

# Inside the Sean Combs Hotline: The Makings of a Mass Tort

From a low-slung building in Montana, employees process sex abuse complaints against the music mogul that have been drawn to them through advertising and a viral hotline.

Calls to a hotline dedicated to accusations against Sean Combs are among those answered by agents at Reciprocity Industries. Agents have processed complaints that have turned into dozens of lawsuits. Janie Osborne for The New York Times



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**By Julia Jacobs**

Julia Jacobs reported from Billings, Mont., and Houston.

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In a room full of cubicles, workers in headsets read from their computer screens, addressing callers who dialed a 1-800 number. They have a script.

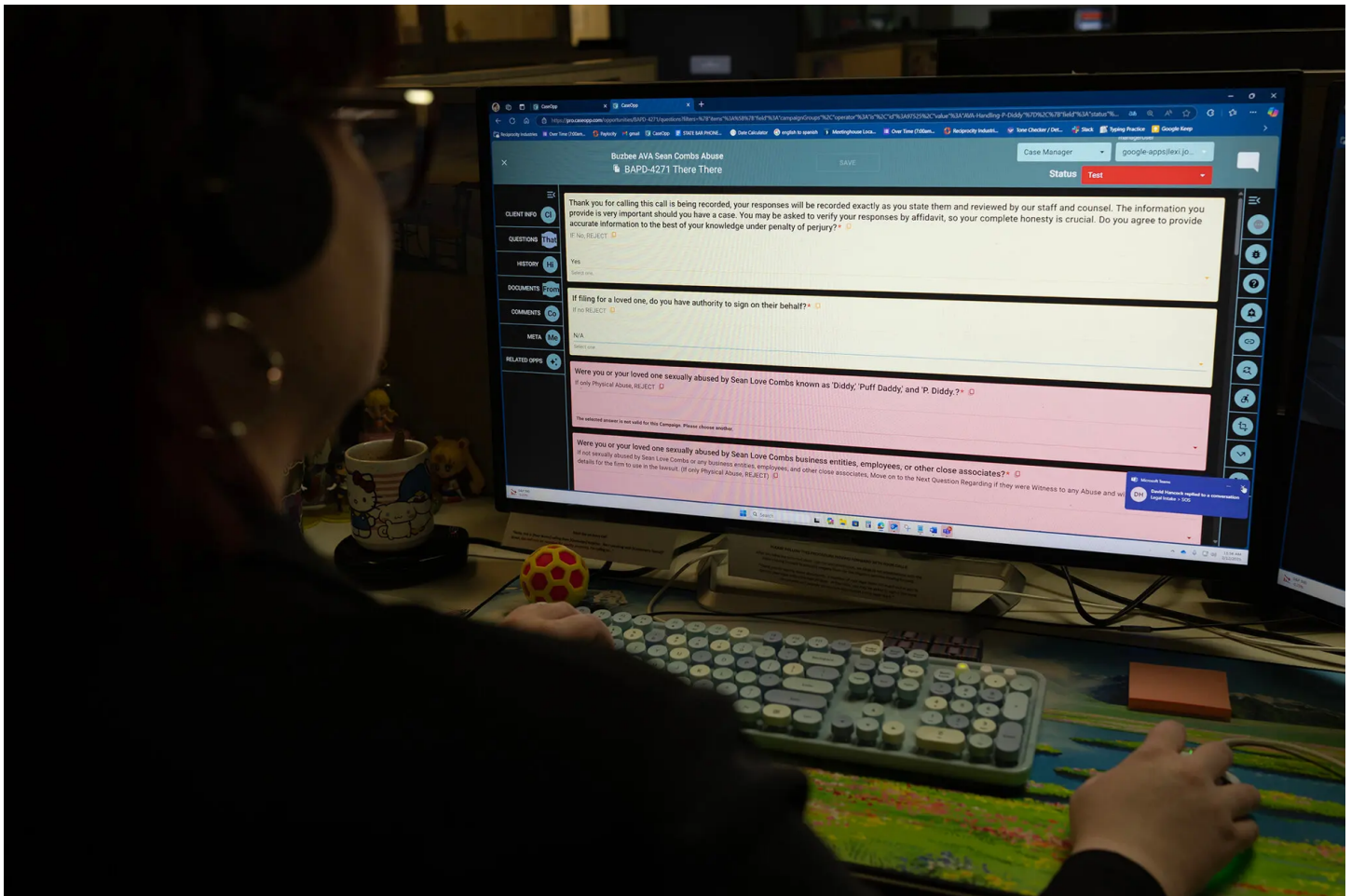
*“Were you or your loved one sexually abused by Sean ‘Love’ Combs, known as Diddy, Puff Daddy and P. Diddy?”*

