



# Rx FOR THE LICENSING HEADACHE

*The experts at Supportive Insurance Services love what they do*

By Elisabeth Boone, CPCU

**F**or most insurance agents—not to mention adjusters, carriers, and surplus lines brokers—obtaining and maintaining out-of-state licenses is about as much fun as a migraine headache. For starters, 51 jurisdictions means 51 different sets of rules, regulations, and requirements, full of fine print and eternally subject to change.

Add in deadlines, penalties, and a huge dose of tedium, and you have all

the ingredients for a skull-banging headache. In many firms, the licensing assignment gets dumped on someone who already has a full-time job, doesn't have the time or know-how to take on the added responsibility, and wouldn't wish it on his or her worst enemy.

That's the bad news. The good news is that insurance professionals who get a headache just thinking about licensing issues can find relief by turning to experts who actually thrive on meeting the myriad challenges of the licensing world.

At Supportive Insurance Services, a full-service licensing firm based in

Vincennes, Indiana, a close-knit team of highly trained professionals is happy to diagnose and treat licensing headaches. Established in 2001 by Barbara Donnar, president and chief executive officer, Supportive provides a full menu of licensing services. Jeff Brinkmann, an experienced insurance marketing professional, joined Supportive in 2004 and is vice president of sales and marketing.

Donnar and Brinkmann were colleagues at Golden Rule Insurance Company, where she managed licensing and commissions for more than 100,000 producers and agencies and he served as the officer in



Photography by Phil Smith

*The Supportive Insurance Services team.*

charge of marketing administration. In 1999, Brinkmann left the insurer to form his own consulting firm. Donnar was happy with her job and had no plans to leave the company—until she started hearing an inner voice that suggested she venture out on her own.

“I loved my job and couldn’t imagine leaving it,” she says. “On a rational level, quitting a great job and starting my own business from scratch didn’t make any sense—but that inner urging kept getting stronger, and I finally decided that I needed to make the leap.”

When Donnar started Supportive Insurance Services, she didn’t intend to provide licensing services, she remarks. “This isn’t really what I thought I would be doing,” she says. “I had seen myself doing the kind of consulting work that Jeff was doing. But I kept getting calls from people who said they wished I would set up

a licensing facility because there was a real need for it.”

### **Gearing up for growth**

When Donnar launched Supportive, it was a one-person, home-based shop in which she wore multiple hats: owner, CEO, marketing specialist, IT manager, and customer service rep. With 18 years of licensing experience to her credit, Donnar clearly had the requisite knowledge to succeed in her complex field; what she needed was marketing leadership to help her business grow, and a competent staff to handle the daily workflow.

“Barb kept calling and asking me to join Supportive,” Brinkmann recalls. “She persuaded me to come to work with her, which was a great decision on my part. When I came on board in 2004 there were just three of us, and over the last five years we’ve grown to a staff of 17 people. We have

a tremendous amount of depth in insurance licensing; our employees have an average of 20 years of licensing and insurance experience,” Brinkmann says.

Supportive Insurance Services specializes in non-resident licensing for agents, agencies, adjusters, and insurers. The firm also handles carrier appointments, corporate registrations, and annual reports, and in addition offers Web design and marketing services; business, regulatory, and compliance consulting; and staff training.

### **Curing agents’ headaches**

Some agents and agencies contact Supportive Insurance Services before their licensing issues become headaches; others, for a variety of reasons, don’t call for help until those issues have become full-blown migraines.



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*—Barbara Donnar  
President/Chief Executive Officer*

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Vice President  
Sales and Marketing*

"In my experience, in most agencies the people who are doing the licensing don't understand it," Donnar says. "Because they don't understand it, they hate it. At trade shows, agents come up to my booth and tell me about their licensing problems. I ask them: 'Does the employee who handles your licensing understand it? Does he or she like doing it?' Invariably the answer to both questions is 'No!'"

"In most agencies, the licensing function doesn't fall into anyone's job description, and it's completely different from everything else employees do," Donnar continues. "Sometimes the licensing assignment is given to an employee in the

accounting department or in human resources, and in other cases an agency principal may take it on. Almost no one wants to do it, so often the job gets passed from one employee to another—and if the person who was handling the licensing leaves, the agency is stuck because no one else knows anything about it."

Employees who don't understand and don't like what they're doing, even if they're conscientious, are bound to make mistakes—and when it comes to licensing, mistakes can be costly, resulting in fines, penalties, and even suspension or revocation of licenses.

For example, Donnar says, some agency owners don't realize that the agency itself, as well as individual producers, needs to secure a license, or that the agency must register as a corporation in nonresident states in which it does business.

