

NCAJ gives legal assistants a vote on board

By **GUY LORANGER, Staff Writer**
guy.loranger@nc.lawyersweekly.com

The N.C. Advocates for Justice has voted to give its legal assistants division a vote on its board of governors.

During the NCAJ's annual convention last week at Sunset Beach, members voted overwhelmingly to also allow legal assistants to join the organization with "verification" from an NCAJ member attorney, rather than "sponsorship," and to allow LAD members to hold non-executive committee chairs in other divisions.

The membership vote came after the relevant changes to the NCAJ's bylaws were approved by its membership committee in December 2008 and by its board of governors in January.

According to NCAJ officials, no other similar organization in

the country has granted its legal assistants such voting rights and membership privileges.

"It's just another example of the support and dedication that the attorneys have given our section and the support that they have given us in all we do," said Rhonda Rodenbough, a Winston-Salem paralegal, 18-year NCAJ member and current chair of the LAD.

With 554 members, the LAD is the third-largest section in the NCAJ, trailing only the criminal defense and auto torts sections.

Prior to last week's vote, the LAD chair had a seat on the board of governors but no voting power.

Although the LAD was formed in 1983, the topic of paralegal voting did not really surface until the NCAJ decided to change its name from the N.C. Academy of Trial Lawyers last year, said the

LAD's immediate past chair, Karen Parrish of Greensboro.

"They looked at the bylaws and revisited the idea that the chair didn't have a vote," said Parrish, an NCAJ member since 1992. "I can't say enough how much everybody has been open to it."

Dick Taylor, the NCAJ's chief executive officer, told North Carolina Lawyers Weekly earlier this year that giving the LAD chair a vote appeared to be "completely non-controversial" among its members.

"The board thought that these people are valuable, and their point of view is valuable, and they ought to vote and participate."

The new voting and membership rights will give LAD members "a broader base for how we can be involved in the Advocates for Justice as a whole," Rodenbough said.

She also hopes that the NCAJ's move will spur the state's other legal organizations to afford greater privileges to its legal assistant members.

Last year, for instance, the N.C. Bar Association voted down a proposal for its paralegal division to have a vote on its board of governors that, if approved, would have been a first for the country's bar associations.

The NCBA did, however, open up access for paralegals to participate on its executive committee and the audit and finance committee.

"I'm hoping it will encourage them to say, 'We need to see the worth in our paralegals as well. We need to really think about what they do for us on a daily basis, and about what they do for our clients,'" Rodenbough said.

Editor's note: Staff writer Diana Smith contributed to this report.



Rodenbough



Parrish