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costs to any party (except as set forth in this Settlement), except for claims to enforce the Settlement. (¶38)

- o "Released Claims" means any and all claims, complaints, causes of action, allegations of liability, damages, restitution, interest, demands or rights, that reasonably arise out of or relate to the facts, events, transactions or circumstances that were alleged against Allianz Life in the Complaint or pursued in the Action, under any legal theory or construct including a request for declaratory relief. Released Claims includes any future claims, complaints, causes of action, allegations of liability, damages, restitution, interest, demands or rights, that that may accrue upon a surrender or annuitization of an Active Deferred Settlement Annuity occurring after the Annuity Status Date if they reasonably arise out of or relate to the facts, events, transactions or circumstances that were alleged against Allianz Life in the Complaint or pursued in the Action, under any legal theory or construct, including a request for declaratory relief. Released Claims include but are not limited to any of the following subject matters, all of which were alleged and pursued in the Action (¶17.nn):
 - The disclosure, nondisclosure or defective disclosure of information required by the California Insurance Code, including but not limited to Cal. Ins. Code § 10127.13, relating to surrender charges or penalties, prior to or in connection with the sale, issuance, or delivery of a Settlement Annuity.
 - The amount or disclosure, nondisclosure or defective disclosure, or calculation of any claimed charge, fee, penalty, or reduction,

including an alleged loss of a bonus, associated with the partial or full surrender of a Settlement Annuity, or with the election by a Beneficiary of a Settlement Annuity to take the Death Benefit in the form of a lump sum payment, including but not limited to claims based on Cal. Civ. Code §§ 1442 and 1671;

- The amount or disclosure, nondisclosure or defective disclosure of any claimed charge, fee, penalty or reduction associated with Allianz Life's determination or calculation of annuitization payments in excess of the minimum payments guaranteed under each Settlement Annuity;
- Allianz Life's alleged failure to provide, or calculation of, a bonus credit to the Annuitization Value or Cash Value of the Settlement Annuity, or the disclosure, nondisclosure or defective disclosure thereof; and/or
- Allianz Life's selection, declaration, determination or calculation of annuitization interest rates or purchase rates in connection with the annuitization of the Settlement Annuities.
- With respect to the Released Claims (¶40):
 - Nothing shall preclude any action or proceeding to enforce the terms of the Agreement;
 - No claims of any nature are released with respect to any annuity, or other contract or agreement, between the Class Representative or any Settlement Class Member and Defendant, or its predecessors, successors, or assigns, other than a Settlement Annuity;

- Class Representatives and the Settlement Class members shall continue to have all rights under their Settlement Annuity, except to the extent it is changed or modified by the Settlement and Agreement.
- The Release is, and may be raised, as a complete defense to and precludes any claim, action, or proceeding encompassed by the Release against the Allianz Life Releasees herein. (¶42)
- "Released Parties" means Allianz Life and its Related Parties. (¶17.mm)
 - o "Related Parties" means a party's or Settlement Class Member's current, former, and future spouses, estates, heirs, assigns, beneficiaries, executors, administrators, trusts, trustees, predecessors, successors, parent organizations, subsidiaries, affiliates, partners, joint venturers, officers, directors, shareholders, employees, members, managers, trustees, agents, appointed agents, representatives, attorneys, and any persons designated as annuitants under a Settlement Annuity. (¶17.11)
- The named Plaintiffs will also provide a general release (¶39)
 - O Upon full funding, the Agreement forever discharges the Defendant Releasees from any claims or liabilities and permanently bars and enjoins (¶70.h):
 - Plaintiffs and their Related Parties from filing, commencing, prosecuting, maintaining, intervening in, participating in, conducting, or continuing litigation as class members or otherwise, or from receiving any benefits from any lawsuit, administrative, arbitration, remediation or regulatory proceeding or order, or other

legal proceeding in any jurisdiction, in accordance with the provisions of Section IV;

- Plaintiffs and their Related Parties, and all persons in active concert or participation with them, from filing, commencing, or prosecuting a lawsuit, arbitration, remediation or other legal proceeding as a class action, a separate class, or group for purposes of pursuing a putative class action (including by seeking to amend a pending complaint to include class allegations or by seeking class certification in a pending action in any jurisdiction) on behalf of Plaintiffs, arising out of, based on, or relating to the Released Claims.
- The releases are effective as of the date that Defendant pays the last portion of the Gross Settlement Amount into the Settlement Fund (¶70.h), which should occur within 30 days after the Effective Date (¶24).

