

You're a *what?*

Process server

If Rebecca Reid is at your door, you might be in trouble. Legal trouble, that is. As a process server, it's Rebecca's job to hand deliver legal documents to the people involved in court cases.

These legal documents range from a summons to appear in court to a subpoena for producing evidence. How Rebecca does her job depends on the documents she serves. For example, divorce papers often must be delivered directly to the person named on the document; an eviction notice usually can be given to a person's spouse. After delivery, she files a report—or proof of service—stating when, where, and how the document was delivered.

Service of process is required by law. Court rules usually prevent people who are associated with a case, such as a lawyer or another party to the case, from serving the documents. In some states, sheriffs serve them. For many cases, however, lawyers—or others who need papers served—hire a professional process server to do it.

Clients may contact self-employed process servers, like Rebecca, or hire someone through a company that specializes in process serving. Process servers first meet with the client to discuss a single job or a series of deliveries and the date by which the documents must be served. Then, they pick up the documents and, for some jobs, receive payment in advance.

Many of Rebecca's jobs are straightforward: She visits people at their homes or businesses and gives them the papers. She also makes a note of the person's appearance and the date, time, and place of service. If someone refuses to accept the document, she

simply explains what it is and drops it at the person's feet.

Other jobs, however, are more complicated. Some defendants, for example, don't want to be found. "You have to be persistent and tenacious because you need to track people down," says Rebecca.

If a defendant is particularly evasive, Rebecca might do a stakeout. First, to preempt phone calls from concerned neighbors, she lets the police department know what she is doing. Then, she waits and watches for the person to appear so she can give him or her the document.

This part of a process server's work is often misunderstood. "People have the idea that we're like bounty hunters, going after people with guns," says Rebecca. "It just isn't the case." Process servers' only purpose is to deliver legal documents. And typically, after three unsuccessful attempts to visit a plaintiff or defendant, process servers resort to an alternate means of service, such as service by mail.

Process serving can involve risk, as some people take out their anger about the legal case on the person bringing them the bad news. But Rebecca typically avoids jobs that might threaten her safety. If a situation looks dangerous, she won't deliver the papers. Instead, she returns them to the client who hired her, along with the money she was paid to do the job.

Like most process servers, Rebecca usually tries to avoid confrontation and leaves the location as soon as she hands people the document. "If you're respectful, people take the papers," she says. "Sometimes they might

Elka Torpey

Elka Torpey is an economist in the Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections, BLS. She is available at torpey.elka@bls.gov.

scream obscenities at you, but that's the worst thing that's happened to me."

In most states, there are no formal educational requirements to become a process server. Training courses are available through associations, colleges, and private firms. Some states require that workers be registered or licensed, which often includes a background check, and taking out a bond (which, for Rebecca, costs about \$25 a year). Process servers also typically must be U.S. citizens, be at least 18 years old, and have no felony convictions.

Process servers must follow precise legal rules, so attention to detail is essential. For process servers who have their own business, sales skills are also important because they must sell their services to get jobs.

A process-serving business is easy to start. In addition to meeting state requirements, these workers usually need their own form of transportation. A computer, cell phone, and GPS device are also helpful. To protect them from liability, many process servers get errors and omissions insurance.

Rebecca learned about process serving when she was involved in a court case of her own. "I became friends with my attorney," she says, "and when the case was over she asked me if I wanted to work for her." After working for the attorney a short time, Rebecca went into business for herself.

People come to process serving from a variety of backgrounds. Some have worked—and may continue to work—in law enforcement or as private investigators. Others do tasks related to different kinds of legal work. For example, Rebecca provides support services to lawyers, including filing papers with the court. But she earns most of her income from process serving.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics does not collect employment or wage data specifically on process servers. Industry sources suggest that there are about 15,000 to 20,000 process servers in the United States, working both full and part time.

Earnings vary a lot, according to industry sources. Top earners may make more than

\$70,000 a year. But because process servers are usually paid by the job, those who take fewer jobs earn less. The fee for a standard service ranges from about \$20 to \$80, depending on geographic location and other factors. The rate is often higher for difficult or expedited service.

A process server's hours may be determined by when people are most likely to be at home, which can mean evening or weekend work. But process servers can usually choose which and how many jobs to take. "The best part is the flexibility," says Rebecca. "I can work when I want and not work when I want. And unless it's a rush service, you have days to do it, so you can fit it in when you have time."

In addition to its flexibility, process serving offers opportunities for networking near and far. Laws about service vary by state, but a process server in one state can take a job serving someone in another with the help of a process server colleague there.

Networking extends beyond the work, too. "People lean on each other a lot," says Rebecca. "There's a real social network among process servers. It can be a lot of fun." ☺☺☺

