BEFORE THE DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS & INDUSTRY LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

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IN THE MATTER OF:

Qualified Employee

License No. 47088,

FALCON CREDIT MANAGEMENT, LLC d/b/a DAMIAN FALCONE & COMPANY,

Covered Service Provider License No.

Associated Covered Service Provider

Respondents.

DAMIAN ROLAND FALCONE,

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MLD Case No. 2016-004

FINDINGS OF FACT, CONCLUSIONS OF LAW, AND ORDER

This is a contested case between Claimant, the Mortgage Lending Division (DML), and Respondents, Falcon Credit Management LLC d/b/a Damian Falcone & Company ("FCM") and Damian Roland Falcone ("Falcone") (collectively, "Respondents").

This matter was commenced on September 26, 2016, when DML issued a Notice of Intent to Issue and Enter Final Order Revoking Covered Provider License And Associated Covered Service Provider License, Requiring Payment of Restitution, Imposing Administrative Fine, And Assessing Administrative Costs, and Notice of Opportunity for Hearing. Respondents requested a hearing pursuant to NRS 645F.855. On March 8, 2017, MLD issued a Complaint. Also on March 8, 2017, DML referred the matter for hearing, and I was appointed.

The hearing took place June 5-7, 2017. Witnesses Diana Martinez, Jessica Monsour, Geoff Powers, Raymond Del Rosario, Marie Del Graziano, and Damian Roland Falcone testified under oath, and each was subject to direct and crossexamination. The parties stipulated to the admission of all documentary exhibits: DML's exhibits, MLD000001-000396, and Respondents' exhibits, FALCONE000001-000617. Prior to the commencement of the hearing, Respondents voluntarily surrendered their

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I. ISSUES

Did Respondents violate NAC 645F.475, NRS 645F.405, NAC 645F.835(3)(c), or NAC 645F.600(2)(a)?

covered service provider and associated covered service provider licenses.

II. FINDINGS OF FACT

Falcone is the owner of several businesses and the holder of several professional licenses. Among the businesses Falcone owns is FCM, which offers a variety of services, including debt management, bankruptcy counseling, and loan modification. FCM has held a license as an NRS Chapter 645F covered service provider since January 15, 2010.¹ Falcone has also possessed an NRS Chapter 645F associated covered service provider license since January 15, 2010.² Respondents' activities as NRS Chapter 645F licensed covered service providers are under the regulatory jurisdiction of DML.

Consent Order

On November 28, 2012, Respondents entered into a Voluntary Consent Order with DML.³ The terms of the Consent Order instructed Respondents to cease and desist claiming, demanding, charging, collecting, or receiving advance fees from a homeowner before the homeowner executes an agreement with its lender or servicer incorporating an offer of mortgage assistance.⁴ The Consent Order also ordered Respondents to pay restitution to the nine homeowners from whom they collected such advance fees; Respondents complied with the Consent Order.

In the 2014 Final Report of Examination issued by DML, Respondents were determined to be in violation of the prohibition on the collection of advance fees.⁵

¹ MLD000001.

² MLD000002.

³ MLD000384-394.

⁴ MLD000384-394.

⁵ FALCONE000169.

Annual Exam and 2016 Final Report

DML conducts annual examinations of NRS Chapter 645F licensees. At the conclusion of each annual exam, DML issues a final report containing its findings. In September 2015, Diana Martinez, DML Compliance Audit Investigator, began the annual examination of Respondents covering the period from January 1, 2014, through March 30, 2015. DML investigators reviewed seven client files out of the fifty-four client files that Respondents processed during that time period.⁶ DML issued a Final Report of Examination dated June 14, 2016 ("Final Report"), setting forth DML staff's findings of violations and exceptions identified during the examination. Respondents received a rating of "4" in the Final Report, with DML noting four primary violations for which Respondents were required to take immediate remedial action: failure to maintain complete and suitable records, collection of advanced fees, deceptive advertising, and violating an order of the Commissioner.8 Respondents' counsel authored a detailed letter in response to the Final Report, which contained proposed solutions to the four violations.9 DML did not alter its Final Report. DML ultimately commenced this action seeking revocation of Respondents' licenses and the payment of restitution, fines, and costs based on the four violations noted in the Final Report.

