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What Do Paralegals Do?

Celebrating the Work of Paralegals on Paralegal Day

BY JOSE L. TRUJILLO

Early in my career as a paralegal, I worked for a small boutique law firm that specialized in bankruptcy and family law. At one point a client asked, “What do paralegals do?” Never having been asked that question before, I paused for a few seconds and then looked at my attorney, hoping she would interject and provide an answer. Of course, I had my own ideas about my career and was ready to provide a response. I probably would have said something like: “Paralegals assist with drafting legal documents, collecting information, and assisting with court proceedings.” But my attorney quickly exclaimed, “Everything. Without my paralegal, I would lose my mind and never find a thing! My office would stop running!” Her impassioned response caught me off guard, and a smile came over me that I’m positive

conveyed my enthusiasm and sincere gratitude for her support.

In honor of Paralegal Day 2018, I feel compelled to share this story in support of the hundreds of thousands of fellow paralegals, legal assistants, and paraprofessionals who find themselves in the trenches each and every day. I would also like to recognize the file clerks, paralegal interns, court clerks, and other legal support staff who work alongside them.

As we all know, many of us work tirelessly behind the scenes. Others work directly with clients and support their teams in both the public and private sectors. Often we are the primary contacts for clients and opposing counsel. We work directly with court clerks, third-party vendors, and state and federal agencies. We volunteer for local community

projects, many of which require long hours and expenses for which we are not reimbursed. We do so proudly and for the greater good of our community and our profession.

In my time as a paralegal, I’ve found that only a small percentage of working paralegals and legal assistants know that Colorado recognizes our profession annually on May 4. This brings me back to the original question: “What do paralegals do?” It was after being asked that same question many times that a fellow paraprofessional identified the need to recognize the long history of legal support staffs’ valued contributions to the legal community.

Karen Woodward, a paralegal from Denver and a member of the Colorado Association of Professional Paralegals and Legal Assistants (CAPPLA),¹ has said that the biggest problem she faced when moving to Colorado was “the misconception that legal assistants and paralegals weren’t one in the same.”² For that reason, she worked diligently to educate the public and explain that legal assistants are highly trained professionals who bring value to law firms across the state.³ Woodward’s work with CAPPLA was instrumental in bringing about the dedication of Colorado’s Paralegal

Day.⁴ Specifically, she is credited with working with our state's General Assembly in founding House Joint Resolution 04-1060, Concerning the Creation of Paralegal Day.

Due to paraprofessionals⁵ like Woodward and others in our paralegal and legal assistant community, our state recognizes the contributions and services paralegals have provided and continue to provide to our deserving public and our judicial branch alike. The tireless effort and professionalism shown by our local paraprofessionals has helped us continue to rise above criteria set by the American Bar Association, the National Federation of Paralegal Associations, the National Association of Legal Assistants, and our local judicial branch.

It is worth noting that there is a sweeping trend across our great country that has led to the creation and implementation of limited licensure of paralegals. The primary purpose

of these programs is to provide limited legal services so that paralegals can meet the needs of the growing number of pro se litigants. Allowing qualified, proficient, and competent paralegals to provide limited legal services, with proper oversight, is helping to bridge the gap to justice equality and relieve the courts of overly crowded dockets.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank each and every legal assistant, paralegal, and legal support staff member, as well as paralegal students striving to contribute to the future of our profession, for your relentless dedication and tireless devotion to our ever-changing and rewarding profession. The services you provide to our deserving public, our courageous and extremely talented attorneys, and of course our remarkable, one-of-a-kind judges are invaluable.

Please know you are recognized for the greater good you provide our community and

for the professionalism you exuberate in the trenches each and every day.

With great respect and admiration, Happy Paralegal Day, May 4, 2018! 



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NOTES

1. The Colorado Association of Professional Paralegals and Legal Assistants is a new paralegal organization in the Denver Metro area. CAPPLA will be an affiliate of the National Association of Legal Assistants (NALA) within the next few months.

2. Dengler, "Honoring and Celebrating Paralegals Untiring Behind the Scene Work," Law Crossing (2016).

3. In 1997 the American Bar Association updated its definition of "legal assistant" to include "paralegal" because "the terms 'legal assistant' and 'paralegal' are, in practice, used interchangeably." The current definition reads:

A legal assistant or paralegal is a person, qualified by education, training or work experience who is employed or retained by a lawyer, law office, corporation, governmental agency or other entity and who performs specifically delegated substantive legal work for which a lawyer is responsible.

www.americanbar.org/groups/paralegals/resources/current_aba_definition_of_legal_assistant_paralegal.html.

4. Dengler, *supra* note 2.

5. Dictionary.com defines a paraprofessional as "a person who assists a doctor, lawyer, teacher, or other professional, but not licensed to practice in the profession."



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