P.O. Box 2484  
Mt. Pleasant, SC 29465

The Honorable Jenny Abbott Kitchings  
Clerk of Court  
South Carolina Court of Appeals  
P.O. Box 11629  
Columbia, SC 29211

Ms. Virginia Crocker  
Judicial Director  
S.C. Workers' Compensation Comm'n  
P.O. Box 1715  
Columbia, SC 29202-1715



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**KATHRYN WILLIAMS, P.A.**  
ATTORNEYS AT LAW

P.O. BOX 10693  
619 N. MAIN STREET  
GREENVILLE, SC 29603

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The Honorable Jenny Abbott Kitchings  
Clerk of Court  
South Carolina Court of Appeals  
P.O. Box 11629  
Columbia, SC 29211

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