*“If the abuse occurred at a party, please list the name of the party. What kind of party was it?”*

Their employer, Reciprocity Industries, is a legal services company located in a low-slung building in Billings, Mont., more than 2,000 miles from the Brooklyn jail where Mr. Combs awaits trial on federal racketeering and sex trafficking charges.

For years, the company has helped seed litigation by fielding complaints from people hurt by natural disasters, weedkillers or abusive clergy.

Now it's the central collection point for sexual assault allegations against Mr. Combs.



When a call related to Mr. Combs comes in, Reciprocity employees walk callers through a questionnaire that asks them to share the details of their complaints, including potential witnesses. Janie Osborne for The New York Times

Some complaints come in through the phone, others arrive online in response to ads promoted on Facebook and Instagram. (A news conference where a backdrop displayed the hotline in large red numbers made headlines last October.)

By the company's count, it has received some 26,000 contacts. It has deemed hundreds of complaints worthy of review. Already, the lead lawyer handling these cases, Tony Buzbee, a high-profile litigator from Houston, has filed nearly 40 lawsuits against Mr. Combs. He says more are coming.

In their court filings, Mr. Combs' accusers describe harrowing abuse. Fifteen plaintiffs say he raped them. Three say they were minors at the time. The accounts are often similar: a drink at a party, unusual wooziness and a sexual assault. All were initially filed anonymously.

"Plaintiff has experienced a significant impact on her personal life," lawyers said in a suit that accused Mr. Combs of assaulting a woman at a hotel in 2014.

The cases against Mr. Combs, who denies assaulting anyone, amount to what's called a mass tort, in which many people, often drawn by advertising, file claims against a common defendant.

This growing area of the law has long been divisive.

Lawyers for plaintiffs say the cases foster justice for those who have suffered at the hands of powerful people or institutions, such as former Boy Scouts who were sexually abused. But critics say mass torts, and the advertising often aligned with them, can draw frivolous claims that are haphazardly vetted, and that the sheer volume of cases can overwhelm both the court system and defense teams.



Andrew Van Arsdale's law firm posted ads on social media, including these A.I.-generated images, which drew a large response after Mr. Combs was indicted. AVA Law Group

It will be months, perhaps years, before settlements, dismissals or verdicts resolve whether Mr. Combs was a serial predator. But his lawyers are already challenging the ways in which many of the cases have been collected.

"We have seen a very high volume of very, very dubious cases," Mark Cuccaro, one of Mr. Combs's lawyers, told a judge at a hearing in January.

Mr. Combs denies sexually assaulting anyone and has pleaded not guilty to the criminal charges. His lawyers say the deluge of suits is not evidence of guilt, only proof that some people will seek to feed off financial settlements from a wealthy celebrity.

One case was withdrawn last month after the plaintiff, who said she had been raped by Mr. Combs and the rapper Jay-Z when she was 13, acknowledged having made mistakes in her account in an interview with NBC News. Her allegations have precipitated a contentious legal battle involving private investigators

and courts in multiple states.

In another Combs case, aspects of an anonymous man's lawsuit accusing Mr. Combs of rape — including the year — were amended after inconsistencies emerged in his interview with CNN.

Mr. Buzbee said those issues should not affect the other cases. "I've always said that each case lives or dies on its own merit," he said in an interview.

The increase in mass torts related to sexual abuse has been driven in part by laws established in the #MeToo era that extended new opportunities for plaintiffs who did not bring claims during the typical statute of limitations.

Reciprocity Industries, however, did not enter the Combs case because it was approached by people who said they had been abused, according to Andrew Van Arsdale, the lawyer in charge of the company. It entered, he said, after he noted that an explosive lawsuit had been filed by a former girlfriend of Mr. Combs and that the music mogul had settled it the next day.