Respondents' Record-Keeping

Respondents created and maintained ledgers for each of their clients, recording the dates and purposes of payments made by the client and the last four digits of the bank account into which Respondents deposited the money. 10 Respondents also maintained internal accounting records, in the form of QuickBooks, which documented a wide variety of credits and debits—from client payments to mediation fees to web design to attorney fees. 11 The QuickBooks records for the bank account ending in 1221

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⁶ FALCONE000044.

⁷ FALCONE000042-51.

⁸ FALCONE000046-47.

⁹ FALCONE000001-4.

¹⁰ MLD000006-156.

¹¹ MLD000364-383.

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¹² FALCONE000231-234. ¹³ FALCONE000231.

¹⁴ FALCONE000231; MLD000244.

¹⁵ FALCONE000232; MLD000244.

¹⁶ MLD000037.

Respondents' Contracts With and Software Membership Sales To Clients

not related to NRS Chapter 645F licensed activities.

(the only QuickBooks records included in evidence) reveal that the account co-mingled

funds from a variety of sources and used those funds for a variety of purposes, many

Respondents created a Service Agreement that served as the contract between it and each of its clients. 12 The Service Agreement stated that the client requested "Loss" Mitigation, Financial, Credit and Debt Management services" from Respondents and agreed to pay the schedule of fees set forth in the Agreement. 13 Among the terms of the Agreement was a statement that Respondents would provide the client either a 4- or 6month "membership to FalconDox software for the purpose of managing personal credit and debt."14 For the software membership, the customer agreed to pay an amount ranging from \$1,000 to \$2,000 "upon the commencement of this agreement." The software membership was presented as part and parcel of Respondents' service package; it was not billed as optional. Once a client paid for the software membership, he or she was provided a link to sign in via email; the link expired if the client did not click on it within two days.

Falcone told Marie Del Graziano that the software was essentially a recordkeeping device. She was to upload all documents she received from her bank to the software, and the software would assess those documents for legal violations that could be used as leverage in Respondents' negotiations with her bank. Ms. Del Graziano did upload the communications she received from her bank, nearly 100 documents in total. Ms. Del Graziano paid Respondents \$6,000 for three 4-month subscriptions to the software. 16 Ms. Del Graziano had trouble accessing the software from her home but was able to access it from Respondents' office.

Falcone told Geoff Powers he could use the software to view the status of and

17 MLD000062.18 MLD000051.

details pertaining to his case. Mr. Powers never accessed the software, nor did he care to, believing it to be a tool used by Respondents. Mr. Powers paid Respondents \$2,000 for one 4-month subscription to the software.¹⁷

Falcone told Raymond Del Rosario the software was necessary for the loan modification he sought. Mr. Del Rosario did not attempt to access the software because he believed the software was simply a necessary tool for Respondents to obtain loss mitigation on his behalf. Mr. Del Rosario paid Respondents \$2,000 for one 4-month subscription to the software.¹⁸

None of the testifying witnesses understood the software to be an optional purchase; all understood it to be the cost of obtaining Respondents' services. Respondents did not tell any of the testifying witnesses the software was for their use in managing their personal credit and debt, nor did any of the testifying witnesses use the software for that purpose. All of the testifying witnesses paid money toward the software subscription before executing any agreement with their servicer or lender for mortgage assistance.

III. LEGAL ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

a. Respondents Failed to Maintain Complete and Suitable Records in Violation of NAC 645F.475.

DML charges Respondents with violating NAC 645F.475, which sets forth the record-keeping requirements by which all NRS Chapter 645F licensees must abide.

