§ 215. Penalties and civil action; prohibited retaliation. 1. (a) No employer or his or her agent, or the officer or agent of any corporation, partnership, or limited liability company, or any other person, shall discharge, threaten, penalize, or in any other manner discriminate or retaliate against any employee (i) because such employee has made a complaint to his or her employer, or to the commissioner or his or her authorized representative, or to the attorney general or any other person, that the employer has engaged in conduct that the employee, reasonably and in good faith, believes violates any provision of this chapter, or any order issued by the commissioner (ii) because such employer or person believes that such employee has made a complaint to his or her employer, or to the commissioner or his or her authorized representative, or to the attorney general, or to any other person that the employer has violated any provision of this chapter, or any order issued by the commissioner (iii) because such employee has caused to be instituted or is about to institute a proceeding under or related to this chapter, or (iv) because such employee has provided information to the commissioner or his or her authorized representative or the attorney general, or (v) because such employee has testified or is about to testify in an investigation or proceeding under this chapter, or (vi) because such employee has otherwise exercised rights protected under this chapter, or (vii) because the employer has received an adverse determination from the commissioner involving the employee, or (viii) because such employee has used any legally protected absence pursuant to federal, local, or state law.

An employee complaint or other communication need not make explicit reference to any section or provision of this chapter to trigger the protections of this section.

As used in this section, to threaten, penalize, or in any other manner discriminate or retaliate against any employee includes; threatening to contact or contacting United States immigration authorities or otherwise reporting or threatening to report an employee's suspected citizenship or immigration status or the suspected citizenship or immigration status of an employee's family or household member, as defined in subdivision two of section four hundred fifty-nine-a of the social services law, to

a federal, state or local agency; or assessing any demerit, occurrence, any other point, or deductions from an allotted bank of time, which subjects or could subject an employee to disciplinary action, which may include but not be limited to failure to receive a promotion or loss of pay.

(b) If after investigation the commissioner finds that an employer or person has violated any provision of this section, the commissioner may, by an order which shall describe particularly the nature of the violation, assess the employer or person a civil penalty of not less than one thousand nor more than ten thousand dollars provided, however, that if the commissioner finds that the employer has violated the provisions of this section in the preceding six years, he or she may assess a civil penalty of not less than one thousand nor more than twenty thousand dollars. The commissioner may also order all appropriate relief including enjoining the conduct of any person or employer; ordering payment of liquidated damages to the employee by the person or entity in violation; and, where the person or entity in violation is an employer ordering rehiring or reinstatement of the employee to his or her former position or an equivalent position, and an award of lost compensation or an award of front pay in lieu of reinstatement and an award of lost compensation. Liquidated damages shall be calculated as an amount not more than twenty thousand dollars. The commissioner may assess liquidated damages on behalf of every employee aggrieved under this section, in addition to any other remedies permitted by this section.

(c) This section shall not apply to employees of the state or any municipal subdivisions or departments thereof.

2. (a) An employee may bring a civil action in a court of competent jurisdiction against any employer or persons alleged to have violated the provisions of this section. The court shall have jurisdiction to restrain violations of this section, within two years after such violation, regardless of the dates of employment of the employee, and to order all appropriate relief, including enjoining the conduct of any person or employer; ordering payment of liquidated damages, costs and reasonable attorneys' fees to the employee by the person or entity in violation; and, where the person or entity in violation is an employer,

ordering rehiring or reinstatement of the employee to his or her former position with restoration of seniority or an award of front pay in lieu of reinstatement, and an award of lost compensation and damages, costs and reasonable attorneys' fees. Liquidated damages shall be calculated as an amount not more than twenty thousand dollars. The court shall award liquidated damages to every employee aggrieved under this section, in addition to any other remedies permitted by this section. The statute of limitations shall be tolled from the date an employee files a complaint with the commissioner or the commissioner commences an investigation, whichever is earlier, until an order to comply issued by the commissioner becomes final, or where the commissioner does not issue an order, until the date on which the commissioner notifies the complainant that the investigation has concluded. Investigation by the commissioner shall not be a prerequisite to nor a bar against a person bringing a civil action under this section.

(b) At or before the commencement of any action under this section, notice thereof shall be served upon the attorney general by the employee.

3. Any employer or his or her agent, or the officer or agent of any corporation, partnership, or limited liability company, or any other person who violates subdivision one of this section shall be guilty of a class B misdemeanor.