

## **CHAPTER 4. RULES OF PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT**

### **PREAMBLE: A LAWYER'S RESPONSIBILITIES**

A lawyer, as a member of the legal profession, is a representative of clients, an officer of the legal system, and a public citizen having special responsibility for the quality of justice.

As a representative of clients, a lawyer performs various functions. As an adviser, a lawyer provides a client with an informed understanding of the client's legal rights and obligations and explains their practical implications. As an advocate, a lawyer zealously asserts the client's position under the rules of the adversary system. As a negotiator, a lawyer seeks a result advantageous to the client but consistent with requirements of honest dealing with others. As an evaluator, a lawyer acts by examining a client's legal affairs and reporting about them to the client or to others.

In addition to these representational functions, a lawyer may serve as a third-party neutral, a nonrepresentational role helping the parties to resolve a dispute or other matter. Some of these rules apply directly to lawyers who are or have served as third-party neutrals. See, e.g., rules 4-1.12 and 4-2.4. In addition, there are rules that apply to lawyers who are not active in the practice of law or to practicing lawyers even when they are acting in a nonprofessional capacity. For example, a lawyer who commits fraud in the conduct of a business is subject to discipline for engaging in conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit, or misrepresentation. See rule 4-8.4.

In all professional functions a lawyer should be competent, prompt, and diligent. A lawyer should maintain communication with a client concerning the representation. A lawyer should keep in confidence information relating to representation of a client except so far as disclosure is required or permitted by the Rules of Professional Conduct or by law.

A lawyer's conduct should conform to the requirements of the law, both in professional service to clients and in the lawyer's business and personal affairs. A lawyer should use the law's

procedures only for legitimate purposes and not to harass or intimidate others. A lawyer should demonstrate respect for the legal system and for those who serve it, including judges, other lawyers, and public officials. While it is a lawyer's duty, when necessary, to challenge the rectitude of official action, it is also a lawyer's duty to uphold legal process.

As a public citizen, a lawyer should seek improvement of the law, access to the legal system, the administration of justice, and the quality of service rendered by the legal profession. As a member of a learned profession, a lawyer should cultivate knowledge of the law beyond its use for clients, employ that knowledge in reform of the law, and work to strengthen legal education. In addition, a lawyer should further the public's understanding of and confidence in the rule of law and the justice system, because legal institutions in a constitutional democracy depend on popular participation and support to maintain their authority. A lawyer should be mindful of deficiencies in the administration of justice and of the fact that the poor, and sometimes persons who are not poor, cannot afford adequate legal assistance. Therefore, all lawyers should devote professional time and resources and use civic influence to ensure equal access to our system of justice for all those who because of economic or social barriers cannot afford or secure adequate legal counsel. A lawyer should aid the legal profession in pursuing these objectives and should help the bar regulate itself in the public interest.

Many of the lawyer's professional responsibilities are prescribed in the Rules of Professional Conduct and in substantive and procedural law. A lawyer is also guided by personal conscience and the approbation of professional peers. A lawyer should strive to attain the highest level of skill, to improve the law and the legal profession, and to exemplify the legal profession's ideals of public service.

A lawyer's responsibilities as a representative of clients, an officer of the legal system, and a public citizen are usually harmonious. Zealous advocacy is not inconsistent with justice. Moreover, unless violations of law or injury to another or another's property is involved, preserving client confidences ordinarily serves

the public interest because people are more likely to seek legal advice, and heed their legal obligations, when they know their communications will be private.

In the practice of law, conflicting responsibilities are often encountered. Difficult ethical problems may arise from a conflict between a lawyer's responsibility to a client and the lawyer's own sense of personal honor, including obligations to society and the legal profession. The Rules of Professional Conduct often prescribe terms for resolving these conflicts. Within the framework of these rules, however, many difficult issues of professional discretion can arise. These issues must be resolved through the exercise of sensitive professional and moral judgment guided by the basic principles underlying the rules. These principles include the lawyer's obligation to protect and pursue a client's legitimate interests, within the bounds of the law, while maintaining a professional, courteous, and civil attitude toward all persons involved in the legal system.

Lawyers are officers of the court and they are responsible to the judiciary for the propriety of their professional activities. Within that context, the legal profession has been granted powers of self-government. Self-regulation helps maintain the legal profession's independence from undue government domination. An independent legal profession is an important force in preserving government under law, for abuse of legal authority is more readily challenged by a profession whose members are not dependent on the executive and legislative branches of government for the right to practice. Supervision by an independent judiciary, and conformity with the rules the judiciary adopts for the profession, assures both independence and responsibility.

Thus, every lawyer is responsible for observance of the Rules of Professional Conduct. A lawyer should also aid in securing their observance by other lawyers. Neglect of these responsibilities compromises the independence of the profession and the public interest that it serves.

**Scope:**

The Rules of Professional Conduct are rules of reason. They should be interpreted with reference to the purposes of legal representation and of the law itself. Some of the rules are imperatives, cast in the terms of “must,” “must not,” or “may not.” These define proper conduct for purposes of professional discipline. Others, generally cast in the term “may,” are permissive and define areas under the rules in which the lawyer has discretion to exercise professional judgment. No disciplinary action should be taken when the lawyer chooses not to act or acts within the bounds of that discretion. Other rules define the nature of relationships between the lawyer and others. The rules are thus partly obligatory and disciplinary and partly constitutive and descriptive in that they define a lawyer’s professional role.

The comment accompanying each rule explains and illustrates the meaning and purpose of the rule. The comments are intended only as guides to interpretation, whereas the text of each rule is authoritative. Thus, comments, even when they use the term “should,” do not add obligations to the rules but merely provide guidance for practicing in compliance with the rules.

The rules presuppose a larger legal context shaping the lawyer’s role. That context includes court rules and statutes relating to matters of licensure, laws defining specific obligations of lawyers, and substantive and procedural law in general. Compliance with the rules, as with all law in an open society, depends primarily upon understanding and voluntary compliance, secondarily upon reinforcement by peer and public opinion, and finally, when necessary, upon enforcement through disciplinary proceedings. The rules do not, however, exhaust the moral and ethical considerations that should inform a lawyer, for no worthwhile human activity can be completely defined by legal rules. The rules simply provide a framework for the ethical practice of law. The comments are sometimes used to alert lawyers to their responsibilities under other law.

Furthermore, for purposes of determining the lawyer’s authority and responsibility, principles of substantive law external

to these rules determine whether a client-lawyer relationship exists. Most of the duties flowing from the client-lawyer relationship attach only after the client has requested the lawyer to render legal services and the lawyer has agreed to do so. But there are some duties, for example confidentiality under rule 4-1.6, which attach when the lawyer agrees to consider whether a client-lawyer relationship will be established. See rule 4-1.18. Whether a client-lawyer relationship exists for any specific purpose can depend on the circumstances and may be a question of fact.

Failure to comply with an obligation or prohibition imposed by a rule is a basis for invoking the disciplinary process. The rules presuppose that disciplinary assessment of a lawyer's conduct will be made on the basis of the facts and circumstances as they existed at the time of the conduct in question in recognition of the fact that a lawyer often has to act upon uncertain or incomplete evidence of the situation. Moreover, the rules presuppose that whether discipline should be imposed for a violation, and the severity of a sanction, depend on all the circumstances, such as the willfulness and seriousness of the violation, extenuating factors, and whether there have been previous violations.

Violation of a rule should not itself give rise to a cause of action against a lawyer nor should it create any presumption that a legal duty has been breached. In addition, violation of a rule does not necessarily warrant any other nondisciplinary remedy, such as disqualification of a lawyer in pending litigation. The rules are designed to provide guidance to lawyers and to provide a structure for regulating conduct through disciplinary agencies. They are not designed to be a basis for civil liability. Furthermore, the purpose of the rules can be subverted when they are invoked by opposing parties as procedural weapons. The fact that a rule is a just basis for a lawyer's self-assessment, or for sanctioning a lawyer under the administration of a disciplinary authority, does not imply that an antagonist in a collateral proceeding or transaction has standing to seek enforcement of the rule. Accordingly, nothing in the rules should be deemed to augment any substantive legal duty of lawyers or the extra-disciplinary consequences of violating a substantive legal duty. Nevertheless, since the rules do establish standards of

conduct by lawyers, a lawyer's violation of a rule may be evidence of a breach of the applicable standard of conduct.

### **Terminology:**

“Belief” or “believes” denotes that the person involved actually supposed the fact in question to be true. A person's belief may be inferred from circumstances.

“Consult” or “consultation” denotes communication of information reasonably sufficient to permit the client to appreciate the significance of the matter in question.

“Confirmed in writing,” when used in reference to the informed consent of a person, denotes informed consent that is given in writing by the person or a writing that a lawyer promptly transmits to the person confirming an oral informed consent. See “informed consent” below. If it is not feasible to obtain or transmit the writing at the time the person gives informed consent, then the lawyer must obtain or transmit it within a reasonable time.

“Firm” or “law firm” denotes a lawyer or lawyers in a law partnership, professional corporation, sole proprietorship, or other association authorized to practice law; or lawyers employed in the legal department of a corporation or other organization.

“Fraud” or “fraudulent” denotes conduct having a purpose to deceive and not merely negligent misrepresentation or failure to apprise another of relevant information.

“Informed consent” denotes the agreement by a person to a proposed course of conduct after the lawyer has communicated adequate information and explanation about the material risks of and reasonably available alternatives to the proposed course of conduct.

“Knowingly,” “known,” or “knows” denotes actual knowledge of the fact in question. A person's knowledge may be inferred from circumstances.

“Lawyer” denotes a person who is a member of The Florida Bar or otherwise authorized to practice in the state of Florida.

“Partner” denotes a member of a partnership and a shareholder in a law firm organized as a professional corporation, or a member of an association authorized to practice law.

“Reasonable” or “reasonably” when used in relation to conduct by a lawyer denotes the conduct of a reasonably prudent and competent lawyer.

“Reasonable belief” or “reasonably believes” when used in reference to a lawyer denotes that the lawyer believes the matter in question and that the circumstances are such that the belief is reasonable.

“Reasonably should know” when used in reference to a lawyer denotes that a lawyer of reasonable prudence and competence would ascertain the matter in question.

“Screened” denotes the isolation of a lawyer from any participation in a matter through the timely imposition of procedures within a firm that are reasonably adequate under the circumstances to protect information that the isolated lawyer is obligated to protect under these rules or other law.

“Substantial” when used in reference to degree or extent denotes a material matter of clear and weighty importance.

“Tribunal” denotes a court, an arbitrator in a binding arbitration proceeding, or a legislative body, administrative agency, or other body acting in an adjudicative capacity. A legislative body, administrative agency, or other body acts in an adjudicative capacity when a neutral official, after the presentation of evidence or legal argument by a party or parties, will render a binding legal judgment directly affecting a party’s interests in a particular matter.

