

Study Shows High Consumer Satisfaction With Independent Paralegals

A recent HALT-sponsored study shows overwhelming satisfaction with independent paralegals among Californians who have used their services. The study, undertaken by students at the University of California Hastings College of the Law, questioned consumers in the San Francisco Bay area who had used independent paralegals (known in California as “legal document assistants”) about their experience using these non-lawyer service providers. The study found that those surveyed “have voiced a unanimous belief that [legal document assistants] provide an important service for those who cannot afford representation at divorce.”

“This study knocks a huge hole in the legal establishment’s claim that only a lawyer can provide legal services,” said HALT Senior Counsel Tom Gordon. “The degree of consumer satisfaction with independent paralegals is as great as that with lawyers—even greater.”

Legal document assistants are a prominent part of the legal landscape in California. The state was chosen for the study because of the prevalence of legal document assistants, and because the profession has been licensed and regulated since 2000. The study reviewed almost 3,000 divorce documents filed in San Francisco, Alameda and Santa Clara counties. Of those, over 12 percent were labeled as having been filed by legal document assistants.

Detailed questionnaires were administered to 47 of the filers who had used a legal document assistant. Ninety-six percent of those surveyed felt that the quality of services they received was “okay” or better, with nearly half responding that the service was “great” or “outstanding.” Over 93 percent said they would use a legal document assistant again under similar circumstances.

In addition to the high quality of services that consumers felt they received, the study illuminated another benefit to legal document assistants—lower cost. The vast majority of respondents cited lower cost as a reason they used a legal document assistant rather than an attorney. The average respondent paid about \$400; lawyers often charge that much *per hour*. Eighty-nine percent of those questioned thought that the fee they paid was reasonable for the work performed.

California and Arizona are the only states to license and regulate independent paralegals. In other states, independent paralegals often operate in a legal gray area, threatened by the possibility of prosecution for the unauthorized practice of law. The licensing and regulation of paralegals was cited by many survey respondents as a reason for feeling more secure about using a legal document assistant. “Consumers should not be forced to use the gray market to find legal assistance,” explained Gordon. “This study shows that other states can help consumers by following California’s example and permitting independent paralegals to serve the marketplace for legal services.”