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Divorce kit company founder leaves firm

[SOUTH PINELLAS Edition]

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Deborah Dolen said she resigned because she had accomplished her "purpose." The work-at-home company faces a lawsuit in circuit court. The founder of a Sarasota work-at-home company accused of defrauding customers across the nation has left the company. Deborah Dolen's resignation from AAA Family Centers came two days after a story about the company appeared in the St. Petersburg Times on Jan. 2. Ms. Dolen insisted last week that she helped - not hurt - customers with her paralegal business and said her latest round of problems stems from people's inability to forget her troubled past and acknowledge her many accomplishments. "You will never meet a woman in your life who has tried as hard as I to overcome crises . . . and who still managed to help as many people as I have," Ms. Dolen wrote in a statement. "I have never intentionally hurt anyone, in fact all I ever do is give, often times way too much." In her 36 years, Ms. Dolen has had her share of problems. She has used more than a half- dozen aliases and a handful of Social Security numbers. She has said she once was a prostitute. She served seven years for using money collected for a charity for crippled children for a luxury home and cars. These days, the Sarasota woman is under investigation again. The state Attorney General's Office in Tampa is looking into Ms. Dolen and AAA Family Centers. So is the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office. And the Florida Bar is trying to find out whether Ms. Dolen practiced law without a license. Investigators say as many as 5,000 people across the country may have bought paralegal kits from AAA Family Centers after finding out about the work-at-home program from newspaper ads and the Internet. Some customers have complained they were not paid, given less work than promised and provided useless or pirated computer programs, said Kevin Jackson, an investigator in the Attorney General's Office. Ms. Dolen and the company also face a lawsuit in Pinellas-Pasco Circuit Court. Dissatisfied customer Peter Penrose of St. Petersburg filed a suit last month and is asking a judge to let others join him in a class-action suit. Ms. Dolen said she resigned Jan. 4 because her "purpose" had been accomplished. But she is still featured prominently, along with her teenage daughters, on AAA's Web site and uses the company's e-mail address. Company officials would not comment on the circumstances of Dolen's departure. But they did say AAA continues to sell the kits for \$345 to customers, who are hired to type up the lengthy divorce and bankruptcy forms at home. The company, affiliated with the independent paralegal organization Para-Link International, seems to make most of its money off the kits themselves - 5,000 kits at \$345 each is almost \$1.8-million - and not by completing divorce and bankruptcy forms, customers and investigators say. Each kit buyer is paid \$25 for typing one set of forms. "We're continuing as normal," said Marcy Haley, assistant sales manager and member of the three- person management team running the company for stockholders. Sales "are about the same - a pretty steady flow." But the complaints continue to pour into consumer protection agencies around the state and the Attorney General's Office. Diane Weart, 53, had been ill and was searching for a job she could do from her home in the Orlando area when she saw an ad for AAA. She had worked as a paralegal for two decades, so she was sure she could master the program. She had some initial problems with the software, but Ms. Weart said she believed Ms. Dolen's assurance the programs would be fixed and even agreed to become a trainer for other kit buyers. Ms. Weart quit, though, after hundreds of other people had problems with the kits and the company did not pay what she was owed. "I know I'm never going to see a dime from her," Ms. Weart said. Jackson, the investigator, said he sent information to the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office because he thinks the case may be criminal. Sheriff's Detective Mike O'Brien, who is handling the case, did not return several messages for comment last week. Ms. Haley said the company hasn't been told of any investigations. But the company's former attorney was sent a letter dated Dec. 22 from Lexis-Nexis, which owns some of the computer programs used by AAA, accusing the company of copyright infringement and threatening to sue. A second company, Corel in Ontario, also is considering action, Jackson said. The allegations, combined with Dolen's history, may indicate criminal intent, Jackson said. In 1990, Ms. Dolen - under the name Deborah Harvey - was convicted of racketeering and grand theft for using money from the Foundation for Children with Spina Bifida to buy a \$225,000 home, a Mercedes-Benz and other cars. In 1992, she was found guilty of money laundering, credit-card fraud and living off the services of a prostitute. She has faced myriad other charges, including trying to hire an undercover detective in 1988 to steal and burn her car for insurance, a charge on which she was acquitted. "My past experience with the legal system was so horrific, overwhelming and unfair, I dedicated my life to helping others afford justice," Ms. Dolen wrote in her statement. - Times researcher Caryn Baird contributed to this report. Anita Kumar covers consumer-affairs issues. She can be reached at (727) 893-8472 or at kumar@sptimes.com.

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