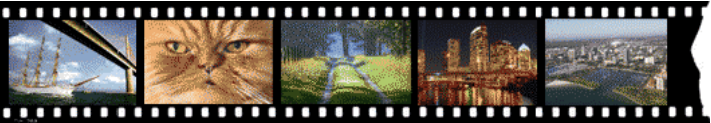


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**Paralegal kit marketer snubs court, FTC says**

[NORTH PINELLAS Edition]

St. Petersburg Times - St. Petersburg, Fla.

Author: JEFF TESTERMAN

Date: Nov 10, 2000

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**Document Text**

The Federal Trade Commission says it has evidence that Para-Link International has continued to market its work-at-home paralegal kits, even after a judge issued a temporary restraining order against the company alleging deceptive trade practices.

In papers filed in U.S. District Court in Tampa this week, FTC attorneys say one consumer bought a Para-Link "Perfect Divorce and Bankruptcy Kit" over the Internet on Oct. 24, seven days after a federal judge issued a restraining order against Para-Link and related companies called AAA Family Centers and Liberty Group of America.

In addition, FTC attorneys say that after the restraining order was issued, a seller of Para-Link kits received e-mails advising distributors to continue selling kits in order to raise money for Para-Link's "legal defense fund."

Headquartered in Sarasota, Para-link, AAA Family Centers and Liberty Group of America were established by Deborah R. Dolen, 37, who has been convicted of funneling money contributed to a charity for crippled children into the purchase of homes and luxury cars.

Using a blizzard of ads in local newspapers and over the Internet, Para-link promised consumers they could earn "over \$200 an hour" by purchasing work-at-home kits priced from \$395 to \$495. The ads said the kits would train buyers to work as paralegals, handling divorce and bankruptcy work for others. The pitch also said that after buyers completed training and passed an exam, Para-link would make case referrals to buyers, paying them \$30 for each case referral completed.

Federal investigators say the claims are deceptive and violate federal law.

The FTC says kits sometimes took weeks to arrive. Training software was flawed. Audiotapes were sometimes inaudible. Buyers had difficulty passing the paralegal qualifying exam. And few case referrals were made available to consumers who did complete training and pass the exam.

On Oct. 16, The FTC filed a federal lawsuit against Para-Link, AAA Family Centers, Liberty Group of America and Dolen outlining the deceptive trade practices and seeking a temporary restraining order. The order was issued Oct. 17.

A day later, a court-appointed receiver seized the books of the companies, changed the locks on company offices and contacted Internet Web site hosts to request that work-at-home kit sites be taken down.

After the restraining order was issued, the FTC says in court documents, it obtained additional evidence that Para-Link and the other companies had defrauded "roughly 3,000 consumers out of \$1.2- million."

In a report detailing the receiver's actions, FTC attorneys say investigators entering the companies' Sarasota offices found "nothing more than a boiler room" filled with phones, telemarketing scripts and sales records. Handwritten notes summarizing daily sales profits showed the company took in \$13,000 in the three days prior to the issuance of the restraining order.

The receiver also found records revealing that 3,000 work-at-home kits were sold in 2000 but only 383 case referrals were made, far from the 10 to 20 cases a week the companies had promised buyers.

The FTC says it has discovered that Para-Link has now evolved into "a multilevel marketing scheme," with kit buyers recruited to set up a nationwide network of distributorships.

Dolen's companies also have begun marketing credit repair services for an up-front payment of \$375, though charging in advance for such services is illegal, according to FTC attorneys.

The FTC now wants an injunction to prohibit Para-Link and sister companies from marketing work-at-home kits. Thursday, a federal magistrate set a hearing for Tuesday to hear

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arguments.

The Sarasota County Sheriff's Office and investigators with the U.S. Postal Service are investigating Dolen's companies.

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**Abstract** (Document Summary)

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