

VIRGINIA:

BEFORE THE VIRGINIA STATE BAR DISCIPLINARY BOARD

IN THE MATTER OF  
SHALONDA MICHELLE TILLMAN

VSB DOCKET NO. 24-021-131653

**MEMORANDUM ORDER OF SUSPENSION**

THIS MATTER was heard on April 25, 2025, before a panel of the Virginia State Bar Disciplinary Board (“Board”) consisting of Alison G. M. Martin, 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice Chair, presiding, (“Chair”), Joseph D. Platania, Alexander Simon, Dawn E. Boyce, and Elisabeth Martingayle, Lay Member. The Chair polled members of the panel as to whether any of them had any personal or financial interest that may affect, or may be reasonably perceived to affect, their ability to be impartial, to which inquiry each member responded in the negative.

Tenley C. Seli, Assistant Bar Counsel, represented the Virginia State Bar (“VSB”). Shalonda Michelle Tillman, appeared through Microsoft Teams, without counsel.

Lisa A. Wright, court reporter with Chandler and Halasz, Inc., P.O. Box 1975, Mechanicsville, Virginia 23116, (804) 730-1222, after being duly sworn, reported the hearing and transcribed the proceedings.

The Clerk of the Disciplinary System (“Clerk”) timely sent all legal notices of the date and place in the manner prescribed by Part Six, Section IV, Paragraphs 13-12 and 13-18 of the Rules of the Supreme Court of Virginia (“Rules”).

The matter came before the Board on the Subcommittee Determination (Certification) of the Second District, Section I Subcommittee, pursuant to Part Six, Section IV, Paragraph 13-18 of the Rules, involving misconduct charges against the Respondent. Bar Counsel timely identified witnesses and exhibits. Prior to the hearing at the Final Pre-Hearing Conference, the Chair advised that VSB exhibits 1 through 39, to which there was no objection, would be admitted into evidence

at the hearing. Respondent did not designate witnesses or exhibits. There were no pre-hearing stipulations.

### **PROCEEDINGS AND FINDINGS OF FACT**

At the commencement of the hearing, the Chair verified that Respondent, Shalonda Tillman, and Complainant, Takeisha Brown (“Brown”), both of whom were appearing by audiovisual means, could hear and observe the proceedings. The Chair confirmed that there were no objections to VSB Exhibits 1-39, which were formally admitted. Upon questioning by the Chair, Respondent stated that she was familiar with the procedure that would be followed at the hearing and waived the recitation of the summary of the alleged misconduct, the nature and purpose of the hearing, the procedures to be followed during the hearing, and the dispositions available to the Board following the hearing. Thereafter, Bar Counsel and Respondent gave their opening statements. During the hearing, the Board received testimony from Takeisha Brown, through the Microsoft Teams platform; Tyquesha Hargrave (“Hargrave”), through the Microsoft Teams platform; and VSB Investigator Jennifer Collins, in person. Sheneda Hollis was present to testify in person but was not called because of stipulations reached between Bar Counsel and Respondent during the course of the proceedings.

The stipulations reached were as follows:

1. The petition for conditional pardon has never been filed.
2. Sheneda Hollis provided Respondent with three letters in support of the petition for conditional pardon.
3. Brown is Tyquesha Hargrave’s foster mother.
4. Brown hired Respondent and advised Hargrave approximately two weeks after the Respondent was retained.
5. Respondent contacted Hargrave within approximately three weeks of her retention and, over the course of her representation, had three contacts with Hargrave--one telephone call,

one Zoom session and one in-person meeting—in addition the JPay letters entered into evidence at VSB Exhibit 35, pages 170-194.

6. Hargrave received notice, on or about March 2024, that a package sent to her at the jail by Respondent was rejected.
7. Hargrave never told Respondent not to file the petition for conditional pardon and remained interested in pursuing the petition.

After considering the evidence and the Stipulations, the Board made the following findings of fact based upon clear and convincing evidence.

