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## THE BAR ASSOCIATION'S BEST KEPT SECRET

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Want to know what is the Nassau County Bar Association's best kept secret? It is the Lawyer Referral Information Service.

As its name implies, the Lawyer Referral Information Service ("LRIS") refers potential clients to lawyers that are enrolled with the service. LRIS receives approximately 250 inquiries per week from the general public and other attorneys. That translates into well over 12,000 potential referrals each year. This treasure trove

of potential business is analyzed and referred to the lawyers enrolled with the LRIS.

Lawyers that enroll are placed on panels depending on their area of practice. There are more than fifty panels, not including sub-panels. Some panels, such as Matrimonial Law and Criminal Law, have a significant number of attorneys. Other panels, such as Animal Law and Maritime Law, have only two attorneys enrolled. There is no limit to the number of panels that an attorney can be on provided he or she has the requisite experience in that area of law.

Two long time NCBA employees, Pat Carbonaro and Carolyn Bonino, screen the inquiries to determine the appropriate panel to be considered for the referral and whether the inquirer actually needs legal assistance, as opposed to some other help. Then, Pat and Carolyn, using the LRIS computer database, select two attorneys to whom the potential client is referred. Selection is based on several factors, including the particular practice area involved (i.e. which panel to consult), geographic proximity of the potential client to the lawyer, and any other special considerations such as whether the potential client needs an attorney who is bilingual. Once the pool of prospective lawyers is narrowed through this process, two are selected on a rotating basis. After the referral, the LRIS is not involved in the lawyer-client relationship.

The LRIS has some strong advantages over other forms of attorney marketing. First, the Nassau County Bar Association is inherently credible and trustworthy to the general public and the Bar. Second, besides having a presence on the Internet and in the Yellow Pages, LRIS is permitted to place signs in the Nassau County Courts, advertising its service. That, alone, results in the LRIS receiving a significant number of inquiries. Third, there are only approximately 350 attorneys enrolled with LRIS out of a total bar membership of approximately 6,000 members. Less than ten (10%) percent of the bar association is receiving the benefit of membership

in the LRIS, which results in more referrals to the select few that have enrolled. Considering all this, and the costs of enrolling on the LRIS, it can be a very effective tool.

Enrollment on the LRIS has traditionally cost \$250 annually, plus an additional nominal fee for certain panels. For example, enrolling on the Criminal law panel costs an additional \$50. However, change is coming to the existing fee structure. Many other bar associations have, in addition to the registration fee, required the attorney receiving a referral to share with the bar association a percentage of the fees earned from the referral. The NCBA has been exploring a change in the LRIS' fee structure since 2009. In 2010, it received a report from the American Bar Association's Lawyer Referral and Information Service Standing Committee which recommended that NCBA institute a percentage fee referral system. This September, the NCBA Board of Directors voted to change the fee structure to be in line with many other bar associations' referral services across the country.

Effective January 1, 2013, the fee to enroll with the LRIS will be an annual registration fee of \$250.00 plus ten percent (10%) of fees collected from a referral, or any transaction, proceeding or action directly related to the matter referred. The first \$1,000 that the attorney earns on each referral is not subject to the referral fee, which is only triggered once the attorney collects more than \$1,000 on each referral. For example, if the attorney collects \$1,500 from a referral, he or she remits \$50 back to NCBA.

The percentage fee compares favorably to that charged by other referral services. By comparison, the New York County Lawyers' Association charges an escalating scale of six (6%) percent to eighteen (18%) percent. Moreover, the NYCLA's threshold for triggering a referral fee is only \$600.

Some may react negatively to sharing a small portion of his or her fee with the NCBA. However, lawyers commonly enter into referral arrangements with other lawyers. Oftentimes those arrangements involve a much greater percentage of the fee than the LRIS' ten (10%) percent.

The change in fee structure is designed to generate more revenue for NCBA so it can offer more and better services to its members. Also, a portion of the increased fees is expected to be devoted to increased advertising of the LRIS. That, in turn, should result in more potential referrals.

The LRIS is planning to hold seminars in January 2013 to discuss the fee change, as well as some other administrative and operational changes that are underway.

The LRIS is a great way to seek more business. For further information, or to enroll, contact Executive Director Keith Soressi or Pat Carbonaro (516-747-4070) to enroll.