

## PRELIMINARY REPORT OF TEMPORARY RECEIVER

I.

## Introduction

On July 7, 2009, this Court entered a Temporary Restraining Order ("TRO") appointing me as Temporary Receiver of US Foreclosure Relief Corp., and three individuals (George Escalante, Cesar Lopez, and Adrian Pomery) variously doing business as US Foreclosure Relief, Inc., Lighthouse Services, California Foreclosure Specialists, H.E. Service Company, H.E. Servicing, Inc., Pomery & Associates, and Homeowners Legal Assistance.

One of my primary mandates in the TRO is to determine whether the business can be operated lawfully as a going concern. I respectfully submit this Preliminary Report to advise the Court of my initial actions and preliminary observations. In the short time since my appointment, I, together with attorneys and accountants, have located and reviewed documents, traced financial transactions, and interviewed the principals and key employees. We have also had a number of conversations with officials at the State Bar of California, the California Department of Real Estate ("DRE"), and an expert in the field of loan modification. I can now provide the following snapshot of the structure of the business, its operation, and the flow of monies.

Given the continuing risk to consumers, this matter is time sensitive. As such, I feel it is important to share with the Court my bottom line conclusions to date: Even if most of the deceptive sales practices could be cured, this is not a lawful advance fee loan modification business. It is not operated and managed by a lawyer or a properly licensed DRE broker. It is a phone sales operation selling unlicensed loan modification services with more than 80% of its clients residing outside of California. The business has processed loan modification applications, but on applications taken since November 2008, only 11% have resulted in closed modifications. The relationship with two different lawyers was nominal at best

and served primarily as a cover to dignify the business and invoke the attorney exception to advance fee prohibitions. It is this advance fee component of the business which is fatal to its ability to be a going concern.

П.

## **Receivership Activities**

#### A. Facilities

At approximately 9:30 a.m. on the morning of July 9, 2009, I took possession of the offices of H.E. Servicing, Inc. ("HE") at 2125 Katella Avenue, Suite 330 in Anaheim and the offices of Pomery & Associates ("Pomery") at 2020 Chapman Avenue, Suite 220 in Orange, CA.

I also inspected the offices at 1010 West Chapman, Suite 200 in Orange, a previous location for U. S. Foreclosure Relief Corp ("USFR"), and confirmed that those offices had been vacated.

In taking possession of these offices, I coordinated our efforts with the Orange County District Attorney's office, local Anaheim police, and investigators from the State Bar of California. The District Attorney's office also executed search warrants on both offices.

After taking control of the offices, I arranged for the external locks to be changed. Since then, only my agents have had unsupervised access to the offices.

The Pomery office is a modest 500 square foot space for one attorney - Mr. Pomery - and a receptionist. Mr. Pomery was not present. No loan modification files, indeed no files of any kind, were located.

HE, on the other hand, was a bustling enterprise with nearly 60 employees at work. HE leases 11,285 square feet in an office building across from Anaheim Stadium. The actual lease for this space is between the building owner and "Sonia Mendoza [Escalante's girlfriend or wife] individually and doing business as Tri-Star Funding". The lease was entered into in November 2008 for a two year term at \$28,212 per month. Monthly rent is paid directly from HE to the landlord.

The office space is well-equipped, but not extravagant, with specific areas designated for sales, operations, and finance. All employees cooperated, completed a brief questionnaire and were excused for the day. None of the principals were present, but all were contacted and appeared later in the day.

#### В. **Bank Accounts**

Immediately after receiving the TRO, the FTC served various banks in order to freeze assets. The following chart summarizes the accounts we are now aware of, including those that are frozen.

	BANK	ACCOUNT NAME	BALANCE IN ACCOUNT AS OF 7/13/08
1	BOA*	Adrian Pomery & Associates	\$30,000.00 (estimate)
2	Paypal*	US Foreclosure Relief	\$600,000.00 (estimate)
3	WaMu	HOLA Trust	\$131,134.50
4	WF*	Sonia Mendoz dba H.E. Service Company	\$5,591.27
5	WF	US Foreclosure Relief Corporation	(\$6.00)
6	WF	US Foreclosure Relief Corp. DBA Lighthouse Service	closed
7	WF	US Foreclosure Relief Corp.	closed
8	WF	US Foreclosure Relief Corp.	closed
9	WF	H.E. Servicing, Inc.	
10	WF	H.E. Servicing, Inc.	<del></del>
11	WF*	H.E. Servicing, Inc.	\$105,282.03
12	WF	California Foreclosure Specialists	\$37.87
13	WaMu	Citadel Legal – Operating Checking	\$500.00
14	WaMu	Citadel Legal – Trust Account	
		TOTAL:	\$872,540

<sup>\*</sup> indicates that the amount is frozen

3

sets.