1. Respondent was admitted to the Virginia State Bar (“VSB”) in 2021. At all relevant times, Respondent was a member of the VSB and operated Anson Law, PLLC in Norfolk, Virginia.
2. In August 2022, Complainant Brown hired Respondent to prepare and submit a petition for a conditional pardon on behalf of her foster daughter, Hargrave, who was incarcerated at Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women.
3. Respondent charged Brown a flat fee of \$3,500 to prepare and submit the conditional pardon to the Governor’s office. On August 4, 2022, Brown paid \$3,500.00 to Respondent, who deposited Brown’s advanced legal fee into her operating account.
4. The Secretary of the Commonwealth of Virginia states a conditional pardon is an act by the Governor to modify or end a sentence imposed by a court. The Governor only grants a conditional pardon when there is substantial evidence of extraordinary circumstances to warrant it. To be eligible for a conditional pardon, a petitioner must be incarcerated. The petitioner must complete the Virginia Pardon Petitioner Questionnaire and provide the following information:
  - An explanation of why the petitioner feels the Governor should grant the pardon;
  - Petitioner’s employment history for the last ten years;
  - Petitioner’s educational accomplishments, including the names of schools, years attended, and degrees or certifications received;
  - Any military history;
  - Community service or volunteer work performed; and
  - Detailed information regarding all arrests, charges, convictions, pleas, appeals, and sentences.

If a Virginia felony is involved, petitioner must include a copy of their Restoration of Rights paperwork. To be considered by the Governor, the pardon must be mailed to the Secretary of the Commonwealth in Richmond, Virginia.

5. Approximately two weeks after Brown paid the \$3,500 to Respondent, Hargrave learned that Brown hired Respondent to prepare and submit a petition for a conditional pardon. Hargrave's first contact with Respondent was by phone.
6. Respondent later met with Hargrave by Zoom.
7. On or about December 12, 2022, Respondent met with Hargrave in person at Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women.
8. Respondent gave Brown and Sheneda Hollis ("Hollis"), Hargrave's aunt, instructions for submitting letters in support of Hargrave's pardon petition. Respondent advised Brown and Hollis to address Hargrave's youth at the time of her crimes and that she was remorseful.
9. On December 15, 2022, Brown provided Respondent with two letters in support of the pardon petition. Hollis provided Respondent with three letters of support.
10. Respondent did not complete the required Virginia Pardon Petitioner Questionnaire. Respondent did not obtain a copy of Hargrave's criminal history from the Virginia State Policy Criminal Records Division as recommended by the Virginia Pardon Petitioner Questionnaire. Respondent did not complete the Restoration of Rights paperwork required when the petitioner's convictions involved felonies.
11. By email dated February 3, 2023, Respondent advised Brown that she had finished the pardon "packet[.]" Respondent asked Brown to confirm that Hargrave's family and friends had submitted letters in support of the pardon petition. Respondent stated to Brown that if the family did not plan to submit any other letters, she would "send out the packet."
12. By email dated February 15, 2023, Brown asked Respondent whether the pardon petition was submitted. Respondent advised Brown by email that she "was able to submit the pardon" and she sent Hargrave a copy of the pardon petition "for her record[s]."
13. By email dated February 26, 2023, Brown questioned Respondent's statement that she submitted the pardon petition and asked Respondent to communicate with Hargrave about the petition for a conditional pardon. Respondent advised Brown by email that she would "call the prison tomorrow" to ensure that Hargrave received the pardon petition.
14. On March 21, 2023, Respondent and Hargrave spoke by phone about the pardon petition.
15. On March 25, 2023, Hargrave sent Respondent contact information for individuals willing to support her pardon petition.
16. By email dated March 31, 2023, Respondent advised Hargrave the pardon petition would arrive at Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women that evening.
17. By email dated April 7, 2023, Hargrave notified Respondent that she "never got the package."

