



5th March 2008

News Release – for immediate release
YLAL Survey on Paralegals in legal aid: a growing and unhealthy dependency?

Paralegals are being exploited and underpaid, according to a survey of members conducted by Young Legal Aid Lawyers (YLAL). Respondents also raised concerns about lack of training, poor working conditions, uncertain career progression and the implications of Lord Carter's proposed pyramid model. YLAL has called on the Law Society and the Legal Services Commission to take firm action to ensure that the sustainability of legal aid is not jeopardised as legal aid firms become more reliant on the use of paralegals to survive.

Commenting on the survey, Laura Janes, YLAL's Chair, said:

'This survey was inspired by anecdotal evidence about the unfair treatment of paralegals combined with the increased reliance on paralegals in the post Carter legal aid world. The results are shocking: the low levels of pay and strong sense that many paralegals felt undervalued and exploited must trigger firm and urgent action.'

The pay level for many paralegals was found to be low compared to trainee solicitors, despite respondents undertaking similar or the same work. Of the respondents, 43% earned less than £17k and 13% earned under £14k. 75% of the former paralegals able to comment said that their salary was below the Law Society minimum for training contacts at the time. The survey revealed that it is not uncommon for paralegals to be asked to work unpaid, in return for a chance of gaining paid paralegal work or a training contract.

Working conditions were regarded as worse for paralegals than for solicitors by 60% of respondents. Lack of training was of particular concern to many of the respondents. Over 90% carried casework and 7% even conducted advocacy. However, just 10% received detailed formal training. 85% of respondents undertook paralegal work with a view to eventually qualifying as a lawyer.

The results indicate that, unless urgent action is taken, even more 'would be' young legal aid lawyers will seek employment in other fields. Under-trained paralegals working for overworked supervisors will not be able to supply the standard of legal services that clients deserve. The current level of exploitation is already limiting access to the legal profession, as students from under privileged backgrounds struggle to service education related debts on paralegal salaries.

Janes also commented that:

'We have drawn up a list of recommendations, including a recommended minimum salary for paralegals. We hope that the Law Society and the Legal Services Commission will take urgent action to ensure that the work force upon whom the future of legal aid will depend is treated fairly. We also believe that this issue cannot be divorced from the raft of changes being imposed on our legal aid system in great haste and urge caution and reflection in this process if the future of legal aid is to be truly sustainable.'

Notes for Editors

Young Legal Aid Lawyers are a group of lawyers who are committed to practicing in those areas of law, both criminal and civil, that have traditionally been publicly funded. The group includes those who are still studying and training as well as recently qualified barristers and solicitors.

YLAL was set up in early April 2005 and has two primary objectives:-

-To campaign for a better future for legal aid. This includes lobbying Government and responding to Government consultation papers and proposals from other relevant organisations, providing the perspective of the "next generation" of legal aid lawyers.

-To raise awareness of legal aid as a vital public service by producing articles for publication and hosting events. Part of this aim is to encourage new lawyers to work in legal aid. We provide a mentoring scheme and advertise relevant career opportunities on our web site (for members only) to help new lawyers develop a career in legal aid.

The full report is available at

http://www.younglegalaidlawyers.org/files/Releases_Responses/YLAL%20Paralegal%20Survey%20Report_280208.pdf

For more information please see our website at

www.younglegalaidlawyers.org or contact Laura Janes 07855 777 969 or Sian Davin on 07947 380 602. Any emails should be directed through the web site contacts page.