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New group launches website to help lawyers find, book neutrals

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To help law firms find experienced arbitrators and mediators, the National Academy of Distinguished Neutrals (NADN) created an Illinois chapter and a website.

The group, known as the Illinois Academy of Mediators & Arbitrators (IAMA), launched its free site — IllinoisMediators.org — last week to assist firms in finding a neutral by identifying practice criteria or dispute types and navigating a roster of 28 mediators and arbitrators.

Most of the academy's members publish their availability calendars online.

The online schedules save litigators "hundreds upon hundreds of hours of phone tag," said Darren Lee, executive director of NADN.

"Everyone can sing from the same hymn sheet by going to the database and e-mailing that availability around," Lee said. "And within an hour or two, they can settle on a date, and it is locked down."

IAMA members William E. Hartgering, Stanley P. Sklar, Robert W. Berliner Jr. and Faustin A. Pipal Jr. were appointed as the executive committee to select the Illinois chapter's other members.

Pipal, a partner at Pipal & Berg LLP, spends about 80 percent of his time as a mediator specializing in personal-injury, product-liability and employment matters for Resolute Systems LLC.

"I really feel like I've found my calling," he said. "You make peace for people, and by the end of day, it's a release for folks to be out of the system. It's very gratifying."

The online scheduling, Pipal said, makes "a lot of sense in my business."

"Getting people to the table and getting all the schedules coordinated is such a huge part of it," he said. "And the online calendar makes that easy

because you can see when the mediator is available and block out a date."

A neutral's membership in the association is by invitation only with a peer-nomination vote and an extensive client-interview vetting procedure.

A mediator must complete at least 200 mediations and an arbitrator must complete at least 20 arbitrations in commercial or civil litigation.

The top 5 to 10 percent of practitioners in each state are invited to join the association because, Lee said, that percentage handles "about 90 percent of the substantive cases."

Berliner, a sole practitioner, joined the association because he liked "the idea of a quality-controlled group."

"I looked at the names of the neutrals in other states, and they were people that I knew either personally or by reputation as being real leaders," he said.

Berliner became a neutral in 1997 after 23 years as an attorney who primarily worked in business litigation, because it offered him the chance to assist people in a "very direct, tangible way."

"They have disputes but litigation is frightfully expensive," Berliner said. "It's also emotionally and personally draining. If you can help them resolve that and put it behind them, it's a real service."

IAMA is the 43rd chapter of NADN, nadn.org. The association's original chapter in Florida launched in 2005.

As the association grows, the strict criteria for acceptance does not change, Lee said.

"If it turns out, for example, there is no one in Alaska that has done 200-plus mediations, we won't have anybody in Alaska," Lee said. "But I'm sure it's more so that we missed them than there isn't anybody that qualifies. But that criteria is really key."

Sklar, CEO of Dispute Resolution Services, said IAMA



Darren Lee



William E. Hartgering



Stanley P. Sklar



Faustin A. Pipal Jr.

provides an avenue to clients who seek a less expensive alternative to dispute resolutions.

Sklar, also the executive director for arbitration studies at the Center for Dispute Resolution at DePaul University College of Law, informs students he won't turn them into arbitrators in the one course.

"What I can do is make you aware that there is an alternative method to dispute resolution out there," Sklar said. "To me, if I get that message across, then I feel like I've succeeded in teaching these students."

Hartgering, an arbitrator and mediator at JAMS Inc., has worked as a neutral for more

than three decades and agreed the profession is "more of a calling."

"I always wanted to be litigator," he said. "But I found for me, bringing people together was more fun than trying cases."

IAMA helps law firms by providing access to the state's most experienced professionals in the field, Hartgering said.

"Practiced law is about practice, and people who try cases when they are 60 still learn from it," he said.

"There's no substitute for that experience, and this gives lawyers trying to choose a mediator a broader view of our experience."