4 5

6 7

8

9 10

11 12

13

1415

16 17

18

19 20

2122

23

25

24

2627

28

Other than the money in these accounts, there do not appear to be any other liquid assets.

## C Interviews

We have conducted multiple interviews. These include interviews of Messrs. Escalante, Lopez, Pomery, and Moreno and members of the sales, operations, and finance teams.

## D. <u>Documents/Information/Electronic Data</u>

Upon taking possession, we confirmed that all hard copy documents were secure and we retained a forensic computer firm to make images of the servers and 13 laptop computers on site. We have done spot reviews of a number of other laptop computers, but have refrained from imaging those computers up until this point because of the cost involved. I believe that we have control of all available electronic data relating to Defendants' operation. We are reviewing this information in order to reconstruct the operational and financial picture.

## E. Forensic Accountants

We have retained the firm of Riel & Associates ("Riel") to reconstruct the financial activity of Defendants. To date, Riel has reviewed all available records and prepared multiple reports.

## F. Compliance With TRO

Once we secured the premises and completed a basic review of the business, I took immediate steps to insure compliance with the TRO as follows:

- 1. Our overriding goal was to take all steps needed to achieve compliance, while also trying to protect the consumer to the extent possible.
- 2. We have suspended all sales activities "in-take" by excusing all sales personnel who previously handled approximately 500 incoming calls per day in staggered shifts from 5:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. We

5

6

7

8

9

1011

12

1314

16

15

17

18

19

2021

22

23

2425

2627

28

placed a voicemail message on the sales line alerting consumers to the suspension and directed them to call their lender directly or contact Hope Now, a non-profit loan modification service working with the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

- 3. We pulled all existing commitments for outbound marketing via radio and TV advertising.
- 4. We suspended modification processing, except as to files with immediate foreclosures sale dates, while we develop a detailed go forward strategy to be ready by Monday, July 20.
- 5. We placed a "Notice to Consumers" on Defendants' operative websites which reported the appointment of a Receiver and directed consumers to their lender or Hope Now.

## G. Cooperation of Defendants

All Defendants have generally been cooperative. They have met with us as requested, answered all questions, and provided access to the necessary records. In particular, Mr. Pomery has been forthright and appeared legitimately distressed for the fate of loan modifications that are in process.

To date, no Defendant has delivered the Financial Statements required by Paragraph VII of the TRO.

#### III.

## **Summary of Business Operations**

At the outset, it is a challenge to precisely categorize this business. It is not a law practice. It is not a licensed mortgage or real estate company. Rather, I see this business as a high–pressure, cash–up–front telephone sales business targeting distressed homeowners. It appears that some homeowners may have been helped, but the overriding goal of the business was not to help homeowners, but to make money.

#### A. Structure

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

26

27

28

The current structure of the business evolved from previous businesses of Defendant George Escalante. After contact from the Orange County District Attorney in October, 2008, Escalante began the process of dissolving USFR (and its various dbas). Shortly afterwards, however, he placed an advertisement on Craigslist for an attorney. That search led to Defendant Adrian Pomery, a relatively recent law school graduate, who formed Pomery & Associates as the nominal law firm linked to the business. The servicing arm adopted a new dba – HE Servicing Company. Consumers paid their \$2,500 fee to Pomery who remitted \$2,375 to HE and kept \$125. Pomery did visit the HE office – twice a day in general - and was involved in communication with at least some consumers. But, he had no employees involved in the business.

In April, 2009, Escalante set out to find a new attorney when Pomery expressed a desire to withdraw from the business as he saw it as high risk. Escalante ran another Craigslist ad and this time found Brandon Moreno, Stanford Law class of 2004, and they together came up with a new name – Homeowners Legal Assistance ("HOLA," a dba of Cresidis Legal, Moreno's Professional Corporation) and Escalante formed a new service entity – H.E. Servicing, Inc. Moreno cut a better deal than Pomery – under his arrangement, he retained \$250 for each file. As with Pomery, all payments were made to HOLA and placed in the Cresidis Trust Account; Moreno then disbursed \$2,250 to HE. Credit card payments were processed through Escalante's merchant account and from there disbursed to the lawyer's trust accounts. At the time of my appointment, Moreno and Escalante had agreed to increase the consumer fee to \$2,950, prohibit any further refunds, and increase the Moreno/HOLA share to \$300 per client.