"Predators don't just do it to one person," Mr. Van Arsdale said in an interview, "they do it to many, many people."

Within days, he said, his firm had taken out its first social media ad asking people about their interactions with Mr. Combs.

## The Rise of Mass Torts





Mr. Van Arsdale founded Reciprocity Industries as a legal advertising firm. Over the past several years, it has grown into a legal call and services center with about 70 intake agents answering phones. Janie Osborne for The New York Times

The legal landscape changed dramatically in 1977, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the prohibition against lawyer advertising violated the First Amendment. Soon lawyers' faces and testimonials were popping up in newspapers and on television.

Rules developed by courts and bar associations restrict lawyers, generally, from calling people injured in, say, a car crash to ask if they can represent them. But advertising a lawyer's services in a public forum and, in some cases, tailoring the messaging to a particular group of potential plaintiffs is allowed. Rules prohibit false or misleading ads.

Disciplinary action for infractions is uncommon, experts say, but court disciplinary bodies do review ads in response to complaints.

Advocates for mass-tort reform, often lawyers who represent companies facing litigation, have sought more regulations on the content of ads and the role of third-party investors who help finance some claims with huge numbers of plaintiffs.

Spending on mass-tort television advertising has averaged about \$190 million per year over the past decade, according to X Ante, a data analysis company. But social media has become the new frontier.

“It’s so much easier and faster to reach that many more people,” said Karen Barth Menzies, a lawyer who has been working on mass-tort cases since the 1990s.

Unlike class-action lawsuits, in which a small number of plaintiffs represent a larger group of people, often with largely identical complaints, mass torts are filed as many individual lawsuits that typically feature similar, but factually distinct claims against the same defendant.

Reciprocity, which Mr. Van Arsdale operates with a friend from high school, a software engineer, does not actually file mass-tort lawsuits. It assists them by collecting and assessing complaints and turning them over to client law firms or to his own law firm, which is a separate company, to litigate.

Mr. Van Arsdale has been in the legal advertising business since 2006, viewing his whole career as devoted to getting people access to the justice system. He decided to become a lawyer and passed the bar in 2018. Shortly after, he was asked to join his first sexual abuse case, the mass tort in which the Boy Scouts organization was accused of failing to protect children.

Mr. Van Arsdale and his colleagues took out television spots in search of potential plaintiffs. “It took three weeks of ads to even get the first case,” he said. As the calls and cases rolled in, Mr. Van Arsdale hired more staff. Today, Reciprocity employs roughly 70 employees to answer the phones 24/7 and more than 30 others to further develop potential cases.

In the Combs case, three potential clients signed up after the first advertisement. “It wasn’t as big as we thought it was going to be,” he said.

Then Mr. Combs was indicted, and Mr. Van Arsdale’s law firm took out another round of social media ads.

“The world is watching P. Diddy’s case unfold,” one read, alongside an A.I.-generated image of Mr. Combs in jail. “If you’ve been silenced, now is the time to find your voice.”

The contacts began to flow in much more quickly.

About a week later, Mr. Van Arsdale said, Mr. Buzbee reached out. Years earlier, he said, Reciprocity had helped Mr. Buzbee with advertising on another mass-tort case.

A hard-charging lawyer, Mr. Buzbee built his career filing lawsuits on behalf of oil and gas workers and won some eye-popping verdicts. More recently, he secured settlements for more than two dozen women who accused the football player Deshaun Watson of sexual misconduct in massage appointments.

“We started talking about Diddy,” Mr. Van Arsdale recalled of their conversation in September. “I said, ‘Well, we’ve got some cases — I think this is real.’ He said, ‘Well, let’s go, I’d love to work on those.’”

## His Profile Is Big, Like Texas



Tony Buzbee, a Houston plaintiffs' lawyer who has also represented major Texas politicians, joined the Combs civil cases in September. Brandon Bell/Getty Images

It takes three elevators to reach Mr. Buzbee's penthouse office on the 75th floor of the tallest building in Texas. Inside, sharks are the decorative motif: a silver sculpture of one, shark-shaped doorknobs and a shark tattoo on Mr. Buzbee's right forearm.

