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The Life of a Private Investigator

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Most people, when they hear the term “private investigator,” think of the FBI or the crime detective at the local police department. Maybe they know about large government investigative agencies, like the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Securities and Exchange Commission, or the New York State Attorney General’s Medicaid fraud control unit. They might have also watched some crime shows on TV or heard of private investigative companies like Pinkerton or Kroll. Rarely, however, do people think they might have use for a private investigator in their own lives. Yet my career as a private investigator has given me the opportunity to perform vital services for clients, including locating individuals, doing background checks, running surveillance, and gathering information in child custody and infidelity matters.

My career began with a New York City-based investigative agency designed to combat welfare fraud. I then transferred to the federal sector, performing inquiries related to occupational Safety and Health (OSHA) job discrimination allegations. After seven years of experience in many types of investigation, I, like many retirees from the public sector, entered the field of private investigation.

Prior to moving to Maryland about four years ago, I worked mostly in Manhattan’s Upper West Side Jewish community, doing investigations involving surveillance as well as high profile background inquiries. I particularly recall conducting a criminal and civil background check for a Manhattan-based religious institution interested in hiring a new employee. The search revealed a criminal history, confirming the institution’s decision to refrain from employing this individual.

Another interesting assignment involved the gathering of evidence for a custody case of a Jewish child. The case had many twists and turns – one of them involving surveillance stints at a synagogue meal – and ultimately revealed that the subject had violated the court agreement.

I have been hired by shadchanim to conduct searches on matches, and by people inquiring about their partner. I have also often been asked to find tenants who failed to pay their rent to a management company or landlord. This is a valuable service to the many members of the Jewish community who are in the real estate business.

What to Expect

Television programs like “CSI” and “Law and Order” give the faulty impression that investigative assignments can be solved within hours. While certain assignments may be fulfilled by merely using a computer to search online databases, other tasks require extensive interviewing and/or surveillance, in which the investigator performs leg work, physically following a subject. Whatever the assignment, a good investigator will perform his duties in a comprehensive manner, without cutting corners. That he did so will be evident in the information that is ultimately presented to the client.

The cost of hiring a private investigator is structured either as a flat rate or an hourly rate. For example, many background inquiries are performed for a flat fee, and sometimes the investigator will agree to a no-hit-no-fee arrangement. Alternatively, surveillance assignments are typically billed by the hour, including travel expenses. At times, surveillance activity can require multiple investigators to achieve the intended goal. Additionally, the requirements for an investigative assignment can vary, depending on whether the client needs data for a court proceeding or is merely satisfying his curiosity.

Clients can expect the investigator to inform them of his capabilities. In the event of an imminent deadline, for example, the investigator should reveal to the client what he can effectively accomplish within that timeframe, as well as prioritize the significant aspects of the case. In addition, it is important to beware of detectives who convey the impression that they specialize in all facets of investigations. If an investigator lacks experience in a particular area, he should be happy to provide the client with a referral to another investigator. On numerous occasions where I have been unable to attend to a particular assignment, for whatever reason, I have always tried to assist the client by recommending that he or she contact another investigator.

When looking for someone to hire, clients should note the investigator's ability to retain clients for a long period of time. This is one sign that he conducts his assignments in an efficient manner. For example, if a former client contacts an investigator after several years to conduct new assignments, this indicates that he or she was satisfied with the results received in the past. And, of course, as with choosing any professional, ask others for their opinions. Clients are happy to recommend a good detective to their friends or family.

During my eight-year career as a private investigator, I have been fortunate to have had extremely rewarding experiences: assisting clients in difficult situations, and especially seeing that they are satisfied with the outcome. In this field, it is tremendously satisfying to help clients resolve problematic areas in their lives, while ensuring that justice is upheld.

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