

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
TENNESSEE

Ward v. KaTom Restaurant Supply, Inc.

Ward · No. 3:24-cv-119 · Decided January 23, 2026

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Eastern District of Tennessee ruled on KaTom Restaurant Supply, Inc.'s motion for summary judgment in Jack Ward's Title VII action alleging transgender discrimination, retaliation, and hostile work environment. The court denied summary judgment on the sex discrimination claim because factual disputes remained regarding discriminatory animus and the role of a decisionmaker in Ward's termination. The court granted summary judgment on the retaliation and hostile work environment claims.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Eastern District of Tennessee
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Charles E. Atchley, Jr.
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Eastern District of Tennessee
DECIDED	January 23, 2026
DOCKET	3:24-cv-119
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Defendant moved for summary judgment on all of Plaintiff's Title VII claims. The district court granted summary judgment on the retaliation and hostile work environment claims and denied it on the transgender-based sex discrimination claim.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Summary judgment is proper when the movant shows that there is no genuine dispute as to any material fact and the movant is entitled to judgment as a matter of law. The court views the evidence and reasonable inferences in the light most favorable to the nonmovant and may not weigh evidence or assess credibility.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unpublished

TOPICS

- employment discrimination
- title vii
- retaliation
- hostile work environment
- summary judgment

PRACTICE AREAS

employment law

civil rights

civil procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether genuine disputes of material fact precluded summary judgment on Ward's Title VII sex discrimination claim based on his transgender identity and termination.
2. Whether Ward engaged in protected activity sufficient to support a Title VII retaliation claim when he emailed human resources to clarify the restroom policy.
3. Whether the alleged comments, restroom restriction, and related conduct were sufficiently severe or pervasive to establish a Title VII hostile work environment.

HOLDINGS

1. Summary judgment was denied because genuine disputes existed regarding whether Ward was terminated because of his transgender identity.
2. KaTom was entitled to summary judgment because Ward did not engage in protected activity.
3. KaTom was entitled to summary judgment because the alleged harassment was not objectively severe or pervasive.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Viewing the evidence in the light most favorable to Ward and drawing all reasonable inferences in his favor, there is genuine factual dispute as to whether Ward was terminated because of his transgender identity.”
(Section III.A)

“This seeking of clarification, without more, is insufficient to show that Ward “took an overt stand against suspected illegal discriminatory action.”” (Section III.B)

“Viewing the January 26th comments and the restroom policy in the totality of the circumstances as the Court must, see Bowman, 220 F.3d at 463, it is apparent no reasonable factfinder could conclude that Ward has cleared the “high bar” of showing he was subjected to objectively severe or pervasive harassment.” (Section III.C)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Ward was hired by KaTom as a designer shortly after informing the company that he was transitioning from female to male and would use the name Char and he/him pronouns. During a January 26, 2023 meeting, a company vice president objected to discussing Ward's gender identity, declined to use pronouns for Ward, questioned his name change, and restricted Ward's restroom access to women's or gender-neutral restrooms. Ward was terminated on February 16, 2023, ostensibly for misuse of Microsoft Teams and related insubordination, but the record disputed who made the termination decision and whether the vice president participated in it. Ward's email seeking clarification of the restroom policy did not expressly oppose or characterize the policy as discriminatory.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Jack Ward filed suit alleging that KaTom Restaurant Supply, Inc. discriminated against him because of his transgender identity, retaliated against him for opposing a restroom policy, and subjected him to a hostile work environment, all under Title VII. KaTom moved for summary judgment. The court granted the motion in part, dismissed the retaliation and hostile work environment claims with prejudice, and allowed the sex discrimination claim concerning Ward's termination to proceed to trial.

DISPOSITION

other

CASES CITED

- Matsushita Electric Industrial Co. v. Zenith Radio Corp., 475 U.S. 574, 587 (1986)
- Nat'l Satellite Sports, Inc. v. Eliadis Inc., 253 F.3d 900, 907 (6th Cir. 2001)
- Anderson v. Liberty Lobby, Inc., 477 U.S. 242, 248–49, 252 (1986)
- Celotex Corp. v. Catrett, 477 U.S. 317, 323, 325 (1986)
- Moldowan v. City of Warren, 578 F.3d 351, 374 (6th Cir. 2009)
- White v. Wyndham Vacation Ownership, Inc., 617 F.3d 472, 475–76 (6th Cir. 2010)
- Bostock v. Clayton County, 590 U.S. 644, 662, 681 (2020)
- Jacklyn v. Schering-Plough Healthcare Products Sales Corp., 176 F.3d 921, 926 (6th Cir. 1999)
- Nguyen v. City of Cleveland, 229 F.3d 559, 563 (6th Cir. 2000)
- Erwin v. Potter, 79 F. App'x 893, 897 (6th Cir. 2003)
- McDonnell Douglas Corp. v. Green, 411 U.S. 792, 802 (1973)
- Wheat v. Fifth Third Bank, 785 F.3d 230, 237 (6th Cir. 2015)
- Loyd v. Saint Joseph Mercy Oakland, 766 F.3d 580, 590 (6th Cir. 2014)
- Miles v. Southern Central Human Resource Agency, Inc., 946 F.3d 883, 888 (6th Cir. 2020)
- Manzer v. Diamond Shamrock Chemicals Co., 29 F.3d 1078, 1084 (6th Cir. 1994)
- Gross v. FBL Financial Services, Inc., 557 U.S. 167, 180 (2009)
- Ash v. Tyson Foods, Inc., 546 U.S. 454, 456 (2006)
- Geiger v. Tower Automotive, 579 F.3d 614, 621 (6th Cir. 2009)
- EEOC v. Avery Dennison Corp., 104 F.3d 858, 860 (6th Cir. 1997)
- Mansfield v. City of Murfreesboro, 706 F. App'x 231, 236 (6th Cir. 2017)
- Khalaf v. Ford Motor Co., 973 F.3d 469, 485, 489 (6th Cir. 2020)
- Blizzard v. Marion Technical College, 698 F.3d 275, 288 (6th Cir. 2012)
- Nathan v. Great Lakes Water Authority, 992 F.3d 557, 565 (6th Cir. 2021)
- Bowman v. Shawnee State University, 220 F.3d 456, 458–59, 462–64 (6th Cir. 2000)
- Harris v. Forklift Systems, 510 U.S. 17, 23 (1993)
- Berryman v. SuperValu Holdings, Inc., 669 F.3d 714, 718 (6th Cir. 2012)

- Doe v. Triangle Doughnuts, LLC, 472 F. Supp. 3d 115, 129–30 (E.D. Pa. 2020)
- Texas v. EEOC, 785 F. Supp. 3d 170, 191–92 (N.D. Tex. 2025)
- Morris v. Oldham County Fiscal Court, 201 F.3d 784, 790 (6th Cir. 2000)
- Clark v. UPS, 400 F.3d 341, 351 (6th Cir. 2005)
- Roberts v. Gibbs, 655 F. Supp. 3d 683, 692 (E.D. Tenn. 2023)
- Fidelity National Title Insurance Co. v. Worldwide Property Hub, LLC, No. 2:23-cv-02210-SHM-cgc, 2025 WL 373463, at *12 (W.D. Tenn. Aug. 26, 2025)
- Sigler v. American Honda Motor Co., 532 F.3d 469, 480–81 (6th Cir. 2008)
- Pack v. Damon Corp., 434 F.3d 810, 815 (6th Cir. 2006)
- Weigel v. Baptist Hospital, 302 F.3d 367, 377–78 (6th Cir. 2002)

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