



Partnership

The State Bar of Michigan (SBM) is a mandatory bar association—you must belong to the association to practice law in the state of Michigan. At last count, we have nearly 38,000 members scattered in Michigan and across the country. But as I discovered early on in my bar career, it is difficult, if not impossible, for our association to be all things to all members. And that is why we rely on our partners—our sections, local bars, affinity bars, and special-interest bars—when providing services to members.

The SBM currently has 38 sections—separate dues-paying groups of our members who share a common interest, usually in a particular area of law or practice—with over 50,000 members (our members belong to 1.3 sections, on average). These sections range from the over 7,500-member Young Lawyers Section to the 67-member Latin American Bar Activities Section.

Sections are the SBM's lasers into substantive law. Generally, section members either devote all or a good portion of their practices to the area of law. As such, many of them are the specialists that we generalists turn to for guidance. Twenty-eight of the sections maintain listservs, those Internet discussion groups that are targeted toward the practice area of the section. Members can post questions, receive input from other members on tricky practice problems, discuss new court rules and procedures, and keep each other updated on appellate cases and decisions.

All of the sections have their own web pages linked through the SBM site. At least 21 of the sections publish a newsletter or journal. Many sections partner with the Institute of Continuing Legal Education (ICLE) to develop and provide specialized continuing legal education programs. The Probate and Estate Planning Section and the Family Law Section have developed certificate programs through ICLE, where members can complete

a comprehensive course of study in estate planning or family law.

Because section dues are voluntary and not compelled, sections can maintain legislative advocacy programs in areas that the SBM cannot. A number of our sections employ lobbyists and work with legislators who welcome the section members' subject-matter expertise when drafting or reviewing legislation.

The State Bar of Michigan currently recognizes 136 affinity bars. Affinity bars are local, special-interest, and minority bar associations. According to the best information that we have, these 136 associations have approximately 25,000 members, with individual associations ranging in size from 10 to 3,000 members.

These affinity bars provide numerous opportunities for their members to get involved in their local legal communities. The local bars sponsor the swearing-in ceremonies for new lawyers, work with local schools, and introduce their members to the bench and the bar. They provide immeasurable amounts of help to our courts, working with them to improve the court system for litigants, attorneys, and the general public.

Other affinity bars focus on ethnic issues—race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. They educate other lawyers about the issues of diversity, and they give their members an invaluable opportunity for mentoring and networking. They also work with schools to provide educational opportunities.

Still other affinity bars focus on practice areas—trial practice, insurance defense work, and the like. Another group, usually called inns of court, focuses on the teaching of practical trial skills and fostering civility.

All of these organizations play a vital role in the mission of the organized bar. They provide service to their members—otherwise, they wouldn't exist. And they do it on a level that the SBM can't—on a much smaller, more personal level than our organization of 38,000 can manage.

So sections provide help with the substantive law portion of our practice, local bars provide networking and connections, and other affinity bars allow members to pursue a particular ethnic or cultural interest and to educate the rest of us about their groups. The SBM can act as a clearinghouse of information to help these affinity bars with their respective missions. The SBM can act on issues that require a statewide response. We can coordinate the character and fitness component of the bar admissions, work on statewide issues and court rules, and work on programs, like Access to Justice, that may be impractical or overwhelming for a smaller organization.

The great thing about this multitude of groups is how they complement one another. All of them work as partners to provide the best combination of service for our members. And that beats a "Who's best?" competition any day! ♦

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