As best we can tell, Moreno was an infrequent visitor to the office. Moreno had no employees on site at the Katella operation. The Negotiations Manager – Suki Arcebido – reported to us that she had only seen Moreno once. To a person, the other seven negotiators working with us this week have reported that they have had no contact with Mr. Moreno, and some cannot recall actually ever having seen him.

Despite Defendants' limited efforts to create the illusion, this was not a law firm owned or operated by Pomery or Moreno/HOLA. It was Escalante's business. He paid the rent, hired the employees, outfitted the offices, ran the finances, and ultimately controlled the operations.

Attached as Exhibits 1 is a Timeline of the evolution from USFR to Pomery to HOLA and as Exhibit 2 is a summary of the HE corporate structure.

## B. Marketing

Marketing has been orchestrated and paid by HE, but put out in the name of HOLA or its predecessor Pomery. As of July 9, 2009, the weekly budget was \$70,000 for radio (95%) and TV (5%) advertising in 100 different media markets. All these ads directed consumers to the toll free lines at the HE office in Anaheim. At the time we entered the offices, Escalante was about to increase that budget to \$80,000–\$100,000 a week with the expectation of new business totaling at least \$270,000 a week.

The sales personnel in Anaheim did some outbound phone selling based on "paper leads" acquired from various lead vendors. But, most sales counselors' time was devoted to responding to inbound calls.

There is some evidence that outbound phone sales were handled through third party telemarketing vendors, but no such vendor appears to be retained at this time.

These marketing efforts were orchestrated and closely monitored for call fulfillment by a media buyer based in Texas.

The HOLA and Pomery websites were also a source of in-bound sales activity either through phone or email.

## C. Sales

The Sales Department is essentially a well-appointed telephone boiler room with phone cubicles for 44 sales people – "counselors" – and separate offices or stations for 3 on–site managers. At my appointment, 31 counselors were on staff, working staggered shifts covering 5:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. In the last few weeks, HE has been aggressively recruiting additional sales people.

Counselors were paid only for completed sales. With some variations based on seniority, the typical commission was \$450 for a fully paid sale – i.e., \$2,500 – with an extra \$25 if the consumer paid by debit card or wire transfer. If the consumer could only handle a payment plan (minimum \$1,000 down), the sales person received only a percentage (10–15%) of the amount actually paid with no commission on the later payments. The incentives were clear – sell and get paid in full, preferably by debit card or wire.

There is evidence of a "Customer Service Black Book" and a "Sales Black Book" which collected memos and directives about the proper things to say and proper procedures. But, my review to date leaves no question that this was a sales company with sales personnel incentivized to sell. In a cursory search, we found multiple examples of zealous sales techniques which, by any standard, crossed the line into express consumer deception. For example:

- Sales Manager Billy Burke provided the sales team a Point/Counterpoint for clients reacting to a negative Better Business Bureau rating. Among his points:
  - o "We are attorney based";
  - o "10,000 confirmed and negotiated loan modifications" (versus the actual number of 311 for the period November 2008 to July 8, 2009);
  - o "90% success rate";
  - o "Nationwide Service and over 100 workers";

- Our lead attorney, Adrian Pomery, is a member of the California Bar";
- o "We are an attorney based firm ... have a success rate second to none ... have a real money back guarantee ... have closed over 10,000 loan modification over the last 36 months, with only two real complaints." (Exhibit 3).
- On the day before the Receiver arrived, the sales team was alerted to the new higher fee \$2,950 and the new No Refund Policy. They were encouraged to adopt a "no tell, no ask policy" about refunds. (Exhibit 4).
- Counselors were paid an extra commission of \$25 if they could persuade the client to pay by direct deposit or wire transfer. (Exhibit 5).
- Counselors were encouraged to stop being so nice remind the customers their problem will get even worse. (Exhibit 6).
- Counselors were provided with prepared reminders to explain why a "law firm" was permitted to charge advance fees under California Civil Code Section 2945 (Exhibit 7).
- Counselors were encouraged to refer loan modification clients to Defendant Cesar Lopez's new business H.E. Debt Relief and paid \$2.50 for every referral. (Exhibit 8).
- Counselors were at times instructed not to give out the attorney's number or contact him directly. (Exhibit 9).
- Refunds were recently capped at \$20,000 per week. (Exhibit 10).
- Counselors were told that with the new aggressive stance of the "new attorney [Moreno]," it was "open season" on signing people up. (Exhibit 11).
- Counselors were instructed to never mention any connection to

