

State Bar of California

With Strategic Planning Not Yet Completed, It Projects General Fund Deficits and Needs Continued Improvement in Program Administration

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State Bar of California's response as of October 2007, January 2008

The State Bar of California (State Bar), established by the California State Constitution, is a public corporation with a mission to preserve and protect the justice system. The law requires every person admitted and licensed to practice law in a court in California to be a member unless the individual serves as judge in a court of record. The State Bar's 23-member board of governors (board) establishes policy and guides such functions as licensing attorneys providing programs to promote the professional growth of members of the State Bar.

State law requires the Bureau of State Audits to audit the State Bar's operations from January 1, 2006, through December 31, 2006, but does not specify topics the audit should address. For this audit we reviewed the implementation of the State Bar's long-range strategic plan, its financial forecasts of expected revenues and expenditures, its administration of the Legal Services Trust Fund Program (legal services program), and its implementation of the recommendations from our 2005 audit. The 2005 audit assessed how the State Bar monitored its disciplinary case backlog, followed procedures for processing disciplinary cases, prioritized cost recovery efforts, and updated forecasts of revenues and expenditures.

Finding #1: The State Bar has not fully implemented its strategic-planning process.

In 2001 the State Bar's board began developing and implementing a strategic management cycle to guide the State Bar's activities. As part of that process, the board developed the State Bar's long-range strategic plan. As an outgrowth of the board's planning activities, the State Bar's staff engaged in a departmental strategic-planning process intended to enhance operations and build a culture of continuous improvement in the State Bar. Although the board adopted the strategic plan in 2004, the State Bar still has not completed its strategic-planning process. Specifically, the State Bar has not fully developed planning documents for each of its departments that are intended to implement the board's strategic goals and specify the indicators needed to measure departmental performance in meeting those goals. These departmental plans were to include annually updated action plans intended to identify the actions necessary to meet strategic goals and prioritize the allocation of resources.

The State Bar completed the preliminary departmental plans by December 2005. The executive director instructed each of the departments to include all ideas and comments from staff in its operational plans recognizing that the plans would require edit and revision. The State Bar expected to finalize the plans during 2006. However, according to the State Bar's executive director, several

Audit Highlights . . .

Our review revealed that the State Bar of California:

- » *Began a strategic planning process in 2003; however, development of many departmental plans and performance measures are incomplete.*
- » *Does not prepare annual budgets based on the results of strategic planning, but rather on projected costs for current levels of staff and resources.*
- » *Is pursuing an increase in annual membership fees from active members to offset a projected deficit of almost \$12 million in its general fund by December 2010.*
- » *Continues to await approval of additional authority to collect money related to disciplinary cases, but does not expect the new authority to significantly increase collections in the short term.*
- » *Needs to improve administration of its Legal Services Trust Fund Program to ensure that it maximizes revenue from interest on trust accounts attorneys establish and appropriately completes required monitoring activities.*
- » *Reduced its backlog of open disciplinary cases to 256 cases, moving closer to its goal of 200 backlogged cases.*
- » *Needs to continue improving its processing of disciplinary cases by consistently using checklists and conducting random audits.*

challenges, such as reorganization of several departments and the retirement of three key senior executives, have slowed the revision process. The State Bar currently expects to complete the revisions to the departmental plans by July 2007.

In addition, the State Bar has begun to evaluate its information technology systems and is concerned that they may not be capable of effectively capturing performance measurement data identified in the departmental plans. The State Bar estimates the cost to upgrade its information technology systems will total \$3.4 million to \$5.8 million per year from 2008 to 2013; however, it has not yet identified a source of funds to pay for these upgrades.

Further, because its strategic-planning efforts are still incomplete, the State Bar has not been able to determine whether it is accomplishing the board's strategic goals and does not currently tie its annual budget to its strategic plan and performance measurement efforts. Rather, the State Bar's budget process focuses primarily on estimating the cost of current staff and other resources using known and anticipated price increases.