III. ANALYSIS OF SETTLEMENT AGREEMENT

"Before final approval, the court must conduct an inquiry into the fairness of the proposed settlement." Cal. Rules of Court, rule 3.769(g). "If the court approves the settlement agreement after the final approval hearing, the court must make and enter judgment. The judgment must include a provision for the retention of the court's jurisdiction over the parties to enforce the terms of the judgment. The court may not enter an order dismissing the action at the same time as, or after, entry of judgment." Cal. Rules of Court, rule 3.769(h).

As discussed more fully in the Order conditionally approving the settlement, "[i]n a class action lawsuit, the court undertakes the responsibility to assess fairness in order to

prevent fraud, collusion or unfaimess to the class, the settlement or dismissal of a class action. The purpose of the requirement [of court review] is the protection of those class members, including the named plaintiffs, whose rights may not have been given due regard by the negotiating parties." See *Consumer Advocacy Group, Inc. v. Kintetsu Enterprises of America* (2006) 141 Call. App.4th 46, 60 [internal quotation marks omitted]; see also *Wershba v. Apple Computer, Inc.* (2001) 91 Call. App.4th 224, 245 ("*Wershba*"), disapproved on another ground in *Hernandez v. Restoration Hardware* (2018) 4 Call. 5th 260 [Court needs to "scrutinize the proposed settlement agreement to the extent necessary to reach a reasoned judgment that the agreement is not the product of fraud or overreaching by, or collusion between, the negotiating parties, and that the settlement, taken as a whole, is fair, reasonable and adequate to all concerned."] [internal quotation marks omitted].

"The burden is on the proponent of the settlement to show that it is fair and reasonable. However 'a presumption of fairness exists where: (1) the settlement is reached through arm's-length bargaining; (2) investigation and discovery are sufficient to allow counsel and the court to act intelligently; (3) counsel is experienced in similar litigation; and (4) the percentage of objectors is small." See *Wershba*, *supra*, 91 Cal.App.4th at pg. 245, citing *Dunk v. Ford Motor Co.* (1996) 48 Cal.App.4th 1794, 1802. Notwithstanding an initial presumption of fairness, "the court should not give rubber-stamp approval." See *Kullar v. Foot Locker Retail*, *Inc.* (2008) 168 Cal.App.4th 116, 130. "Rather, to protect the interests of absent class members, the court must independently and objectively analyze the evidence and circumstances before it in order to determine whether the settlement is in the best interests of those whose claims will be extinguished." *Ibid.*, citing 4 Newberg on Class Actions (4th ed. 2002) § 11:41, p. 90. In that determination, the court should consider factors such as "the strength of plaintiffs'

case, the risk, expense, complexity and likely duration of further litigation, the risk of 1 maintaining class action status through trial, the amount offered in settlement, the extent 2 of discovery completed and stage of the proceedings, the experience and views of 3 counsel, the presence of a governmental participant, and the reaction of the class 4 members to the proposed settlement." Id. at 128. This "list of factors is not exclusive and 5 the court is free to engage in a balancing and weighing of factors depending on the 6 circumstances of each case." Wershba, supra, 91 Cal.App.4th at pg. 245.) 7 2 Á. A PRESUMPTION OF FAIRNESS EXISTS The Court preliminarily found in its Order of July 8, 2022 that the presumption of 9 fairness should be applied. No facts have come to the Court's attention that would alter 10 that preliminary conclusion. Accordingly, the settlement is entitled to a presumption of 11 fairness as set forth in the preliminary approval order. 12 THE SETTLEMENT IS FAIR, ADEQUATE, AND REASONABLE В. 13 The settlement was preliminarily found to be fair, adequate and reasonable. 14 Notice has now been given to the Class. The notice process resulted in the following: 15 Number of Settlement Class Members: 25,700 16 Number of Settlement Class Members entitled to receive a distribution 17 from the Net Settlement Fund: 10,280 12 Number of Settlement Class Members with policies in deferral: 15,420 19 Number of notices mailed: 25,700 20 Number of undeliverable notices: 67 21 Number of opt-outs: 24 22

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Number of participating class members: 25,676

Number of objections: 1

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(Declaration of Alexander Thomas ("Thomas Decl.") filed October 18, 2022, ¶¶2-11; Declaration of Alexander Thomas filed December 5, 2022, ¶¶2-5.)

Cynthia Crist objects on the basis that her settlement payment of \$98.76 "seems low" in comparison to the proposed class representative service awards of \$15,000 each for Plaintiffs Sanchez and Confino. In summary, she argues that the annuitized amount on her annuity, \$1,037 per month, is "so much less" than she expected after investing for 12 years (2008 to 2020). She asserts that her settlement should be "equitable" to the class representatives'. (See Exhibit C to Thomas Decl. filed October 18, 2022.)