“Writing” or “written” denotes a tangible or electronic record of a communication or representation, including handwriting, typewriting, printing, photostating, photography, audio or video recording, and electronic communications. A “signed” writing

includes an electronic sound, symbol or process attached to or logically associated with a writing and executed or adopted by a person with the intent to sign the writing.

## **Comment**

### **Confirmed in writing**

If it is not feasible to obtain or transmit a written confirmation at the time the client gives informed consent, then the lawyer must obtain or transmit it within a reasonable time. If a lawyer has obtained a client's informed consent, the lawyer may act in reliance on that consent so long as it is confirmed in writing within a reasonable time.

### **Firm**

Whether 2 or more lawyers constitute a firm above can depend on the specific facts. For example, 2 practitioners who share office space and occasionally consult or assist each other ordinarily would not be regarded as constituting a firm. However, if they present themselves to the public in a way that suggests that they are a firm or conduct themselves as a firm, they should be regarded as a firm for purposes of the rules. The terms of any formal agreement between associated lawyers are relevant in determining whether they are a firm, as is the fact that they have mutual access to information concerning the clients they serve. Furthermore, it is relevant in doubtful cases to consider the underlying purpose of the rule that is involved. A group of lawyers could be regarded as a firm for purposes of the rule that the same lawyer should not represent opposing parties in litigation, while it might not be so regarded for purposes of the rule that information acquired by 1 lawyer is attributed to another.

With respect to the law department of an organization, including the government, there is ordinarily no question that the members of the department constitute a firm within the meaning of the Rules of Professional Conduct. There can be uncertainty, however, as to the identity of the client. For example, it may not be clear whether the law department of a corporation represents a subsidiary or an affiliated corporation, as well as the corporation by

which the members of the department are directly employed. A similar question can arise concerning an unincorporated association and its local affiliates.

Similar questions can also arise with respect to lawyers in legal aid and legal services organizations. Depending upon the structure of the organization, the entire organization or different components of it may constitute a firm or firms for purposes of these rules.

## **Fraud**

When used in these rules, the terms “fraud” or “fraudulent” refer to conduct that has a purpose to deceive. This does not include merely negligent misrepresentation or negligent failure to apprise another of relevant information. For purposes of these rules, it is not necessary that anyone has suffered damages or relied on the misrepresentation or failure to inform.

## **Informed consent**

Many of the Rules of Professional Conduct require the lawyer to obtain the informed consent of a client or other person (e.g., a former client or, under certain circumstances, a prospective client) before accepting or continuing representation or pursuing a course of conduct. See, e.g., rules 4-1.2(c), 4-1.6(a), 4-1.7(b), and 4-1.18. The communication necessary to obtain consent will vary according to the rule involved and the circumstances giving rise to the need to obtain informed consent. The lawyer must make reasonable efforts to ensure that the client or other person possesses information reasonably adequate to make an informed decision. Ordinarily, this will require communication that includes a disclosure of the facts and circumstances giving rise to the situation, any explanation reasonably necessary to inform the client or other person of the material advantages and disadvantages of the proposed course of conduct and a discussion of the client’s or other person’s options and alternatives. In some circumstances it may be appropriate for a lawyer to advise a client or other person to seek the advice of other counsel. A lawyer need not inform a client or other person of facts or implications already known to the client or other person;

nevertheless, a lawyer who does not personally inform the client or other person assumes the risk that the client or other person is inadequately informed and the consent is invalid. In determining whether the information and explanation provided are reasonably adequate, relevant factors include whether the client or other person is experienced in legal matters generally and in making decisions of the type involved, and whether the client or other person is independently represented by other counsel in giving the consent. Normally, these persons need less information and explanation than others, and generally a client or other person who is independently represented by other counsel in giving the consent should be assumed to have given informed consent.

Obtaining informed consent will usually require an affirmative response by the client or other person. In general, a lawyer may not assume consent from a client's or other person's silence. Consent may be inferred, however, from the conduct of a client or other person who has reasonably adequate information about the matter. A number of rules state that a person's consent be confirmed in writing. See, e.g., rule 4-1.7(b). For a definition of "writing" and "confirmed in writing," see terminology above. Other rules require that a client's consent be obtained in a writing signed by the client. See, e.g., rule 4-1.8(a). For a definition of "signed," see terminology above.

## **Screened**

This definition applies to situations where screening of a personally disqualified lawyer is permitted to remove imputation of a conflict of interest under rules 4-1.11, 4-1.12, or 4-1.18.

The purpose of screening is to assure the affected parties that confidential information known by the personally disqualified lawyer remains protected. The personally disqualified lawyer should acknowledge the obligation not to communicate with any of the other lawyers in the firm with respect to the matter. Similarly, other lawyers in the firm who are working on the matter should be informed that the screening is in place and that they may not communicate with the personally disqualified lawyer with respect to the matter. Additional screening measures that are appropriate for

the particular matter will depend on the circumstances. To implement, reinforce, and remind all affected lawyers of the presence of the screening, it may be appropriate for the firm to undertake these procedures as a written undertaking by the screened lawyer to avoid any communication with other firm personnel and any contact with any firm files or other information, including information in electronic form, relating to the matter, written notice and instructions to all other firm personnel forbidding any communication with the screened lawyer relating to the matter, denial of access by the screened lawyer to firm files or other information, including information in electronic form, relating to the matter, and periodic reminders of the screen to the screened lawyer and all other firm personnel.

In order to be effective, screening measures must be implemented as soon as practicable after a lawyer or law firm knows or reasonably should know that there is a need for screening.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective Jan. 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417); amended May 21, 2015, corrected June 25, 2015, effective October 1, 2015 (164 So.3d 1217), amended November 9, 2017, effective February 1, 2018 (234 So.3d 577).

## **4-1. CLIENT-LAWYER RELATIONSHIP**

### **RULE 4-1.1 COMPETENCE**

A lawyer must provide competent representation to a client. Competent representation requires the legal knowledge, skill, thoroughness, and preparation reasonably necessary for the representation.

#### **Comment**

#### **Legal knowledge and skill**

In determining whether a lawyer employs the requisite knowledge and skill in a particular matter, relevant factors include the relative complexity and specialized nature of the matter, the lawyer's general experience, the lawyer's training and experience in the field in question, the preparation and study the lawyer is able to

give the matter, and whether it is feasible to refer the matter to, or associate or consult with, a lawyer of established competence in the field in question. In many instances the required proficiency is that of a general practitioner. Expertise in a particular field of law may be required in some circumstances.

A lawyer need not necessarily have special training or prior experience to handle legal problems of a type with which the lawyer is unfamiliar. A newly admitted lawyer can be as competent as a practitioner with long experience. Some important legal skills, such as the analysis of precedent, the evaluation of evidence and legal drafting, are required in all legal problems. Perhaps the most fundamental legal skill consists of determining what kind of legal problems a situation may involve, a skill that necessarily transcends any particular specialized knowledge. A lawyer can provide adequate representation in a wholly novel field through necessary study. Competent representation can also be provided through the association of a lawyer of established competence in the field in question.

Competent representation may also involve the association or retention of a non-lawyer advisor of established technological competence in the field in question. Competent representation also involves safeguarding confidential information relating to the representation, including, but not limited to, electronic transmissions and communications.

In an emergency a lawyer may give advice or assistance in a matter in which the lawyer does not have the skill ordinarily required where referral to or consultation or association with another lawyer would be impractical. Even in an emergency, however, assistance should be limited to that reasonably necessary in the circumstances, for ill-considered action under emergency conditions can jeopardize the client's interest.

A lawyer may accept representation where the requisite level of competence can be achieved by reasonable preparation. This applies as well to a lawyer who is appointed as counsel for an unrepresented person. See also rule 4-6.2.

## **Thoroughness and preparation**

Competent handling of a particular matter includes inquiry into and analysis of the factual and legal elements of the problem, and use of methods and procedures meeting the standards of competent practitioners. It also includes adequate preparation. The required attention and preparation are determined in part by what is at stake; major litigation and complex transactions ordinarily require more extensive treatment than matters of lesser complexity and consequence. The lawyer should consult with the client about the degree of thoroughness and the level of preparation required as well as the estimated costs involved under the circumstances.

## **Maintaining competence**

To maintain the requisite knowledge and skill, a lawyer should keep abreast of changes in the law and its practice, engage in continuing study and education, including an understanding of the benefits and risks associated with the use of technology, including generative artificial intelligence, and comply with all continuing legal education requirements to which the lawyer is subject.

Amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417);  
amended September 29, 2016, effective January 1, 2017 (200 So.3d 1225);  
amended August 29, 2024, effective October 28, 2024 (SC2024-0032).

## **RULE 4-1.2 OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE OF REPRESENTATION**

**(a) Lawyer to Abide by Client's Decisions.** Subject to subdivisions (c) and (d), a lawyer must abide by a client's decisions concerning the objectives of representation, and, as required by rule 4-1.4, must reasonably consult with the client as to the means by which they are to be pursued. A lawyer may take action on behalf of the client that is impliedly authorized to carry out the representation. A lawyer must abide by a client's decision whether to settle a matter. In a criminal case, the lawyer must abide by the client's decision, after consultation with the lawyer, as to a plea to be entered, whether to waive jury trial, and whether the client will testify.

**(b) No Endorsement of Client's Views or Activities.** A lawyer's representation of a client, including representation by appointment, does not constitute an endorsement of the client's political, economic, social, or moral views or activities.

**(c) Limitation of Objectives and Scope of Representation.** If not prohibited by law or rule, a lawyer and client may agree to limit the objectives or scope of the representation if the limitation is reasonable under the circumstances and the client gives informed consent in writing, except that a lawyer giving advice in a short-term limited legal services program under Rule 4-6.6 is not required to obtain the consent in writing. If the lawyer and client agree to limit the scope of the representation, the lawyer must advise the client regarding applicability of the rule prohibiting communication with a represented person.

**(d) Criminal or Fraudulent Conduct.** A lawyer must not counsel a client to engage, or assist a client, in conduct that the lawyer knows or reasonably should know is criminal or fraudulent. However, a lawyer may discuss the legal consequences of any proposed course of conduct with a client and may counsel or assist a client to make a good faith effort to determine the validity, scope, meaning, or application of the law.