To ensure that the strategic plan is fully implemented in an effective and timely manner, we recommended that the State Bar do the following:

- Complete revisions of the departmental plans that will serve to implement the board's strategic goals and ensure that each departmental plan contains meaningful performance indicators that will measure how successfully goals are being met.
- Limit performance measurement to indicators that can be accurately tracked on an ongoing basis and measure desired outcomes.
- Ensure that its departments, during their departmental plan revision process, identify the objectives and performance measures that can be attained, considering existing resource levels and information technology capabilities. In addition, on an ongoing basis the departments should revise their annual action plans to update this information given additional information technology upgrades.
- Take the steps necessary to ensure its information technology systems can capture the required performance measurement data to support the projects needed to accomplish strategic-planning objectives, or devise alternative means of capturing this data such as using an Excel spreadsheet.

State Bar's Action: Partial corrective action taken.

The State Bar made revisions to the 14 departmental plans, as of April 30, 2007. The State Bar indicated that, going forward, its departments will submit a report of accomplishments and performance measure adjustments and proposed action plans in January or February each year.

In addition, as part of the overall review of departmental plans the State Bar has evaluated the usefulness, validity, and source of data and collection strategies for the performance measures. The State Bar has reviewed all departmental plans to determine whether the measures can be captured with the State Bar's existing technology.

Moreover, the State Bar stated that their information technology department is working on a strategy that will ensure that the systems that run the various business functions of the State Bar are modernized, sustainable, and capable of capturing and reporting relevant performance data. This plan is part of an overall agencywide plan to refresh its information technology capabilities that the State Bar anticipates will be funded in part by a \$10 technology assessment to the members.

Finding #2: The State Bar projects deficits in its general fund.

Because it estimates the fees it will collect from the increased volume of membership will not keep pace with its rising costs, the State Bar forecasts it will face a deficit of nearly \$12 million in its general fund by December 31, 2010. The State Bar uses its general fund to account for membership fee payments and revenues it receives that are not related to other fund activities and to account for the expenses for maintaining, operating, and supporting its attorney disciplinary process. The State Bar established its Public Protection Reserve Fund (reserve fund) in 2001 to set aside a portion of its general fund as a buffer in the event of a revenue shortfall, like that which occurred after 1997 when it was unable to obtain timely statutory authority to assess the base annual membership fee that funds its disciplinary function and other operations it pays for from its general fund. However, use of the reserve fund to mitigate the projected general fund deficit will not likely provide a satisfactory solution to the State Bar's projected imbalance between revenues and expenses in its general fund. It estimates that even if it uses the balance of the reserve fund to partially offset the projected deficit in its general fund, the combined balance in the two funds will still result in a deficit of about \$6.3 million by December 31, 2010.

The State Bar's authority to assess a base annual membership fee is temporary, and historically the State Bar has needed the Legislature to reaffirm that authority every one to two years. Its current authority expires on January 1, 2008, unless extended before that date. The State Bar noted that to remedy the expected deficit, it is in ongoing discussions with key members of the Legislature to obtain statutory authority to increase the base annual membership fee for active members. The State Bar has determined it will need a \$25 increase in the fee to eliminate its projected general fund deficit and provide funding for information technology upgrades. However, as previously discussed, it has not successfully completed its strategic planning process that will allow it to identify the resources it needs to meet its strategic goals and base its budgeting process on these identified resources. This fact could hamper its efforts to justify a fee increase.

In addition, the State Bar does not anticipate that pending approval by the California Supreme Court (supreme court) of procedures to help recover its costs to discipline members or recover payments to members' clients from the Client Security Fund will have an immediate significant impact. This new enhanced collection authority, when implemented, will allow the State Bar to use money judgment authority to attempt to collect costs from disciplined attorneys.

The State Bar is preparing to implement its enhanced collection authority when approved. According to the State Bar's chief financial officer, in anticipation of the supreme court's approval, the State Bar is attempting to organize available information regarding the unpaid amounts. For example, the State Bar is trying to find the most current addresses of debtors and merge that information with other pertinent data, such as case numbers, restitution orders, and amounts owed. In addition, the State Bar is formulating a policy to guide staff in determining which cases will be affected by the rule, and therefore should be pursued, and which cases will be most fruitful in terms of potential collections.