"Often agents become aware of these requirements after the fact," Brinkmann comments. "They apply for a license in a given state and then they receive a notice that they first need to file for a corporate registration. Now they have to figure out how to do that. At this point, the agent is navigating the 'waters' of licensing without a rudder, and in trying to go it alone he or she is



*The Renewal team (from left): Paula Stephens, Cindy Hawkins, Cathy Jackson, Cindy Fisher, and Beverly Lancaster.*

*The Licensing team (from left): Kelly Potts, Penni Hutcheson, Esther Lake, Kelly Aldridge, and Karen Wimbley.*



learning what to do through the school of hard knocks,” he says.

Pointing to another potential licensing “landmine,” Brinkmann says: “Many agencies today are doing some form of Internet marketing—but some don’t realize that before you market via the Web in a state, you need to be licensed in that state.”

### **Call on the experts**

As these examples show, lack of knowledge about licensing just adds to the burden for agents who are trying to handle this function themselves. Just as they don’t fully understand the language of licensing, many agents don’t realize they can spare themselves the pain, without breaking the bank.

“What I tell agents who come to me with their licensing headaches is: You need to give this responsibility to someone who understands it—someone who’s experienced and who does it every day,” Donnar explains.

“We have a dedicated staff of knowledgeable experts who can manage the entire process, from obtaining the initial licenses to maintaining them and filing the documents required by the various states. We take the pain out of licensing, and we make it affordable,” she asserts.

When agents find out that there is a cure for their licensing headaches, Donnar says, they’re invariably surprised and delighted. “Agents tell me: ‘We would love to outsource the licensing function.’”

### **Getting started**

Once an agent or agency owner decides to retain Supportive Insurance Services to handle the licensing function, Brinkmann says, it’s easy to get started.

“The agent completes the data forms for him or herself, as well as for the corporation if we’re licensing it. The agent sends us the funds, and we

take it from there,” he says. “Our maintenance program is very much the same: We need data forms for the individuals whose licenses we’re maintaining. They go into our database, and we pay the renewal fees on the agents’ behalf, as well as handling address changes, tracking their continuing education credits, and so on. They provide us what we call a state funds check, with which we pay the agent’s state fees. The agent also pays us a monthly fee to manage the licenses.”

The Supportive Insurance Services Web site contains a link that agents can use to view their state’s continuing education requirements and make sure they are in compliance.

“When a client’s resident license is about to renew, we notify them and they can go on our Web site and purchase the continuing education courses they need,” Donnar explains. “We offer this option through our partnership with 360 Training.”



Jeff Brinkmann and Beth McGuire comprise the Sales and Marketing team.

## Happy customer

Not all agents who come to Supportive Insurance Services are suffering from licensing migraines; instead they're looking for preventive medicine.

That was the case for Rick Brattin, chief executive officer of Rich & Cartmill, Inc., a prominent all-lines independent agency with headquarters in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Founded more than 75 years ago, Rich & Cartmill for many years has done business in its neighboring

states of Missouri, Kansas, and Colorado. Obtaining and maintaining those licenses in house was a fairly simple matter, Brattin says—but when the agency decided to become licensed in all 48 contiguous states, he realized that the best option was to outsource the work.

“As we started growing and needing to obtain more nonresident licenses, we started to interview firms that specialize in licensing,” Brattin says. “I first spoke with Barb Donnar in 2003. I felt very comfortable with

her because she had such a strong background in licensing. I felt she was very capable and had a good process and system set-up to keep track of all of our nonresident licenses,” Brattin remarks.

“Supportive runs the whole show, just as if we had someone in house doing it—in fact, much better, because they specialize in licensing,” he says.

Another benefit of using Supportive, Brattin points out, is that his agency's employees don't have to call the various state insurance departments to obtain licensing information. “When you call an insurance department, it's like calling the IRS—you never get the same person twice, and the more people you talk to, the more different answers you're likely to get,” he remarks. “With Supportive, we don't have to deal with this problem; their people have the resources and contacts to get the correct information quickly.”

Another reason Rich & Cartmill decided to outsource the nonresident licensing function, Brattin says, is that he doesn't have to worry about losing the employee who had been assigned the responsibility. “If we did this in house and that person left,” he comments, “we'd be in a huge mess.”

“I'm really glad we made the choice to go with Barb and Supportive,” Brattin says. “They do a great job for us, and their knowledge and experience are a valuable resource for us as we continue to expand our operations.”

When it comes to licensing headaches, it's clear that the team at Supportive Insurance Services can provide both the prevention and the cure. “What we bring to the table,” Donnar says, “are experience, integrity, consistency, and stability. Everything we do is geared toward building relationships based on trust and accountability. When you call us, we listen—and we deliver.” ■

### For more information:

#### Supportive Insurance Services

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