Your Lawyer and Accredited Specialist Certification

A quick glance through the "attorneys" section of the yellow page directory of any major metropolitan area will make it clear that many lawyers specialize in one or more kinds of legal matters.

Like other professionals, many lawyers concentrate their practices to certain fields of law. In fact, most specialize to some degree by limiting the range of matters they handle.

An increasing number of lawyers are choosing to be recognized as having special knowledge and experience by becoming certified specialists in certain fields of law.

Lawyers who are certified as specialists have been recognized by independent professional certifying organizations as having an enhanced level of skill, as well as substantial involvement in established legal specialty areas. Certifying organizations require lawyers to demonstrate special training, experience and knowledge to ensure that recognition as a certified specialist is meaningful and reliable.

Specialty certification programs available to lawyers are growing both in numbers and variety. In 1993, the American Bar Association (ABA) adopted a set of voluntary national standards, along with a set of procedures to accredit specialty certification programs.

The standards were designed to establish reasonable and valid criteria to accredit programs that grant specialty certification to qualified lawyers and to provide state authorities with a basis for approving programs which seek recognition in their jurisdictions.

What Does ABA Accreditation Mean?

ABA accreditation signifies that a certifying organization's program has been reviewed by the ABA and found to meet the Standards for Accreditation of Specialty Certification Programs for Lawyers.

The accreditation standards were developed to provide both lawyers and clients with a way to identify those certification programs that employ adequate methods and criteria to reliably recognize experienced legal specialists.

To obtain ABA accreditation for a program, a certifying organization must show, among other things, that:

- It is dedicated to the identification of lawyers who exhibit an advanced level of skill and expertise, and that it is dedicated to the development and improvement of the professional competence of lawyers.
- It possesses the organizational and financial resources to carry out its certification program on a continuing basis, and that the key personnel have - by experience, education and professional background - the ability to direct and carry out such programs.
- The requirements and procedures for certifying lawyers are not arbitrary, can be clearly understood and easily applied, and that they do not discriminate against any lawyers seeking certification on the basis of race, national origin, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or age.
- Each specialty area in which certification is offered is an area of the law in which significant numbers of lawyers regularly practice and is described in terms which are understandable to both lawyers and potential clients.
ABA Accredited Specialty Certification Programs Require Their Lawyers To:

- Provide evidence of substantial involvement in the specialty area.
- Provide references from lawyers and judges.
- Pass a written examination covering the substantive and procedural law in the specialty area.
- Demonstrate completion of at least 36 hours of continuing legal education courses in the specialty area in the three-year period proceeding the lawyer's application for certification.
- Be admitted to practice in one or more states and be a members in good standing; and
- Be re-certified at least every five years and be subject to revocation or certification if they fail to meet program requirements.

How Do I Know Whether My Lawyer Is Certified By An Accredited Program?

Look for the statement, "Accredited by the American Bar Association to certify lawyers in the specialty area(s) of ____________" in the program's descriptive materials or on the certificate furnished to your lawyers.

For a copy of the ABA Accreditation Standards on Information on Lawyer Specialty Certification contact:

American Bar Association
Standing Committee on Specialization
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