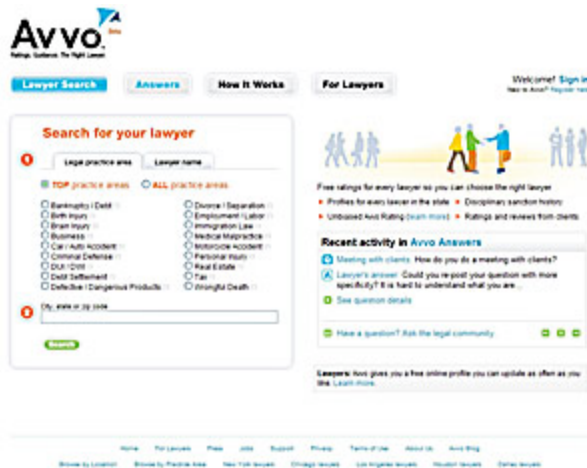


N.J. Judiciary Releases Lawyer Data To Online Directory for Consumers
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By Mary Pat Gallagher
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Avvo Homepage

It took about a year of dickering, but the New Jersey judiciary has finally released registration data on the state's 66,443 active lawyers to a Seattle company that wants to post it on the Web.

The court handed over a disk - with attorney names, addresses, telephone numbers, dates of admission and identification numbers - to Avvo Inc., which runs a consumer-oriented site, www.avvo.com, that seeks to address the difficulty that the average person has in finding a lawyer when the need arises.

In an accompanying letter, Supreme Court Clerk Stephen Townsend said the "Court decided to relax the confidentiality provision of Rule 1:20-1(c)," which governs attorney registration, and was providing data on all active lawyers.

The data, received Monday, will be included in attorney profiles that will be uploaded by the end of June, says Avvo president Mark Britton. The profiles will also contain disciplinary histories and information culled from Internet search engines.

Avvo - derived from "avvocato," Italian for lawyer - lists more than 655,000 lawyers in nine states, including California, Illinois, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Texas, as well as the District of Columbia. On Wednesday, Avvo will add another 116,000 lawyers from Florida and Massachusetts.

The site rates lawyers from 1 (extreme caution) to 10 (superb) based on an algorithm that weighs length of practice, professional achievements and disciplinary history.

Lawyer-rich New Jersey was meant to be part of the nine-state launch last June, but Avvo was unable to obtain registration data, despite repeated requests.

Townsend told Avvo the judiciary was behind schedule in compiling an electronic database of lawyers and would not make the information available to outside vendors until the job was done.

Avvo persisted, asking for the underlying public records data "in any reasonable form." Townsend responded that "the system to collect and maintain that information accurately is not in place." Once it did attain "apparent reliability," it would be made available only to court employees at first to confirm its reliability, though the plan is to provide access through the judiciary's Web site. He told Avvo he was unable to give the company a date when the information would be available.

On Jan. 31, Townsend suggested Avvo petition the Court "to relax its existing Rules and policies in this area."

Avvo petitioned on March 13, pointing to New Jersey's strong presumption of public access and the absence of confidentiality concerns around licensing data and noting that "every one of the 29 other states Avvo has contacted make attorney licensing data available to the public, in many cases in a convenient electronic form on CD."

On Monday, Avvo received a CD, Townsend's letter and a bill for \$305.

Court spokeswoman Winnie Comfort says Avvo asked for the information in a way that was "not immediately available" and the Court accommodated the company by providing "something we have that would normally not be distributed."