NAC 645F.475 Retention and maintenance of certain records; "complete and suitable records" interpreted. (NRS 645F.255, 645F.390)

1. Each licensee shall keep and maintain, at all times at each location where the licensee conducts business, complete and suitable records of all transactions by the licensee at that location. Each licensee shall also keep and maintain, at all times at each such location, all original books, papers and data, or copies thereof, clearly reflecting the financial condition of the business of the licensee and shall retain records of all of the activity of the licensee for a period of at least 4

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- years after the date of the last activity relating to the transaction.
- 2. As used in this section, "complete and suitable records" means a file that includes, but is not limited to, the following documents, if applicable to the type and purpose of the transaction:
- (a) All contracts entered into between the licensee and the homeowner;
- (b) Any additional contracts entered into between parties to the transaction;
- (c) All disclosures provided to the homeowner;
- (d) All authorizations signed by the homeowner;
- (e) All worksheets;
- (f) All mortgage statements and notices;
- (g) All related loan documentation for the loan subject to modification or other covered services;
- (h) All lender or servicer requested items, including, but not limited to, hardship letters, bank statements, W-2 forms, pay stubs, expense support or tax returns;
- (i) All correspondence between the lender or homeowner with the licensee, including, but not limited to, letters, messages sent via electronic mail, facsimiles and logs related to calls or other contacts or information;
- (j) All loan modification offers or agreements provided to, or received from, the lender or servicer;
- (k) Copies of all public, recorded documents, including, but not limited to, the notice of default and election to sell and the notice of sale;
- (I) Any other documentation used by the licensee in the normal course of business as it relates to a homeowner:
- (m) A copy of each item of advertising material that was published or distributed by or on behalf of the licensee in the format in which the material was published or distributed;
- (n) A copy of any written complaint against the licensee, together with all correspondence, notes, responses and other documentation related to the disposition of the complaint;
- (o) All checkbooks, check registers, bank statements, deposit slips, withdrawal slips, cancelled checks and other records that relate to the business of the licensee;
- (p) Copies of all federal tax withholding forms, reports of income for federal taxation and evidence of payments to all employees, independent contractors and other persons that worked for the licensee;
- (q) Copies of all documents evidencing a contractual relationship between the licensee and any third-party

- (r) Copies of all material correspondence related to the business of the licensee not covered in paragraph (i), including, but not limited to, electronic messages; and
- (s) Copies of all reports, audits, examinations, inspections, reviews, investigations or other similar activities relating to the business of the licensee performed by any third party, including, but not limited to, any regulatory or supervisory authority.

DML asserts that Respondents violated NAC 645F.475 by failing to separate the financial records for its licensed activities from financial records for its other myriad activities and this prevented DML's examiners from ascertaining Respondents' financial condition. Specifically, DML contends, "[T]he Licensee fails to maintain complete and suitable financial records related to all deposits, payments[,] and transfers listed on the general ledgers for all accounts utilized by the Licensee. These accounts are not properly identified and prevent [DML] from distinguishing transactions applicable to the Licensee from transactions applicable to other businesses of the Licensee."

The QuickBooks records for the bank account ending in 1221 reveal that the account was not restricted solely to debits and credits for NRS 645F-licensed activities; rather, Respondents used the 1221 account for activities including web design, accounting fees, attorney's fees, and credit card payments. The QuickBooks records for the bank account ending in 1221 did not clearly identify which deposits were associated with which clients. In certain instances, deposits recorded on the ledgers did not match the deposits recorded on the QuickBooks records. The co-mingled nature of the bank account ending in 1221 made it impossible for DML investigators to ensure the accuracy of Respondents' accounting and ascertain their true financial condition.

Respondents failed to maintain complete and suitable records in violation of NAC 645F.475. NAC 645F.835(3)(c) authorizes the imposition of an administrative fine of up

¹⁹ MLD000381.

²⁰ See, e.g., MLD000046 and MLD000370.

to \$10,000 for this violation. Respondents shall be subject to a \$5,000 fine for this violation because their failure to segregate their business accounts is egregious in light of Falcone's years of business experience; but, their voluntary surrender of their licenses ensures no further violations of this particular kind.

b. Respondents Collected Advance Fees in Violation of NRS 645F.405.

