

FAQs: The State Bar of Wisconsin Paralegal Certification Program

Below are some frequently asked questions about the State Bar of Wisconsin (SBW) Paralegal Certification Program. For specific program requirements, please refer to the information and standards for the program available on the SBW Paralegal Certification Program [webpage](#).

What is the SBW Paralegal Certification Program?

The SBW Paralegal Certification Program is a self-funded, voluntary credentialing program of the State Bar of Wisconsin, a mandatory professional association created by the Wisconsin Supreme Court for all attorneys who hold a Wisconsin law license.

A State Bar of Wisconsin Certified Paralegal™ (or SBWCP) is a person who meets and maintains the certification requirements of the SBWCP program, including training and ethical standards. The program provides a benchmark to ensure paralegal competency and enhance the quality of legal services provided by Wisconsin paralegals, under the supervision of attorneys.

Why does the State Bar of Wisconsin certify paralegals?

Paralegals work closely with attorneys. The State Bar of Wisconsin established the program to identify training and ethical standards for paralegals working in Wisconsin and to recognize the professional commitment of paralegals who choose to become SBW Certified Paralegals.

The program provides a benchmark for paralegal standards for lawyers who do or plan to work with paralegals. Plus, it promotes access to legal services and the justice system by utilizing the services of qualified paralegals.

Do I have to be SBW-certified to work as a paralegal in Wisconsin?

No, certification is voluntary. You may continue to work as a paralegal without certification. However, all paralegals, whether certified or not, must be supervised by an attorney. Practicing law without a law license is considered a misdemeanor in Wisconsin.

Why should I consider the SBW Paralegal Certification Program?

The State Bar of Wisconsin Certified Paralegal designation allows paralegals to market their education and/or experience in Wisconsin-specific law. The designation signals to law firms, corporate legal departments, and other legal employers, that you have a high level of education or experience.

Although obtaining the certification may not make an immediate impact on your employment, over time, legal employers will begin to see the value of employing SBW Certified Paralegals.

Why would legal employers want to employ a SBW Certified Paralegal?

Paralegals can perform substantive legal tasks under the supervision of lawyers. Paralegals with a demonstrated level of education, experience, and continued training in Wisconsin-based law

and procedure, including ethical duties, will allow lawyers to delegate legal work with greater confidence. Highly qualified paralegals create efficiencies that drive value for legal employers and their clients, who indirectly and directly rely on the work performed by paralegals.

The SBW Paralegal Certification Program creates a benchmark for the quality of paralegal services. In addition, the program will make the hiring process easier, since a SBW Certified Paralegal's credentials are already verified by the State Bar of Wisconsin.

Does the certification program create competition with lawyers?

No. The work of all paralegals, whether certified or not, must be supervised by a licensed attorney in Wisconsin. Paralegals cannot practice law independently.

SBW Certified Paralegals must be employed or retained by a licensed attorney, law office, corporation, government agency, or other entity, to perform substantive legal work under the supervision of a licensed attorney who would perform the work absent the paralegal.

What qualifications do I need to become a SBW Certified Paralegal?

A paralegal can qualify to become a SBW Certified Paralegal through qualified education or work experience, explained below. Those with paralegal studies teaching experience may also qualify.

How do I qualify to be a SBW Certified Paralegal through Education?

You must hold an associate's or bachelor's degree from a "qualified paralegal studies program," or a bachelor's degree in any discipline from an accredited institution. In addition, you must earn at least 18 semester credits offered by a qualified paralegal studies program, with a minimum grade of "C" in each course. Currently, the following institutions have a qualified paralegal studies programs:

- Chippewa Valley Technical College
- Lakeshore Technical College
- Madison College
- Milwaukee Area Technical College
- Northeast Wisconsin Technical College
- Western Technical College

A qualified paralegal studies program may also include programs at educational institutions:

- Sanctioned by the Wisconsin Technical College System Board or the U.W. Board of Regents
- Approved by the American Bar Association's House of Delegates *or* are members of the American Association for Paralegal Education *and* teach Wisconsin-based substantive and procedural law content as required by the State Bar Paralegal Certification Program.

If I attended a paralegal studies program in another state, does that count?

No. Fundamental to the State Bar of Wisconsin program is knowledge of Wisconsin procedural and substantive law. Therefore, out-of-state studies will not count unless the paralegal studies program was approved by the American Bar Association's House of Delegates *or* is a member of the American Association for Paralegal Education *and* teaches Wisconsin-based substantive and procedural law content as required by the SBW Paralegal Certification Program.

Paralegals who do not meet the educational requirements because their program of study lacked the requisite Wisconsin-based content may meet the educational requirements for certification by earning at least 21 continuing legal education credits in Wisconsin substantive and procedural law training offered by the State Bar of Wisconsin or a qualified paralegal studies program.

Example: John Doe obtained an associate's degree in paralegal studies from an institution in Kansas before moving to Wisconsin. To obtain certification, John must obtain at least 21 continuing legal education credits from the State Bar of Wisconsin or a qualified paralegal studies program in Wisconsin.