- USFR and to get rid of USFR files. (Exhibit 12).
- Counselors were reminded that the purpose of the business was to make money. (Exhibit 13).
- Counselors were encouraged to stay in the grey area. (Exhibit 14).
- One counselor kept notes at his desk which stated that Brandon Moreno was "the most aggressive attorney in the mortgage industry" and that "we go right to the top ... and bypass loss mitigation and customer service department." (Exhibit 15).
- Counselors were regularly motivated to sell so they could win a Rolex. (Exhibit 16).
- Counselors were told by the sales manager to forget about saying "We do not stop foreclosures" because "we are going to lose 75% + of our business. If they implement this verbiage in customer service ... excuse my language but WE'RE F.... [expletive deleted]." (Exhibit 17).

## D. Operations

HE was set up to process mortgage modification applications and did, in fact, successfully process some modifications. The office was adapted to move applications through six "Status" stages. The various application files are color-coded to identify which phase of the Escalante business they represented – USFR clients were assigned manila folders, Pomery clients blue folders, and HOLA clients green folders.

Based on the internal Pipeline Report, I can report that during the period November, 2008 through July 8, 2009, a total of 2,960 loan modification files were opened at HE (1957 Pomery and 1,007 HOLA) after the client paid at least the minimum \$1,000 on the \$2,500 fee. Of those 2,960, 311 (11%) have ended up as completed modifications. As of the date of this Report, 791 (27%) are under submission at the lender, 1,051 (36%) are in various stages of preparation for

submission. 406 (14%) clients have received refunds because they cancelled and/or their documents were never completed. 102 (4%) are awaiting payment on approved refunds. Attached as Exhibit 18 is a Summary of the Pipeline Report prepared by our forensic accountant, Riel and Associates.

We have seen strong evidence that HE purposely delayed refund payments and that Escalante had recently implemented a \$20,000 per week ceiling in refunds, regardless of the amount due to consumers. Consumers constantly had to badger HE to receive refunds and even then they were delayed weeks and weeks.

A total of *eight* staff Negotiators communicated directly with clients and lenders about mortgage details. Another six Negotiator assistants handled the processing of documents. Negotiators were paid by HE a base salary of \$500/week plus a commission of \$75 for each completed modification. None of these Negotiators have any employment arrangement with either Pomery or HOLA.

## E. Financial

Our preliminary review indicates that the various components of this business were profitable. Pomery (\$125 per file) and Moreno/HOLA (\$250 per file) had nominal related expenses and we, therefore, estimate their profit margins were very high.

For the period November 2008 through July 8, 2009, the complete enterprise had gross revenues of approximately \$6.2 million, all paid to the two lawyer trust accounts. Approximately \$620,000 was retained by the lawyers as their fee and the remainder distributed to HE. For the time period of January 1 through June 30, 2009, we have found a report prepared by an outside accountant for HE showing gross revenue of \$5.9 million, operating expenses of \$1.7 million, for net income of \$4.5 million. (Exhibit 19).

Our investigation is still too preliminary to confirm the extent which the principals also received significant withdrawals from the company.

Attached as Exhibit 20 is a Preliminary Inventory of HE's Office and Equipment Assets.

3

# IV.

4 5

# Paragraph XIV of the TRO tasks me to determine if this business can be operated lawfully and profitably. My conclusion is no.

Can This Business Be Operated Lawfully and Profitably?

7

6

## A. Lawfully

8

To become a lawful going concern, this business faces significant hurdles at two levels:

1011

12

13

14

15

16

1. <u>Misleading Consumers</u>. The over–promise, under–deliver phenomenon which is documented in the Plaintiffs' presentation to the court, and confirmed by our on-site experience, could, *in theory*, be corrected. The infrastructure is in place to operate a legitimate business. It would, however, take a paradigm shift in the sales culture of the business and the recruiting, training and supervision of the sales and operations staff. Such shifts would take time and reduce profitability, but would be possible. At a minimum, the whole commission structure tied to completed sales would have to be altered to remove incentives for over-selling.

17 18

19

2. <u>Structure.</u> Even if all deceptive trade practices could be removed, the basic business model has systemic flaws at two levels. Neither appears curable.