DML charges Respondents with violating NRS 645F.405 by charging and collecting a fee for the 4- or 6-month FalconDox software membership at the commencement of Respondents' relationship with clients. NRS 645F.405 prohibits the collection of advance fees from a client:

A person who performs any covered service for compensation, a foreclosure consultant and a loan modification consultant shall not claim, demand, charge, collect or receive any compensation before a homeowner has executed a written agreement with the lender or servicer incorporating the offer of mortgage assistance obtained from the lender or servicer by the person who performs any covered service for compensation, the foreclosure consultant or the loan modification consultant.

(bold emphasis added). There is no dispute that Respondents were performing covered services as defined by NRS 645F.310 for each of the 87 clients at issue²¹ and also that each client executed a Service Agreement and made payment toward the software membership prior to executing a written offer of mortgage assistance. Therefore, the legal question presented is whether Respondents' collection of payment for a software membership constituted an impermissible advance fee or a permissible sale of a product, as Respondents posit.

NRS 645F.405 was adopted by the Nevada Legislature in 2011, with the express purpose of bringing Nevada law in line with the Federal Trade Commission's Final Rule, codified by the Bureau of Consumer Financial Protection at 12 C.F.R. § 1015.5 (commonly referred to as the MARS Rule or Regulation O).²² Regulation O, adopted in

²¹ Respondents placed into evidence financial ledgers for 87 clients, all of whom paid money to Respondents for software memberships.

²² Minutes of Assembly Committee on Commerce and Labor, A.B. 308, 76th Sess., at 30 (NV 2011).

2010, followed a lengthy rulemaking process during which the FTC received abundant evidence of for-profit mortgage assistance relief service providers (MARS) committing consumer fraud by accepting thousands of dollars in advance of providing any service, and, in many cases, never providing any mortgage assistance relief services despite the collection of such monies.²³ Regulation O, therefore, prohibits the collection of advance fees by any MARS provider. NRS 645F.405 does the same, applying the prohibition to providers of covered services, foreclosure consultants, and loan modification consultants.

In adopting the Final Rule, which became Regulation O, the FTC expressly declined to prohibit the collection of advance fees for "products" in addition to "services," concluding,

The Commission declines to include products in the definition of MARS in the Final Rule. The record demonstrates that providers of services to help consumers modify their mortgages and avoid foreclosure often engage in unfair and deceptive practices; in contrast, neither the Commission's law enforcement experience nor the rulemaking record show that those who sell products for mortgage assistance relief are engaged in the same types of conduct.²⁴

However, a for-profit mortgage assistance relief provider may not simply evade application of Regulation O by characterizing an item as a product and collecting an advance fee for it.

In 2016, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) brought an enforcement action against an attorney for violation of, inter alia, Regulation O.²⁵ The defendant, Gordon, created two programs, or agreements, into which he would enter with clients: first, a program in which clients paid for preparation of certain legal "products" advertised to help them in their disputes with the lenders that owned their mortgages; and second, a "pro bono legal agreement" for the provision of free legal

 $^{^{\}rm 23}$ Mortgage Assistance Relief Services, 75 Fed. Reg. 75,091 (Dec. 1, 2010).

²⁴ *Id.* at 75102.

²⁵ CFPB v. Gordon, 819 F.3d 1179, 1184 (9th Cir. 2016).

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²⁸ *Id.* at 1194. 28

²⁷ *Id.*

³⁰ Id. at 1194-95. 31 FALCONE000232.

