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**Work-at-home company closed**

[SOUTH PINELLAS Edition]

St. Petersburg Times - St. Petersburg, Fla.

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**Document Text**

Federal and state authorities have shut down a Sarasota work-at-home company accused of defrauding thousands of people around the nation.

In a complaint unsealed in federal court Monday, the Federal Trade Commission claims AAA Family Centers failed to pay customers who bought kits to work at home, gave them less work than promised and provided them with useless computer programs.

Customers, who used the kits to help others file for divorce or declare bankruptcy without a lawyer, also may have unknowingly practiced law without proper authorization and could be subject to penalties under the Bankruptcy Code.

The complaint was filed against AAA, two sister companies and business founder Deborah Dolen, who has admitted to being a prostitute and was convicted of using money collected for a charity for crippled children on luxury cars and homes. Ms. Dolen's mother, Judy Graves, and Matthew See, a company president, also were named.

AAA Family Centers, located in Manatee County, was closed last week after an unannounced visit by FTC officials, state attorney general investigators and county sheriff's deputies. The phones and computers were disconnected, and the locks were changed.

"That's fairly severe but the facts warranted that," said Kevin Jackson of the Attorney General's Office in Tampa. "We don't have to worry about anyone else buying a kit tomorrow."

Investigators said as many as 5,000 people across the United States and Canada may have bought kits. The company made its money off the kits themselves - 5,000 kits costing between \$395 and \$495 each could have netted more than \$2-million - and not by completing the divorce and bankruptcy forms, they said.

The company's books showed receipts of \$30,000 to \$40,000 a week from kit sales, said Jackson, who first received complaints about the company almost a year ago. Each kit buyer was supposed to be paid \$25 for typing one set of forms.

"I'm as happy as I can be that they've been stopped," said Peter Penrose, 58, a St. Petersburg kit buyer who sued the company in December. "The only thing I'm sorry about is that it took so long, and people continued to get sucked into it."

U.S. District Court Judge James Whittemore granted Tampa attorney Gwynne Young control over the company and gave her the responsibility to analyze its finances. At a hearing set for Nov. 9, the judge will consider whether the business should be closed permanently, said Howard Shapiro, FTC spokesman.

AAA and its sister companies, Para-Link International and the Liberty Group of America, also were being investigated by the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office and Postal Inspection Services, a law enforcement arm of the U.S. Postal Service. Calls to those offices were not returned Monday.

Ms. Dolen, 37, could not be reached Monday and Dana Watts, an attorney previously hired by the company, did not return a phone call. Judy Graves, 55, Para-Link vice president and Matthew See, 40, Liberty Group director and president, also could not be reached.

Ms. Dolen resigned from AAA in January, days after state investigators revealed they were looking into the kits, but she has returned as a consultant and remained a president of one of the other companies. The Florida Bar is looking into whether Ms. Dolen practiced law without a license.

- Times researcher Cathy Wos contributed to this report.

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**Abstract (Document Summary)**

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