### **Comment**

#### **Allocation of authority between client and lawyer**

Subdivision (a) confers on the client the ultimate authority to determine the purposes to be served by legal representation, within the limits imposed by law and the lawyer's professional obligations. Within those limits, a client also has a right to consult with the lawyer about the means to be used in pursuing those objectives. At the same time, a lawyer is not required to pursue objectives or employ means simply because a client may wish that the lawyer do so. A clear distinction between objectives and means sometimes cannot be drawn, and in many cases the client-lawyer relationship partakes of a joint undertaking. In questions of means, the lawyer should assume responsibility for technical and legal tactical issues but should defer to the client regarding such questions as the expense to be incurred and concern for third persons who might be

adversely affected. Law defining the lawyer's scope of authority in litigation varies among jurisdictions. The decisions specified in subdivision (a), such as whether to settle a civil matter, must also be made by the client. See rule 4-1.4(a)(1) for the lawyer's duty to communicate with the client about these decisions. With respect to the means by which the client's objectives are to be pursued, the lawyer must consult with the client as required by rule 4-1.4(a)(2) and may take action as is impliedly authorized to carry out the representation.

On occasion, however, a lawyer and a client may disagree about the means to be used to accomplish the client's objectives. The lawyer should consult with the client and seek a mutually acceptable resolution of the disagreement. If these efforts are unavailing and the lawyer has a fundamental disagreement with the client, the lawyer may withdraw from the representation. See rule 4-1.16(b)(2). Conversely, the client may resolve the disagreement by discharging the lawyer. See rule 4-1.16(a)(3).

At the outset of a representation, the client may authorize the lawyer to take specific action on the client's behalf without further consultation. Absent a material change in circumstances and subject to rule 4-1.4, a lawyer may rely on the advance authorization. The client may, however, revoke this authority at any time.

In a case in which the client appears to be suffering mental disability, the lawyer's duty to abide by the client's decisions is to be guided by reference to rule 4-1.14.

### **Independence from client's views or activities**

Legal representation should not be denied to people who are unable to afford legal services or whose cause is controversial or the subject of popular disapproval. By the same token representing a client does not constitute approval of the client's views or activities.

### **Agreements limiting scope of representation**

The scope of services to be provided by a lawyer may be limited by agreement with the client or by the terms under which

the lawyer's services are made available to the client. When a lawyer has been retained by an insurer to represent an insured, for example, the representation may be limited to matters related to the insurance coverage. A limited representation may be appropriate because the client has limited objectives for the representation. In addition, the terms on which representation is undertaken may exclude specific means that might otherwise be used to accomplish the client's objectives. Limitations may exclude actions that the client thinks are too costly or that the lawyer regards as repugnant or imprudent, or which the client regards as financially impractical.

Although this rule affords the lawyer and client substantial latitude to limit the representation if not prohibited by law or rule, the limitation must be reasonable under the circumstances. If, for example, a client's objective is limited to securing general information about the law the client needs in order to handle a common and typically uncomplicated legal problem, the lawyer and client may agree that the lawyer's services will be limited to a brief consultation. This limitation, however, would not be reasonable if the time allotted was not sufficient to yield advice upon which the client could rely. In addition, a lawyer and client may agree that the representation will be limited to providing assistance out of court, including providing advice on the operation of the court system and drafting pleadings and responses. If the lawyer assists a pro se litigant by drafting any document to be submitted to a court, the lawyer is not obligated to sign the document. However, the lawyer must indicate "Prepared with the assistance of counsel" on the document to avoid misleading the court, which otherwise might be under the impression that the person, who appears to be proceeding pro se, has received no assistance from a lawyer. If not prohibited by law or rule, a lawyer and client may agree that any in-court representation in a family law proceeding be limited as provided for in Family Law Rule of Procedure 12.040. For example, a lawyer and client may agree that the lawyer will represent the client at a hearing regarding child support and not at the final hearing or in any other hearings. For limited in-court representation in family law proceedings, the lawyer must communicate to the client the specific boundaries and limitations of

the representation so that the client is able to give informed consent to the representation.

Regardless of the circumstances, a lawyer providing limited representation forms a client-lawyer relationship with the litigant, and owes the client all attendant ethical obligations and duties imposed by the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar, including, but not limited to, duties of competence, communication, confidentiality, and avoidance of conflicts of interest. Although an agreement for limited representation does not exempt a lawyer from the duty to provide competent representation, the limitation is a factor to be considered when determining the legal knowledge, skill, thoroughness and preparation reasonably necessary for the representation. See rule 4-1.1.

An agreement concerning the scope of representation must accord with the Rules of Professional Conduct and law. For example, the client may not be asked to agree to representation so limited in scope as to violate rule 4-1.1 or to surrender the right to terminate the lawyer's services or the right to settle litigation that the lawyer might wish to continue.

### **Criminal, fraudulent, and prohibited transactions**

A lawyer is required to give an honest opinion about the actual consequences that appear likely to result from a client's conduct. The fact that a client uses advice in a course of action that is criminal or fraudulent does not, of itself, make a lawyer a party to the course of action. However, a lawyer may not assist a client in conduct that the lawyer knows or reasonably should know to be criminal or fraudulent. There is a critical distinction between presenting an analysis of legal aspects of questionable conduct and recommending the means by which a crime or fraud might be committed with impunity.

When the client's course of action has already begun and is continuing, the lawyer's responsibility is especially delicate. The lawyer is required to avoid assisting the client, for example, by drafting or delivering documents that the lawyer knows are fraudulent or by suggesting how the wrongdoing might be

concealed. A lawyer may not continue assisting a client in conduct that the lawyer originally supposed was legally proper but then discovers is criminal or fraudulent. The lawyer must, therefore, withdraw from the representation of the client in the matter. See rule 4-1.16(a). In some cases, withdrawal alone might be insufficient. It may be necessary for the lawyer to give notice of the fact of withdrawal and to disaffirm any opinion, document, affirmation, or the like. See rule 4-1.1.

Where the client is a fiduciary, the lawyer may be charged with special obligations in dealings with a beneficiary.

Subdivision (d) applies whether or not the defrauded party is a party to the transaction. For example, a lawyer must not participate in a transaction to effectuate criminal or fraudulent avoidance of tax liability. Subdivision (d) does not preclude undertaking a criminal defense incident to a general retainer for legal services to a lawful enterprise. The last sentence of subdivision (d) recognizes that determining the validity or interpretation of a statute or regulation may require a course of action involving disobedience of the statute or regulation or of the interpretation placed upon it by governmental authorities.

If a lawyer comes to know or reasonably should know that a client expects assistance not permitted by the Rules of Professional Conduct or other law or if the lawyer intends to act contrary to the client's instructions, the lawyer must consult with the client regarding the limitations on the lawyer's conduct. See rule 4-1.4(a)(5).

Amended July 23, 1992, effective Jan. 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended November 13, 2003, effective January 1, 2004 (860 So.2d 394); amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417); October 19, 2017, effective November 20, 2017 (228 So.3d 1117); amended Jan. 4, 2019, effective March 5, 2019 (267 So.3d 891).

### **RULE 4-1.3 DILIGENCE**

A lawyer shall act with reasonable diligence and promptness in representing a client.

## Comment

A lawyer should pursue a matter on behalf of a client despite opposition, obstruction, or personal inconvenience to the lawyer and take whatever lawful and ethical measures are required to vindicate a client's cause or endeavor. A lawyer must also act with commitment and dedication to the interests of the client and with zeal in advocacy upon the client's behalf. A lawyer is not bound, however, to press for every advantage that might be realized for a client. For example, a lawyer may have authority to exercise professional discretion in determining the means by which a matter should be pursued. See rule 4-1.2. The lawyer's duty to act with reasonable diligence does not require the use of offensive tactics or preclude the treating of all persons involved in the legal process with courtesy and respect.

A lawyer's workload must be controlled so that each matter can be handled competently.

Perhaps no professional shortcoming is more widely resented than procrastination. A client's interests often can be adversely affected by the passage of time or the change of conditions; in extreme instances, as when a lawyer overlooks a statute of limitations, the client's legal position may be destroyed. Even when the client's interests are not affected in substance, however, unreasonable delay can cause a client needless anxiety and undermine confidence in the lawyer. A lawyer's duty to act with reasonable promptness, however, does not preclude the lawyer from agreeing to a reasonable request for a postponement that will not prejudice the lawyer's client.

Unless the relationship is terminated as provided in rule 4-1.16, a lawyer should carry through to conclusion all matters undertaken for a client. If a lawyer's employment is limited to a specific matter, the relationship terminates when the matter has been resolved. If a lawyer has served a client over a substantial period in a variety of matters, the client sometimes may assume that the lawyer will continue to serve on a continuing basis unless the lawyer gives notice of withdrawal. Doubt about whether a client-lawyer relationship still exists should be clarified by the

lawyer, preferably in writing, so that the client will not mistakenly suppose the lawyer is looking after the client's affairs when the lawyer has ceased to do so. For example, if a lawyer has handled a judicial or administrative proceeding that produced a result adverse to the client and the lawyer and the client have not agreed that the lawyer will handle the matter on appeal, the lawyer must consult with the client about the possibility of appeal before relinquishing responsibility for the matter. See rule 4-1.4(a)(2). Whether the lawyer is obligated to prosecute the appeal for the client depends on the scope of the representation the lawyer has agreed to provide to the client. See rule 4-1.2.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective Jan. 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417).

## **RULE 4-1.4 COMMUNICATION**

**(a) Informing Client of Status of Representation.** A lawyer shall:

(1) promptly inform the client of any decision or circumstance with respect to which the client's informed consent, as defined in terminology, is required by these rules;

(2) reasonably consult with the client about the means by which the client's objectives are to be accomplished;

(3) keep the client reasonably informed about the status of the matter;

(4) promptly comply with reasonable requests for information; and

(5) consult with the client about any relevant limitation on the lawyer's conduct when the lawyer knows or reasonably should know that the client expects assistance not permitted by the Rules of Professional Conduct or other law.

**(b) Duty to Explain Matters to Client.** A lawyer shall explain a matter to the extent reasonably necessary to permit the client to make informed decisions regarding the representation.

## **Comment**

Reasonable communication between the lawyer and the client is necessary for the client to effectively participate in the representation.

### **Communicating with client**

If these rules require that a particular decision about the representation be made by the client, subdivision (a)(1) requires that the lawyer promptly consult with and secure the client's consent prior to taking action unless prior discussions with the client have resolved what action the client wants the lawyer to take. For example, a lawyer who receives from opposing counsel an offer of settlement in a civil controversy or a proffered plea bargain in a criminal case must promptly inform the client of its substance unless the client has previously indicated that the proposal will be acceptable or unacceptable or has authorized the lawyer to accept or to reject the offer. See rule 4-1.2(a).

Subdivision (a)(2) requires the lawyer to reasonably consult with the client about the means to be used to accomplish the client's objectives. In some situations – depending on both the importance of the action under consideration and the feasibility of consulting with the client – this duty will require consultation prior to taking action. In other circumstances, such as during a trial when an immediate decision must be made, the exigency of the situation may require the lawyer to act without prior consultation. In such cases the lawyer must nonetheless act reasonably to inform the client of actions the lawyer has taken on the client's behalf. Additionally, subdivision (a)(3) requires that the lawyer keep the client reasonably informed about the status of the matter, such as significant developments affecting the timing or the substance of the representation.

