

Convention Chaos and Kudos

By: Corinne Deering, RP, NFPA Secondary

The National Federation of Paralegal Associations (“NFPA”) held their 2013 Annual Convention in Hartford, Connecticut, from Thursday, October 3rd through Sunday, October 6th. I attended the Convention as the Secondary NFPA Representative for the Vermont Paralegal Organization. The Primary NFPA Representative, Diane Brown, and the VPO President, Carie Tarte also attended the convention. The VPO was able to send Pamela Keats as an observer to the convention on Saturday to experience the policy meeting where the decisions are made on the agenda topics and proposed bylaw resolutions.

Convention was a whirlwind experience of non-stop activities, meetings, votes and re-votes, parliamentary procedure, and Robert’s Rules of Order. There really was no time to see the sights of Hartford. I returned to Vermont exhausted. Kudos must go out to the Central Connecticut Paralegal Association and their convention committee for all the work done to host this national convention and do such a good job. Everything seemed to go smoothly.

We started our convention activities by meeting the early arrivers for dinner on Wednesday night at the Arch Street Tavern. We overtook the Tavern, met new people and had great food. Not only did the NFPA convention attendees meet at the Tavern, but also the attendees of the National Public Records Research Association (“NPRRA”) who were having their convention in Hartford as well. We met Ruth from Tennessee, Loretta from Oregon and Blair Wagner, the President of the NPRRA who became known as the “Purple Shirt Guy.”

Thursday was a day full of concurrent continuing legal education sessions. I attended: Evidence & Expert Testimony – Best Practices; Medicare Set-Asides & Special Needs Trusts as Settlement Planning Tools; Legal Research on the Web – Tricks & Best Practices for the Litigation Paralegal; and Trial Preparation, Trial Demonstrative & Electronic Exhibits. By the end of the day, my mind was swimming. In between sessions, we had approximately 15 minutes to visit with the exhibitors and vendors, to make sure we got our vendor bingo cards completed, and to guess the names of artists of famous works of art to win prizes. The keynote luncheon presentation consisted of a panel of four paralegals speaking on career transitioning into non-traditional alternative roles. We finished up the day with a NFPA workshop on strategic planning, a reception with the exhibitors and the NFPA Board of Directors’ Meeting. By 7:30, we were craving real food and some quiet time, so we slipped out of the Board Meeting and ventured into Hartford in search of food. On the recommendation of the hotel staff, we found ourselves walking a few blocks to Trumbell Kitchen where we had a delicious dinner and stumbled upon Purple Shirt Guy and some of his NPRRA conventioners.

Friday morning started early for the First Timer’s to the Convention with an early morning meeting to discuss the do’s and don’ts of parliamentary procedure and Robert’s Rules. We met with our Mentors and discussed any questions we had about voting procedures and speaking rules. Our next stop was the day-long Regional Meetings where we met with the other delegates from Region V. We discussed suggested improvements to the NFPA website, the need for members to volunteer for NFPA committees and coordinator positions, and the agenda topics

and proposed bylaw resolutions to be voted upon at the policy meeting. The meetings concluded with a Treasurer's meeting to review the NFPA budget and to go over any questions any of the delegates had for the NFPA Treasurer.

We closed Friday night at the Hartford Club with a joint NFPA and NPRRA social event including dinner, entertainment, dancing and caricatures. The night began with people bingo games forcing us to mix and mingle with other NFPA convention attendees and members of the NPRRA to fill our bingo cards, finding someone who owned more than 30 pairs of shoes to someone who spoke Dutch. Part of the entertainment was a local attorney who played the piano and sang comical songs he had written about the fun and games of the legal industry. Fun was had by all and the dancing shoes got a good workout. We said our goodbyes to our new friends from NPRRA – Ruth and Blair, the Purple Shirt Guy.

Saturday and Sunday morning were spent in the Policy Meeting debating and voting upon the agenda topics and proposed bylaw resolutions brought before the NFPA Board. There were six agenda topics and three bylaw resolutions proposed. Two of the bylaw proposals were not officially brought to the floor of the Policy Meeting and therefore withdrawn from debate and consideration. The following are the topics discussed and voted upon:

a) NFPA put into place a special election procedure to fill any NFPA Board vacancy which occurs during the Board member's term of office. The procedures were submitted to the NFPA Board at the 2013 summer Board meeting and were submitted to the delegates for approval by a majority vote of the voting members at the convention. The agenda topic passed without discussion.

b) The agenda topic was raised requesting the expansion of the eligibility requirements to sit for the Paralegal Advance Competency Exam® (PACE®) to include eligibility through having held a CORE Registered Paralegal™ (CRP™) credential for two years or more, with a successful renewal, remaining a CRP™ in good standing, and including at least six (6) years of substantive paralegal experience. Despite expecting that this agenda topic would have a considerable amount of discussion, there was none. The topic went directly to a vote and failed to pass. On Sunday morning, a motion was made to reconsider the topic. A majority vote was required to bring the topic back to the floor for reconsideration. This was a very tight vote, but the motion for reconsideration failed so the topic was not brought back to the floor for further consideration.