In response, representatives of Defendant and Lewis & Ellis, Inc., the actuarial consulting firm that prepared the mailing lists for the Settlement Administrator, each provide declarations showing that the objector's settlement check was properly calculated in accordance with the distribution plan approved by the Court. (See MFA at 11:22-12:19; see also Decl. of Laurie Jannsen ISO Final, Decl. of Terry Long ISO Final.)

The Court overrules the objection. To the extent the objection is based on a belief that the class member should be entitled to a higher recovery, it should be noted that settlements, "need not obtain 100 percent of the damages sought in order to be fair and reasonable," and that even if the relief is substantially less than what would be available after a successful outcome, "this is no bar to a class settlement because 'the public interest may indeed be served by a voluntary settlement in which each side gives ground in the interest of avoiding litigation." (Wershba, supra, 91 Cal.App.4th at 250, citing Air Line Stewards, etc., Loc. 550 v. American Airlines, Inc. (7th Cir. 1972) 455 F.2d 101. 109.) Further, the objector had the opportunity to opt-out and seek individual redress if she did not find the amount conferred to be fair.

In addition, the objector seems to misunderstand the purpose of the proposed \$15,000 service awards to the class representatives. A service award is intended as compensation to induce a named plaintiff's participation in a lawsuit, if necessary, and the actual amount of the award is within the Court's discretion to decide at final approval, based on the plaintiff's contributions to the action as well as the risks incurred by serving as a class representative. The service award is separate and distinguishable from the relief provided to class members in exchange for their release of claims under the settlement.

Finally, the Court notes that out of a large class, the number of objections is minimal, reflecting the class's overwhelmingly positive response.

The Court finds that the notice was given as directed and conforms to due process requirements. Given the reactions of the Class Members to the proposed settlement and for the reasons set for in the Preliminary Approval order, the settlement is found to be fair, adequate, and reasonable.

C. CLASS CERTIFICATION IS PROPER

For the reasons set forth in the preliminary approval order, certification of the Class for purposes of settlement is appropriate.

D. ATTORNEY FEES AND COSTS

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Class Counsel requests \$6,616,666.67 (33 1/3%) for attorney fees and \$332,571.79 for costs. (Motion for Attorney Fees at 4:3-5, 10:11-13.)

Courts have an independent responsibility to review an attorney fee provision and award only what it determines is reasonable. *Garabedian v. Los Angeles Cellular Telephone Company* (2004) 118 Cal.App.4th 123, 128. A percentage calculation is permitted in common fund cases. *Laffitte v. Robert Half Int'l, Inc.* (2016) 1 Cal.5th 480, 503.

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In the instant case, fees are sought pursuant to the percentage method, as crosschecked by lodestar. (Motion for Attorney Fees at pp. 4-10.) The \$6,616,666.67 fee request is approximately one-third of the Gross Settlement Amount. The notice expressly advised class members of the fee request, and no one objected on that basis. (Thomas Decl. filed October 18, 2022, ¶9 and Exhibit A thereto.)

A lodestar is calculated by multiplying the number of hours reasonably expended by the reasonably hourly rate. PLCM Group, Inc. v. Drexler (2000) 22 Cal.4th 1084, 1095-1096 (*PLCM*). "Generally, '[t]he lodestar is calculated using the reasonable rate for comparable legal services in the local community for noncontingent litigation of the same type, multiplied by the reasonable number of hours spent on the case.' " Environmental Protection Information Center v. Dept. of Forestry & Fire Protection (2010) 190 Cal. App. 4th 217, 248, quoting Nichols v. City of Taft (2007) 155 Cal.App.4th 1233, 1242-1243.

As to the reasonableness of the rate and hours charged, trial courts consider factors such as "the nature of the litigation, its difficulty, the amount involved, the skill required in its handling, the skill employed, the attention given, the success or failure, and other circumstances." PLCM, supra, 22 Cal.4th at p. 1096. "The evidence should allow the court to consider whether the case was overstaffed, how much time the attorneys spent on particular claims, and whether the hours were reasonably expended." Christian Research Institute v. Alnor (2008) 165 Cal. App. 4th 1315, 1320.

Attorney Davis represents that the hourly rates of the Gianelli & Morris attorneys who worked on this matter range from \$675 to \$900 per hour, and were awarded by courts in other class actions that this counsel litigated against insurance providers. (Decl. of Joshua S. Davis ISO Attorney Fees, ¶40-43.) He represents that his firm spent 3,945.35 hours on the action for a lodestar of \$2,995,612.50. (Id. at \$48.)

