

Lawyers, Too, Now Advertising

By MARK MATTHEWS

Lawyers are moving to the suburbs. And with them are storefront offices, advertising and the state's first franchise-type operation with "legal services at prices middle-income families can afford."

Those words appeared recently in an ad for the Legal Clinics of Cawley, Schmidt & Sharrow, which has 18 offices in five states and the District of Columbia. The latest, run by lawyer Eric M. Doroshow, is in the Apollo Shopping Center on the Kirkwood Highway.

Doroshow is alone but is affiliated

with Cawley, Schmidt & Sharrow. Other lawyers have advertised their availability, and at least one other lawyer, John B. Kennedy, has advertised his basic prices.

While more traditional practitioners may not like it, few will deny these changes promise to introduce at least a temporary element of competition into the formerly quiet and often clubby profession.

Since last November, when the Delaware Supreme Court spelled out rules for lawyer advertising, five offices have opened in the Wilmington suburbs, according to the Delaware Bar Association.

Of these, four firms advertised their new operations and two have

advertised prices.

Without advertising, says Kennedy, it would have been more difficult to establish his shopping-center law office in Claymont. Ads, lawyers say, can notify potential clients of a lawyer's location much faster than referrals and word-of-mouth.

Although stores and industry began to follow middle-class residents to the suburbs in the late 1950s, lawyers are only now beginning to leave downtown locations that offer easy access to federal and state courts, law libraries and other lawyers.

Neal Phillips, who recently opened a suburban office at the

intersection of Foulk and Silver-side roads, said, "One of the problems for a young lawyer, the way the legal job market is, is that you have to offer something that's not offered elsewhere — like a convenient location."

Arlen Mekler, who recently advertised his new office across from the Midway Shopping Center on Kirkwood Highway (he maintains a downtown Wilmington office), reports the new site has "worked out beautifully." Phillips, however, described his business to date as "erratic."

Mekler is typical of the new

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Attorney Eric M. Doroshow advertises his prices

Staff Photo by Ron Dubick

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suburban lawyers willing to see clients in the evening and on weekends.

Like two other lawyers who advertise — Ruth M. Ferrell in Wilmington and A. Gary Wilson in Pike Creek Center — Mekler does not advertise his prices, although Delaware rules allow it.

The two who have listed their prices claim rates considerably lower than average for basic legal services.

Kennedy's ads in the Town Talk shopper list prices of \$280 for uncontested divorces, \$25 for basic wills, \$15 for wills for senior citizens and \$15 for a power-of-attorney.

But ads placed for Doroshow's office go beyond other ads published in the state in their promotional quality. They list prices, feature large white type on a dark background and show a picture of a couple seated in front of a lawyer's desk.

Doroshow, a 28-year-old former Community Legal Aid Society lawyer who also was an assistant Wilmington city solicitor, has opened a branch of what is virtually a legal franchise.

The Cawley, Schmidt & Sharrow clinics started opening in mid-1977 with the stated aim of providing moderately-priced legal help to middle-income, suburban families.

As Doroshow describes it, the operation combines economies with streamlined office procedures to allow clinic lawyers a high volume of clients while maintaining a uniform standard of quality. It's the McDonald's idea adapted to the legal profession.

After being screened at clinic headquarters in Baltimore and found acceptable as a clinic lawyers, Doroshow agreed to pay a "service fee" of several hundred dollars (he is still negotiating the price) to learn the clinic legal pattern.

Key elements are a series of forms designed to reduce office paperwork and a two-inch-thick

manual giving step-by-step instructions on how to pursue a variety of cases.

The forms allow office assistants to gather basic information needed for a case, saving the lawyer's time for more complicated legal questions, Doroshow says.

One of them, for personal injury cases, also suggests the best time in a client interview for offering to represent other parties injured in a traffic accident.

The manual offers instruction on how to handle criminal, domestic relations, estate, corporate and negligence cases "from start to finish," Doroshow says.

The franchise concept extends to bulk buying of advertising and of office supplies, such as stationary. The ad placed by Doroshow this week was prepared for Cawley, Schmidt & Sharrow's clinics by an advertising agency in Alexandria, Va.

Clinic offices prominently post a fee schedule for basic services: Uncontested divorce without property settlement, \$150; uncontested bankruptcy for an individual with no assets, \$275; bankruptcy for a husband and wife with no assets, \$550; uncontested name change, \$50; a simple, uncomplicated will, \$35, and business incorporation, \$175.

The concept of flat rates has already begun to draw fire from the Delaware legal establishment.

John M. Bader, chairman of the Specialization Committee of the Delaware Bar Association and a member of the DBA's Advertising Committee, recently branded the concept "fallacious."

In a letter to the American Bar Association publication, The Bar Leader, Bader said, "It is a pernicious error to classify commonplace legal services, such as wills, uncontested divorces, voluntary bankruptcies and the like as 'routine.'"

Even the simplest case, he wrote, requires some sort of special treatment by a lawyer. In a name-change case, for instance, "I take the time to explain to the client some of the ramifications of

a legal name change. Occasionally, this results in the individual changing his mind and not going through the procedure at all. Divorces and bankruptcies obviously involve these same considerations."

The Baltimore clinic's \$35 fee for a simple will, Bader said in an interview, is "a perfect example of the kind of fee I could charge for a will if I had my paralegal (assistant) do it, leaving aside any explanation of estate planning." Advertising of fixed prices, he maintains, could lead to lawyers taking a "shoddy shortcut."

Doroshow concedes the clinic concept is aimed at making the handling of simple cases more efficient, and said he would function as a more traditional lawyer, charging higher fees, with more complicated cases. Some detailed cases would be referred to a specialist.

But, he says, a possible development in the clinic concept might be to have those specialists available at clinic headquarters to guide branch attorneys in cases that would otherwise be out of their depth.

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