



## Sharon Robertson; Paralegal, North Carolina Prisoner Legal Services, Inc.; Linville Falls, NC

[Charisse Dengler]

As a paralegal for the North Carolina Prisoner Legal Services' (NCPLS) Safe and Humane Jails Project, Sharon Robertson has a job that would make most people nervous.

"One of the first questions I was asked during my interview with NCPLS was whether I could handle talking to a person who has been charged or convicted of a serious crime inside a prison or jail without a guard physically standing in the room," she said.

"I can still recall the first time I was escorted into the bowels of a prison unit to interview a client and heard the clang of the steel doors close behind me as I walked into prison for the first time. I prayed there wouldn't be an y electrical blackouts while I was in there."

However, Robertson said she has had less than a handful of experiences in which an inmate was anything but polite and respectful.

"I treat the inmate with the same respect as you would any person and provide them with all the professional courtesy they deserve; and in return, the inmate returns this same respect. Every person is entitled to be treated with a certain degree of respect. I also make sure not to place myself in any situation that compromises my safety when interviewing the inmate."

NCPLS is a nonprofit organization that makes legal services available to more than 37,000 inmates in 78 North Carolina state prisons and more than 250,000 people in the state's 98 county jails. The services Robertson and her colleagues provide range from advice to representation.

"It is NCPLS' mission to ensure that inmates in the state prisons and county jails are provided the basic necessities of life and

that the courts accord them the safeguards and guarantees provided by law," Robertson said. "In these ways, we act on behalf of our citizens to enforce societal standards of morality and decency to ensure humane and lawful treatment of people in custody of the state. Prisoner advocates, such as myself, provide the checks and balances that are critical to our justice system. One needs to look no further than the Abu Ghraib prison incident in Iraq to appreciate the importance of our work."

Robertson, who has been with NCPLS for 16 years, uses her expertise in civil rights to assist the civil team.

"The area of civil rights law I deal with focuses primarily on conditions of confinement for pretrial detainees, which include complaints about inadequate medical services, substandard or dangerous living conditions, and threats to physical health and safety from other inmates or abuse by prison officials," she said.

"My responsibilities include reviewing and responding to correspondence; identifying legal issues; conducting investigations, which involves interviewing clients and witnesses; obtaining information and facts from various institutions and agencies; researching legal questions; organizing and maintaining client files; monitoring conditions—through records reviews and inspection tours—in the 98 county jails in North Carolina," she said. "I also provide litigation support, which includes interacting closely with clients and witnesses, particularly during trials."

Robertson said it is sometimes a challenge to communicate with the inmates because many have limited reading and writing skills. However, it is this challenge and others that make her position with NCPLS rewarding.

"I enjoy working for NCPLS because of the challenges, the assistance I provide our clients, and the respect I am given by my peers and colleagues," she said. "Each client inquiry and file presents a new set of factual issues that challenge my substantive knowledge and reasoning abilities and stimulate my growth and professional knowledge."

In addition to her work for NCPLS, Robertson is currently serving as Co-Chair of the North Carolina Paralegal Association's Pro Bono Committee and as Region 2 Director for the National Association of Legal Assistants. In the past, she has served as the President of the NCPA and Chair of the Legal Assistants Division of the North Carolina Bar Association.

"In my opinion, membership in a paralegal association is vital and essential for professional growth and career development," she said. "Paralegal associations are in the forefront in establishing the standards for the paralegal profession through the creation of ethical codes of conduct and national certification examinations. My membership in various state associations and the National Association of Legal Assistants has provided me with information regarding the paralegal profession that I would not have learned elsewhere."



Robertson said it was after her first statewide paralegal association seminar that she realized being a paralegal was more than just another job and began to view it as her career.

“Association membership shows your employer—and your family—that you consider your career a profession and that you care enough about your profession to further your own career development,” she said.

Robertson also feels that the interpersonal and leadership skills she has learned through the many associations she has been a part of have been instrumental in her growth as a paralegal.

“Another benefit to membership association has been the...leadership skills learned by working as a committee member, committee chair, and in various positions as an officer that have served me well in my job,” she said. “My involvement in paralegal associations provided me with a smaller area to learn public-speaking skills and the art of working with others in a group that have carried into my job.”

Robertson, who has been a paralegal for more than 21 years, advises paralegal students to make sure they are prepared before entering the workplace.

“Most employers are now seeking individuals who have earned a four-year degree...and my advice to students would be to continue their education and earn their bachelor’s degree,” she said. “I would also suggest that students should consider taking the Certified Legal Assistants Exam, sponsored by the National Association of Legal Assistants, upon graduation.”