

2005 FORMAL ETHICS OPINION 3

Search Adopted Opinions

IMMIGRATION PROSECUTION TO GAIN AN ADVANTAGE IN A CIVIL MATTER

Adopted: July 14, 2005

Opinion rules that a lawyer may not threaten to report an opposing party or a witness to immigration officials to gain an advantage in civil settlement negotiations.

Inquiry:

During the discovery phase of a civil lawsuit, the defense lawyer learns that the plaintiff may be in the country illegally. Some of the plaintiff's witnesses may also be in the country illegally. The plaintiff's immigration status is entirely unrelated to the civil suit.

May the defense lawyer threaten to report the plaintiff or a witness to immigration authorities to induce the plaintiff to capitulate during the settlement negotiations of the civil suit?

Opinion:

This is a matter of first impression. The Rules of Professional Conduct and the ethics opinions have previously addressed only the issue of threatening criminal prosecution to gain an advantage in a civil matter.

Before 1997, Rule 7.5 of the Rules of Professional Conduct made it unethical for a lawyer "to present, participate in presenting, or threaten to present criminal charges primarily to obtain an advantage in a civil matter." The rule was not included in the Rules of Professional Conduct when they were comprehensively revised in 1997. Nevertheless, a lawyer may not use a threat of criminal prosecution with impunity. Threats that constitute extortion, compounding a crime, or abuse of process are already prohibited by other rules. See Rule 3.1 (meritorious claims); Rule 4.1 (truthfulness in statements to others); Rule 4.4 (respect for rights of third persons); Rule 8.4(b) and (c) (prohibiting criminal or fraudulent conduct). Moreover, 98 FEO 19 provides that a lawyer may present or threaten to present criminal charges in association with the prosecution of a civil matter but only if the criminal charges are related to the civil matter, the lawyer believes the charges to be well grounded in fact and warranted by law, and the lawyer does not imply an ability to improperly influence the district attorney, the judge or the criminal justice system.

The present inquiry involves the threat, not of criminal prosecution, but of disclosure to immigration authorities. Whether making such a threat is criminal extortion is a legal determination outside the purview of the Ethics Committee. If it is, the conduct is prohibited under Rule 8.4(b). Even where a lawyer may lawfully threaten to report a party or a witness to immigration authorities to gain leverage in a civil matter, the exploitation of information unrelated to the client's legitimate interest in resolving the lawsuit raises some of the same concerns as threatening to pursue the criminal prosecution of the opposing party for an unrelated crime.

In ABA Formal Opinion No. 92-363, threats of criminal prosecution are permitted only when there is a nexus between the facts and circumstances giving rise to the civil claim, and those supporting criminal charges. As explained in the opinion, requiring a relationship between the civil and criminal matters

tends to ensure that negotiations will be focused on the true value of the civil claim, which presumably includes any criminal liability arising from the same facts or transaction, and discourages exploitation of extraneous matters that have nothing to do with evaluating that claim. Introducing into civil negotiations an unrelated criminal issue solely to gain leverage in settling a civil claim furthers no legitimate interest of the justice system, and tends to prejudice its administration.

ABA Formal Op. No. 92-363; see also Rule 8.4(d)(prohibiting conduct that is prejudicial to the administration of justice).

There is no valid basis for distinguishing between threats to report unrelated criminal conduct and threats to report immigration status to the authorities: the same exploitation of extraneous matters and abuse of the justice system may occur. Rule 4.4(a) prohibits a lawyer, when representing a client, from using means that have no substantial purpose other than to embarrass, delay, or burden a third person. In addition, the prohibition on conduct that is prejudicial to the administration of justice "should be read broadly to proscribe a wide variety of conduct including conduct that occurs outside the scope of judicial proceedings." Rule 8.4, cmt. [4]. The threat to expose a

party's undocumented immigration status serves no other purpose than to gain leverage in the settlement negotiations for a civil dispute and furthers no legitimate interest of our adjudicative system. Therefore, a lawyer may not use the threat of reporting an opposing party or a witness to immigration officials in settlement negotiations on behalf of a client in a civil matter.