²⁶ *Id.* at 1185.

services including negotiating with lenders for loan modifications.²⁶ Clients were required to pay for the products to receive the "free" legal services.²⁷ Gordon contended that his actions were not in violation of Regulation O because he only charged fees for the legal products, while providing the loan modification services for free.²⁸

The Ninth Circuit rejected Defendant Gordon's defense wholesale. "This obvious attempt to evade the requirements of Regulation O fails."29

> It is undisputed that Gordon's "pro bono" services were in reality in exchange for consideration, because consumers were eligible for the "pro bono" modification services only if they signed up for and paid the fees for the legal products. Gordon suggests that this court is bound by the language in his contract, stating [that] his services were "pro bono." but nothing in the regulations suggest that this court must close its eyes to the facts and rely only on the contract itself to determine whether the services were actually "in exchange for consideration."30

Respondents' similarly obvious attempt to evade the requirements of NRS 645F.405 also fails. Clients were effectively required to purchase the software membership to obtain covered services from Respondents. Respondents' Service Agreement contained stock language incorporating the purchase of the software membership to each client. And, in direct contrast to the Service Agreement's language concerning other terms, such as financial and credit evaluation services, 31 the language concerning the software membership did not indicate that the purchase was optional. Further detracting from the credibility of the software membership as an actual product separate from the covered service is the fact that Respondents told each testifying witness the software membership served a different purpose, none matching the purpose stated on Respondents' Service Agreement. Finally, Respondents' practical use of the software, to document the legal violations committed by the bank or servicer for purposes of leverage during modification negotiations, falls squarely into the description of "forensic accounting" prohibited by Regulation O's ban on advance fees.³²

Respondents violated NRS 645F.405 by charging and collecting advance fees from clients under the guise of software memberships before the clients executed written agreements with the lender or servicer incorporating an offer of mortgage assistance. Pursuant to NAC 645F.835(2), Respondents shall issue restitution to each of the 87 clients for whom financial ledgers were included in evidence. NRS 645F.410, authorizes the imposition of an administrative fine of up to \$25,000 for this violation. Respondents shall be subject to an administrative fine in the amount of \$15,000 for this violation because, though it was in circumvention of the spirit and purpose of the prohibition on advance fees, Respondents evidenced multiple consultations with multiple attorneys who approved of the practice, which suggests Respondents practiced some due diligence in endeavoring to abide by the law.

c. Violation of an Order of the Commissioner

DML charges Respondents with violating NAC 645F.835(3)(c), which authorizes discipline against licensees for violating any order of the Commissioner.

- 3. For each violation committed by a person who engages in an activity for which licensure as a covered service provider, foreclosure consultant or loan modification consultant is required under this chapter and chapter 645F of NRS, without regard to whether the person is licensed under this chapter and chapter 645F of NRS, the Commissioner may impose upon the person an administrative fine of not more than \$10,000, and if the person holds a license as a covered service provider, foreclosure consultant or loan modification consultant, the Commissioner may suspend, revoke or place conditions upon the person's license, or may do both, if the person, whether or not acting as such:
- $[\ldots]$

(c) Does not conduct business in accordance with law or has violated any provision of this chapter or <u>chapter</u> <u>645F</u> of NRS or any order of the Commissioner;

(bold emphasis added). DML contends that Respondents violated the 2012 Consent

³² 75 Fed. Reg. at 75,100 n.110, 75,096.

Order by charging and collecting advance fees for software memberships.

As discussed *supra*, Respondents charged and collected advance fees in violation of NRS 645F.405. This conduct was also in violation of the 2012 Consent Order, which expressly prohibited Respondents from charging or collecting advance fees.

Respondents violated NAC 645F.835(3)(c) by charging and collecting advance fees in violation of an order of the Commissioner. NAC 645F.835(3) authorizes the imposition of an administrative fine of up to \$10,000 for this violation. Respondents shall be subject to a \$5,000 fine for this violation because although they did alter the Service Agreement following the 2012 Consent Order in an attempt to come into compliance, they received notice that they were still out of compliance as early as December 2013 and at the latest by August 2014, and they did not make any changes.

d. Deceptive Trade Practices

DML charges Respondents with violating NAC 645F.600(2), which requires licensees' advertisements to comply with the general provisions of NRS Chapter 598, the Chapter governing deceptive trade practices. DML contends that Respondents violated NRS 598.0915(5), (9), and (15) by failing to give certain clients access to the software for which they paid. NRS 598.0915 defines certain activities as deceptive trade practices, and the particular subsections at issue are set forth in full below:

A person engages in a "deceptive trade practice" if, in the course of his or her business or occupation, he or she:

- $[\ldots]$
- 5. Knowingly makes a false representation as to the characteristics, ingredients, uses, benefits, alterations or quantities of goods or services for sale or lease or a false representation as to the sponsorship, approval, status, affiliation or connection of a person therewith.
- [...]
- 9. Advertises goods or services with intent not to sell or lease them as advertised.
- [...]
- 15. Knowingly makes any other false representation in a transaction.