In Houston, where he ran for mayor in 2019, Mr. Buzbee is a well-known figure, largely because of his work, but also because of his penchant for spectacle.

A former Marine captain, Mr. Buzbee caused a stir in 2017 by parking a World War II-era tank outside his home in the city. On his ranch in northeast Texas, he keeps hundreds of animals, including zebras and camels that draw the attention of passing drivers. His clients have included former Gov. Rick Perry, who later served as the best man when he married several years ago.

When disaster strikes, Mr. Buzbee often enters the legal fray. He filed suits after Hurricane Harvey, after a deadly crowd surge at Travis Scott's Astroworld festival and after the fatal implosion of the Titan submersible, in which he represents the family of Paul-Henri Nargeolet, a maritime expert who died in the disaster.

"I get a lot of calls from people that have worked their cases up to a point where they need somebody to come try them, like they can't do that part of it," he said. "And that's the part I do the best."



Colleagues describe Mr. Buzbee as an unrelenting litigator who, as a businessman, can choose to accept only cases he believes in. “Tony gets to say ‘no’ anytime he wants,” said Chad Pinkerton, who once worked at Mr. Buzbee’s firm.

Six days after Mr. Buzbee and Mr. Van Arsdale agreed to work together on the Combs cases, they held a news conference at which Mr. Buzbee announced they had 120 clients who intended to sue the music mogul, speaking in front of the sign featuring Reciprocity’s 1-800 number. “The biggest secret in the entertainment industry that really wasn’t a secret at all has finally been revealed to the world,” Mr. Buzbee told those gathered.

Within 24 hours, the hotline received roughly 12,000 calls. “It broke our systems,” Mr. Van Arsdale said.

Lawyers for Mr. Combs have called the news conference a “publicity stunt” and Mr. Buzbee a “1-800 attorney.”

“Sean Combs has never sexually assaulted or trafficked anyone — man or woman, adult or minor,” they said in a statement. “No number of lawsuits, sensationalized allegations, or media theatrics will change that reality.”

## In Montana, at the Call Center



Reciprocity Industries is based in a one-story building in Billings, Mont., more than 2,000 miles away from

Complaints about Sean Combs to Reciprocity Industries often start with calls to the room filled with cubicles, known as “the floor.” From there, they progress through a system that Mr. Van Arsdale said ferrets out false claims.

“You’re going to have scam artists out there, right?” he said in an interview. “You’re going to have crank callers and that’s just part of it, right? But you need to have the proper processes and procedures in place to try to stomp them out.”

A questionnaire from a call is reviewed by a second employee, who decides whether to pass it on to “litigation support.” There, staffers gather more information and test whether an account is consistent, Mr. Van Arsdale said.

People who respond to social media ads online are called by agents who walk them through the questionnaire. Some contacts have come in through an Arizona law firm that is behind a website urging users to “see if you qualify” to join the Combs litigation. The firm is paid a referral fee for successful claims, Mr. Van Arsdale said.

Claims that survive the weed-out process are sent to Mr. Van Arsdale’s law firm, which is about a 15-minute drive away. There, lawyers seek further corroboration, including witness testimony and police or medical records, he said.

All of the more than 26,000 contacts related to the Combs cases are organized in a database. More than 600 came to be viewed as potential cases, Mr. Van Arsdale said. Others, he said, were often found to be from pranksters, or people who viewed themselves as witnesses or who had called to complain about something else.

Some 200 files were sent on to Mr. Buzbee’s firm, where Mr. Buzbee said he has lawyers and former police personnel who continue to vet the claims.

As is typical in mass-tort cases, the lawyers handling the Combs lawsuits would collect a portion of any money awarded in a verdict or settlement, typically 40 percent, Mr. Van Arsdale said. Reciprocity charges fees to the law firms that hire it, and uses that income to support its outreach.

In the Boy Scouts case, Mr. Van Arsdale and co-counsels represent roughly 11,000 plaintiffs with accounts of sexual abuse. Several years ago, one of the institution’s insurance carriers, Century Indemnity Company, described Reciprocity in court papers as a “claims aggregator” and questioned its scrutiny of claims, its use of financial incentives and the accuracy of the ads it was using.

