



# STANDING STRONG

The State Bar of Texas Paralegal Division celebrates 40 years.

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**T**he State Bar of Texas made history in the United States on October 23, 1981, when it became the first state bar to form a paralegal division.

The State Bar Paralegal Division's creation came as a result of several years of work by the Legal Assistants Committee of the Bar and its staff in response to the growth and development of the paralegal profession, with the bar recognizing that paralegals' participation in the administration of justice, professional responsibility, and public service in cooperation with the bar was necessary. An additional reason for forming the division was to provide a statewide organization for paralegals that would serve as a central vehicle for effective communication and resolution of matters of mutual concern to paralegals throughout the state.

The idea for its creation is credited to attorneys Tom Hanna (executive director of the State Bar of Texas, 1978-1981) and Bob Towery, who was director of institutes for the State Bar of Texas and a member of the then-called "Legal Assistants Committee" of the State Bar. Hanna and Towery worked with the committee to develop a presentation to the State Bar Board of Directors and State Bar President Wayne Fisher. The board created the Paralegal Division (at that time titled the "Legal Assistant Division" of the State Bar of Texas) on October 23, 1981. The division's name was changed in 2005 to Paralegal Division, and the bar formally defined paralegal as:

"A paralegal is a person, qualified through various combinations of education, training or work experience, who is employed or engaged by a lawyer, law office, governmental agency, or other entity in a capacity or function which involves the performance, under the ultimate direction and supervision of a licensed attorney, of specifically delegated substantive legal work, which work, for the most part, requires a sufficient knowledge of legal principles and procedures that, absent such person, an attorney would be required to perform the task."

In 2006, the bar amended this definition to include education, training, and work experience standards. These standards are another major milestone in the division's history and are intended to assist the public in obtaining quality legal services, assist attorneys in their utilization of paralegals, and assist judges in determining whether paralegal work is a reimbursable cost when granting attorneys' fees.<sup>1</sup>

The division has now supported paralegals for 40 years and has stayed true to the basic principles of its formation—to provide a professional association for paralegals to grow and focus on education and career development. As such, the division has provided a broad spectrum of opportunities for its members and continues to monitor the profession as a whole throughout Texas and the U.S. The division's leaders comprise an executive committee and district directors for 12 geographical regions across the state, as well as a coordinator (a two-time past division president). There are numerous

committees that focus on various aspects for the division such as Membership, Ethics, Public Relations, Professional Development, and Publications, with numerous ad hoc committees concentrating on current issues of the profession. These leaders and committee members volunteer their time and passion to contribute to the paralegal profession and community. The division has two appointed State Bar Board advisers who are kept updated on division activities throughout the year.

Since the first year, the division has participated in offering numerous educational opportunities for paralegals—through not only local district seminars across the state, participation in the Texas Forum and other events, but also a three-day statewide seminar since 1999 titled Texas Advanced Paralegal Seminar, or TAPS, held each fall in alternating cities. TAPS speakers are attorneys from all over the state presenting advanced topics. This is the largest and most comprehensive paralegal seminar held in Texas. Additionally, the division offers online CLE courses and maintains an online database of courses. This strong focus on education is also promoted by the division through its Ambassador Program, which consists of former presidents who volunteer to speak upon request on a variety of topics. These ambassadors travel the state to offer their services to other organizations and groups at no charge.

The Texas Supreme Court approved specialty certifications for paralegals under the Texas Board of Legal Specialization, and the division works closely with TBLS. The first exams were given in March 1994. The division has authored a guide available for its members to assist in studying for the TBLS exams.

The division has offered various news updates and publications to its members and in 1992 began publishing the *Texas Paralegal Journal* as a formal magazine, which was offered in a print format for numerous years but now is in a digital format, allowing the publication to reach an expanded audience. The division also has a monthly newsletter, *Paralegal Pulse*, which is produced by the board of directors and offers the most current news and updates for the month, articles, and geographic news.

Additionally, one of the largest member benefits and resources is the division's e-group. Members post questions, share forms, assist each other in locating experts and vendors, share employment opportunities, and much more.

Members of the division authored the *Paralegal Ethics Handbook* in 2007, which is updated each year, and is available for purchase through Thomson Reuters. This handbook is used by colleges and law firms nationwide and is the only publication of its kind, specifically focusing on ethics for Texas paralegals.

The division, like the bar, strongly encourages pro bono work by its members and offers opportunities for its members to participate, as well as an annual award honoring a member for pro bono work.

Any profession is only as strong as its continuity, and as such, the division encourages new members to the profession to use its mentor program where entry-level paralegals are paired with

veteran members for guidance and career development.

Division members also have the opportunity to join the Texas Bar College and various sections of the bar. Additionally, several division members serve on various State Bar committees.

As another educational opportunity, with a bit of history and fun added in, the division offers an annual trip to Europe where travelers can join in learning about various law and court procedures in other countries as well as the history of that country as it relates to its laws.

The division also participates in an annual meeting of all regional paralegal associations in Texas known as Texas Alliance of Paralegal Associations. Over 25 paralegal organizations come together for this annual event to discuss current topics involving paralegals and the legal profession.

Due to a Texas legislative resolution a number of years ago, October 23 of each year is declared Paralegal Day in the state of Texas. The resolution states:

Paralegals are vital resources to their firms, performing valuable services for and under the direction of an attorney, and their work requires a thorough knowledge of legal concepts and facts. October 23 marks the anniversary of the founding of the Paralegal Division of the State Bar of Texas, a division established to promote high standards of conduct, professional ethics, and responsibility through continuing legal education and cooperation with the State Bar of Texas. The goals of the Paralegal Division are to achieve more economical and improved legal services throughout the state, to focus on benefits for its members and the paralegal profession, and to develop opportunities, incentives, and recognition for legal education. Through their exceptional talents and expertise, paralegals provide valuable services that contribute significantly to the efficient functioning of the judicial system in the Lone Star State and they are indeed worthy of special recognition.

This year, the division is celebrating 40 years and continues to remain a leader across the nation for paralegals and other paralegal associations to continue to grow as the legal profession grows. **TBJ**

## NOTES

1. See <https://txpd.org/about-pages/texas-paralegal-definition-and-standards/>.



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