18. By email dated April 14, 2023, Hargrave asked Respondent when the pardon petition would arrive. Respondent did not respond to Hargrave's request.
19. Hargrave received notice from the mailroom saying a package from Respondent had been returned to Respondent because it was sent to the incorrect address. Hargrave advised the VSB that she never received a pardon petition from Respondent.
20. From April 14, 2023 through August 13, 2023, Respondent had no contact with Hargrave and did not taken any action on the pardon petition.
21. On August 2, 2023, Hargrave sent another email to Respondent inquiring about the status of the pardon petition.
22. By email dated August 14, 2023, Brown advised Respondent that Hargrave "never received anything from anywhere" and asked Respondent to provide proof that she filed the pardon petition. Respondent asked Hargrave by email if she received "the really [big] package" and instructed Hargrave to sign and return the pardon petition.
23. By email dated August 15, 2023, Hargrave again advised Respondent she had "not received anything at all[.]"
24. By email dated August 16, 2023, Brown advised Respondent that if she did not receive proof that the pardon petition was submitted, she would "have to request a refund in full back from you [.]"
25. From August 30, 2023 through April 15, 2024, Respondent had no contact with Hargrave.
26. By email dated March 18, 2024, Respondent advised Brown that the pardon petition was not submitted because Hargrave had failed to sign the pardon petition and Hargrave's signature with necessary. Respondent told Brown that she was "preparing a new packet" and she thought sending it directly" to Brown was "the best course of action." Brown asked Respondent to return the advanced fee because she had not filed the pardon petition pursuant to their agreement on the parameters of the representation.
27. On March 25, 2024, Brown filed a bar complaint with the VSB. Brown contended that she paid Respondent \$3,500 to file a pardon petition for Hargrave. Brown asserted that Respondent said the pardon petition was filed when "it was never filed." Brown stated that Respondent was unresponsive when she asked for proof that the pardon petition was filed and blocked Brown from communicating with her.
28. On April 16, 2024, Respondent told Hargrave that she had "no problem" with providing a copy of the pardon petition and she "assumed [Hargrave] signed and mailed it off" because it made "no sense as to how a 100[-]page pardon" was missing. Respondent told VSB Investigator Collins that she retained a copy of the pardon petition.

29. On April 18, 2024, Hargrave stated to Respondent that “I don’t have any papers” and “the one time” Respondent sent her legal mail, it was returned to Respondent because “it wasn’t sent to the correct address.”
30. On May 14, 2024, the VSB served on Respondent a subpoena *duces tecum* for the production of certain documents regarding the representation of Hargrave, including but not limited to her entire client file and all communications with Hargrave and others about the representation.
31. By email dated May 21, 2024, Respondent told Hargrave that she “wrote a big pardon package” and she had “no problem with bringing it” to Hargrave for her signature.
32. On or about June 10, 2024, Respondent produced her client file to the VSB. Respondent’s file consisted of 28 pages and included a partially drafted Request for a Conditional Pardon that was 14 pages in length. The file did not contain a Virginia Pardon Petitioner Questionnaire, Restoration of Rights paperwork, the letters in support of the pardon, or any letters from Respondent to Hargrave transmitting the pardon petition.
33. Respondent told the VSB that she sent the pardon petition to Hargrave in late March 2023. Respondent acknowledged that the pardon petition was returned and contended that she re-sent the petition to Hargrave. Respondent stated that she planned to submit the pardon packet “to the [G]overnor’s office” when Hargrave signed and returned the pardon petition packet to Tillman.
34. Respondent did not schedule any calls, virtual meetings or in-person meetings with Hargrave to review the pardon petition and to obtain her signature, which was required to submit the pardon petition.
35. Respondent never filed a pardon petition on Hargrave’s behalf with the Secretary of the Commonwealth. Respondent did not produce a pardon petition to either Hargrave or Brown.
36. Respondent never refunded any of the \$3,500 advance fee she was paid to prepare and submit the pardon petition.