A lawyer's regular communication with clients will minimize the occasions on which a client will need to request information concerning the representation. When a client makes a reasonable request for information, however, subdivision (a)(4) requires prompt compliance with the request, or if a prompt response is not feasible,

that the lawyer, or a member of the lawyer's staff, acknowledge receipt of the request and advise the client when a response may be expected.

Lawyers have particular responsibilities in communicating with clients regarding changes in firm composition. See Rule 4-5.8.

### **Explaining matters**

The client should have sufficient information to participate intelligently in decisions concerning the objectives of the representation and the means by which they are to be pursued, to the extent the client is willing and able to do so.

Adequacy of communication depends in part on the kind of advice or assistance that is involved. For example, when there is time to explain a proposal made in a negotiation, the lawyer should review all important provisions with the client before proceeding to an agreement. In litigation a lawyer should explain the general strategy and prospects of success and ordinarily should consult the client on tactics that are likely to result in significant expense or to injure or coerce others. On the other hand, a lawyer ordinarily will not be expected to describe trial or negotiation strategy in detail. The guiding principle is that the lawyer should fulfill reasonable client expectations for information consistent with the duty to act in the client's best interests and the client's overall requirements as to the character of representation. In certain circumstances, such as when a lawyer asks a client to consent to a representation affected by a conflict of interest, the client must give informed consent, as defined in terminology.

Ordinarily, the information to be provided is that appropriate for a client who is a comprehending and responsible adult. However, fully informing the client according to this standard may be impracticable, for example, where the client is a child or suffers from mental disability. See rule 4-1.14. When the client is an organization or group, it is often impossible or inappropriate to inform every one of its members about its legal affairs; ordinarily, the lawyer should address communications to the appropriate officials of the organization. See rule 4-1.13. Where many routine

matters are involved, a system of limited or occasional reporting may be arranged with the client.

### **Withholding information**

In some circumstances, a lawyer may be justified in delaying transmission of information when the client would be likely to react imprudently to an immediate communication. Thus, a lawyer might withhold a psychiatric diagnosis of a client when the examining psychiatrist indicates that disclosure would harm the client. A lawyer may not withhold information to serve the lawyer's own interest or convenience or the interests or convenience of another person. Rules or court orders governing litigation may provide that information supplied to a lawyer may not be disclosed to the client. Rule 4-3.4(c) directs compliance with such rules or orders.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective Jan. 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417).

## **RULE 4-1.5 FEES AND COSTS FOR LEGAL SERVICES**

### **(a) Illegal, Prohibited, or Clearly Excessive Fees and Costs.**

A lawyer must not enter into an agreement for, charge, or collect an illegal, prohibited, or clearly excessive fee or cost, or a fee generated by employment that was obtained through advertising or solicitation not in compliance with the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar. A fee or cost is clearly excessive when:

(1) after a review of the facts, a lawyer of ordinary prudence would be left with a definite and firm conviction that the fee or the cost exceeds a reasonable fee or cost for services provided to such a degree as to constitute clear overreaching or an unconscionable demand by the lawyer; or

(2) the fee or cost is sought or secured by the lawyer by means of intentional misrepresentation or fraud upon the client, a nonclient party, or any court, as to either entitlement to, or amount of, the fee.

**(b) Factors to Be Considered in Determining Reasonable Fees and Costs.**

(1) Factors to be considered as guides in determining a reasonable fee include:

(A) the time and labor required, the novelty, complexity, difficulty of the questions involved, and the skill requisite to perform the legal service properly;

(B) the likelihood that the acceptance of the particular employment will preclude other employment by the lawyer;

(C) the fee, or rate of fee, customarily charged in the locality for legal services of a comparable or similar nature;

(D) the significance of, or amount involved in, the subject matter of the representation, the responsibility involved in the representation, and the results obtained;

(E) the time limitations imposed by the client or by the circumstances and, as between attorney and client, any additional or special time demands or requests of the attorney by the client;

(F) the nature and length of the professional relationship with the client;

(G) the experience, reputation, diligence, and ability of the lawyer or lawyers performing the service and the skill, expertise, or efficiency of effort reflected in the actual providing of such services; and

(H) whether the fee is fixed or contingent, and, if fixed as to amount or rate, then whether the client's ability to pay rested to any significant degree on the outcome of the representation.

(2) Factors to be considered as guides in determining reasonable costs include:

(A) the nature and extent of the disclosure made to the client about the costs;

(B) whether a specific agreement exists between the lawyer and client as to the costs a client is expected to pay and how a cost is calculated that is charged to a client;

(C) the actual amount charged by third party providers of services to the attorney;

(D) whether specific costs can be identified and allocated to an individual client or a reasonable basis exists to estimate the costs charged;

(E) the reasonable charges for providing in-house service to a client if the cost is an in-house charge for services; and

(F) the relationship and past course of conduct between the lawyer and the client.

All costs are subject to the test of reasonableness set forth in subdivision (a) above. When the parties have a written contract in which the method is established for charging costs, the costs charged under that contract will be presumed reasonable.

**(c) Consideration of All Factors.** In determining a reasonable fee, the time devoted to the representation and customary rate of fee need not be the sole or controlling factors. All factors set forth in this rule should be considered, and may be applied, in justification of a fee higher or lower than that which would result from application of only the time and rate factors.

**(d) Enforceability of Fee Contracts.** Contracts or agreements for attorney's fees between attorney and client will ordinarily be enforceable according to the terms of such contracts or agreements, unless found to be illegal, obtained through advertising or solicitation not in compliance with the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar, prohibited by this rule, or clearly excessive as defined by this rule.

**(e) Duty to Communicate Basis or Rate of Fee or Costs to Client and Definitions.**

(1) *Duty to Communicate.* When the lawyer has not regularly represented the client, the basis or rate of the fee and costs must be communicated to the client, preferably in writing, before or within a reasonable time after commencing the representation. A fee for legal services that is nonrefundable in any part must be confirmed in writing and must explain the intent of the parties as to the nature and amount of the nonrefundable fee. The test of reasonableness found in subdivision (b), above, applies to all fees for legal services without regard to their characterization by the parties.

The fact that a contract may not be in accord with these rules is an issue between the lawyer and client and a matter of professional ethics, but is not the proper basis for an action or defense by an opposing party when fee-shifting litigation is involved.

(2) *Definitions.*

(A) Retainer. A retainer is a sum of money paid to a lawyer to guarantee the lawyer's future availability. A retainer is not payment for past legal services and is not payment for future services.

(B) Flat Fee. A flat fee is a sum of money paid to a lawyer for all legal services to be provided in the representation. A flat fee may be termed "non-refundable."

(C) Advance Fee. An advanced fee is a sum of money paid to the lawyer against which the lawyer will bill the client as legal services are provided.

**(f) Contingent Fees.** As to contingent fees:

(1) A fee may be contingent on the outcome of the matter for which the service is rendered, except in a matter in which a contingent fee is prohibited by subdivision (f)(3) or by law. A contingent fee agreement must be in writing and must state the method by which the fee is to be determined, including the

percentage or percentages that will accrue to the lawyer in the event of settlement, trial, or appeal. The agreement must also state the costs to be deducted from the recovery and whether those costs are to be deducted before or after the contingent fee is calculated. On conclusion of a contingent fee matter, the lawyer must provide the client with a written statement describing the outcome of the matter and, if there is a recovery, showing the remittance to the client and the method of its determination. This written statement must include an itemization of costs, fees of each lawyer or law firm participating in the fee, and payments to third parties to be paid from the recovery.

(2) Every lawyer who accepts a retainer or enters into an agreement, express or implied, for compensation for services rendered or to be rendered in any action, claim, or proceeding in which the lawyer's compensation is to be dependent or contingent in whole or in part on the successful prosecution or settlement must do so only where the fee arrangement is reduced to a written contract, signed by the client, and by a lawyer for the lawyer or for the law firm representing the client. No lawyer or firm may participate in the fee without the consent of the client in writing. Each participating lawyer or law firm must sign the contract with the client and must agree to assume joint legal responsibility to the client for the performance of the services in question as if each were partners of the other lawyer or law firm involved. The client must be furnished with a copy of the signed contract and any subsequent notices or consents. All provisions of this rule will apply to such fee contracts.

(3) A lawyer must not enter into an arrangement for, charge, or collect:

(A) any fee in a domestic relations matter, the payment or amount of which is contingent on the securing of a divorce or on the amount of alimony or support, or property settlement in lieu thereof; or

(B) a contingent fee for representing a defendant in a criminal case.

(4) A lawyer who enters into an arrangement for, charges, or collects any fee in an action or claim for personal injury or for property damages or for death or loss of services resulting from personal injuries based on tortious conduct of another, including products liability claims, in which the compensation is to be dependent or contingent in whole or in part on the successful prosecution or settlement must do so only under the following requirements:

(A) The contract must contain the following provisions:

(i) “The undersigned client has, before signing this contract, received and read the statement of client’s rights and understands each of the rights set forth in it. The undersigned client has signed the statement and received a signed copy to refer to while being represented by the undersigned lawyer(s).”

(ii) “This contract may be cancelled by written notification to the lawyer at any time within 3 business days of the date the contract was signed, as shown below, and if cancelled the client is not obligated to pay any fees to the attorney for the work performed during that time. If the lawyer has advanced funds to others in representation of the client, the lawyer is entitled to be reimbursed for amounts that the lawyer has reasonably advanced on behalf of the client.”

(B) The contract for representation of a client in a matter set forth in subdivision (f)(4) may provide for a contingent fee arrangement as agreed on by the client and the lawyer, except as limited by the following provisions:

(i) Without prior court approval as specified below, any contingent fee that exceeds the following standards are presumed, unless rebutted, to be clearly excessive:

a. Before the filing of an answer or the demand for appointment of arbitrators or, if no answer is filed or no demand for appointment of arbitrators is made, the expiration of the time period provided for such action:

million; plus

1. 33 1/3% of any recovery up to \$1 million; plus
2. 30% of any portion of the recovery between \$1 million and \$2 million; plus
3. 20% of any portion of the recovery exceeding \$2 million.

b. After the filing of an answer or the demand for appointment of arbitrators or, if no answer is filed or no demand for appointment of arbitrators is made, the expiration of the time period provided for such action, through the entry of judgment:

million; plus

1. 40% of any recovery up to \$1 million; plus
2. 30% of any portion of the recovery between \$1 million and \$2 million; plus
3. 20% of any portion of the recovery exceeding \$2 million.

c. If all defendants admit liability at the time of filing their answers and request a trial only on damages:

million; plus

1. 33 1/3% of any recovery up to \$1 million; plus
2. 20% of any portion of the recovery between \$1 million and \$2 million; plus
3. 15% of any portion of the recovery exceeding \$2 million.

d. An additional 5% of any recovery after institution of any appellate proceeding or postjudgment relief or action is required for recovery on the judgment.

