



## VBA Bankruptcy Section Bench Bar Meeting

June 13, 2023 – Burlington Courthouse  
12:30 pm – 1:30 pm

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Judge Cooper

Student Loan APs when United States is a Defendant: Proposed Guidance

Comments due by September 1, 2023

2023 VT Local Rules Revision Advisory Group

1. Fresh look at rules with following objectives in mind, the key being to simplify procedures.
2. Collaborating with Court stakeholders to set policy and establish local procedures that facilitate the just, speedy, and inexpensive administration of every case and proceeding under the Bankruptcy Code in the District of Vermont.
3. Identifying and resolving issues with or between the local rules, the Code, the Federal Rules of Bankruptcy Procedure, case law, and any changes that have occurred over time.
4. Analyzing existing local forms to determine whether they fulfill the requirements and/or intentions of statutory language, local rules, or standing administrative orders that are not addressed by the national forms.
5. Using what we learn to facilitate the education of law students and Vermont practitioners to encourage participation and representation of Vermont debtors and creditors.

CLE Topics

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Tavian Mayer

Local Rules Revision Advisory Group

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Brian Ortiz  
Paul Levine

Presentation on the Comparison of Chapter 11, Small Business, Subchapter V and Chapter 12 Cases

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Alex Edelman  
David Dunn

Update from Bankruptcy Section Co-Chairs

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Ray Obuchowski

Reminder of 341 Meeting Preparation, timely submission of Attorney Declaration of Identification with attached IDs and timely upload of Debtor documents as required under Vt. LBR 4002(d)

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Jody Kennedy

The CM/ECF system will be down the weekend of June 24<sup>th</sup> for updates beginning at 5:30 p.m. on Friday, June 23. Attorneys should plan accordingly.

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Judge Cooper

New Business

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**UNITED STATES BANKRUPTCY COURT  
DISTRICT OF VERMONT**

**Guidelines for Adversary Proceedings under 11 U.S.C. § 523(a)(8)  
in which the United States is a Defendant**

Pursuant to 11 U.S.C. § 523(a)(8), individual debtors may seek a judgment declaring certain student loans and related obligations (“Student Loans”) dischargeable, where excepting Student Loans from discharge would impose an undue hardship on the debtor and their dependents. The United States Department of Justice (“DOJ”), in cooperation with the United States Department of Education (“DOE”), promulgated guidance for its attorneys with respect to Student Loan bankruptcy litigation (the “Guidance”). The Guidance became effective November 17, 2022, and applies *only* to loans held by DOE.

To accommodate this Guidance, the court deems it appropriate to provide its bar and litigants with these Guidelines. These Guidelines apply only to adversary proceedings under 11 U.S.C. § 523(a)(8) in which DOE is a defendant.

**I. Summary of DOJ Guidance**

The Guidance applies to future bankruptcy cases and proceedings, as well as (wherever practical) to pending matters. Given that the Guidance constitutes internal policy, it does not create any substantive or procedural rights enforceable at law. The Guidance seeks to promote three goals:

- (1) To set clear, transparent, and consistent expectations for discharge that debtors can understand, regardless of whether they are represented by counsel;
- (2) To reduce debtors’ burden in pursuing adversary proceedings aimed at obtaining a discharge of their Student Loans by simplifying the fact-gathering process; **and**
- (3) Where the facts support it, to increase the number of proceedings in which the government stipulates to facts demonstrating the existence of undue hardship and recommends that the court discharge a debtor’s Student Loans.

After a debtor commences an adversary proceeding under 11 U.S.C. § 523(a)(8), the DOJ attorney assigned to the proceeding should provide the debtor/plaintiff with an “Attestation”, along with the debtor’s Student Loan account history and details, which DOE will provide to DOJ.

The Attestation consists of a lengthy form, which must be completed under penalty of perjury. The Attestation requires the debtor to provide detailed information concerning the debtor’s current income and expenses, their future inability to repay their Student Loans, their prior efforts to repay their Student Loans, their current assets, and any additional circumstances relevant to the showing of undue hardship that the debtor bears the burden of proof to be entitled to a judgment of dischargeability. The Attestation also requests that the debtor provide documentation that corroborates the debtor’s stated income. The DOJ may request additional evidence where necessary to verify the information set forth in the debtor’s Attestation.

The Guidance offers detailed instructions for evaluating an Attestation and supporting documentation, focusing on the factors relevant to a court's determination of dischargeability under *Brunner v. New York State Higher Educ. Svcs. Corp.*, 831 F.2d 395 (2d Cir. 1987). The Guidance also requires DOJ to consult with DOE in reviewing a debtor's Attestation and corroborating documentation to determine an appropriate course of action in each proceeding.