### **DETERMINATION OF MISCONDUCT**

The following conduct by Respondent was found by clear and convincing evidence to constitute misconduct in violation of the following provisions of the Rules of Professional Conduct:

#### **Rule 1.3 Diligence**

- (a) A lawyer shall act with reasonable diligence and promptness in representing a client.

The Board found the following actions violated Rule 1.3(a): failing to complete a Virginia Pardon Petitioner Questionnaire, failing to prepare Restoration of Rights paperwork, failing to monitor completion of the pardon petition, failing to complete preparation of the pardon petition, failing to produce a pardon petition to Hargrave or Brown and failing to complete the legal work she was hired to perform.

### **Rule 1.3 Diligence**

(b) A lawyer shall not intentionally fail to carry out a contract of employment entered into with a client for professional services, but may withdraw as permitted under Rule 1.16.

The Board found the following actions violated Rule 1.3(b): failing to complete or produce the pardon petition, even though Brown repeatedly requested a copy and Hargrave repeatedly stated she did not receive the pardon petition, and by failing to complete the legal work for which she was hired despite falsely representing that she had done so.

### **Rule 1.4 Communication**

(a) A lawyer shall keep a client reasonably informed about the status of a matter and promptly comply with reasonable requests for information.

The Board found the following actions violated Rule 1.4(a): failing to communicate with Hargrave about the status of the submission of the pardon petition, failing to explain to Hargrave that she did not complete or submit the pardon petition, failing to ascertain whether Hargrave desired to proceed with the pardon petition and blocking Brown's means of communication after her repeated requests for a copy of the pardon petition and a refund of her advance fee.

### **Rule 1.15 Safekeeping Property**

(a) *Depositing Funds.*

(1) All funds received or held by a lawyer or law firm on behalf of a client or a third party, or held by a lawyer as a fiduciary, other than reimbursement of advances for costs and expenses shall be deposited in one or more identifiable trust accounts; all other

property held on behalf of a client should be placed in a safe deposit box, or other place of safekeeping as soon as practicable.

The Board found the following action violated Rule 1.15(a)(1): failing to deposit client funds into a trust account.

#### **Rule 1.15 Safekeeping Property**

(a) *Specific Duties:* -- a lawyer shall:

\* \* \*

(4) promptly pay or deliver to the client or another as requested by such person the funds, securities, or other properties in the possession of the lawyer that such person is entitled to receive[.]

The Board found the following action violated Rule 1.15(a)(4): failing to refund any funds to Brown when Respondent failed to complete the representation.

#### **Rule 1.15 Safekeeping Property**

(b) *Specific Duties:* -- a lawyer shall:

\* \* \*

(5) not disburse funds or use property of a client or of a third party with a valid lien or assignment without their consent or convert funds or property of a client or third party, except as directed by a tribunal.

The Board found the following action violated Rule 1.15(b)(5): depositing client funds into an operating account before they were earned.

### **8.4 Misconduct**

It is professional misconduct for a lawyer to:

\* \* \*

(c) engage in conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit or misrepresentation which reflects adversely on the lawyer's fitness to practice law[.]

The Board found the following actions violated Rule 8.4(c): advising Brown that she had submitted the pardon petition when she did not, and failing to complete and submit the pardon petition after telling Hargrave and the VSB that she would.

### **IMPOSITION OF SANCTIONS**

After announcing its findings by clear and convincing evidence, the Board received evidence and argument from Bar Counsel in aggravation and/or mitigation misconduct, including a certified copy of Respondent's prior disciplinary record (Public Admonition with Terms issued by the Second District, Section I Subcommittee of the Virginia State Bar in VSB Docket No. 22-021-129917 effective October 12, 2023, involving similar misconduct with regard to Rule 1:15). VSB Exhibit 40. Respondent presented argument and was given the opportunity to present evidence in mitigation but chose not to do so.