In addition, attorney Marron represents that the hourly rates of the Law Offices of Ronald A. Marron attorneys who worked on this matter range from \$490 to \$815 per hour (with \$225 per hour for paralegals), and have been awarded by courts in other class actions. (Decl. of Ronald A. Marron ISO Attorneys' Fees, ¶¶ 9, 13.) He represents that his firm spent 531.6 hours on the action for a lodestar of \$343,033.50. (*Id.* at ¶48.)

Based on the representations of Class Counsel, the combined lodestar for 4,476.95 hours of work between the two firms is \$3,338,646, implying a multiplier of 1.98. Counsel contends that they devoted substantial time and effort to this action and litigated it for more than six years, which included a trial on Allianz's *res judicata* defense, the motion for class certification, and opposing two summary judgment motions, as well as the work done in discovery, which included the review of about 40,480 pages of documents, taking the depositions of Defendant's employees and witnesses, defending the depositions of the Class Representatives, and consultation with experts regarding two-tiered annuities, Allianz's ESI, the Class data, damage modeling, class member damage calculations and settlement distribution. (Davis Decl. ISO Attorney Fees, ¶34-38.) Neither of the Class Counsel firms has provided its actual time records with this motion, stating they will be made available upon request and will be brought to the hearing on this Motion. (*Id.* at ¶33.) Without specific detail as to the tasks and hours undertaken on the case and why they were reasonably necessary, there can be no meaningful lodestar crosscheck.

The Ninth Circuit maintains a well-established "benchmark for an attorneys' fee award in a successful class action [as] twenty-five percent of the entire common fund." *Williams v. MGM-Pathe Commc'ns Co.*, 129 F.3d 1026, 1027 (9th Cir. 1997). Those courts generally start with the 25% benchmark and adjust upward or downward depending on: the extent to which class counsel "achieved exceptional results

for the class," whether the case was risky for class counsel, whether counsel's performance "generated benefits beyond the cash settlement fund," the market rate for the particular field of law (in some circumstances), the burdens class counsel experience while litigating the case (e.g., cost, duration, foregoing other work), and whether the case was handled on a contingency basis." *In re Online DVD-Rental Antitrust Litig.*, 779 F.3d 934, 954-55 (9th Cir. 2015) (quoting *Vizcaino v. Microsoft Corp.*, 290 F.3d 1043, 1048-50 (9th Cir. 2002)); *Rabin v. PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP* (N.D.Cal. Feb. 3, 2021, No. 16-cv-02276-JST) 2021 U.S.Dist.LEXIS 41285, at *20-21.

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The Court has handled this matter since approximately 2017. It has been vigorously litigated by very experienced counsel on both sides. The work done by Class Counsel reflected their experience and expertise in insurance cases involving annuities. Plaintiffs' counsel took this case on a contingency and had no guarantee of an outcome, particularly given the *Mooney* case. There is a degree of monetary recovery for class members who have yet to annuitize but who do so in the time periods specified in the settlement. The fee request represents a reasonable percentage of the total funds paid by Defendant in these circumstances. Accordingly, the Court awards fees in the amount of \$6,616,666.67.

Fee Split: Class Counsel entered into a written agreement that provided fees awarded by the Court will be split by Class Counsel as follows: 75% of the fees to Gianelli & Morris, ALC, and 25% of the fees to the Law Offices of Ronald Marron.

Both Diane V. Sanchez and Jules Confino consented in writing to the fee split as part of their retainer agreements with Class Counsel. (Davis Decl. ISO Attorney Fees, ¶57.)

Class Counsel requests \$332,571.79 in costs. This is less than the \$337,351.74 cap provided in the settlement agreement (¶44). The amount was disclosed to Class Members in the Notice, and no objections to it were received. (Thomas Decl. filed

October 18, 2022, ¶9 and Exhibit A thereto.) Costs include: expert consultation fees (\$181,966.25), class certification administrator notice (\$46,621.13), and mediation fees (\$17,750). (Davis Decl. ISO Attorney Fees, ¶53; Marron Decl. ISO Attorneys' Fees, ¶10.)

The costs appear to be reasonable and necessary to the litigation, are reasonable in amount, and were not objected to by the class.

For all of the foregoing reasons, costs of \$332,571.79 are approved.

