

Immigration law migrates to Orlando

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With the surge of immigrants into Central Florida comes the phalanx of immigration attorneys.

Orlando criminal attorney Mark NeJame is branching into immigration law, and has assembled what he calls a "dream team," including a former Immigration and Naturalization Services attorney and a former aide to a U.S. senator.

Lisa Krueger Khan, who has practiced immigration law here since 2001, relies on word-of-mouth and her catchy Web site -- lisavisa.com -- to get clients.

Immigration law is big business. And Orlando is poised to become a hub. In Central Florida, the number of immigration attorneys has more than doubled in 10 years to nearly 100, according to the American Immigration Lawyers Association. Orlando has 60 immigration attorneys in the association's directory. La Prensa, a weekly Spanish newspaper in Orlando, had 14 ads for immigration attorneys.

The surge mirrors Central Florida's immigrant population growth. Sixteen percent of greater Orlando is foreign-born, according to the American Community Survey, a product of the U.S. Census.

Another reason for the increase in immigration firms: ICE --Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Created in March 2003 by combining the law-enforcement arms of the former Immigration and Naturalization Service and the former U.S. Customs Service and bringing them under the investigative branch of the Department of Homeland Security, ICE has stepped up enforcement in many regions. The agency works closely with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) -- so when folks are denied green cards or other forms of residency, ICE agents come knocking.

Gail Seeram, an immigration attorney with nine years of experience, has seen the number of immigration attorneys swell in Orlando. She's also seen many leave when they realize the volume of work involved.

Unlike other areas of law, in the wake of 9-11, immigration law is changing constantly.

"It's a highly technical area," said Seeram, who spends an hour or two each workday just keeping up with the changes in law and procedure.

While attorneys agree there is money to be made in immigration law, it isn't as profitable as other areas of law such as personal injury and medical malpractice. Payment for a deportation case averages \$5,000-\$10,000, but can go as high as \$20,000 with appeals and complications.

Many clients don't have the money to pay high-priced attorneys, said Philip M. Zyne, who at one time ran one of the biggest firms in Miami -- a team of 20. He now practices in Orlando.

Zyne said the key is volume.

Some clients, though, do have the money to pay -- and they will sell their house and car to pay attorneys.

"It's their lifeline to citizenship," said Mayra Uribe-Sutton, an immigration specialist who worked in Sen. Bill Nelson's office and is joining NeJame's team.

NeJame also brought on board Dan Vara, the former INS lead attorney who helped reunite Elian Gonzalez with his Cuban father in 2000, and Rajan Joshi, a deportation lawyer with connections in the United Kingdom.

NeJame also plans to handle deportation cases. He will still practice criminal law, but said he wanted to create the new division in his firm -- NeJame, LaFay, Jancha, Barker and Tumarkin -- because he is of Lebanese heritage and receives calls asking for immigration help.

Krueger Khan's desk brims with forms for clients from all over the world.

Central Florida doesn't have the number of immigration firms as does Miami, but that likely will change.

A field office for immigration applications at Lee Vista Boulevard and Corporate Centre Boulevard is to open in summer 2008. It will aim to help handle the crush of applicants in Florida seeking legalization and citizenship.

In 2005, the Orlando sub-office received about 13,700 citizenship applications and more than 14,000 legalization requests.

The need for attorneys is also evidenced by the backlog at the George C. Young U.S. Courthouse and Federal Building in downtown Orlando. The court has one of the longest waits in the country, with more than 9,000 immigrants waiting to plead cases.

Babita Persaud can be reached at bpersaud@orlandosentinel.com or 407-420-6088.