Where DOJ and DOE determine that a debtor has shown that: (a) absent a discharge of their Student Loans, the debtor and their dependents would suffer undue hardship; (b) the debtor presently lacks an ability to repay their Student Loans; (c) the debtor's ability to pay their Student Loans is likely to persist in the future; and (d) the debtor has acted in good faith in the past in attempting to repay their Student Loans, the Guidance advises DOJ attorneys to stipulate to such facts and to recommend that the court issue a partial or full discharge of the debtor's Student Loans. DOJ must advise debtors that its stipulation and recommendation do not bind the court, which will render its own determination as to whether the Student Loans are dischargeable. The Guidance encourages debtors and DOE attorneys to cooperate in filing the appropriate documents to enable the court to consider whether to issue an order to discharge Student Loans.

## **II. Guidelines for the Prosecution of Adversary Proceedings Under 11 U.S.C. § 523(a)(8)**

Once a debtor commences an adversary proceeding under 11 U.S.C. § 523(a)(8), they must timely serve DOE with process.<sup>1</sup> Assuming timely, proper service of process, DOE must answer or otherwise respond to the complaint within 35 days following issuance of the summons.<sup>2</sup> The court must generally issue a scheduling order within 90 days following service of the complaint.<sup>3</sup> And the parties must convene a discovery conference, exchange the material described in Rule 26(a)(1)(A) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, and file a discovery plan within 21 days prior to the initial scheduling conference or the deadline for issuing a scheduling order.<sup>4</sup>

These deadlines do not allow sufficient time for DOE to provide DOJ with the debtor/plaintiff's Student Loan history and account details, for transmittal of that information and the Attestation to the debtor, for the debtor to gather the necessary documentation to complete the Attestation, for the DOJ and DOE to analyze the debtor's Attestation and corroborating documentation, and for DOJ to make its recommendation to the court, all as required by the Guidance.

The court believes that allowing time for the parties to comply with the Guidance will save the parties' and the court's resources, and will make management of adversary proceedings under 11 U.S.C. § 523(a)(8) efficient and fair. Accordingly, the court has promulgated and adopted these Guidelines, which apply to adversary proceedings in which DOE is a defendant and to which the Guidance applies.

After the Debtor/Plaintiff files their complaint and serves DOE with process in compliance with Rule 7004(e) of the Federal Rules of Bankruptcy Procedure, the parties shall

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<sup>1</sup> See Fed. R. Bankr. P. 7004(e)

<sup>2</sup> Fed. R. Bankr. P. 7012(a)

<sup>3</sup> Fed R. Bankr. P. 7016 and Fed R. Civ. P. 16(b)(2)

<sup>4</sup> See Fed. R. Civ. P. 16(b), 26(a)(1)(A), 26(a)(1)(C), 26(f)(1), and 26(f)(2); and Fed. R. Bankr. P. 7016 and 7026

file a Stipulation that conforms to that attached here as **Exhibit A**. This Stipulation sets forth the parties' agreement to, and requests the court's approval of, the following:

- (1) Extension of the deadline by which DOE must answer or otherwise respond to the Debtor/Plaintiff's complaint by 120 days;
- (2) Continuance of the initial scheduling conference to a date that is no sooner than 60 days after DOE's extended responsive pleading deadline;
- (3) Calculation of the deadlines set forth in Rules 26(a)(1)(C) (exchange of initial disclosures), 26(f)(1) (conduct discovery conference), and 26(f)(2) (filing discovery plan), which apply to sections under 11 U.S.C. § 523(a)(8) pursuant to Rule 7026 of the Federal Rules of Bankruptcy Procedure, from the date of the continued scheduling conference; and
- (4) Good cause for delay in issuing a scheduling order after the deadline set forth in Rule 16(b)(2) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, which applies to adversary proceedings pursuant to Rule 7016 of the Federal Rules of Bankruptcy Procedure.

When the parties file the Stipulation, they also shall file a proposed order approving the Stipulation. Such order shall conform to the example attached here as **Exhibit B**.

If the parties reach agreement that the Student Loans should be dischargeable in whole or in part, they shall file a proposed Stipulated Judgment for review and entry by the court.

If the parties are unable to agree to a Stipulated Judgment, then the adversary proceeding will proceed in accordance without the Stipulation.

