

Illinois ARDC Files Action Against Copyright Troll

One of the infamous copyright troll attorneys who sent thousands of shakedown letters to persons who allegedly illegally downloaded porn videos now faces an action brought by the Illinois Attorney Registration and Disciplinary Commission (ARDC).

John L. Steele, who operated various law firms—including Prenda Law with Paul Duffy Steele Hansmeier and The Anti-Piracy Group—has been charged with eight counts of fraud, misuse of the court system, and dishonesty, according to the 147-paragraph amended complaint filed with the ARDC hearing board. The complaint stopped short of recommending what discipline should be imposed.

Steele, Duffy, Prenda Law, Steele Hansmeier, and The Anti-Piracy Group filed 118 copyright infringement actions in various federal courts against 15,878 John Doe defendants, the complaint states. None of the John Doe defendants were served with service of process. Instead, Duffy, who died in August, 2015, and Steele sent letters and conducted phone calls attempting to exact monetary settlements related to the allegations that the defendants had illegally downloaded pornography. However, Steele “had not taken steps to determine who had ‘illegally’ downloaded the copyrighted content, and did not have a reasonable basis to believe that the recipient of the letter was an actual ‘infringer,’” the complaint states.

Some of the copyright “owners” were companies in which Steele and Duffy had ownership interests, but they hid that fact from the courts, stating instead that the principal of the companies was a person who was the caretaker of Steele’s vacation home.

The complaint requests various findings, including that Steele engaged in dishonesty, fraud, and deceit, filed lawsuits without supporting facts, made frivolous discovery requests, engaged in conduct prejudicial to the administration of justice, and disobeyed obligations to the court.

In one case as a result of Steele’s and Duffy’s conduct, U.S. District Court Judge Otis Wright in 2013 requested that the lawyers be referred to their respective states for disciplinary action. See our [earlier story](#).

In the Matter of John Lawrence Steele, Illinois Attorney Registration and Disciplinary Commission No. 2015PR00068, filed August 20, 2015.

Balough Law Offices, LLC, is a Chicago-based law firm which focuses on cyberspace, business, and intellectual property law. Our homepage is balough.com.