

Want to Strengthen New Jersey's Attorney Disciplinary System? Join the District Ethics Committees - *New Jersey Law Journal*

May 8, 2024

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In the summer and fall of 1947, delegates from every corner of New Jersey successfully came together at the New Brunswick campus of Rutgers University to draft a new state constitution. Among the many changes made by the 1947 New Jersey Constitution was a complete reorganization and unification of the state court system, with the new Supreme Court of New Jersey sitting at its apex.

In Article VI, Section II, Clause 3, the state Constitution grants the Supreme Court authority over “the admission to the practice of law and the discipline of persons admitted.” Pursuant to this exclusive authority, the Supreme Court, over time, has created the Disciplinary Review Board, the Office of Attorney Ethics, and the District Ethics Committees to assist it in regulating attorneys. Unlike most other jurisdictions nationwide where the attorney disciplinary system is staffed solely or predominantly by paid, often career, employees, New Jersey's disciplinary system is unique.

All of the members of the Disciplinary Review Board and the District Ethics Committees are volunteers. Some, like me, are practicing attorneys while others are retired judges or members of the public from all walks of life. The common thread that binds us is our overriding duty to ensure that attorneys comply with the Rules of Professional Conduct and to protect the public from the unscrupulous few who seek to undermine the reputation of the entire legal community. Our purpose is not to punish for punishment's sake; instead, in the immortal words of Chief Justice Robert N. Wilentz in *In re Wilson*, the purpose of the disciplinary system is the “maintenance of public confidence in [the judicial system] and in the bar as a whole[.]” 81 N.J. 451, 461 (1979).

We value the contribution of the public members because justice must not only be done, it must be seen to be done. To that end, the Rules of Court require that a public member of a District Ethics Committee concur in a decision to decline docketing of an ethics grievance and to participate on every three-member hearing panel once a disciplinary complaint is filed. We also deeply appreciate the service of our attorney members who investigate ethics grievances and prosecute disciplinary complaints. Attorney members of the disciplinary system are entitled to a Madden exemption from court-ordered pro bono work and four ethics CLE credits for each two-year reporting cycle.

I have been a member of the District VIII Ethics Committee, which has jurisdiction over Middlesex County, for the past five years and have served as vice chair since September 2023. In addition to the benefits noted earlier, service on a District Ethics Committee has provided me and my colleagues with greater insight of the ethics rules and the opportunity to meet and work with attorneys and members of the public on interesting and challenging cases.

The strength of New Jersey's attorney disciplinary system depends on attorneys like you. Our committee, along with the other District Ethics Committees statewide, are looking for new attorney member volunteers. If you are interested in

applying to join a District Ethics Committee, please reach out to me or contact the Office of Attorney Ethics at oaе.mbx@njcourts.gov.

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