2021

22

23

a. <u>Up-Front Fees</u>. Defendants, like many loan modification entrepreneurs, have aligned themselves with a lawyer in order to piggy back the lawyer's exemption from prohibitions against advance fee arrangements for loan modifications. Such a model is fatally flawed as follows:

2425

fatally flawed as follows:

1. The consumer is deceived into believing he is hiring a lawyer

2627

28

or a law firm;

- 2. The lawyer is engaging in improper fee splitting, has formed a partnership with a non-lawyer, and is not using reasonable care in the handling of his "clients." Such practices are forbidden and subject the lawyer to sanctions.
- 3. Under certain circumstances, the DRE permits licensed brokers to accept advance fees for loan modifications, but the fees must be paid to a trust account and only 25% can be disbursed to the broker before completion of the modification. The services must also be delivered by the broker or licensed agents under his supervision.
- b. <u>Servicing Non–California Borrowers</u>. Nearly 80% of Defendants' loan modification applications have been from non–California residents. Such a practice may subject the attorney whose trust account serves as the enterprises' bank account to charges that he is engaged in the unauthorized practice of law in those states outside California. These Defendants have been introduced to this problem through Cease and Desist letters from the states of Ohio, North Carolina, Indiana, and Georgia. (Exhibit 21). Likewise, a DRE licensed broker or sales agent could not represent out-of-state borrowers without also complying with local state regulations.

## B. <u>Profitably</u>

If the business were run lawfully, profitability would be severely challenged as follows:

- 1. If sales personnel faithfully sold the service with absolutely no hyperbole, hype, or misinformation, we expect that alone would slow sales dramatically and would increase expenses for hiring, training, and supervision.
- 2. Advance payment would be severely restricted to situations where

an attorney and his employees or a DRE-licensed broker and his licensed sales agents were actually delivering the loan modification services. Under the DRE model, only 25% could truly be paid in Such limits on advance fees would itself kill the advance. opportunity to build a volume business as there would not be enough operating income to cover expenses. To operate on a payment upon completion system would require substantial capital to fund operations.

doing modifications outside The regulatory restrictions on 3. California (whether by California lawyers, California licensed brokers, or others) would cripple volume, if not end out-of-state business altogether.

In the end, it appears this business was built on two faulty assumptions -(i) that a nominal relationship with a lawyer is enough to get past the general prohibition against advance fees and (ii) that there are no regulatory obstacles to operating outside California. Neither assumption is accurate. To the contrary, state regulations abound that specifically target what this company is doing advance fee loan modification services.

Dated: July 15, 2009

/s/ Thomas W. McNamara Thomas W. McNamara, Court Appointed Temporary Receiver for US Foreclosure Relief Corp., et al

28

1	PROOF OF SERVICE				
2 3	FTC, et al. v. U.S. Foreclosure Relief Corp., et al. United States District Court - Central District of California, Southern Division Case Number: SACV-09-768 JVS (MLGX)				
4 5	I, Borany T. Reinbold, declare as follows:				
6	I am an employee of a member of the bar of this Court at whose direction				
	was made in the County of San Diego, State of California. I am over the age of 18				
7	and not a party to the within action; my business address is 401 West "A" Street,				
8	Suite 1150, San Diego, California 92101.				
9	On July 15, 2009, I served the foregoing document(s) described as:  • PRELIMINARY REPORT OF TEMPORARY RECEIVER				
10					
11	and				
12	• DECLARATION OF THOM	AS W. MCNAMARA IN			
13	CONNECTION WITH THE PR				
14	on interested parties in this action:				
15	Laura Fremont, Esq.	Counsel for Plaintiff Federal			
16	Sarah Schroeder, Esq.	Trade Commission			
17	Federal Trade Commission, Western Region 901 Market Street, Suite 570				
18	San Francisco, CA 94103				
19	Email: <u>LFREMONT@ftc.gov</u>				
20	SSCHROEDER@ftc.gov	Coursel for The Popula of the			
21	Benjamin G Diehl Daniel A Olivas	Counsel for The People of the State of California			
22	CAAG - Office of the Attorney General				
23	California Department of Justice 300 South Spring Street Suite 1702				
24	Los Angeles, CA 90013				
25	Email: benjamin.diehl@doj.ca.gov dan.olivas@doj.ca.gov				
26	dan.on vasayaoj.oa.gov				
27					
28					

Document 27

Case 8:09-cv-00768-JVS-MLG

Page 18 of 18

Filed 07/15/2009