

Membership Value— What have you done for me lately?

John T. Berry



As your executive director, I am often asked, “What does the Bar do for its members?” On its surface, it is an easy question to answer, but one that I find difficult due to the sheer size and depth of the services provided. I like to begin by telling each member that the State Bar of Michigan provides value beyond the cost of dues.

First and foremost, there is the intangible value of licensure—belonging to an organization that encompasses all who have achieved the minimum requirements for professional certification: law school graduation, a determination of character and fitness, and a passing score on the Bar examination. Qualifying for membership allows attorneys to join the ranks of a privileged and unique organization that regulates its own profession, subject to the supervision of the Michigan Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court has explicitly included in our core mission the goals of improving the practice of law and protecting the public. In response to that mandate, the Bar protects the public from people who hold themselves out to be lawyers and from lawyers who are unfit to practice, upholds and maintains professional standards, and compensates the public for the dishonest acts

of attorneys. Each of these functions supports the essential value of your own license and professional reputation.

The Bar also offers a variety of programs and services to help improve your skills and the legal profession. Free publications, such as the *e-Journal* and *Bar Journal*, provide practice tools and information to sharpen your legal skills. Our Ethics Hotline keeps you up-to-date on ethics rules and regulations. The Bar hopes to expand on this program and include law practice management consultation in the future. The Bar even helps you by

- Ancillary programs supporting disciplinary function (beyond minimal Lawyers’ and Judges’ assistance, remedial diversion programs are not available at this time)
- Professionalism efforts within law schools and the Bar
- Section support
- Legislative Advocacy within *Keller* constraints
- Meeting Services, including Annual Meeting and Bar Leadership Forum
- Member Affinity Programs (Insurance, Research, Car Rentals, etc.)
- Local and Special Purpose Bar Services

The Bar offers a variety of programs and services to help improve your skills and the legal profession.

helping the public find an attorney through its Lawyer Referral Program.

As an active member you are entitled to a package of services and benefits whose combined value exceeds your membership dues. The services are based upon the State Bar of Michigan’s core mission, and are offered to help you provide more competent professional services.

Professional programs and services to help you and the profession:

- Character and Fitness Investigations
- Unauthorized Practice of Law Investigations and Prosecution
- Ethics Hotline
- Practice tools supporting lawyer competency (currently, *e-Journal*, *Bar Journal*, and partnership with ICLE)
- Client Protection Fund

- Justice Initiatives Programming (Access to Justice and Open Justice)
- Lawyer Referral Service 1-800-968-0738
- Member HelpLINE 1-800-968-1442, ext. 6326
- SBM website www.michbar.org

Another common question posed by attorneys is “What has the Bar done for me this year?” In August of 2001, after extensive input from our members, the Board of Commissioners passed a comprehensive Strategic Plan with an understanding that the Plan covered a three-year period, with goals scheduled for full implementation by the year 2004. (A copy of the Strategic Plan can be found at <http://www.michbar.org/news/releases/strategicplan.html>.)

The following summary highlights some of the most important accomplishments of

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the first year, and shines the spotlight on areas needing improvement in order to complete the Plan within the next two years:

- Extensive overhaul of the Board of Commissioner and Bar committee structure (Goals 4.4, 6.1, 6.1.1, 6.3, 6.3.1, 6.3.2)
- Establishment of the first of many section summits with immediate plans to deal with every aspect of the relationship between sections and the Bar, including the services to be provided and section advocacy (Goals 2.3, 2.4, 6.4)
- Tough belt-tightening, resulting in two balanced budgets, combined with dramatic improvements in financial review, planning, and reporting (Goals 5.1, 5.1.1, 5.3.2, 5.6)
- Significant changes in the Annual Meeting, including a joint meeting with members of the judiciary (Goals 5.5, 5.5.1). The Vision Committee is recommending even more dramatic changes for upcoming years, including emphasis on the business aspects and a reduction in the number of days. Total costs will be reduced to Bar members from over \$300,000 to \$60,000. (Goal 5.5.1)
- A plan has been completed and is being sent to the Board to provide for non-dues related fees, applicable to reinstatements and inactive status. (Goal 5.4)
- Coordination and alignment of projects between the Access to Justice Task Force and the Open Justice Commission (Goal 1.8)
- Extensive work with the Attorney Grievance Commission and the Attorney Discipline Board on developing an ethics school (Goal 3.4.5)
- Coordination with Cooley Law School to develop a new Professionalism Center (Goals 1.6, 1.3, 1.1)
- Numerous changes in entire staff involvement in planning and implementation of projects and programs (Goals 4.1, 4.1.1, 4.3)
- Improved communications efforts through a redesigned *e-Journal*, a *Bar Journal* read-

ership survey, and the development of a new client newsletter to help our members market their practice. (Goals 1.2, 3.1, 3.2)

Challenges

- The main challenge remains in obtaining adequate financing to implement the Strategic Plan. Bar dues have not been raised in ten years, and further analysis of the dues structure will continue. In addition, the Strategic Plan calls for doing away with the dues cycle of charging members too much at first to make up for leaner years, and then waiting too long to react to the cumulative effect of inflation and growth in attorney population (Goals 5.4, 5.1.2, 5.1.3, 5.1.4)
- Business Plans are nearing completion for a cost effective and competitive e-filing program, increased efforts in UPL prosecutions, pro-active involvement in defining

the future practice of law and in law office management and technology help for lawyers. All these central core parts of the Strategic Plan, as well as a call center await new sources of funding (Goals 1.3, 1.6)

- Significant investment losses and other financial pressures challenge the Bar's ability to maintain an appropriate cash reserve (Goal 5.2)
- Significant investment losses and increased claims that include gambling problems of attorneys have reduced the Client Protection Fund to below \$800,000.

It has been a year of dramatic change with many accomplishments to celebrate and recognize with pride. The next two years will require even more hard work, more visionary leadership, and, very importantly, the continued political courage to make tough, and at times unpopular, decisions. ♦