However, the State Bar does not expect that its current collection rate will increase appreciably in the near future. According to the State Bar's assistant chief general counsel, the disciplined attorneys whose debts make up most of the unpaid amount were disbarred or resigned with disciplinary charges pending. He stated these attorneys are generally financially distressed and unable to repay clients or the State Bar at the time of their disbarment or resignation. The chief assistant general counsel further stated that, according to the State Bar's outside counsel, in five to 10 years some of the disciplined attorneys will have sufficient earnings to seek loans and will want to reestablish their credit and disbarred attorneys may want to seek reinstatement to practice law. He noted that credit-reporting agencies would pick up abstracts of judgments that have been recorded in county recorders' offices, but that if the State Bar wanted to directly report the debts, it would need procedures to comply with the federal Fair Credit Reporting Act. The chief assistant general counsel stated that the State Bar is still considering the costs and benefits of reporting judgments to credit-reporting agencies.

Additionally, although the law currently assesses a yearly \$10 per-member building fee, which the State Bar is accumulating in its building fund, it can only use those funds to acquire and improve facilities or other related capital expenditures. The State Bar anticipates accumulating the funds over the next seven years in anticipation of using the balance as part of a down payment for the purchase of a facility in Los Angeles.

To effectively allocate its resources and justify its membership fees we recommended that the State Bar align its budgets with the results of its strategic-planning process.

To ensure that it maximizes collection efforts and its ability to implement the Rules of Court as soon as the supreme court approves procedures allowing their use, we recommended that the State Bar do the following:

- Complete its database and input all available information on the Client Security Fund and disciplinary debtors.
- Implement its proposed policy for pursuing debtors.
- Complete its assessment of the costs and benefits of reporting judgments to credit-reporting agencies.

State Bar's Action: Partial corrective action taken.

To ensure the highest level of integrity in its automated system, the State Bar has contracted with an independent auditor to review current procedures and processes to ensure that judgments filed are accurate and the data has integrity as information moves through the system.

The supreme court approved the Rule of Court in April 2007. In July 2007 the board adopted a pursuit policy for court ordered disciplinary costs and Client Security Fund obligations, which was immediately implemented. The State Bar reported that, as of January 2008, it has been awarded 80 judgments.

The State Bar interviewed three collection agencies currently under contract with the Administrative Office of the Courts and submitted to the vendors a request for additional information and pricing to assure they can evaluate the costs and benefits of using some or all of the collection agencies' services. The State Bar has tentatively selected one of the vendors.

The State Bar's 2008 adopted budget has been redesigned to link its budget with its strategic planning process. The proposed budget is aligned with the State Bar's organizational and functional structures as defined by its strategic plan and presents basic workload and performance information in major program areas.

Finding #3: The State Bar needs to improve its legal services program and attorney discipline system.

For grant year 2006–07 the State Bar awarded \$26.7 million in grant funds from the legal services program to provide civil legal assistance to indigent Californians. The funds for the program come primarily from interest on trust accounts attorneys establish for certain client funds, state budget appropriations, and an allocation of certain court filing fees. The State Bar does not ensure that all attorneys comply with the law requiring them to remit the interest on these trust accounts to the State Bar to support the legal services program. The State Bar reported that in 2006 it received about \$15.8 million from attorneys' trust accounts. However, because about 25 percent of the practicing attorneys in California do not remit interest earned on clients' trust accounts that qualify for the legal services program or report that they do not maintain trust accounts, the State Bar does not know whether it receives all the funds it should to support the legal services program.

The State Bar asks attorneys to report when they open or close trust accounts or no longer handle such client funds; however, it does not investigate nonreporting attorneys to determine whether they should establish trust accounts and remit the interest to the State Bar. According to the State Bar's deputy executive director, the State Bar has no authority to mandate reporting and would need an amendment to the statutes or to the Rules of Court to gain the authority to mandate reporting from its members.