(ii) If any client is unable to obtain a lawyer of the client's choice because of the limitations set forth in subdivision

(f)(4)(B)(i), the client may petition the court in which the matter would be filed, if litigation is necessary, or if that court will not accept jurisdiction for the fee approval, the circuit court in which the cause of action arose, for approval of any fee contract between the client and a lawyer of the client's choosing. Authorization will be given if the court determines the client has a complete understanding of the client's rights and the terms of the proposed contract. The application for authorization of the contract can be filed as a separate proceeding before suit or simultaneously with the filing of a complaint. Proceedings on the petition may occur before service on the defendant and this aspect of the file may be sealed. A petition under this subdivision must contain a certificate showing service on the client and, if the petition is denied, a copy of the petition and order denying the petition must be served on The Florida Bar in Tallahassee by the member of the bar who filed the petition. Authorization of such a contract does not bar subsequent inquiry as to whether the fee actually claimed or charged is clearly excessive under subdivisions (a) and (b).

(iii) Subject to the provisions of 4-1.5(f)(4)(B)(i) and (ii), a lawyer who enters into an arrangement for, charges, or collects any fee in an action or claim for medical liability in which the compensation is dependent or contingent in whole or in part on the successful prosecution or settlement must provide the language of article I, section 26 of the Florida Constitution to the client in writing and must orally inform the client that:

a. Unless waived, in any medical liability claim involving a contingency fee, the claimant is entitled to receive no less than 70% of the first \$250,000 of all damages received by the claimant, exclusive of reasonable and customary costs, whether received by judgment, settlement, or otherwise, and regardless of the number of defendants. The claimant is entitled to 90% of all damages in excess of \$250,000, exclusive of reasonable and customary costs and regardless of the number of defendants.

b. If a lawyer chooses not to accept the representation of a client under the terms of article I, section 26 of the Florida Constitution, the lawyer must advise the client, both orally and in writing, of alternative terms, if any, under which the

lawyer would accept the representation of the client, as well as the client's right to seek representation by another lawyer willing to accept the representation under the terms of article I, section 26 of the Florida Constitution, or a lawyer willing to accept the representation on a fee basis that is not contingent.

c. If any client desires to waive any rights under article I, section 26 of the Florida Constitution in order to obtain a lawyer of the client's choice, a client may do so by waiving such rights in writing, under oath, and in the form provided in this rule. The lawyer must provide each client a copy of the written waiver and must afford each client a full and complete opportunity to understand the rights being waived as set forth in the waiver. A copy of the waiver, signed by each client and lawyer, must be given to each client to retain, and the lawyer must keep a copy in the lawyer's file pertaining to the client. The waiver must be retained by the lawyer with the written fee contract and closing statement under the same conditions and requirements provided in 4-1.5(f)(5).

### **WAIVER OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT PROVIDED IN ARTICLE I, SECTION 26 OF THE FLORIDA CONSTITUTION**

On November 2, 2004, voters in the State of Florida approved The Medical Liability Claimant's Compensation Amendment that was identified as Amendment 3 on the ballot. The amendment is set forth below:

#### **The Florida Constitution**

Article I, Section 26 is created to read "Claimant's right to fair compensation." In any medical liability claim involving a contingency fee, the claimant is entitled to receive no less than 70% of the first \$250,000 in all damages received by the claimant, exclusive of reasonable and customary costs, whether received by judgment, settlement or otherwise, and regardless of the number of defendants. The claimant is entitled to 90% of all damages in excess of \$250,000, exclusive of reasonable and customary costs and regardless of the number of defendants. This provision is self-executing and does not require implementing legislation.

The undersigned client understands and acknowledges that (initial each provision):

\_\_\_\_\_I have been advised that signing this waiver releases an important constitutional right; and

\_\_\_\_\_I have been advised that I may consult with separate counsel before signing this waiver; and that I may request a hearing before a judge to further explain this waiver; and

\_\_\_\_\_By signing this waiver I agree to an increase in the attorney fee that might otherwise be owed if the constitutional provision listed above is not waived. Without prior court approval, the increased fee that I agree to may be up to the maximum contingency fee percentages set forth in Rule Regulating The Florida Bar 4-1.5(f)(4)(B)(i). Depending on the circumstances of my case, the maximum agreed upon fee may range from 33 1/3% to 40% of any recovery up to \$1 million; plus 20% to 30% of any portion of the recovery between \$1 million and \$2 million; plus 15% to 20% of any recovery exceeding \$2 million; and

\_\_\_\_\_I have three (3) business days following execution of this waiver in which to cancel this waiver; and

\_\_\_\_\_I wish to engage the legal services of the lawyers or law firms listed below in an action or claim for medical liability the fee for which is contingent in whole or in part upon the successful prosecution or settlement thereof, but I am unable to do so because of the provisions of the constitutional limitation set forth above. In consideration of the lawyers' or law firms' agreements to represent me and my desire to employ the lawyers or law firms listed below, I hereby knowingly, willingly, and voluntarily waive any and all rights and privileges that I may have under the constitutional provision set forth above, as apply to the contingency fee agreement only. Specifically, I waive the percentage restrictions that are the subject of the constitutional provision and confirm the fee percentages set forth in the contingency fee agreement; and

\_\_\_\_\_I have selected the lawyers or law firms listed below as my counsel of choice in this matter and would not be able to engage their services without this waiver; and I expressly state that this

waiver is made freely and voluntarily, with full knowledge of its terms, and that all questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENT BY CLIENT FOR PRESENTATION TO THE COURT**

The undersigned client hereby acknowledges, under oath, the following:

I have read and understand this entire waiver of my rights under the constitutional provision set forth above.

I am not under the influence of any substance, drug, or condition (physical, mental, or emotional) that interferes with my understanding of this entire waiver in which I am entering and all the consequences thereof.

I have entered into and signed this waiver freely and voluntarily.

I authorize my lawyers or law firms listed below to present this waiver to the appropriate court, if required for purposes of approval of the contingency fee agreement. Unless the court requires my attendance at a hearing for that purpose, my lawyers or law firms are authorized to provide this waiver to the court for its consideration without my presence.

Dated this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_.

By: \_\_\_\_\_

CLIENT

Sworn to and subscribed before me this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ by \_\_\_\_\_, who is personally known to me, or has produced the following identification: \_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_

Notary Public

My Commission Expires:

Dated this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_.

By: \_\_\_\_\_

ATTORNEY

(C) Before a lawyer enters into a contingent fee contract for representation of a client in a matter set forth in this rule, the lawyer must provide the client with a copy of the statement of client's rights and must afford the client a full and complete opportunity to understand each of the rights as set forth in it. A copy of the statement, signed by both the client and the lawyer, must be given to the client to retain and the lawyer must keep a copy in the client's file. The statement must be retained by the lawyer with the written fee contract and closing statement under the same conditions and requirements as subdivision (f)(5).

(D) As to lawyers not in the same firm, a division of any fee within subdivision (f)(4) must be on the following basis:

(i) To the lawyer assuming primary responsibility for the legal services on behalf of the client, a minimum of 75% of the total fee.

(ii) To the lawyer assuming secondary responsibility for the legal services on behalf of the client, a maximum of 25% of the total fee. Any fee in excess of 25% will be presumed to be clearly excessive.

(iii) The 25% limitation will not apply to those cases in which 2 or more lawyers or firms accept substantially equal active participation in the providing of legal services. In those circumstances counsel must apply to the court in which the matter would be filed, if litigation is necessary, or if such court will not accept jurisdiction for the fee division, the circuit court in which the cause of action arose, for authorization of the fee division in excess of 25%, based on a sworn petition signed by all counsel that discloses in detail those services to be performed. The application for authorization of the contract may be filed as a separate proceeding before suit or simultaneously with the filing of a complaint, or within 10 days of execution of a contract for division of fees when new counsel is engaged. Proceedings on these

applications may occur before service of process on any party and this aspect of the file may be sealed. Authorization of the contract will not bar subsequent inquiry as to whether the fee actually claimed or charged is clearly excessive. An application under this subdivision must contain a certificate showing service on the client and, if the application is denied, a copy of the petition and order denying the petition must be served on The Florida Bar in Tallahassee by the member of the bar who filed the petition. Counsel may proceed with representation of the client pending court approval.

(iv) The percentages required by this subdivision are applicable after deduction of any fee payable to separate counsel retained especially for appellate purposes.

(5) In the event there is a recovery, on the conclusion of the representation, the lawyer must prepare a closing statement reflecting an itemization of all costs and expenses, together with the amount of fee received by each participating lawyer or law firm. A copy of the closing statement must be executed by all participating lawyers, as well as the client, and each must receive a copy. Each participating lawyer must retain a copy of the written fee contract and closing statement for 6 years after execution of the closing statement. Any contingent fee contract and closing statement must be available for inspection at reasonable times by the client, by any other person upon judicial order, or by the appropriate disciplinary agency.

(6) In cases in which the client is to receive a recovery that will be paid to the client on a future structured or periodic basis, the contingent fee percentage must be calculated only on the cost of the structured verdict or settlement or, if the cost is unknown, on the present money value of the structured verdict or settlement, whichever is less. If the damages and the fee are to be paid out over the long term future schedule, this limitation does not apply. No attorney may negotiate separately with the defendant for that attorney's fee in a structured verdict or settlement when separate negotiations would place the attorney in a position of conflict.

**(g) Division of Fees Between Lawyers in Different Firms.**

Subject to the provisions of subdivision (f)(4)(D), a division of fee between lawyers who are not in the same firm may be made only if the total fee is reasonable and:

(1) the division is in proportion to the services performed by each lawyer; or

(2) by written agreement with the client:

(A) each lawyer assumes joint legal responsibility for the representation and agrees to be available for consultation with the client; and

(B) the agreement fully discloses that a division of fees will be made and the basis upon which the division of fees will be made.

**(h) Credit Plans.** A lawyer or law firm may accept payment under a credit plan. Lawyers may charge clients the actual charge the credit plan imposes on the lawyer for the client's transaction.

