

Trained court reporters in demand

Those in the business report a shortage as certified schools dwindle.

By JOHN ANASTASI
STAFF WRITER

If a society becomes more litigious when squeezed by a tough economy, then court reporters — already an in-demand profession — could be poised for an even busier 2009.

“There’s absolutely a shortage, which is an advantage for the court reporters but, as a business owner, it’s tough,” said Karen Strehlow-Kmetz. “Historically, lawyers actually do better in bad times. You get people who slip on a grape in the supermarket who wouldn’t normally sue, but will sue [when times are tough].”

Strehlow-Kmetz runs Strehlow & Associates, a Newtown court reporting agency that subcontracts about 20 reporters who create verbatim transcripts mostly for commercial litigation, personal injury, medical malpractice and other cases.

The possible increase in litigation could be partially offset by attorneys who might opt to push for settlement rather than gamble on a sometimes-costly legal defense, she said. But even so, court reporters have been in

demand for years as the number of schools that train them dwindle.

According to the Virginia-based National Court Reporters Association, the number of NCRA-certified schools in the country dropped from more than 100 in 1996 to just 62 in 2007 and the number of students those schools graduated fell from about 1,000 in 1996 to fewer than 350 last year.

Bucks County Community College had a certificate program in stenography years ago but discontinued it due to lack of enrollment, said school spokeswoman Jean Dolan.

“There are a lot fewer people starting out in the field,” said Deborah Bello, director of Orleans Technical Institute, a Northeast Philadelphia school with a court reporting program. “There’s a desperate need for court reporters. It’s a hidden profession. No one knows about it.”

But the U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated that employment in the field would grow 25 percent between 2006 and 2016 — much faster than the average occupation.

“A lot of baby boomer [court] reporters are reaching retirement, so there’s definitely a supply-side **See COURT, Page E4**

issue,” said Marshall Jorpeland, communications director for the court reporters association. “The demand has continued to be strong. Court cases have grown ... as the population has grown.”

Jorpeland and Bello said they believe computer transcribing and voice-recognition software was still years away from being able to plant a microphone in the middle of a courtroom and having it accurately record and

transcribe every word correctly and attribute each word to the proper speakers.

Northampton’s Chiara Marchione-Long graduated from Orleans Technical Institute with a certification in court reporting after deciding to learn stenography after working in the financial aid office of a court reporting school.

“Once you’re comfortable with it, you can go on autopilot,” said Marchione-Long, who said she enjoys many of the proceedings she works. “It gives you a window into all sorts of professions — psychologists, doctors, neurosurgeons, pilots.”

She added that she was hired to take a college class online so she could transcribe lectures for a hearing-impaired student in real time. Marchione-Long said it was like getting an education for free.

Marchione-Long works at Strehlow & Associates. As a subcontractor, she can pick and choose the assignments she wants, make her own hours and do much of her transcribing work at home.

Bello said Orleans’ court reporting program has picked up students who are starting over after leaving finance jobs in the slowing economy.

“Everyone is uncomfortable with the recession,” said Bello, who is hoping a court reporting session that starts next month picks up some additional students. “That’s when people tend to go back to school.”

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