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E. SERVICE AWARDS TO CLASS REPRESENTATIVES

A service (or incentive) fee award to a named class representative must be supported by evidence that quantifies the time and effort expended by the individual and a reasoned explanation of financial or other risks undertaken by the class representative. The Eleventh Circuit has held that such awards are foreclosed by Supreme Court precedent. See Johnson v. NPAS Sols., LLC (11th Cir. 2020) 975 F. 3d 1244, 1259-1260. This view, however, has not been adopted to date in the Ninth Circuit or the California state courts. Clark v. American Residential Services LLC (2009) 175 Cal.App.4th 785, 806-807. Criteriathe courts may consider in determining whether to make an incentive award include: (1) the risk to the class representative in commencing suit, both financial and otherwise; (2) the notoriety and personal difficulties encountered by the class representative; (3) the amount of time and effort spent by the class representative; (4) the duration of the litigation and; (5) the personal benefit (or lack thereof) enjoyed by the class representative as a result of the litigation. (Citations.)"]. Cellphone Termination Cases (2010) 186 Cal.App.4th 1380, 1394-1395. The theory of these awards is that absent same, lead plaintiffs could have unreimbursed out of pocket expenses or that

there would be no plaintiff at all. See *In Re Continental Securities Litigation* (7th Cir. 1992) 962 F. 2d 566, 571.

The Class Representatives request enhancement awards of \$15,000 each, totaling \$30,000. (Motion for Attorney Fees at 11:21-22.) They urge that the awards are appropriate for the following reasons:

Plaintiff Sanchez represents that her contributions to the action include: reviewing and responding to her attorneys' requests for documentation and information throughout the lawsuit, searching for and producing responsive documents, obtaining financial records from her financial institutions, meeting with her attorney to discuss the case status, having her deposition taken by Defendant on September 5, 2019, preparing a declaration in support of the class certification motion, and reviewing the settlement. She estimates spending a total of 125 to 150 hours on the action. (Declaration of Diane Sanchez ISO Attorney Fees, ¶¶ 8-18.)

Plaintiff Confino represents that his contributions to the action include: preparing a declaration in support of the class certification motion, responding to various written discovery including requests for production of documents, having his deposition taken on October 22, 2019, and reviewing the settlement. He estimates spending approximately 55 hours on the lawsuit. (Declaration of Jules Confino ISO Attorney Fees, ¶ 7-12.)

Although there is a wide variation in the amounts to be paid to class members, the amounts sought as incentive payments are well in excess of the average payment.

(\$1284). In the Ninth Circuit, \$5,000 is presumptively reasonable. See *Rabin v*. *PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP* 2021 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 41285 (N.D. Cal. 2021) *28. In this Court's experience, \$5,000 is also routinely awarded in state court except where

extraordinary risk was undertaken or extraordinary work was done by the named plaintiff.

Neither plaintiff indicates exposure to any risk, such as potential liability for costs if the case did not settle. The work done was, in some respects, that which any plaintiff would have to do in a case (i.e. provide documents to counsel, meeting with counsel, and having a deposition taken). There was, however, attention to be paid to the details of a rather complex settlement and the necessity to be involved with the case from its inception in 2015. In light of the above-described contributions to this action, and in acknowledgment of the benefits obtained on behalf of the class, a \$7,000 service award to each Plaintiff is reasonable and approved.

F. SETTLEMENT ADMINISTRATION COSTS

The Settlement Administrator, KCC Class Action Services, LLC, requests \$120,000 in compensation for its work in administrating this case. (Decl. of Alexander Thomas filed August 8, 2022, ¶4.) At the time of preliminary approval, costs of settlement administration were estimated at \$120,000 (¶59). Class Members were provided with notice of this amount and did not object on this basis. (Thomas Decl. filed October 18, 2022, ¶9 and Exhibit A thereto.)

Accordingly, settlement administration costs are approved in the amount of \$120,000.

IV. CONCLUSION AND ORDER

The Court hereby:

- (1) Grants class certification for purposes of settlement;
- (2) Finds the notice met the requirements of due process;
- (3) Grants final approval of the settlement as fair, adequate, and reasonable;

- (4) Awards \$6,616,666.67 in attorney fees to Class Counsel, Gianelli & Morris and Law Offices of Ron Marron;
- (5) Awards \$332,571.79 in litigation costs to Class Counsel;
- (6) Awards \$7,000 each as Class Representative Service Awards to Diane Sanchez and Jules Confino;
- (7) Awards \$120,000 in settlement administration costs to KCC Class Action Services, LLC;
- (8) Orders class counsel to lodge a proposed Judgment, consistent with this ruling and containing the class definition, full release language, and the names of the class members who opted out by December 30, 2022;
- (9) Orders class counsel to provide notice to the class members pursuant to California Rules of Court, rule 3.771(b); and
- (10) Sets a Non-Appearance Case Review re: Final Report re: Distribution of Settlement Funds for July 1, 2024 at 8:30 a.m. Final Report is to be filed five court days in advance.

Dated: 12/14/22

MAREN E. NELSON

Phone E. Delson

Judge of the Superior Court