How do I qualify with work experience?

An individual may qualify with a high school diploma or equivalent education who has been engaged in work as a paralegal for not less than 4,800 in-office hours at any time during the five years immediately preceding the time of application. You must also have completed at least three hours of approved continuing paralegal education or continuing legal education in legal ethics and professional responsibility during the 12 months immediately preceding the date of application.

Note that paralegals who qualify to be SBW Certified Paralegals through work experience on the effective date of the program, Jan. 1, 2018, must apply within two years of the effective date, or within two years of establishing residency in Wisconsin, whichever is later.

Can I qualify with teaching experience?

You may qualify if you have been teaching full-time in an approved paralegal studies training program for at least three years immediately preceding the date of the application. You must also have completed at least three hours of approved continuing paralegal education or continuing legal education in legal ethics and professional responsibility during the 12 months immediately preceding the date of application.

Will the program do a criminal background check?

Yes, all applicants for certification must consent to a criminal history background check.

Is anyone ineligible to be a SBW Certified Paralegal?

An individual is **not** eligible to be certified if:

- 1) the individual's law license, in any state or jurisdiction, is currently under suspension or revocation or the individual has resigned in lieu of suspension, discipline, or revocation;
- 2) the individual had been convicted of a felony in any state or jurisdiction and their civil rights have not been restored;
- 3) the individual has been found to have engaged in the unauthorized practice of law in any state or jurisdiction;
- 4) the individual's registration, certification, or license to practice has been terminated or revoked for disciplinary reasons by a professional organization, court, disciplinary board, or agency in any jurisdiction;
- 5) the individual fails to comply with the continuing education requirements; or
- 6) the individual's criminal history background check reveals information that would disqualify one from membership in the State Bar of Wisconsin as a lawyer-member.

How much does it cost to obtain and maintain the certification?

An applicant must pay a \$125 nonrefundable application fee. If the application is approved, the applicant must then pay a \$75 certification fee, and annually pay \$75 to maintain certification.

The new certification period, for purposes of the annual fee, begins on June 30. Individuals who initially apply for certification in May or June of a given year must pay the \$75 certification fee, but they will not pay a recertification fee until the following year. May and June are waived.

Those who apply before May in a given year must pay the \$75 certification fee, and they must pay another \$75 certification fee after June 30. The initial certification fee is not prorated.

Example 1: Jane Smith applies for certification on May 15, 2018. She will pay the \$75 certification fee; however, she won't be required to pay another certification fee until 2019.

Example 2: John Smith applies for certification on April 2, 2018. He will pay the \$75 certification fee and will receive another \$75 certification fee invoice in July 2018.

Example 3: Jane Smith applies for certification on October 3, 2018. She will pay the \$75 certification fee and will receive another \$75 certification fee invoice in July 2019.

Can I pay my application and certification fees by credit card?

Applicants must pay the initial application and certification fee by check. SBW Certified Paralegals who pay the annual recertification fee will have an online payment option.

Once I'm certified, what are the continuing education requirements?

To maintain certification as a SBW Certified Paralegal, you must complete at least 12 hours of approved continuing paralegal education or continuing legal education every two years, including a minimum of two hours in the area of legal ethics and professional responsibility.

You may also fulfill this education requirement by completing one semester credit from a qualified paralegal studies program, every two years, with a minimum "C" grade.

The two-year reporting period for a paralegal certified in an even-numbered year will end on June 30 of each even-numbered year following the year of initial certification.

Example: Jane Smith became a SBW Certified Paralegal in 2018. She will be required to report compliance with continuing legal education requirements in 2020.

The two-year reporting period for a paralegal certified in an odd-numbered year will end on June 30 of each odd-numbered year following the year of initial certification.

Example: John Smith became a SBW Certified Paralegal in 2019. He will be required to report compliance with continuing legal education requirements in 2021.

How do I apply?

Submit a completed application form and the nonrefundable \$125 application fee and appropriate application materials, based on work experience, education, or teaching.

If applying based on education experience, submit an official transcript from the educational institution you attended OR acceptable proof that you meet the educational requirements. You will also submit proof of employment or retainer by a Wisconsin-licensed lawyer.

If applying based on work experience, submit a sworn or affirmed declaration from the lawyer(s) with whom you work or have worked attesting to your substantive paralegal work experience, the total hours of which must meet the minimum requirements of the program.

If applying based on teaching experience, submit a verified employment records showing you have met the minimum teaching requirements.

If I lose my certification, can I reapply?

A paralegal who was originally certified and whose certification was resigned or revoked may reapply for certification by providing:

- proof of work experience for five of the eight years immediately preceding the date of the reapplication

OR

- teaching experience for two of the five years immediately preceding the date of the reapplication

The re-applicant must be otherwise eligible for certification under the provisions of the program.

Who do I contact if I have questions about the program?

Contact SBW customer service at (608) 257-3838, toll free at (800) 728-7788, or by email at service@wisbar.org.