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Paralegal kits draw officials' attention

[SOUTH PINELLAS Edition]

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Some kit buyers say they were bilked by a Sarasota company's work-at-home plan. The company's owner denies it. Anne Pagels, 51, was immediately intrigued when she saw a newspaper ad touting a work-at-home job that could earn her thousands of dollars a week. She had spent years working in data processing, so she was sure she could type up the lengthy legal forms for AAA Family Centers, a company that helps people file for divorce or declare bankruptcy without a lawyer. She thought she would make good money while working from the comfort of her home in the Beverly Hills community of Citrus County. In September, Mrs. Pagels ordered the \$345 kit that included a paralegal diploma, a certificate suitable for framing and computer software. The first thing she had to do was complete a test. She worked on it three or four times a week for almost two months. But she said the software didn't work, so she spent \$60 to bring a computer expert to her house. He wasn't able to make it run either. That's when Mrs. Pagels said she realized that she had wasted more than \$400 on AAA Family Centers - and that she wasn't alone. State investigators say as many as 5,000 people across the country may have bought kits from the Sarasota company after finding out about the work-at-home program from 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 at the state Attorney General's Office. The company appears to make 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. "This needs to be stopped," said Peter Penrose, a St. Petersburg kit buyer who expected to get 10 to 20 cases a week but received only six in several months. "Innocent people are getting hurt. It's one of those things that offers hope. But they can never fulfill that hope." Program investigated AAA Family Centers, affiliated with the independent paralegal organization Para-Link International, is being investigated by the Attorney General's Office in Tampa, Jackson said. Investigators there passed information about the company to the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office, Jackson said. Sheriff's Detective Mike O'Brien, who is handling the case, could not be reached for comment last week. The Florida Bar is looking into whether company founder Deborah Dolen practiced law without a license, said Lori Holcomb of the Bar. She said paralegals are not regulated in Florida, so Ms. Dolen is allowed to hand out paralegal diplomas but cannot give legal advice. The companies and Ms. Dolen also face a lawsuit in Pinellas-Pasco Circuit Court. Penrose, 58, who filed the suit last month, is asking a judge to let others join him in a class-action suit. Ms. Dolen, 36, of Sarasota, said late last week she has not been notified of any inquiry. She denies pirating software, practicing law and promising customers a certain amount of cases. She said there were some minor telephone and accounting problems last year but nothing intentionally meant to defraud customers. Ms. Dolen said that she has been in the paralegal business for 16 years, but that her work-at-home program just expanded during the past year. She said she and the company have completed 85,000 cases since 1989, 30,000 of which she did herself. "We DO INTEND to stay around, law is my life and I have helped so many people in 16 years," Dolen wrote in an e-mail. "Myself or the company has NEVER intentionally hurt anyone . . . We are also willing to assist anyone who does feel they have slipped through the cracks, with a company who grew too big too fast - because we entered new markets." She blamed the complaints and investigations on Penrose, who she said was jealous of her accomplishments. Jobs get mixed

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protection in August under Chapter 13 of bankruptcy law. Her creditors included the Internal Revenue Service, according to records. Ms. Dolen said she was forced to file for bankruptcy after her husband died. Dozens of complaints and questions about AAA Family Centers and Para-Link have come into the state Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services in Tallahassee and business groups in Sarasota. Since July, 30 to 40 people have called the Better Business Council, the consumer-protection arm of the Greater Sarasota Chamber of Commerce, to question whether the work-at-home program was legitimate. Records at the Better Business Bureau say the company has "a pattern of no response to customer complaints." Tracy Taylor, 27, of Tampa, searched for a job for a year before hearing about the program. She takes care of her 6-year-old son, Codey, who has a brain tumor, so she needs a way to make money at home. She said she also had trouble getting the software to work. "I want my money back," Ms. Taylor said. "But mostly I don't want this to happen to anyone else." Not everyone is unhappy with the program. Gary Albritton, 54, of Fort Myers, bought a kit just before Thanksgiving and is working on the test. He said people may be upset because they could not do the work. "Maybe I'm getting taken for a ride, but they have given me everything I have asked for in a timely manner," Albritton said. Owner defends operation Ms. Dolen said only a handful of the 5,000 customers she has sold kits to have complained. She said that all businesses receive some complaints and that the amount she had gotten is nothing out of the ordinary. Most people who bought kits were pleased with them, she said, although they never ended up using them. She said 43 kit buyers throughout the country work for her. Another 42 people work for her in her administrative offices in Sarasota. Jo Ann Allen, 47, of Columbia, S.C., who bought a kit in the summer, said she has had only a few minor problems with the company. She said that she had tried several work-at-home programs before and that this is the only time she made money. "I admit

there were times when the paychecks might have been slow, but they always explained why and when I got my check, most of the time it was for more than I had expected," she said. "What this company has been able to do for me is more than what I had expected or even dreamed of." But consumer protection experts say it's best to stay away from all work-at-home programs because more often than not they are scams. Frank Harber, of the Hillsborough County Consumer Service Office, said he has never heard of one that was a legitimate business. "I can't tell people what to do, but I don't really recommend people go into that," he said. "It's just not a good deal." The Better Business Council warns that work-at-home customers who pay money up front usually either do not hear from the company again or do not get what they expected. For example, a company saying it is looking for employees might not actually hire those who respond to its ad but instead give them a list of other employers to contact. "Any kind of opportunity that asks for money up front, don't go there," said Sheryl Lord, director of the Pinellas County Consumer Protection Department. "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is." - Times researcher Kitty Bennett contributed to this report. Staff writer Anita Kumar covers consumer affairs issues. She can be reached at (727) 893-8472 or at kumar@sptimes.com.

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