**(i) Arbitration Clauses.** A lawyer must not make an agreement with a potential client prospectively providing for mandatory arbitration of fee disputes without first advising that person in writing that the potential client should consider obtaining independent legal advice as to the advisability of entering into an agreement containing such mandatory arbitration provisions. A lawyer shall not make an agreement containing such mandatory arbitration provisions unless the agreement contains the following language in bold print:

**NOTICE: This agreement contains provisions requiring arbitration of fee disputes. Before you sign this agreement you should consider consulting with another lawyer about the advisability of making an agreement with mandatory arbitration requirements. Arbitration proceedings are ways to resolve disputes without use of the court system. By entering into agreements that require arbitration as the way to resolve fee disputes, you give up (waive)**

**your right to go to court to resolve those disputes by a judge or jury. These are important rights that should not be given up without careful consideration.**

## **STATEMENT OF CLIENT'S RIGHTS FOR CONTINGENCY FEES**

Before you, the prospective client, arrange a contingent fee agreement with a lawyer, you should understand this statement of your rights as a client. This statement is not a part of the actual contract between you and your lawyer, but, as a prospective client, you should be aware of these rights:

1. There is no legal requirement that a lawyer charge a client a set fee or a percentage of money recovered in a case. You, the client, have the right to talk with your lawyer about the proposed fee and to bargain about the rate or percentage as in any other contract. If you do not reach an agreement with 1 lawyer you may talk with other lawyers.

2. Any contingent fee contract must be in writing and you have 3 business days to reconsider the contract. You may cancel the contract without any reason if you notify your lawyer in writing within 3 business days of signing the contract. If you withdraw from the contract within the first 3 business days, you do not owe the lawyer a fee although you may be responsible for the lawyer's actual costs during that time. If your lawyer begins to represent you, your lawyer may not withdraw from the case without giving you notice, delivering necessary papers to you, and allowing you time to employ another lawyer. Often, your lawyer must obtain court approval before withdrawing from a case. If you discharge your lawyer without good cause after the 3-day period, you may have to pay a fee for work the lawyer has done.

3. Before hiring a lawyer, you, the client, have the right to know about the lawyer's education, training, and experience. If you ask, the lawyer should tell you specifically about the lawyer's actual experience dealing with cases similar to yours. If you ask, the

lawyer should provide information about special training or knowledge and give you this information in writing if you request it.

4. Before signing a contingent fee contract with you, a lawyer must advise you whether the lawyer intends to handle your case alone or whether other lawyers will be helping with the case. If your lawyer intends to refer the case to other lawyers, the lawyer should tell you what kind of fee sharing arrangement will be made with the other lawyers. If lawyers from different law firms will represent you, at least 1 lawyer from each law firm must sign the contingent fee contract.

5. If your lawyer intends to refer your case to another lawyer or counsel with other lawyers, your lawyer should tell you about that at the beginning. If your lawyer takes the case and later decides to refer it to another lawyer or to associate with other lawyers, you should sign a new contract that includes the new lawyers. You, the client, also have the right to consult with each lawyer working on your case and each lawyer is legally responsible to represent your interests and is legally responsible for the acts of the other lawyers involved in the case.

6. You, the client, have the right to know in advance how you will need to pay the expenses and the legal fees at the end of the case. If you pay a deposit in advance for costs, you may ask reasonable questions about how the money will be or has been spent and how much of it remains unspent. Your lawyer should give a reasonable estimate about future necessary costs. If your lawyer agrees to lend or advance you money to prepare or research the case, you have the right to know periodically how much money your lawyer has spent on your behalf. You also have the right to decide, after consulting with your lawyer, how much money is to be spent to prepare a case. If you pay the expenses, you have the right to decide how much to spend. Your lawyer should also inform you whether the fee will be based on the gross amount recovered or on the amount recovered minus the costs.

7. You, the client, have the right to be told by your lawyer about possible adverse consequences if you lose the case. Those adverse consequences might include money that you might have to

pay to your lawyer for costs and liability you might have for attorney's fees, costs, and expenses to the other side.

8. You, the client, have the right to receive and approve a closing statement at the end of the case before you pay any money. The statement must list all of the financial details of the entire case, including the amount recovered, all expenses, and a precise statement of your lawyer's fee. Until you approve the closing statement your lawyer cannot pay any money to anyone, including you, without an appropriate order of the court. You also have the right to have every lawyer or law firm working on your case sign this closing statement.

9. You, the client, have the right to ask your lawyer at reasonable intervals how the case is progressing and to have these questions answered to the best of your lawyer's ability.

10. You, the client, have the right to make the final decision regarding settlement of a case. Your lawyer must notify you of all offers of settlement before and after the trial. Offers during the trial must be immediately communicated and you should consult with your lawyer regarding whether to accept a settlement. However, you must make the final decision to accept or reject a settlement.

11. If at any time you, the client, believe that your lawyer has charged an excessive or illegal fee, you have the right to report the matter to The Florida Bar, the agency that oversees the practice and behavior of all lawyers in Florida. For information on how to reach The Florida Bar, call 850/561-5600, or contact the local bar association. Any disagreement between you and your lawyer about a fee can be taken to court and you may wish to hire another lawyer to help you resolve this disagreement. Usually fee disputes must be handled in a separate lawsuit, unless your fee contract provides for arbitration. You can request, but may not require, that a provision for arbitration (under Chapter 682, Florida Statutes, or under the fee arbitration rule of the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar) be included in your fee contract.

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Client Signature

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Attorney Signature

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Date

Date

**Comment**

**Bases or rate of fees and costs**

When the lawyer has regularly represented a client, they ordinarily will have evolved an understanding concerning the basis or rate of the fee. The conduct of the lawyer and client in prior relationships is relevant when analyzing the requirements of this rule. In a new client-lawyer relationship, however, an understanding as to the fee should be promptly established. It is not necessary to recite all the factors that underlie the basis of the fee but only those that are directly involved in its computation. It is sufficient, for example, to state the basic rate is an hourly charge or a fixed amount or an estimated amount, or to identify the factors that may be taken into account in finally fixing the fee. Although hourly billing or a fixed fee may be the most common bases for computing fees in an area of practice, these may not be the only bases for computing fees. A lawyer should, where appropriate, discuss alternative billing methods with the client. When developments occur during the representation that render an earlier estimate substantially inaccurate, a revised estimate should be provided to the client. A written statement concerning the fee reduces the possibility of misunderstanding. Furnishing the client with a simple memorandum or a copy of the lawyer's customary fee schedule is sufficient if the basis or rate of the fee is set forth.

General overhead should be accounted for in a lawyer's fee, whether the lawyer charges hourly, flat, or contingent fees. Filing fees, transcription, and the like should be charged to the client at the actual amount paid by the lawyer. A lawyer may agree with the client to charge a reasonable amount for in-house costs or services. In-house costs include items such as copying, faxing, long distance telephone, and computerized research. In-house services include paralegal services, investigative services, accounting services, and courier services. The lawyer should sufficiently communicate with

the client regarding the costs charged to the client so that the client understands the amount of costs being charged or the method for calculation of those costs. Costs appearing in sufficient detail on closing statements and approved by the parties to the transaction should meet the requirements of this rule.

Rule 4-1.8(e) should be consulted regarding a lawyer's providing financial assistance to a client in connection with litigation.

Lawyers should also be mindful of any statutory, constitutional, or other requirements or restrictions on attorneys' fees.

In order to avoid misunderstandings concerning the nature of legal fees, written documentation is required when any aspect of the fee is nonrefundable. A written contract provides a method to resolve misunderstandings and to protect the lawyer in the event of continued misunderstanding. Rule 4-1.5(e) does not require the client to sign a written document memorializing the terms of the fee. A letter from the lawyer to the client setting forth the basis or rate of the fee and the intent of the parties in regard to the nonrefundable nature of the fee is sufficient to meet the requirements of this rule.

All legal fees and contracts for legal fees are subject to the requirements of the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar. In particular, the test for reasonableness of legal fees found in rule 4-1.5(b) applies to all types of legal fees and contracts related to them.

### **Terms of payment**

A lawyer may require advance payment of a fee but is obliged to return any unearned portion. See rule 4-1.16(d). A lawyer is not, however, required to return retainers that, pursuant to an agreement with a client, are not refundable. A nonrefundable retainer or nonrefundable flat fee is the property of the lawyer and should not be held in trust. If a client gives the lawyer a negotiable instrument that represents both an advance on costs plus either a nonrefundable retainer or a nonrefundable flat fee, the entire amount should be deposited into the lawyer's trust account, then the portion representing the earned nonrefundable retainer or

nonrefundable flat fee should be withdrawn within a reasonable time. An advance fee must be held in trust until it is earned. Nonrefundable fees are, as all fees, subject to the prohibition against excessive fees.

A lawyer may accept property in payment for services, such as an ownership interest in an enterprise, providing this does not involve acquisition of a proprietary interest in the cause of action or subject matter of the litigation contrary to rule 4-1.8(i). However, a fee paid in property instead of money may be subject to special scrutiny because it involves questions concerning both the value of the services and the lawyer's special knowledge of the value of the property.

An agreement may not be made whose terms might induce the lawyer improperly to curtail services for the client or perform them in a way contrary to the client's interest. For example, a lawyer should not enter into an agreement whereby services are to be provided only up to a stated amount when it is foreseeable that more extensive services probably will be required, unless the situation is adequately explained to the client. Otherwise, the client might have to bargain for further assistance in the midst of a proceeding or transaction. However, it is proper to define the extent of services in light of the client's ability to pay. A lawyer should not exploit a fee arrangement based primarily on hourly charges by using wasteful procedures. When there is doubt whether a contingent fee is consistent with the client's best interest, the lawyer should offer the client alternative bases for the fee and explain their implications. Applicable law may impose limitations on contingent fees, such as a ceiling on the percentage.

### **Prohibited contingent fees**

Subdivision (f)(3)(A) prohibits a lawyer from charging a contingent fee in a domestic relations matter when payment is contingent on the securing of a divorce or on the amount of alimony or support or property settlement to be obtained. This provision does not preclude a contract for a contingent fee for legal representation in connection with the recovery of post-judgment

balances due under support, alimony, or other financial orders because such contracts do not implicate the same policy concerns.

Contingent fees are prohibited in criminal and certain domestic relations matters. In domestic relations cases, fees that include a bonus provision or additional fee to be determined at a later time and based on results obtained have been held to be impermissible contingency fees and therefore subject to restitution and disciplinary sanction as elsewhere stated in these Rules Regulating The Florida Bar.

### **Contingent fee regulation**

Subdivision (e) is intended to clarify that whether the lawyer's fee contract complies with these rules is a matter between the lawyer and client and an issue for professional disciplinary enforcement. The rules and subdivision (e) are not intended to be used as procedural weapons or defenses by others. Allowing opposing parties to assert noncompliance with these rules as a defense, including whether the fee is fixed or contingent, allows for potential inequity if the opposing party is allowed to escape responsibility for their actions solely through application of these rules.

Rule 4-1.5(f)(4) should not be construed to apply to actions or claims seeking property or other damages arising in the commercial litigation context.

