

SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK, APPELLATE DIVISION,
SECOND JUDICIAL DEPARTMENT

Aspromatis v. Aspromatis

Aspromatis, 2026 NY Slip Op 03657 (Supreme Court of the State of New York Appellate Division Second
Judicial Department 2026) · No. 2025-01536 · Decided June 10, 2026

SUMMARY

The New York Appellate Division, Second Department, reversed the portion of an amended order holding the plaintiff in civil contempt for allegedly violating pension survivor-benefit provisions in a divorce settlement stipulation. The court held that the stipulation did not clearly and unequivocally require the plaintiff to elect a postdivorce survivor benefit for the defendant or agree to a corresponding QDRO. The court vacated related penalties and remitted the matter to determine the portion of the attorney's fee attributable to that contempt claim.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of the State of New York, Appellate Division, Second Judicial Department
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Mark C. Dillon, J.P.; Helen Voutsinas, J.; Laurence L. Love, J.; Elena Goldberg Velazquez, J.
JURISDICTION	New York Supreme Court, Appellate Division, Second Judicial Department
DECIDED	June 10, 2026
DOCKET	2025-01536
DISPOSITION	reversed_and_remanded
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	The plaintiff appealed from an amended order in a divorce action that held him in civil contempt for violating survivor-benefit provisions of a so-ordered stipulation of settlement, imposed penalties, directed him to execute documents concerning the survivor benefit, and awarded the defendant attorney's fees.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The Appellate Division reviewed the civil-contempt determination for whether clear and convincing evidence established violation of a lawful order containing a clearly expressed and unequivocal mandate, knowledge of the mandate, and prejudice to a litigant's right.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published

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QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the plaintiff could be held in civil contempt for violating survivor-benefit provisions of the so-ordered stipulation when the stipulation did not clearly and unequivocally require a postdivorce survivor-benefit election for the defendant.
2. Whether the court could direct the plaintiff to execute documents or agree to a QDRO requiring a survivor-benefit election not expressly provided in the stipulation.
3. Whether penalties and attorney's fees attributable to the challenged contempt branch were proper after the contempt determination was reversed.

HOLDINGS

1. The plaintiff could not be held in civil contempt because the stipulation of settlement did not clearly and unequivocally direct him to elect the USPS pension survivor benefit for the defendant after the divorce.
2. The court could not direct the plaintiff to execute documents or agree to a QDRO requiring the survivor-benefit election because the underlying stipulation did not clearly and unequivocally provide for that obligation.
3. The penalties imposed for violating the survivor-benefit provisions were improper, and no attorney's fee could be awarded for the branch of the motion seeking contempt based on those provisions. The matter was remitted to determine the portion of the fee attributable to that branch because the record did not permit that amount to be calculated.

KEY QUOTATIONS

*“A determination that a party is in civil contempt requires clear and convincing evidence that the alleged contemnor violated a lawful order, clearly expressing an unequivocal mandate, of which the alleged contemnor had knowledge, and that a right of a party to the litigation was prejudiced as a result of the violation” (*1)*

*“courts should be extremely reluctant to interpret an agreement as impliedly stating something which the parties have neglected to specifically include” (*1)*

*“A QDRO cannot encompass rights not provided in, or more expansive than, the underlying stipulation of settlement” (*1)*

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

The parties entered into a so-ordered stipulation of settlement addressing the survivor benefit associated with the plaintiff's United States Postal Service pension. They disagreed about whether the stipulation required the plaintiff to elect a survivor benefit for the defendant that would continue after the divorce. The stipulation did not expressly state that the plaintiff had to make that postdivorce election or agree to a qualified domestic relations order requiring it.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The plaintiff commenced an action for divorce and ancillary relief in 2021. The parties entered into a so-ordered stipulation of settlement on August 15, 2023, and a judgment of divorce later incorporated the stipulation but did not merge it. The Supreme Court, Suffolk County, granted the defendant's motion to hold the plaintiff in civil contempt for allegedly violating pension-survivor-benefit provisions, imposed penalties, and awarded attorney's fees. The Appellate Division reversed insofar as appealed from and remitted for determination of the portion of the attorney's fee attributable to the challenged contempt branch.

DISPOSITION

reversed_and_remanded

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

The Supreme Court, Suffolk County, must determine the precise amount of the attorney's fee attributable to the branch of the defendant's motion seeking civil contempt for violation of the survivor-benefit provisions, as distinguished from fees attributable to other contempt allegations not at issue on appeal.

CASES CITED

- El-Dehdan v. El-Dehdan, 26 NY3d 19, 29
- Vermont Teddy Bear Co. v. 538 Madison Realty Co., 1 NY3d 470, 475
- McCoy v. Feinman, 99 NY2d 295, 304-305
- Kraus v. Kraus, 131 AD3d 94, 100-101
- Coulon v. Coulon, 82 AD3d 929
- Matter of McCormick v. Axelrod, 59 NY2d 574, 582-583