Sarah Ward was stunned when the record industry sued her for being a music pirate.

Mrs. Ward, a 66-year-old sculptor and retired schoolteacher, received notice on Sept. 11 from the Recording Industry Association of America that she was being accused of engaging in millions of dollars worth of copyright infringement, downloading thousands of songs and sharing them with the world through a popular file-sharing program called KaZaA.

Mrs. Ward was deeply confused by the accusations, which have disrupted her gentle life in the suburbs of Boston. She does not trade music, she says, does not have any younger music-loving relatives living with her, and does not use her computer for much more than sending e-mail and checking the tides. Even then, her husband does the typing.

"I'm a very much dyslexic person who has not actually engaged using the computer as a tool yet," she explained in her first interview about the case.

On Friday, the industry group dropped its suit against Mrs. Ward, but reserved the right to sue again. An industry spokeswoman denied that any mistake had been made.

"We have chosen to give her the benefit of the doubt and are continuing to look into
the facts," said Amy Weiss, a spokeswoman for the music industry association. She also denied that there were serious disputes about the facts of any other suits. "This is the only case of its kind," Ms. Weiss said.

But those opposed to the recording industry's legal tactics say that the case suggests that the methods used to track down music pirates are flawed. They argue that Mrs. Ward is probably not the only mistaken case in the recording industry dragnet.

Cindy Cohn, the legal director of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, an advocacy group concerned with civil liberties in the digital age, said that her organization was talking with dozens of people who say they have been sued but do not trade files.

In a number of the 261 lawsuits the industry has filed so far, members of the household other than the named defendant might have had access to the machines, she said. But some of those being sued, she added, are contending that their cases are purely ones of mistaken identity.

That is exactly what Mrs. Ward says happened to her. Not only does nobody else use her computer in more than a passing way, the computer, an Apple Macintosh, is not even capable of running the KaZaA file-swapping program. And though the lawsuit against her said that she was heavily into the works of hip-hop artists like Snoop Dogg, Ms. Ward says her musical tastes run to Celtic and folk.

Ms. Ward said that she was fortunate to have several lawyers in her family, and a son-in-law, Dan Levy, who is knowledgeable about the Internet and the file-trading wars. He put her in touch with the Electronic Frontier Foundation, which is based in San Francisco.

"They picked the wrong little old lady to sue," Mr. Levy said. "This case alone should put the record companies on notice that their method of associating KaZaA user names with addresses is flawed."

An official of Mrs. Ward's Internet service provider, Comcast, said that the company had investigated the case and that it gave the right name associated with the Internet identifier, known as an I.P. number, that the industry lawyers demanded. But like many service providers, Comcast issues its I.P. numbers "dynamically," with the numbers shifting each time a user goes online. Both Comcast and the recording industry group say they can accurately trace the I.P. number back to a single user; nonetheless, identifying a particular user can be tricky.

Although Ms. Ward's identity may have been mistaken, the strategy of suing people of all ages and musical tastes is intentional, said Mike Godwin, a lawyer with Public Knowledge, a policy group seeking a middle ground in the piracy fight.

The idea, he said, is to make average people understand that they, too, could be hit with a suit for sharing songs. "If they target 'Tattoo Guy,' who's out of a job but has access to an M.I.T. online account and is downloading songs and selling bootleg CD's out of the trunk of his car, nobody identifies with him," he said.
Ms. Weiss of the recording industry association said that the strategy was, in fact, working as planned. "This is a campaign of deterrence," she said, "and we want to send a strong message that this activity is illegal and there are consequences." Therefore, she said, "we are casting a wide net."

Groups like Public Knowledge and another Washington policy group, the Center for Democracy and Technology, agree with the industry claim that it has a right to pursue copyright infringers and say that suing individuals is a valid strategy so long as the most egregious violators are made the target. But these groups say that the industry must use its newly granted subpoena powers with care, and they suggest that both more judicial oversight and better warnings for those being investigated are needed.

Ms. Ward says she has been shaken by the accusation and threat of heavy penalties, which left her unable to sleep. She says she worries about people less equipped to fight. "We had emotional support and very skilled resources to turn to," she said. "What happens to people who don't have that in their life to clear their names or defend themselves?"

To Ms. Cohn, the case shows that the industry does not recognize the effect that its tactics are having on average people. To corporations, "litigation is just the cost of doing business," she said. "But it isn't just the cost of doing business with the people who they've targeted here."

Though the possibility of a revived lawsuit worries her, Ms. Ward said that the most troubling issue that remains for her is the absence of an apology from the industry group.

"When we can't make human amends to things," she said, "then we don't have a way forward."

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