The Board then recessed to deliberate on the appropriate sanction. The Board found the following aggravating factors: (1) prior disciplinary offense involving Rule 1:15; (2) dishonest or selfish motive in keeping the retainer without performing the contracted for services; (3) a pattern of misconduct as evidenced by the current certification and prior public admonition with terms; (4) multiple offenses over the course of approximately four years; (5) vulnerability of victim, a client who is presently incarcerated and whose conditional petition has still not been filed; and (6) indifference to making restitution, as no restitution had been made prior to the hearing, despite repeated demands by Brown.

In mitigation, the Board considered (1) the Respondent's full and free disclosure to the Disciplinary Board and cooperative attitude toward the proceedings; (2) inexperience in the practice of law, having been in practice only since 2021; and (3) remorse and acknowledgment of responsibility shown at the hearing. The Board was guided in its deliberations by Standard 4.12

and 4.42 of the Annotated Standards for Imposing Lawyer Sanctions, Second Edition (ABA 2019) cited by Bar Counsel. These standards provide that suspension is generally appropriate when a lawyer (1) knows or should know that she is dealing improperly with client property and potentially causing injury to the client; (2) knowingly fails to perform services for a client and causes potential injury to a client; or (3) engages in a pattern of neglect that causes potential injury to a client.

Following deliberation of the appropriate sanctions, the Board reconvened and announced its decision. Having considered the evidence presented and argument of Bar Counsel and Respondent, it is

ORDERED that the license of Respondent Shalonda Michelle Tillman, be and hereby is suspended for nine (9) months, effective April 25, 2025, and subject to the conditions that Respondent pay Takeisha Brown \$3,500.00 in restitution by the end of the nine-month suspension period, and that Respondent join and participate in the Norfolk & Portsmouth Bar Association before the nine-month suspension period is over. The Board encourages, but does not order, the Respondent to seek a mentor through this organization.

It is further ORDERED that, as directed in the Board's April 25, 2025 Summary Order, Respondent must comply with the requirements of Part Six, Section IV, Paragraph 13-29 of the Rules. The Respondent shall forthwith give notice, by certified mail, of the suspension of her license to practice law in the Commonwealth of Virginia, to all clients for whom she is currently handling matters and to all opposing attorneys and presiding judges in pending litigation. The Respondent shall also make appropriate arrangements for the disposition of matters then in her care in conformity with the wishes of her clients. Respondent shall give such notice immediately and in no event later than 14 days of the effective date of the suspension, and make such

arrangements as are required herein as soon as it is practicable and in no event later than 45 days to the effective date of the suspension. The Respondent shall also furnish proof to the clerk within 60 days of the effective date of the suspension that such notices have been timely given and such arrangements have been made for the disposition of the matters.

It is further ORDERED that if the Respondent is not handling any client matters on the effective date of suspension, Respondent shall submit an affidavit to that effect to the Clerk within 60 days of the effective date of the suspension. The Board shall decide all issues considering the adequacy of the notice and arrangements required herein. The burden of proof shall be on the Respondent to show compliance.

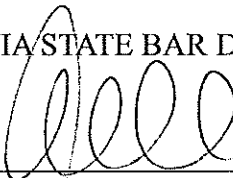
It is further ORDERED that pursuant to Part Six, Section IV, Paragraph 13-9.E of the Rules of the Supreme Court of Virginia, the Clerk of the Disciplinary System shall assess all costs against the Respondent.

It is further ORDERED that an attested copy of this Order be mailed by the Clerk to the Respondent by electronic, first-class, and certified mail, return receipt requested, to her email address and address of record with the Virginia State Bar at 6221 Cushing Street, Suffolk, VA 23435, and a copy by electronic mail to Tenley C. Seli, Assistant Bar Counsel.

ENTERED THIS 10 DAY OF MAY, 2025.

VIRGINIA STATE BAR DISCIPLINARY BOARD

By:



Alison G. M. Martin, Second Vice Chair