Additionally, the State Bar is responsible for on-site monitoring of grantees to determine whether they complied with the program's requirements. However, it does not always adequately perform or document monitoring reviews of the legal services program grantees. Despite the State Bar's grantee-monitoring visits scheduled for the three-year period from January 1, 2004, through December 31, 2006, 12 grantees did not receive program-monitoring visits, and 51 did not receive fiscal-monitoring visits. Further, the State Bar does not always retain documentation needed to demonstrate that staff have completed all the steps in the monitoring process.

A 2005 Bureau of State Audits' report assessed the efforts of the State Bar to address the backlog of disciplinary cases it began accumulating after temporarily losing its statutory authority in 1997 to assess a base annual membership fee. In 2005 the State Bar had 315 backlogged disciplinary cases. As of December 2006 the State Bar had reduced the backlog to 256 with the oldest cases dating back to 2003. This progress moved the State Bar closer to its goal of having no more than 200 backlogged cases.

Our 2005 audit also addressed the State Bar's inability to process disciplinary cases efficiently. In response, the State Bar created checklists to ensure that staff follow significant processing steps and developed random audit procedures to improve its oversight of the processing of disciplinary cases. However, the State Bar has not fully implemented either of these policies. Three of the 30 files we reviewed did not contain properly completed checklists, and supervising trial counsels who oversee the disciplinary case investigators do not always perform the random audits required by the State Bar's policy.

To ensure that it receives all the trust account interest income available for its legal services program, we recommended that the State Bar consider conducting activities, such as interviewing or surveying a sample of members who do not report whether they have established trust accounts. This would allow the State Bar to determine whether some members are holding clients' funds without establishing trust accounts and remitting the interest to the State Bar. If the State Bar finds that the nonreporting members do, in fact, hold client funds that are nominal in amount or are held for a short period of time, it should seek the authority to enforce compliance reporting.

To properly monitor recipients of grants under its legal services program, the State Bar should ensure that it performs and documents all required monitoring reviews; in addition, it should develop a plan to perform the fiscal on-site monitoring visits that were not performed while staying current with its ongoing monitoring requirements.

The State Bar should continue its efforts to reduce its backlog of disciplinary cases to reach its goal of having no more than 200 cases.

The State Bar should ensure that staff use checklists of significant tasks when processing case files and fully implement its 2005 policy directive for random audits of case files by supervising trial counsel.

State Bar's Action: Partial corrective action taken.

The State Bar transmitted to the supreme court for approval a proposal that would require each attorney to complete and maintain an online registration. If adopted by the supreme court, proposed Rule 9.8 specifically requires lawyers to report whether the attorney or the attorney's law firm has established and maintained one or more trust fund accounts required under Business and Professions Code, Section 6211.

The State Bar has decided to focus upon addressing the bigger solution through adoption of online reporting in lieu of undertaking the interim step of manually polling members to determine whether non-reporting members have trust fund accounts.

The State Bar stated that it is coordinating with the Administrative Office of the Courts to survey other grant-making organizations to assist in establishing best practices for monitoring processes and tools. The State Bar's legal services program staff brought monitoring visits current as of December 31, 2007.

Moreover, the State Bar's Office of the Chief Trial Counsel modified its department plan in May 2007 to, among other things, establish a revised goal of having no more than 250 open backlog cases at the end of each year, rather than the previous goal of 200 open backlog cases. Given staffing constraints, the State Bar feels that it may be difficult to achieve the revised backlog goal of 250 by the end of 2007.

Lastly, the State Bar's Chief Trial Counsel issued a memorandum to all affected staff reminding them to use the checklists and directs appropriate supervisory personnel to perform random audits on a monthly basis with respect to the open investigation files of investigators assigned to original disciplinary investigations. The memorandum also directs supervisory personnel to adequately document the random audits and to confirm that any necessary corrective action has been taken.