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Embattled firm's founder back in action

[NORTH PINELLAS Edition]

St. Petersburg Times - St. Petersburg, Fla.

Author: ANITA KUMAR

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Document Text

The woman, who resigned when the state began investigating her, is back using e-mail to solicit buyers for expensive work-at-home kits.

The founder of a Sarasota work-at-home company accused of defrauding people across the nation is back at work, recruiting new customers through a mass e-mailing that claims joining the business could lead to big money.

Deborah Dolen resigned from AAA Family Centers in January, days after state investigators revealed they were looking into the paralegal kits she sold to thousands of people. But she has returned as a consultant and remains president of a sister company that produces the kits.

"We would love to have you back," she wrote in an e-mail. "If you have strayed away, we will take you back with open arms if you take us! . . . Come be successful with us!"

The companies, which advertise on the Internet, sell work-at-home kits to customers who are then hired to fill out lengthy divorce and bankruptcy forms for people.

"Most importantly, MANY KIT BUYERS ARE MAKING THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS!" she wrote. "I simply work on a consultant basis for the company that lifted us up, as do many other people."

But some customers have complained they were not paid, given less work than promised and provided useless or pirated computer programs, said Kevin Jackson of the Attorney General's Office in Tampa.

In her long rambling e-mail, Ms. Dolen accuses a former kit buyer, St. Petersburg resident Peter Penrose, of spreading lies about her and sabotaging the companies. Penrose sued her in Pinellas-Pasco Circuit Court and is asking a judge to let others join him in a class action suit.

Ms. Dolen also blamed the St. Petersburg Times and the Sarasota Herald-Tribune for printing "false accusations." She claims she hired well-known attorney Gerry Spence to fight Penrose and the newspapers. But a secretary at Spence's Jackson, Wyo., office said no record exists of her being a client.

"I have personally helped over 30,000 people, and prior to last year, had NEVER had a complaint of any sort against me from a person who paid me to perform work," she wrote.

Ms. Dolen could not be reached and her attorney, Dana Watts, did not return phone calls.

Matthew See, president of the Liberty Group, which took over AAA in January, said business was doing well with about 900 kit buyers and Ms. Dolen working as a consultant. "She wants us to succeed as we all do," See said. "She's been quite wonderful."

But in the last several months, complaints about Ms. Dolen and the companies have surfaced at the state Attorney General's Office, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and the Federal Trade Commission, state officials say.

The Florida Bar also continues to look into whether Ms. Dolen practiced law without a license.

Jackson said the Attorney General's Office investigated and then turned over its findings to the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office. Chuck Lesaltato, sheriff's spokesman, has previously said a detective was reviewing the case.

U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Steven Freidman fined Ms. Dolen and the company a total of \$20,000 and has forbidden them from working on bankruptcy cases in South Florida. He is considering whether to hold them in contempt of court for not paying the fines - a move that could leave Ms. Dolen in jail and the company facing more sanctions.

The state says as many as 5,000 people across the country might have bought kits from AAA. At \$345 a kit, AAA appears to make money off kits and not by completing divorce and bankruptcy forms, customers and investigators say. Each kit buyer is paid \$25 for typing a set of forms.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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