

## Licensing regulator keeps safety in hand

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There may come a time in a consumer's life when he really should know whether the acupuncturist about to stick him actually knows what he's doing.

Or, for that matter, whether the nail salon she's planning to visit has had any problems with previous customers, or if the electrician she's just hired is properly credentialed to get the job done.

Those professions are among 33 that are licensed and monitored by the Division of Registrations within the Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies, a little-known organization that can provide consumers with a wealth of helpful information.

"What we do is public protection. It's the main reason we are here," said Rosemary McCool, director of the division and herself a licensed nurse.

"We make sure only competent people are licensed. We discipline them or remediate disputes to ensure they do their jobs properly."

The division does this through 21 different boards — such as the Board of Accountancy that regulates CPAs and the Board of Medical Examiners, which oversees doctors and physician's assistants — whose job it is to mete discipline and approve new practitioners. Each board is composed of volunteer members of the public and professionals from the industry being regulated, all 200 of them appointed by the governor.

Last year, the division issued 27,000 licenses, certifications and registrations — there are more than 295,000 total licenses — revenue from which makes up most of its \$23 million annual budget. It employs 169 people.

Each licensee is evaluated and checked against national databases to ensure the holder does not have a discipline problem in another state.

Though not every complaint — and the agency got nearly 4,000 of them last year — results in discipline, consumers can still find out how many were filed against a licensee and their results, a valuable tool in deciding whether to hire them.

In most cases, consumers can see a professional's license history going back years. A complete history of complaints, including those deemed unfounded, is not available for all professions. State law limits disclosure in some professions — medical among them — only to verified complaints.

In the last fiscal year, which ended June 31, the boards together revoked the licenses of 130 individuals, suspended 72 of them, wrote 352 letters of admonition and entered into 801 agreements to stop questionable behavior, McCool said.

Filing a complaint is easy, though it still has a couple of kinks, McCool admits. Complaint forms from the division's website must be printed, filled out and mailed in. The division is working on allowing consumers to file complaints electronically. Some complaints may require a person to release personal records to division investigators, such as those about an accountant and how financial affairs were handled.

Complaints are not usually accepted over the telephone — exceptions are typically made for the elderly or individuals with language barriers — and anonymous ones are discouraged, McCool said.

"Unless there's enough information on its face to investigate, we'd prefer a signed complaint since people have the right to know their accusers," she said.

But that's not all the division does. Inspectors also evaluate certain facilities to ensure they are safe and ready for the public.

"We will inspect places such as pharmacies to ensure they can be opened," McCool said, "and then we'll do the same for tramways at ski resorts."

So why are some seemingly innocuous professions regulated, such as barbers and cosmetologists? Merely to ensure a good haircut?

"They sometimes use very strong chemicals that can be a health hazard," McCool said. "We've started a new seminar for cleaning and disinfecting, so these establishments know how to do this properly and avoid any problems."

More professions are added by the legislature each year. This year, landscape architects joined the ranks of the regulated.

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