As evidence, it submitted an affidavit by a former Reciprocity employee who said she had been paid weekly bonuses based on how many claimants she signed up — to start, \$200 if she signed up 20.

Experts say the payment of such incentives is an ethical gray area, though they were not aware of any specific prohibition.



Mr. Van Arsdale said other call centers use incentives but that he got rid of them at his company because they had become a “distraction.”

“The same kind of rigorous vetting process that we have and exists today existed then,” he said.

## An Accuser Becomes a Defendant

The woman who accused Jay-Z, born Shawn Carter, and Mr. Combs of raping her when she was 13 first gave her account to Reciprocity last fall after responding to a Facebook ad, according to Mr. Van Arsdale.

In her subsequent lawsuit, she described being driven to a party after the 2000 MTV Video Music Awards, where she was given a drink, felt woozy and ended up in a bedroom. She said Mr. Combs and “Celebrity A,” later identified in court papers as Mr. Carter, took turns assaulting her there.

But some details of her account later unraveled. After escaping the house, the suit says, the teenager ran to a gas station, where she called her father to pick her up. Her father, though, who lived in Rochester, N.Y., a five-hour drive from Manhattan, told NBC News he did not recall such a trip.

In the NBC interview, the woman had identified a musician she said she had spoken to at the party. But the musician had actually been on tour that night in the Midwest.

At a news conference, Mr. Carter’s lawyer, Alex Spiro, said the suit made “a mockery” of the justice system.

Mr. Carter accused Mr. Buzbee of trying to blackmail him. He said that weeks earlier, when the court filing had only identified him as “Celebrity A,” the lawyer sent him a letter suggesting they resolve the matter through “confidential mediation.”

Mr. Buzbee said such mediation efforts are standard practice and insisted the complaint had been vetted properly by his lawyers and a retired police detective. He called it “outrageous” to expect someone victimized as a minor to have “perfect recall” more than two decades later.

In February, Mr. Buzbee withdrew the woman’s suit, but the court battle has only grown more bitter.

Last week, Mr. Carter sued the woman and two of her lawyers, Mr. Buzbee and David Fortney. In court papers submitted by Mr. Carter, a private investigator said she had visited the woman on her front porch in Alabama, where she said the woman admitted her rape claim against Mr. Carter was false.

As for the vetting, court papers filed by Mr. Carter’s lawyers say a public record search would have shown that the woman had a “legally-documented history of mental health issues.”

Mr. Buzbee has disputed that his client recanted, and in a recent affidavit, the woman said she stood by her account. She said one reason she had decided to dismiss the lawsuit was because she was “frightened by the reaction of Jay-Z and his supporters” and was concerned she would eventually have to be named. In an email, Mr. Buzbee declined to comment on his client’s mental state, saying it had “nothing to do with her ability to state truth.”

Mr. Carter’s complaint has been embraced by Mr. Combs, whose lawyers said the suit was “just the first of many that will not hold up in a court of law.”

But the more than 50 lawsuits accusing Mr. Combs of sexual abuse extend beyond those vetted and filed by Mr. Buzbee. More than a dozen other lawyers represent clients who say they were victimized by Mr. Combs, and most of those plaintiffs have sued under their own names.

“It validates their own story to hear that they weren’t the only ones,” said Michelle Caiola, a lawyer representing two of those plaintiffs.

Late last month, Mr. Buzbee filed seven more lawsuits from anonymous plaintiffs who accused Mr. Combs of sexual abuse or violence. One man said he was raped in a hotel room when he was 14 years old.

Mr. Van Arsdale said the ads surrounding the Combs case, having run their course, have been pulled, but the hotline still gets calls.

More recently, the law firm had an ad campaign addressed toward people who feel they were harmed by three brothers who have pleaded not guilty to sex trafficking charges in New York.

“If you or a loved one at any time experienced inappropriate behavior by Oren, Tal or Alon Alexander,” one Instagram ad read, “you may be entitled to significant compensation.”

Joe Coscarelli and Ben Sisario contributed reporting. Kirsten Noyes contributed research.

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