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Hair braiders find snags in state law

To practice, a license is needed; but cosmetology schools teach mostly unnecessary skills for many



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August 19, 2009

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When Oumou Wague immigrated to the United States 18 years ago, she braided hair – a skill that virtually all women in her native Senegal learn as girls -- to help her family. Today, braiding still is her primary source of income.

"I am able to pay my bills and support my family back home," said Wague, 38, a mother of three sons who lives in Park Forest. "I was able to buy a house and get established with the business just doing the braids."

But like many hair braiders in Illinois, she does not have a cosmetology license – something required by state law since 1985.

The law requires braiders to complete 1,500 hours of cosmetology school – which can cost upward of \$10,000 – despite the fact that hair braiding-specific courses are not offered at any of the approximately 60 schools that are part of the Illinois Association of Cosmetology Schools. There are about 100 cosmetology schools in Illinois and some of them offer braiding basics, but it is not part of their core curriculum, the association said.

"It's a waste of time and money," said Wague, who has completed 700 hours of coursework and is often asked by instructors to share her braiding expertise. "You try to go and take this training and you're not learning something you're interested in. We learn about perming and chemicals, but I don't do that. I don't use chemicals. It's natural what we do."

Cosmetology industry lobbyists concede that the requirements are excessive for people who only do braiding. A proposal by state Rep. William Burns (D-Chicago) earlier this year would have eliminated licensing for hair braiders.

It was supported by the United African Organization, which advocates on behalf of the thousands of African immigrants in the Chicago area, but the group ultimately supported a compromise that would not eliminate the need for courses, but would reduce the required hours to 300 and primarily would focus on sanitation and business practices. It may be debated this fall.

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Wague, who has owned Sarafina **Hair Braiding** on Chicago's South Side for the last decade, said that despite the law she has received only one letter from the Department of Financial and Professional Regulation, but otherwise hasn't felt it necessary to complete her licensing. Other **hair braiders** said they have never been contacted by the department and one said she was unaware of such requirements.

Alie Kabba, executive director of the United African Organization, said **hair braiders** -- most of whom are women who immigrated from **West African** countries such as Senegal, **Burkina Faso**, Sierra Leone and Togo -- want to comply with state laws but the requirements are too rigid. He said many **hair braiders** who don't have the money to attend cosmetology schools also are less likely to be part of the business community because they opt to work out of their homes.

"It criminalizes their work," Kabba said.

"We want them to become part of the cosmetology framework," Burns said. "We are trying to figure out how to make that happen. If they are licensed and regulated they can go out and borrow money and expand stores and shops and really get some economic benefits."

Under state law, unlicensed **braiders** cannot be protected from customers who refuse to pay or use bogus checks. Burns said any new law would provide protection for both **braiders** and customers.

Carol Frederick, executive director of the Illinois Association of Cosmetology Schools, agrees that **consumer protection** should be the main focus. She said any changes in the law should ensure that **hair braiders** are trained in sanitation, such as keeping combs and pins clean, and health issues, such as identifying scalp diseases and dealing with blood-borne pathogens.

"You don't need to teach these people how to do **hair** -- they know that already," Frederick said. "I think that we concede that the only real reason for licensing for any profession is to protect the public."

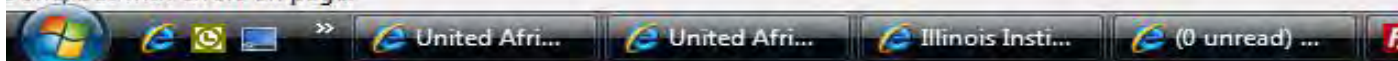
"We think we've negotiated in good faith and understanding the perspective of women in the workforce, many of them single mothers," she added. "We certainly don't see them as competing with cosmetologists, but as providing a complimentary service."

Hair braiders say that salons often refer clients to them who are looking for a break from chemicals and perming. Some **hair** salons offer **hair** braiding along with cutting, styling, perming and straightening, but shops like Wague's only do braiding.

Susan Hofer, a spokeswoman for the Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation, said the department will support and enforce whatever decision is made by legislators.

While the legislature is on summer break, **hair braiders** are waiting and hoping that the law will be changed soon.

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Who licesnses all those teens that do freaky **hair** designs for young kids at mall stores and brithday party places?

jjrg7 (08/20/2009, 2:49 PM)

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I am a **hair** braider and I own a shop since 1998 in Illinois. I have paid my taxes every year. In my shop, I do nothing but braids. The only things I use on my customers while braiding is a comb and a clip. For me it is an Art. I love doing it. Women are different: different shape of face, different texture of **hair**, different length, density, strength ... Most of my costumers are black but, I also get other races. It is a sweet challenge to me every time, to help my customer find the right style or to braid her her in a way to make her beauty come completely out after I am done. Back home in Cameroon in 1978, my grandmother taught me how to braid, I was 8 years old and from there, I never stopped. Yes I went to school and completed my college, but that never stopped me to braid every time I had the chance (at least 5 persons a week). Like an artist, an athlete or a drummer, I just got better with time and practice. Now my skills are absolutely fabulous and my costumers love me. There is no school here that can teach me about braiding. I find it unfair to have to go to school to learn what I am not interested in and pay all that money! Yes I will gladly go, to learn about scalp diseases and current methods of cleaning my combs & clips or anything in the shop. I could even learn what the law provides for my customers protection & mine. Another type of License is what I need! Yes!

smodelady (08/20/2009, 10:18 AM)

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I think it would be quite reasonable to just ask that they take classes in cleaning combs and clean practices. They shouldn't be required to take classes that are not appropriate to what they do, nor should the license be cost prohibitive.

I hope there can be some sort of compromise so that these women can continue their services legally and without causing undue hardship.

I think it's just simply that the people who made the law have no concept of how taking care of natural African **hair** is different than that of white people's **hair** or **hair** that is chemically treated. Now that it's been brought to the attention of the lawmakers it should be changed.

momto4boys (08/19/2009, 5:06 PM)

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