



## Profile: Theresa Prater, RP, Treasurer, American Alliance of Paralegals, Inc., and Senior Paralegal, Rural/Metro Corporation, Scottsdale, AZ

[by Regan Morris]

A paralegal for 25 years, Theresa Prater is a founding member of the American Alliance of Paralegals, Inc. (AAPI). LawCrossing speaks with Ms. Prater about the association and her switch from law firm life into the corporate world.

Theresa Prater started her career as a high school teacher and has blended her love of education with her work as a paralegal. As a founding member of the AAPI, Prater is active in promoting legal education. She has helped design coursework for various paralegal programs and teaches frequently at seminars and as an adjunct professor.

A senior paralegal with Rural/Metro Corporation, a national provider of emergency and non-emergency medical transportation services, fire protection, and other safety-related services, Prater said working in the corporate world involves more responsibility than her past jobs in law firms.

"When you're in-house, you work for the company, but you also have to work for all the employees in the company. And you wear a lot of different hats," she said. "I deal with everybody from the CEO to our group president to mechanics in the field repairing ambulances."

She joined Rural/Metro in Scottsdale, AZ, four years ago and said it was a challenging transition from life at a law firm.

"It was really hard not to think about keeping time and not having interaction with other legal professionals," she said. "I work right now with one lawyer in-house, and he supervises my work. I report to him and tell him what's going on, but I have a lot of independent decision making."

Prater has the authority to settle cases within a certain amount of money, to sign off on legal bills, and to assign cases to outside counsel.

"It is more responsibility," she said. "And I get paid based on that responsibility. I could not go back to a private law firm and get paid what I do here. There's a big, big difference in the pay scale."

While her career now focuses on litigation in the medical field, Prater has worked in plaintiff personal injury and defense, medical malpractice, catastrophic injuries, and commercial litigation throughout her career.

She maintains contact with other legal professionals through various legal associations. She was the primary representative to the various paralegal associations from Arizona for several years and the National Federation of Paralegal Association's (NFPA) continuing legal education coordinator. Prater and other paralegals formed the AAPI to focus more on the individual paralegal. Prater is the treasurer of the group.

As active as she is, Prater fell into the profession. She earned a real estate license while living in Mississippi, and when she and her family moved to Florida, she answered an ad in the paper to do some real estate research for an attorney.

"I thought I was going in there to do some research at the records department of the courthouse and ended up doing all kinds of other stuff," she said. "I thought I was answering an ad for a part-time job."

The attorney hired her as a legal secretary, and when she moved back to Arizona a few years later, Prater enrolled in a paralegal program, working as a legal assistant full time and studying part time.

"When we moved to Arizona, it was right at a difficult time in the market here. It was right after the savings and loan debacle. The local law firms were all looking for business, and there were lawyers looking for jobs as paralegals," she said.

Prater also writes for various publications and is now working on an article for the San Diego Paralegal Association about compliance issues and medical records. She's also an advisory board member of Everest College and Long College, both ABA-approved paralegal programs.

When Prater first worked in a law firm, something clicked; and she knew she didn't want to go back to working as a high school teacher.

"It interested me. It was a constant learning experience, and there were always different areas I could go off into," she said. "I've done personal injury law, both plaintiff's and defense commercial litigation. I now work in the healthcare industry in-house; so I've pretty much run the gamut in 25 years."

She said she advises new paralegals to work hard, ask a lot of questions, and take their responsibility seriously.

"When you make a mistake, admit it, take responsibility for your actions," she said. "It's part of our ethical standard. If you make a mistake, own up to it; and if it causes a problem, then be willing to own up to it. People will help you get through whatever the consequences."