c) An agenda topic was raised asking NFPA to establish an annual "Ethics Week" featuring various activities to highlight the importance of ethics to the paralegal profession. NFPA was asked to designate the first week on May as Ethics Week. This agenda topic passed without discussion.

d) An agenda topic was raised asking NFPA to suspend all outstanding and future payments to the Foundation for the Advancement of the Paralegal Profession ("FAPP") of the net profits from PACE® materials, registration fees and continuing legal education credits for seminars and directing said funds be reallocated to promote both NFPA certification exams and for any other means that NFPA Board of Directors deems appropriate to support NFPA's goals

and professional growth. Discussion ensued about NFPA's obligations and whether or not NFPA was legally bound by contract to make these payments to FAPP. It was reported that there was no contract with FAPP and that the payments were more of a charitable contribution. Some delegates felt that NFPA had a responsibility to support FAPP and were concerned about dismissing a policy that prior delegates felt was important. There was a minor change to the language of the agenda and the vote was called. The vote to suspend payments to FAPP passed.

This vote was brought to the floor following the vote on the attempted increase in dues to NFPA which failed. I believe that the majority of the delegates realized that NFPA just did not have the financial means to continue to support FAPP, especially without the proposed increase in dues.

e) The agenda topic asking the NFPA Board to form an *ad hoc* committee to explore the possibility of NFPA drafting and publishing a "State of the Paralegal Professional Report" every four years passed. The report would provide a detailed analysis of events and trends affecting the paralegal professional. There was discussion on this topic, the cost involved, and the intent of what was being requested. A motion was made and passed to modify the topic that the committee would provide a "recommendation" instead of a "report" on the feasibility of having a State of the Profession Report.

f) An agenda topic was raised requesting that NFPA issue a public position statement against the practice of paralegal employers hiring disbarred and/or suspended attorneys for paralegal positions. This position paper would be consistent with prior resolutions of the NFPA delegates and opinions of the Ethics Board, and would further protect the consuming public and raise NFPA in the eyes of the rest of the legal community. This agenda topic passed after some debate about the differences between disbarred and suspended, and whether or not the wording of the agenda topic should be modified. It was also questioned as to the procedure for having such a position statement issued. The resolution was drafted asking a committee be formed and a position statement be issued by the Board.

g) A proposed amendment to the Bylaws called for an increase of \$5.00 in dues to be assessed against all Voting Member Associations. It would result in voting members' dues to NFPA being raised to \$25 and student members' dues being raised to \$20. This issue was hotly debated and led to the most discussion at the policy meeting. Several compromises were proposed and suggested revisions to the proposed amendment were attempted. It was clear to many that the increase in dues was a last resort for NFPA and that cutbacks were continually being made. Several associations indicated that they would not be passing along any increase to their members right away. Other associations were concerned that the increase would cause their members undue hardship and that they could possibly lose members. Some members of the NFPA board expressed concerns that the current and impending financial condition would not allow board members to attend very important meetings and be liaisons with the ABA and AAFPE, and would restrict NFPA's ability to update the PACE exam. Ultimately, after two votes, the amendment still failed to pass.

While at times it was a struggle to keep up with the changes that were proposed on the floor of the policy meeting, we heard that we had an “easy” policy meeting this year. In the past, they have had caucus meetings into the wee hours of the morning to hash out revisions to the amendments and proposals. It was surprising to learn just how carefully proposed bylaw amendments and agenda topics must be crafted. One word can lead to a wealth of debate and discussion. This year there were no caucus meetings and Sunday’s policy meeting was finished much earlier than expected. Saturday night we enjoyed dinner with the other delegates from Region V at the City Steam Brewery in Hartford.

Diane and I learned a lot at our first NFPA Convention, and most of all, we got an idea of what lies ahead for the VPO hosting the national convention in October 2016. We have a significant amount of work ahead of us, but if Connecticut can do it, so can we! Before the passing of the torch to Dallas, we learned that more than 100 people attended the CLE sessions, 66 delegates, 3 local officers, and 34 observers attended the policy meeting, 132 people were participating in convention for the first time, 41 associations were voting at the policy meeting, and 54 people attended the pro bono conference.

The 2014 NFPA Annual Convention is in Dallas, 2015 is in Honolulu, Hawaii, and 2016 is in Burlington. New Orleans was the only association to bid to host the 2017 convention. The 2014 Joint Conference (Regulation/Leadership/Paralegal Certification) is being held in Boston in March. We hope that you all will step up and assist us with planning a great convention in 2016; we will need all the help we can get!!