**EXHIBIT A**

**UNITED STATES BANKRUPTCY COURT  
DISTRICT OF VERMONT**

**In re:**

**[Insert Debtor's Name]**

**Debtor.**

**Chapter \_\_\_\_**

**Case # \_\_\_\_\_**

**[Insert Plaintiff's Name],**

**Plaintiff,**

**v.**

**[Insert Defendant's Name],**

**Defendant.**

**Adversary Proceeding**

**Case # \_\_\_\_\_**

**STIPULATION TO EXTEND DEADLINES**

Debtor/Plaintiff \_\_\_\_\_ commenced this proceeding on \_\_\_\_\_, 20\_\_\_. Plaintiff seeks a judgment declaring student loans owed to the United States Department of Education ("DOE") dischargeable under 11 U.S.C. §523(a)(8). On November 17, 2022, the United States Department of Justice ("DOJ"), in coordination with DOE, promulgated guidance with respect to proceedings brought pursuant to 11 U.S.C. §523(a)(8) (the "Guidance").

To accommodate the Guidance and the processes contemplated thereby, the parties hereby stipulate and agree as follows:

1. The Guidance applies to this adversary proceeding;
2. This action constitutes one in which this court may enter final orders and judgment, and the parties consent to this court's exercise of jurisdiction and entry of final orders or judgment;
3. The deadline by which DOE must answer or otherwise respond to Plaintiff's complaint is hereby extended by 120 days to \_\_\_\_\_, 20\_\_;
4. The scheduling conference set pursuant to the court's order of \_\_\_\_\_, 20\_\_ (Doc. # \_\_) is hereby continued to \_\_\_\_\_, 20\_\_ at \_\_\_\_:\_\_ am/pm [insert available date and time that is no sooner than 60 days after DOE's extended responsive pleading

deadline, then delete this bracketed text];

5. The parties shall calculate the deadlines set forth in Civil Rules<sup>1</sup> 26(a)(1)(c) (exchange initial disclosures), 26(f)(1) (conduct discovery conference), and 26(f)(2) (file discovery plan), which apply in this proceeding pursuant to Bankruptcy Rule 7026, from the date of the continued scheduling conference; and

6. The need to afford the parties time to comply with the Guidance constitutes good cause for delaying the issuance of a scheduling order beyond the deadline set forth in Civil Rule 16(b)(2), which applies in this proceeding pursuant to Bankruptcy Rule 7016.

The parties respectfully request that the foregoing stipulation be approved and made an order of this court.

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[Insert Name of Attorney for DOE]

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[Insert Name of Debtor's Counsel]

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all citations to a “Bankruptcy Rule” shall refer to one of the Federal Rules of Bankruptcy Procedure and all citations to a “Civil Rule” shall refer to one of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure.

**EXHIBIT B**

**UNITED STATES BANKRUPTCY COURT  
DISTRICT OF VERMONT**

\_\_\_\_\_

**In re:**

**[Insert Debtor's Name]  
Debtor.**

**Chapter \_\_\_\_  
Case # \_\_\_\_\_**

\_\_\_\_\_

**[Insert Plaintiff's Name],  
Plaintiff,**

**Adversary Proceeding  
Case # \_\_\_\_\_**

v.

**[Insert Defendant's Name],  
Defendant.**

\_\_\_\_\_

**ORDER APPROVING STIPULATION TO EXTEND DEADLINES**

This proceeding comes before the court on a Stipulation filed by Plaintiff/Debtor \_\_\_\_\_ and Defendant United States Department of Education ("DOE") (Doc. # \_\_\_\_). The court has analyzed the Stipulation, finds it well-taken, and **ORDERS** as follows:

1. The Stipulation is hereby **APPROVED**;
2. DOE shall answer or otherwise respond to this complaint no later than \_\_\_\_\_, 20\_\_\_\_;
3. The initial scheduling conference is hereby **CONTINUED** to \_\_\_\_\_, 20\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_:\_\_\_\_ am/pm;
4. The parties shall calculate the deadlines set forth in Rules 26(a)(1)(C), 26(f)(1), and 26(f)(2) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, which apply in this proceeding pursuant to Rule 7026 of the Federal Rules of Bankruptcy Procedure, from the date of the continued scheduling conference; and
5. Good cause justifies delay of the issuance of a scheduling order within the time set forth in Rule 16(b)(2) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, which applies in this action pursuant to Rule 7016 of the Federal Rules of Bankruptcy Procedure.

\_\_\_\_\_, 20\_\_\_\_  
Burlington, Vermont

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Hon. Heather Z. Cooper  
United States Bankruptcy Judge