

Empowering Paralegals: The Unsung Heroes of Wisconsin's Legal Landscape

Through a comprehensive certification program, targeted continuing legal education offerings, and robust networking opportunities, the State Bar of Wisconsin is dedicated to the continuous development of paralegals.

BY THERESA ELLIOTT

In the intricate world of law, paralegals often work behind the scenes – yet their contributions are nothing short of heroic. In Wisconsin, these skilled professionals not only bolster attorneys but also significantly enhance the overall efficiency of legal services. Recognizing their vital role, the State Bar of Wisconsin has launched a series of initiatives designed to empower paralegals through education, certification, and community support.

The Essential Role of Paralegals

Paralegals can play a core role in the legal system, juggling tasks that range from legal research and document drafting to client communication. Paralegals often serve as the initial point of contact, providing clarity to clients who may feel lost in the legal maze. They gather information, explain procedures, and ensure that clients understand what's happening in their case. This supportive role can alleviate stress and make legal services more approachable and humane. Because of these efforts, attorneys are then often free to tackle the more complex issues. This in turn allows for more efficient and streamlined processes in the office. The empowerment and accessibility aspects of the paralegal's role are key parts of what makes a paralegal indispensable. They help demystify the law and make it more approachable, which is crucial in promoting justice.

A Commitment to Excellence: The State Bar Certification Program

To ensure high standards of professional competence, the State Bar of Wisconsin has rolled out a certification program – the State Bar of Wisconsin Certified Paralegal™ (SBWCP).

This voluntary certification recognizes the experience of paralegals and underscores their commitment to lifelong learning.

The certification program is designed to elevate the professionalism of paralegals while instilling a sense of pride in their work. By achieving certification, paralegals demonstrate their dedication to the field and the clients of the law firms or organizations they serve, positioning themselves as knowledgeable and reliable partners in the legal process.

Here's what makes the SBWCP stand out:

- **Practical Experience:** Certification requires 2,000 hours of experience supervised by a licensed attorney. Direct experience equips paralegals with the practical skills and confidence needed to tackle complex legal tasks, sharpens their abilities, and cultivates a deeper



Theresa Elliott is the director of professional development at the State Bar of Wisconsin. She previously worked with continuing education programs for architects, engineers, insurance agents, and lawyers. Access the digital article at www.wisbar.org/wl.
telliott@wisbar.org



understanding of legal processes, ensuring they are well prepared for any challenge that comes their way.

• **Lifelong Learning Requirements:**

In a profession that evolves constantly, staying informed is crucial. The State Bar mandates that certification applicants provide proof of Wisconsin-based continuing legal education (CLE) and complete a minimum of 15 CLE hours every two years, including three focused on ethics. Tailored CLE programs, led by both paralegals and attorneys, cover a variety of contemporary topics – from legal technology innovations to legislative changes. This commitment to ongoing education ensures that paralegals are knowledgeable and can adapt to the shifting legal landscape.

• **Networking Opportunities:** The importance of connecting with other paralegals cannot be overstated. The State Bar has established a forum, similar to the Practice 411™ program, where paralegals can exchange experiences, seek advice, and stay updated on best practices. This sense of community is invaluable in a profession in which collaboration is key. Networking enables paralegals to share resources, discuss challenges, and celebrate successes together, fostering a supportive environment that encourages professional growth.

• **Testing of Knowledge and Skills:**

In January 2025, the State Bar will introduce an online general certification test covering diverse areas of Wisconsin law, such as real estate, probate, and family law. This initiative acknowledges paralegals' specialties and supports their CLE needs.

Looking Ahead: Paralegals and Access to Justice

As the Wisconsin Supreme Court seeks innovative ways to enhance access to justice, the role of certified paralegals may be more important than ever. The State Bar is committed to ensuring that paralegals are not just informed and skilled but also deeply connected to the legal community and the clients they serve.

State Bar of Wisconsin Designates February as Paralegal Month

Paralegal Certification Program and Upcoming Seminars



**CERTIFIED
PARALEGAL™**

Hats off to paralegals – those dedicated professionals who devote time and effort to advance access to justice! Lawyers know and appreciate the value that well-trained paralegals provide to their clients and practice. Celebrate the paralegals in your office during February and throughout the year!

The following education programs for paralegals are coming soon. Mark your calendars now and register online at www.wisbar.org/Paralegal.

December 2024

- Effective Legal Writing 2024, Friday, Dec. 13, 2024, 8:30 a.m. – 12:05 p.m.

January 2025

- Family Law for Paralegals, Tuesday, Jan. 21, 2025, 12 – 1 p.m.

February 2025

- Paralegal Month! Celebration of Paralegals in Wisconsin
- Ethics for Paralegals, Wednesday, Feb. 5, 2025, 12 – 1 p.m.
- Legal Writing for Paralegals: Tips from an Appellate Judge, Wednesday, Feb. 12, 2025, 12 – 1 p.m.
- Personal Injury for Paralegals, Thursday, Feb. 13, 2025, 9 a.m. – 12 p.m.

For more information about the State Bar's Paralegal Certification Program, please contact Dan Sitzler, dsitzler@wisbar.org, (608) 333-9494 ext. 6154. For information and to register for upcoming and OnDemand seminars, visit www.wisbar.org/Paralegal. **WL**

Certified paralegals are well equipped to address the unique challenges that arise in various legal fields, from family law to criminal defense. Their ability to conduct thorough research, draft precise documents, and communicate effectively with clients and attorneys alike makes them assets in any legal practice. By pursuing certification, paralegals can enhance their expertise and expand their career opportunities, positioning themselves as leaders in the field.

The Impact of Certification on the Legal Community

The ripple effects of well-trained, certified paralegals extend beyond individual practices to the broader legal community. As paralegals elevate their skills and knowledge, they contribute

to a culture of excellence within their firms. This commitment to exacting standards enhances the reputation of their practice and improves client satisfaction and outcomes.

Paralegals are vital players in Wisconsin's legal ecosystem. Through our comprehensive certification programs, targeted CLE offerings, and robust networking opportunities, the State Bar is dedicated to the continuous development of paralegals. The commitment to adapt and grow with the legal landscape remains steadfast, ensuring that these unsung heroes receive the recognition and support they deserve.

For more information about the State Bar's Paralegal Certification Program, please contact Dan Sitzler, dsitzler@wisbar.org, (608) 333-9494 ext. 6154. **WL**