The credible evidence adduced at hearing did not establish that Respondents

failed or refused to provide clients access to the software. Rather, Ms. Del Graziano was able to access the software from Respondents' office, and neither Mr. Powers nor Mr. Del Rosario attempted to access it. While it could be argued that Respondents knowingly made a false representation as to the uses or benefits of the software by marketing them as a tool for credit and debt management, DML did not make that particular allegation in this charge.

Respondents did not violate NAC 645F.600(2) in the manner alleged.

IV. ORDER³³

IT IS ORDERED that:

Pursuant to NAC 645F.835(3)(c), Respondent FCM's Covered Service Provider license and Falcone's Associated Covered Service Provider license are revoked, effective immediately.

Pursuant to NAC 645F.835(3)(c), Respondents shall pay an administrative fine of \$5,000 for their violation of NAC 645F.475. Respondents shall pay this amount to DML in full within 90 days.

Pursuant to NAC 645F.835(2), Respondents shall pay restitution in the amount of \$276,635. This amount represents the economic losses suffered by the 87 clients at issue as a result of Respondents' violations of NRS and NAC Chapter 645F.³⁴ Respondents shall pay this amount in full within 120 days. DML shall be responsible for properly distributing the restitution monies to the 87 clients within a reasonable amount of time, not to exceed 12 months from the date of receipt of the monies. (cont.)

³³ This is a final decision issued in accordance with both NAC 645F.905 and NRS 233B.125.

³⁴ Pursuant to the Interim Order Pending Audit issued June 23, 2017, Respondents were ordered to conduct a full accounting of the accounts for the 87 clients at issue under the supervision of DML and submit their respective conclusions concerning the amount of restitution owed. However, upon the deadline set for submission, which also constituted the date of the close of the hearing, only DML submitted a fact-based accounting of monies owed. Respondents did not submit any information or communication whatsoever.

Pursuant to NRS 645F.410, Respondents shall pay an administrative fine in the amount of \$15,000 for their violation of NRS 645F.405. Respondents shall pay this amount in full within 90 days.

Pursuant to NAC 645F.835(3)(c), Respondents shall pay an administrative fine of \$5,000 for their violation of NAC 645F.835(3)(c). Respondents shall pay this amount in full within 90 days.

Pursuant to NAC 645F.440(3), Respondents shall pay DML's costs of investigation in the amount of \$10,920. Respondents shall pay this amount in full within 90 days.

Dated this 18th day of July, 2017.

/s/ Denise S. McKay
Denise S. McKay
Administrative Law Judge
State of Nevada

1 **CERTIFICATE OF MAILING** 2 I, Denise S. McKay, do hereby certify that I deposited in the U.S. mail, postage 3 prepaid, via First Class Mail and Certified Return Receipt Requested, a true and correct 4 copy of the foregoing FINDINGS OF FACT, CONCLUSIONS OF LAW, AND ORDER 5 to the following: 6 Michael Mushkin, Esq. Certified Mail: 7012 1010 0000 1182 3498 4475 S. Pecos Email: Michael@mushlaw.com 7 Las Vegas, NV 89121 Karen@mushlaw.com 8 9 Keith Kizer, Esq. Certified Mail: 7012 1010 0000 1182 3504 Rickisha Hightower-Singletary, Esq. Email: KKizer@ag.nv.gov Nevada Office of the Attorney General RSingletary@ag.nv.gov 555 E. Washington Ave., Ste. 3900 11 Las Vegas, NV 89101 12 13 Dated this 18th day of July, 2017. 14 15 /s/ Denise S. McKay 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27

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