

False Claims About Paralegal Profession Persist

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Recently, while driving from work to a LAPA function, I was listening to a popular talk radio program and I heard an advertisement that concerned me very much. A private paralegal school was advertising an educational seminar that promised graduates would be "board certified" after attending seminars for a few Saturdays. The advertisement further claimed that a graduate from this program could earn in excess of \$100,000 a year by working part-time from home.

I immediately wrote to the radio station with my concerns about the misleading statements and claims in the advertisement. My letter explained why LAPA's officers, directors and members could be considered experts on paralegal education and training and therefore were qualified to lodge a complaint against the claims made in the advertisement. I further explained that various LAPA member have known about this school and have attempted to investigate its certifying "Board" for several years. LAPA has been unsuccessful in its efforts to either locale or contact the certifying "Board." During the past several years LAPA representatives made numerous telephone calls to the various telephone numbers provided in the many ads from this particular school. Our calls were not returned and we never received the written material which we requested.

In my letter to the radio station. I also

explained that there is no such designation as a "Board Certified" paralegal in the United States, and the claim that this school can certify its graduates as "Board Certified" must be false. I further explained that paralegal programs which have been approved by the American Bar Association carry the distinction of an "ABA-approved program." The only other professional designation available to paralegals is the Certified Legal Assistant ("CLA"), which is awarded only after one passes a rigorous one and one-half day test administered by the National Association of Legal Assistants ("NALA").

My letter further explained that the advertisement also was misleading when it claimed that paralegals can earn over \$100,000 a year, especially while working part-time from home. In Los Angeles, the average paralegal with over five years experience earns \$40,000-\$60,000 a year. I enclosed a copy of the executive summary results of LAPA's 1995 Salary Survey. Paralegals in the Los Angeles area are among the highest paid paralegals in the nation yet to our knowledge, only one paralegal with over twenty-five years experience earned \$100,000 a year.

Within several days after mailing the letter, I received a telephone call from a person who claimed he was the owner of this school. He was most irate because I questioned the veracity of the advertisement. He advised me that the certifying board was called the American Paralegal Bar Association. I asked about this



board; I asked about its credentials and for its telephone number. I believed these were straightforward questions which deserved a straightforward answer. However, after a long and evasive discourse on his part, the only information he provided was that the Association operates from Culver City and Tustin in California, but the Board is headquartered in New York and he gave the Institute's telephone number: (202) 555-1212! New York Directory Assistance (in case you do not recognize the telephone number) has no listing for the Board.

Further investigation revealed that the "Board" is registered as a non-profit corporation in New York and that the Board's principal is the same person who called me. My immediate response was to question the integrity of a certifying Board which is staffed by the same person who is a principal of the entity which the Board certifies.

I believe this type of advertisement has the potential to harm the paralegal profession and I believe that paralegals should lodge a vigorous protest when any group or person makes such false and misleading claims. This type of advertising serves to further confuse the public about the distinctions between paralegals and those who offer services directly to the public. I believe it is important to swiftly lodge a protest when this type of information is disseminated, to prevent our profession's reputation from being sullied in the eyes of the public.

This type of advertisement, and the fact that it was carried by a prominent national radio station, demonstrates how critical it is that a definition of paralegal be codified as quickly as possible. Without codification, the term "paralegal" is up for grabs by unscrupulous entrepreneurs to lure the unsuspecting public into worthless educational seminars.