Rule 4-1.5(f)(4)(B) is intended to apply only to contingent aspects of fee agreements. In the situation where a lawyer and client enter a contract for part noncontingent and part contingent attorney's fees, rule 4-1.5(f)(4)(B) should not be construed to apply to and prohibit or limit the noncontingent portion of the fee agreement. An attorney could properly charge and retain the noncontingent portion of the fee even if the matter was not successfully prosecuted or if the noncontingent portion of the fee exceeded the schedule set forth in rule 4-1.5(f)(4)(B). Rule 4-1.5(f)(4)(B) should, however, be construed to apply to any additional contingent portion of such a contract when considered together with earned noncontingent fees. Thus, under such a contract a

lawyer may demand or collect only such additional contingent fees as would not cause the total fees to exceed the schedule set forth in rule 4-1.5(f)(4)(B).

The limitations in rule 4-1.5(f)(4)(B)(i)c are only to be applied in the case where all the defendants admit liability at the time they file their initial answer and the trial is only on the issue of the amount or extent of the loss or the extent of injury suffered by the client. If the trial involves not only the issue of damages but also such questions as proximate cause, affirmative defenses, seat belt defense, or other similar matters, the limitations are not to be applied because of the contingent nature of the case being left for resolution by the trier of fact.

Rule 4-1.5(f)(4)(B)(ii) provides the limitations set forth in subdivision (f)(4)(B)(i) may be waived by the client on approval by the appropriate judge. This waiver provision may not be used to authorize a lawyer to charge a client a fee that would exceed rule 4-1.5(a) or (b). It is contemplated that this waiver provision will not be necessary except where the client wants to retain a particular lawyer to represent the client or the case involves complex, difficult, or novel questions of law or fact that would justify a contingent fee greater than the schedule but not a contingent fee that would exceed rule 4-1.5(b).

On a petition by a client, the trial court reviewing the waiver request must grant that request if the trial court finds the client: (a) understands the right to have the limitations in rule 4-1.5(f)(4)(B) applied in the specific matter; and (b) understands and approves the terms of the proposed contract. The consideration by the trial court of the waiver petition is not to be used as an opportunity for the court to inquire into the merits or details of the particular action or claim that is the subject of the contract.

The proceedings before the trial court and the trial court's decision on a waiver request are to be confidential and not subject to discovery by any of the parties to the action or by any other individual or entity except The Florida Bar. However, terms of the contract approved by the trial court may be subject to discovery if

the contract (without court approval) was subject to discovery under applicable case law or rules of evidence.

Rule 4-1.5(f)(4)(B)(iii) is added to acknowledge the provisions of Article 1, Section 26 of the Florida Constitution, and to create an affirmative obligation on the part of an attorney contemplating a contingency fee contract to notify a potential client with a medical liability claim of the limitations provided in that constitutional provision. This addition to the rule is adopted prior to any judicial interpretation of the meaning or scope of the constitutional provision and this rule is not intended to make any substantive interpretation of the meaning or scope of that provision. The rule also provides that a client who wishes to waive the rights of the constitutional provision, as those rights may relate to attorney's fees, must do so in the form contained in the rule.

Rule 4-1.5(f)(6) prohibits a lawyer from charging the contingent fee percentage on the total, future value of a recovery being paid on a structured or periodic basis. This prohibition does not apply if the lawyer's fee is being paid over the same length of time as the schedule of payments to the client.

Fees that provide for a bonus or additional fees and that otherwise are not prohibited under the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar can be effective tools for structuring fees. For example, a fee contract calling for a flat fee and the payment of a bonus based on the amount of property retained or recovered in a general civil action is not prohibited by these rules. However, the bonus or additional fee must be stated clearly in amount or formula for calculation of the fee (basis or rate). Courts have held that unilateral bonus fees are unenforceable. The test of reasonableness and other requirements of this rule apply to permissible bonus fees.

### **Division of fee**

A division of fee is a single billing to a client covering the fee of 2 or more lawyers who are not in the same firm. A division of fee facilitates association of more than 1 lawyer in a matter in which neither alone could serve the client as well, and most often is used when the fee is contingent and the division is between a referring

lawyer and a trial specialist. Subject to the provisions of subdivision (f)(4)(D), subdivision (g) permits the lawyers to divide a fee on either the basis of the proportion of services they render or by agreement between the participating lawyers if all assume responsibility for the representation as a whole and the client is advised and does not object. It does require disclosure to the client of the share that each lawyer is to receive. Joint responsibility for the representation entails the obligations stated in rule 4-5.1 for purposes of the matter involved.

### **Disputes over fees**

Since the fee arbitration rule (chapter 14) has been established by the bar to provide a procedure for resolution of fee disputes, the lawyer should conscientiously consider submitting to it. Where law prescribes a procedure for determining a lawyer's fee, for example, in representation of an executor or administrator, a class, or a person entitled to a reasonable fee as part of the measure of damages, the lawyer entitled to such a fee and a lawyer representing another party concerned with the fee should comply with the prescribed procedure.

### **Referral fees and practices**

A secondary lawyer is not entitled to a fee greater than the limitation set forth in rule 4-1.5(f)(4)(D)(ii) merely because the lawyer agrees to do some or all of the following: (a) consults with the client; (b) answers interrogatories; (c) attends depositions; (d) reviews pleadings; (e) attends the trial; or (f) assumes joint legal responsibility to the client. However, the provisions do not contemplate that a secondary lawyer who does more than the above is necessarily entitled to a larger percentage of the fee than that allowed by the limitation.

The provisions of rule 4-1.5(f)(4)(D)(iii) only apply where the participating lawyers have for purposes of the specific case established a co-counsel relationship. The need for court approval of a referral fee arrangement under rule 4-1.5(f)(4)(D)(iii) should only occur in a small percentage of cases arising under rule 4-1.5(f)(4) and usually occurs prior to the commencement of litigation or at

the onset of the representation. However, in those cases in which litigation has been commenced or the representation has already begun, approval of the fee division should be sought within a reasonable period of time after the need for court approval of the fee division arises.

In determining if a co-counsel relationship exists, the court should look to see if the lawyers have established a special partnership agreement for the purpose of the specific case or matter. If such an agreement does exist, it must provide for a sharing of services or responsibility and the fee division is based upon a division of the services to be rendered or the responsibility assumed. It is contemplated that a co-counsel situation would exist where a division of responsibility is based on, but not limited to, the following: (a) based upon geographic considerations, the lawyers agree to divide the legal work, responsibility, and representation in a convenient fashion (such a situation would occur when different aspects of a case must be handled in different locations); (b) where the lawyers agree to divide the legal work and representation based on their particular expertise in the substantive areas of law involved in the litigation; or (c) where the lawyers agree to divide the legal work and representation along established lines of division, such as liability and damages, causation and damages, or other similar factors.

The trial court's responsibility when reviewing an application for authorization of a fee division under rule 4-1.5(f)(4)(D)(iii) is to determine if a co-counsel relationship exists in that particular case. If the court determines a co-counsel relationship exists and authorizes the fee division requested, the court does not have any responsibility to review or approve the specific amount of the fee division agreed upon by the lawyers and the client.

Rule 4-1.5(f)(4)(D)(iv) applies to the situation where appellate counsel is retained during the trial of the case to assist with the appeal of the case. The percentages set forth in subdivision (f)(4)(D) are to be applicable after appellate counsel's fee is established. However, the effect should not be to impose an unreasonable fee on the client.

## **Credit plans**

Credit plans include credit cards.

Amended October 20, 1987, effective January 1, 1988 (519 So.2d 971); amended October 26, 1989 (550 So.2d 1120); amended December 21, 1990, effective January 1, 1991 (571 So.2d 451); amended July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended October 20, 1994 (644 So.2d 282); amended July 20, 1995 (658 So.2d 930); amended September 24, 1998, effective October 1, 1998 (718 So.2d 1179); amended March 23, 2000 (763 So.2d 1002); amended February 8, 2001 (795 So.2d 1); amended April 25, 2002 (820 So.2d 210); amended May 20, 2004 (875 So.2d 448); October 6, 2005, effective January 1, 2006 (916 So.2d 655); amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417); amended September 28, 2006, effective September 28, 2006 (939 So.2d 1032); amended December 20, 2007, effective March 1, 2008 (978 So.2d 91); amended November 19, 2009, effective February 1, 2010 (24 So.3d 63); amended April 12, 2012, effective July 1, 2012 (101 So.3d 807); amended November 9, 2017, effective February 1, 2018 (234 So.3d 632); amended January 4, 2019, effective March 5, 2019 (267 So.3d 891); amended March 3, 2022, effective May 2, 2022 (SC20-1467).

### **RULE 4-1.6 CONFIDENTIALITY OF INFORMATION**

**(a) Consent Required to Reveal Information.** A lawyer must not reveal information relating to a client's representation except as stated in subdivisions (b), (c), and (d), unless the client gives informed consent.

**(b) When Lawyer Must Reveal Information.** A lawyer must reveal confidential information to the extent the lawyer reasonably believes necessary to:

- (1) prevent a client from committing a crime; or
- (2) prevent death or substantial bodily harm.

**(c) When Lawyer May Reveal Information.** A lawyer may reveal confidential information to the extent the lawyer reasonably believes necessary to:

- (1) serve the client's interest unless it is information the client specifically requires not to be disclosed;

(2) establish a claim or defense on the lawyer's behalf in a controversy between the lawyer and client;

(3) establish a defense to a criminal charge or civil claim against the lawyer based on conduct in which the client was involved;

(4) respond to allegations in any proceeding concerning the lawyer's representation of the client;

(5) comply with the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar;

(6) detect and resolve conflicts of interest between lawyers in different firms arising from the lawyer's change of employment or from changes in the composition or ownership of a firm, but only if the revealed information would not compromise the attorney-client privilege or otherwise prejudice the client; or

(7) respond to specific allegations published via the internet by a former client (e.g. a negative online review) that the lawyer has engaged in criminal conduct punishable by law.

**(d) Exhaustion of Appellate Remedies.** When required by a tribunal to reveal confidential information, a lawyer may first exhaust all appellate remedies.

**(e) Inadvertent Disclosure of Information.** A lawyer must make reasonable efforts to prevent the inadvertent or unauthorized disclosure of, or unauthorized access to, information relating to the client's representation.

**(f) Limitation on Amount of Disclosure.** When disclosure is mandated or permitted, the lawyer must disclose no more information than is required to meet the requirements or accomplish the purposes of this rule.

### **Comment**

The lawyer is part of a judicial system charged with upholding the law. One of the lawyer's functions is to advise clients so that they avoid any violation of the law in the proper exercise of their rights.

This rule governs the disclosure by a lawyer of information relating to the representation of a client during the lawyer's representation of the client. See rule 4-1.18 for the lawyer's duties with respect to information provided to the lawyer by a prospective client, rule 4-1.9(c) for the lawyer's duty not to reveal information relating to the lawyer's prior representation of a former client, and rules 4-1.8(b) and 4-1.9(b) for the lawyer's duties with respect to the use of confidential information to the disadvantage of clients and former clients.

