

IN THE CIRCUIT COURT FOR THE
17TH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT IN AND FOR
BROWARD COUNTY, FLORIDA

P&S ASSOCIATES, GENERAL
PARTNERSHIP, a Florida limited liability
company, *et al.*,
Plaintiffs,

CASE NO: 12-034123 CACE (07)
JUDGE: JACK TUTER

vs.

MICHAEL D. SULLIVAN, *et al.*,
Defendants.

**ORDER ON PLAINTIFFS' RENEWED EXPEDITED MOTION TO COMPEL
DEFENDANTS FRANK AVELLINO AND MICHAEL BIENES TO PRODUCE
COMPUTERS FOR INSPECTION AND TO PRODUCE DOCUMENTS**

THIS CAUSE came before the court on Plaintiffs' Renewed Expedited Motion to Compel Defendants Frank Avellino and Michael Bienes to Produce Computers for Inspection and to Produce Documents. The court, having considered the motion and response, having heard argument of counsel, having reviewed the applicable law, and being otherwise duly advised in the premises, finds and decides as follows:

The record in the instant action reveals that on October 5, 2015, Plaintiffs filed their initial motion to compel defendants, Frank Avellino ("Avellino") and Michael Bienes ("Bienes") (collectively "Defendants"), to produce their personal computers for a forensic examination. The initial motion was filed as a result of deposition testimony that the Defendants routinely delete e-mail communications from their respective e-mail accounts. A hearing on Plaintiffs' initial motion to compel was held on October 26, 2015. Thereafter, on November 16, 2015, this Court entered an order granting in part, and deferring in part Plaintiffs' motion ("November 16, 2015 Order"). Specifically, Defendants were required to: (1) preserve their computers and all e-mails during the pendency of this action; (2) search all folders of their respective e-mail accounts; (3) produce to Plaintiffs a timeline stating the period of time for which e-mails exists in those folders; (4) produce

a privilege log, as necessary; and (5) produce any non-privileged e-mails responsive to Plaintiffs' requests for production. The court deferred ruling on Plaintiffs' request that Defendants surrender their physical personal computers for a forensic examination.

It appears that Defendants complied with this Court's November 16, 2015 Order, and produced documents to Plaintiffs that were located on their respective computers following a search by counsel. On November 20, 2015, Plaintiffs filed the instant renewed motion to compel Defendants Avellino and Bienes to produce their physical personal computers for a forensic examination. Defendants Avellino and Bienes thereafter provided Plaintiffs with amended reports identifying e-mail folders and documents that were not identified in the original reports. Plaintiffs claim that the reports provided by Defendants to Plaintiffs are insufficient, and therefore, a forensic examination of the Defendants' personal computers is necessary. On December 8, 2015, Defendant Avellino and Bienes filed separate responses to the instant renewed motion. Also on December 8, 2015, Defendant Avellino filed an errata sheet, correcting his September 9, 2015 deposition testimony. Specifically, Defendant Avellino asserts that his testimony that he routinely deletes *all* emails was based on a misunderstanding. Rather, Defendant Avellino claims that he routinely deletes *only* spam and vendor emails. On December 8, 2015, Defendants filed separate responses to Plaintiffs' renewed motion. A hearing on Plaintiffs' renewed motion to compel was held before the court on December 11, 2015.

Under Florida law, "[p]arties may obtain discovery regarding any matter, not privileged, that is relevant to the subject matter of the pending action" Fla. R. Civ. P. 1.280 (b) (1). Although Florida's rules governing discovery are "broad enough to encompass requests to examine a computer hard drive," such request should be authorized "only in limited and strictly controlled circumstances." *Menke v. Broward Cnty. School Bd.*, 916 So. 2d 8, 11 (Fla. 4th DCA 2005) (citation omitted). This is so because "unlimited access to anything on the computer would

constitute irreparable harm,” and possibly “expose confidential, privileged information to the opposing party.” *Id.* (citation omitted). As such, inspections of electronic devices may be appropriate if: “(1) there [is] evidence of destruction of evidence or thwarting of discovery; (2) the device likely contain[s] the requested information; and (3) no less intrusive means exist[] to obtain the requested information.” *Antico v. Sindt Trucking, Inc.*, 148 So. 3d 163, 166 (Fla. 1st DCA 2014) (emphasis added) (citations omitted).

In the instant action, in light of the searches performed by counsel for Defendants, the record indicates that the personal computers likely contain the requested information. However, the court determines that Plaintiffs have failed to make an adequate showing to support a forensic examination of Defendants’ personal computers. For instance, Plaintiffs have failed to provide evidence that Defendants destroyed evidence or otherwise thwarted discovery, especially in light of Defendant Avellino’s errata sheet filed on December 8, 2015. Additionally, the court determines that Plaintiffs have failed to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of the lesser intrusive methods employed by this Court’s November 16, 2015 Order. Therefore, Plaintiffs’ renewed motion to compel is denied.

Accordingly, it is hereby:

ORDERED that Plaintiffs’ Renewed Expedited Motion to Compel Defendants Frank Avellino and Michael Bienes to Produce Computers for Inspection and to Produce Documents is DENIED WITHOUT PREJUDICE.

DONE AND ORDERED in Chambers, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, this 8th day of January, 2016.



JACK TUTLER
CIRCUIT COURT JUDGE

Copies to:

Gary A. Woodfield, Esq., Haile Shaw & Pfaffenberger, P.A., 660 U.S. Highway One, Third Floor, North Palm Beach, FL 33408

Peter G. Herman, Esq., Tripp Scott, 110 SE 6th Street, 15th Floor, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301

Thomas M. Messana, Esq., Messana, P.A., 401 East Las Olas Blvd., Suite 1400, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301

Jonathan Etra, Esq., Broad and Cassel, One Biscayne Blvd., 21st Floor, 2 S. Biscayne Blvd., Miami, FL 33131

Leonard K. Samuels, Esq., Berger Singerman, LLP, 350 East Las Olas Blvd., Suite 1000, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301