

Nicholas Ohanesian, 2021–2022 Chair of the Representative Assembly

By Kylie Thompson

Through hard work and with a contagious sense of humor, Nick Ohanesian seems to always rise to the top.

From starting his post-high school education at Grand Rapids Community College to now teaching there, it is easy to see that leadership comes naturally to Ohanesian, the newly elected chair of the State Bar of Michigan Representative Assembly.

A member of the Representative Assembly for eight years, Ohanesian also actively contributes to the SBM Social Security Lawyer Section. He sees his volunteer roles with the State Bar as both a public service and a responsibility.

“It’s of great important to instill trust, meet ethical standards, and reflect society,” Ohanesian said.

As Ohanesian looks ahead to his term leading the State Bar’s final policymaking body, he plans to focus on three priorities:

- Continuing to address diversity and inclusion within the Representative Assembly for the betterment of the Bar.
- Fostering an environment that will inspire more members to serve in the Representative Assembly.
- Maintaining the formative leadership and tireless work provided by past chairs of the Representative Assembly including the two most recent chairs, Chelsea Rebeck and Aaron Burrell.

“There’s an importance in serving on the RA,” said Ohanesian, who, as chair, also appoints members of committees and presides over the Representative Assembly’s two yearly meetings. “It’s a small way to make an impact and contribute to decisions that provide betterment to the people of the state of Michigan.”

An administrative law judge, Ohanesian takes on 500 to 600 Social Security cases a year with a 90% acclamation rate. The work is hard, but Ohanesian looks to the sunnier



Nick Ohanesian

side of life and credits his positive attitude to “not taking myself too seriously.”

“I’ve had to work on cases for the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) where they said they’d settle over my dead body, and I’ve worked with people who often have been dealt a bad hand at life,” Ohanesian said, “The job is stressful, and the people are stressed, [but] there’s no need to make it more stressful than it needs to be.”

Ohanesian didn’t know for sure where his career would take him when he enrolled at Grand Rapids Community College in 1992. He went on to earn a bachelor’s degree in political science with a public law concentration from Western Michigan University in 1996, then graduated from William & Mary Law School in 2000.

He started his legal career as an attorney for the NLRB, working to protect the rights of private-sector employees and ensure the stability of collective bargaining relationships. After six years as an NLRB trial lawyer, Ohanesian was promoted, becoming the youngest manager of an NLRB office when he began overseeing the Jacksonville, Florida, office at the age of 32. In 2010, he

transitioned to his current role as a judge for the Social Security Administration.

In 2013, Ohanesian was appointed to the Representative Assembly. He credits the chairs who came before him for their vision while leading the RA and plans to continue on the trail they’ve blazed.

“I’ve served under good chairs. Both Chelsea and Aaron had to get us through the pandemic and the licensing fee increase, which had to be done,” said Ohanesian, who as RA chair also serves as a member of the SBM Board of Commissioners. “I want to continue the diversity issues brought by Chelsea and Aaron and ensure we’re able to contribute to the betterment of the State Bar of Michigan as we service the public.”

Ohanesian believes the COVID-19 pandemic and the unprecedented hardships it has created intensifies the importance of the State Bar of Michigan. Specifically, he said, it is a critically important time to instill trust, which, in turn, means there is an even greater need for more attorneys to become involved in the Representative Assembly.

“We need to encourage people to run. I want to have so many people showing up that we have too many,” Ohanesian said.

As he embarks on his voyage through his term as chair — while also serving as an administrative law judge, Board of Commissioners member, university law professor, husband, and father of two adult children — Ohanesian believes his experience will help him lead the Representative Assembly through another year likely to be marked by pandemic-induced uncertainty but adds that his personality will help him excel. With an easy smile, calm temperament, and kind nature, he is quick to remind those around him that everyone is just trying to do their best.

“We’re all human,” Ohanesian said, “and it’s important to remember that.” ■

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