A fundamental principle in the client-lawyer relationship is that, in the absence of the client's informed consent, the lawyer must not reveal information relating to the representation. See terminology for the definition of informed consent. This contributes to the trust that is the hallmark of the client-lawyer relationship. The client is thereby encouraged to seek legal assistance and to communicate fully and frankly with the lawyer even as to embarrassing or legally damaging subject matter. The lawyer needs this information to represent the client effectively and, if necessary, to advise the client to refrain from wrongful conduct. Almost without exception, clients come to lawyers in order to determine their rights and what is, in the complex of laws and regulations, deemed to be legal and correct. Based on experience, lawyers know that almost all clients follow the advice given, and the law is upheld.

The principle of confidentiality is given effect in 2 related bodies of law, the attorney-client privilege (which includes the work product doctrine) in the law of evidence and the rule of confidentiality established in professional ethics. The attorney-client privilege applies in judicial and other proceedings in which a lawyer may be called as a witness or otherwise required to produce evidence concerning a client. The rule of client-lawyer confidentiality applies in situations other than those where evidence is sought from the lawyer through compulsion of law. The confidentiality rule applies not merely to matters communicated in confidence by the client but also to all information relating to the representation, whatever its source. A lawyer may not disclose confidential information except as authorized or required by the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar or by law. However, none of the

foregoing limits the requirement of disclosure in subdivision (b). This disclosure is required to prevent a lawyer from becoming an unwitting accomplice in the fraudulent acts of a client. See also Scope.

The requirement of maintaining confidentiality of information relating to representation applies to government lawyers who may disagree with the policy goals that their representation is designed to advance.

### **Authorized disclosure**

A lawyer is impliedly authorized to make disclosures about a client when appropriate in carrying out the representation, except to the extent that the client's instructions or special circumstances limit that authority. In litigation, for example, a lawyer may disclose information by admitting a fact that cannot properly be disputed or in negotiation by making a disclosure that facilitates a satisfactory conclusion.

Lawyers in a firm may, in the course of the firm's practice, disclose to each other information relating to a client of the firm, unless the client has instructed that particular information be confined to specified lawyers.

### **Disclosure adverse to client**

The confidentiality rule is subject to limited exceptions. In becoming privy to information about a client, a lawyer may foresee that the client intends serious harm to another person. However, to the extent a lawyer is required or permitted to disclose a client's purposes, the client will be inhibited from revealing facts that would enable the lawyer to counsel against a wrongful course of action. While the public may be protected if full and open communication by the client is encouraged, several situations must be distinguished.

First, the lawyer may not counsel or assist a client in conduct that is criminal or fraudulent. See rule 4-1.2(d). Similarly, a lawyer has a duty under rule 4-3.3(a)(4) not to use false evidence. This duty is essentially a special instance of the duty prescribed in rule

4-1.2(d) to avoid assisting a client in criminal or fraudulent conduct.

Second, the lawyer may have been innocently involved in past conduct by the client that was criminal or fraudulent. In this situation the lawyer has not violated rule 4-1.2(d), because to “counsel or assist” criminal or fraudulent conduct requires knowing that the conduct is of that character.

Third, the lawyer may learn that a client intends prospective conduct that is criminal. As stated in subdivision (b)(1), the lawyer must reveal information in order to prevent these consequences. It is admittedly difficult for a lawyer to “know” when the criminal intent will actually be carried out, for the client may have a change of mind.

Subdivision (b)(2) contemplates past acts on the part of a client that may result in present or future consequences that may be avoided by disclosure of otherwise confidential communications. Rule 4-1.6(b)(2) would now require the lawyer to disclose information reasonably necessary to prevent the future death or substantial bodily harm to another, even though the act of the client has been completed.

The lawyer’s exercise of discretion requires consideration of such factors as the nature of the lawyer’s relationship with the client and with those who might be injured by the client, the lawyer’s own involvement in the transaction, and factors that may extenuate the conduct in question. Where practical the lawyer should seek to persuade the client to take suitable action. In any case, a disclosure adverse to the client’s interest should be no greater than the lawyer reasonably believes necessary to the purpose.

### **Withdrawal**

If the lawyer’s services will be used by the client in materially furthering a course of criminal or fraudulent conduct, the lawyer must withdraw, as stated in rule 4-1.16(a)(1).

After withdrawal the lawyer is required to refrain from making disclosure of the client's confidences, except as otherwise provided in rule 4-1.6. Neither this rule nor rule 4-1.8(b) nor rule 4-1.16(d) prevents the lawyer from giving notice of the fact of withdrawal, and the lawyer may also withdraw or disaffirm any opinion, document, affirmation, or the like.

Where the client is an organization, the lawyer may be in doubt whether contemplated conduct will actually be carried out by the organization. Where necessary to guide conduct in connection with the rule, the lawyer may make inquiry within the organization as indicated in rule 4-1.13(b).

### **Dispute concerning lawyer's conduct**

A lawyer's confidentiality obligations do not preclude a lawyer from securing confidential legal advice about the lawyer's personal responsibility to comply with these rules. In most situations, disclosing information to secure this advice will be impliedly authorized for the lawyer to carry out the representation. Even when the disclosure is not impliedly authorized, subdivision (c)(5) permits this disclosure because of the importance of a lawyer's compliance with the Rules of Professional Conduct.

Where a legal claim or disciplinary charge alleges complicity of the lawyer in a client's conduct or other misconduct of the lawyer involving representation of the client, the lawyer may respond to the extent the lawyer reasonably believes necessary to establish a defense. The same is true with respect to a claim involving the conduct or representation of a former client. The lawyer's right to respond arises when an assertion of complicity has been made. Subdivision (c) does not require the lawyer to await the commencement of an action or proceeding that charges complicity, so that the defense may be established by responding directly to a third party who has made the assertion. The right to defend, of course, applies where a proceeding has been commenced. Where practicable and not prejudicial to the lawyer's ability to establish the defense, the lawyer should advise the client of the third party's assertion and request that the client respond appropriately. In any event, disclosure should be no greater than the lawyer reasonably

believes is necessary to vindicate innocence, the disclosure should be made in a manner that limits access to the information to the tribunal or other persons having a need to know it, and appropriate protective orders or other arrangements should be sought by the lawyer to the fullest extent practicable.

If the lawyer is charged with wrongdoing in which the client's conduct is implicated, the rule of confidentiality should not prevent the lawyer from defending against the charge. A charge can arise in a civil, criminal, or professional disciplinary proceeding and can be based on a wrong allegedly committed by the lawyer against the client or on a wrong alleged by a third person; for example, a person claiming to have been defrauded by the lawyer and client acting together. A lawyer entitled to a fee is permitted by subdivision (c) to prove the services rendered in an action to collect it. This aspect of the rule expresses the principle that the beneficiary of a fiduciary relationship may not exploit it to the detriment of the fiduciary. As stated above, the lawyer must make every effort practicable to avoid unnecessary disclosure of information relating to a representation, to limit disclosure to those having the need to know it, and to obtain protective orders or make other arrangements minimizing the risk of disclosure.

Subdivision (c)(7) allows a lawyer to respond to specific allegations published via the internet by a former client (e.g. a negative online review) that the lawyer has engaged in criminal conduct punishable by law. However, under subdivision (f), even when the lawyer is operating within the scope of the (c)(7) exception, disclosure must be no greater than the lawyer reasonably believes necessary to refute the specific allegations.

### **Disclosures otherwise required or authorized**

The attorney-client privilege is differently defined in various jurisdictions. If a lawyer is called as a witness to give testimony concerning a client, absent waiver by the client, rule 4-1.6(a) requires the lawyer to invoke the privilege when it is applicable. The lawyer must comply with the final orders of a court or other tribunal of competent jurisdiction requiring the lawyer to give information about the client.

The Rules of Professional Conduct in various circumstances permit or require a lawyer to disclose information relating to the representation. See rules 4-2.3, 4-3.3, and 4-4.1. In addition to these provisions, a lawyer may be obligated or permitted by other provisions of law to give information about a client. Whether another provision of law supersedes rule 4-1.6 is a matter of interpretation beyond the scope of these rules, but a presumption should exist against a supersession.

### **Detection of Conflicts of Interest**

Subdivision (c)(6) recognizes that lawyers in different firms may need to disclose limited information to each other to detect and resolve conflicts of interest, for example, when a lawyer is considering an association with another firm, two or more firms are considering a merger, or a lawyer is considering the purchase of a law practice. See comment to rule 4-1.17. Under these circumstances, lawyers and law firms are permitted to disclose limited information, but only once substantive discussions regarding the new relationship have occurred. Any disclosure should ordinarily include no more than the identity of the persons and entities involved in a matter, a brief summary of the general issues involved, and information about whether the matter has terminated. Even this limited information, however, should be disclosed only to the extent reasonably necessary to detect and resolve conflicts of interest that might arise from the possible new relationship. The disclosure of any information is prohibited if it would compromise the attorney-client privilege or otherwise prejudice the client (e.g., the fact that a corporate client is seeking advice on a corporate takeover that has not been publicly announced; that a person has consulted a lawyer about the possibility of divorce before the person's intentions are known to the person's spouse; or that a person has consulted a lawyer about a criminal investigation that has not led to a public charge). Under those circumstances, subdivision (a) prohibits disclosure unless the client or former client gives informed consent. A lawyer's fiduciary duty to the lawyer's firm may also govern a lawyer's conduct when exploring an association with another firm and is beyond the scope of these rules.

Any information disclosed under this subdivision may be used or further disclosed only to the extent necessary to detect and resolve conflicts of interest. This subdivision does not restrict the use of information acquired by means independent of any disclosure under this subdivision. This subdivision also does not affect the disclosure of information within a law firm when the disclosure is otherwise authorized, for example, when a lawyer in a firm discloses information to another lawyer in the same firm to detect and resolve conflicts of interest that could arise in connection with undertaking a new representation.

### **Acting Competently to Preserve Confidentiality**

Paragraph (e) requires a lawyer to act competently to safeguard information relating to the representation of a client against unauthorized access by third parties and against inadvertent or unauthorized disclosure by the lawyer or other persons who are participating in the representation of the client or who are subject to the lawyer's supervision. See rules 4-1.1, 4-5.1 and 4-5.3. For example, a lawyer should be aware that generative artificial Intelligence may create risks to the lawyer's duty of confidentiality. The unauthorized access to, or the inadvertent or unauthorized disclosure of, information relating to the representation of a client does not constitute a violation of paragraph (e) if the lawyer has made reasonable efforts to prevent the access or disclosure. Factors to be considered in determining the reasonableness of the lawyer's efforts include, but are not limited to, the sensitivity of the information, the likelihood of disclosure if additional safeguards are not employed, the cost of employing additional safeguards, the difficulty of implementing the safeguards, and the extent to which the safeguards adversely affect the lawyer's ability to represent clients (e.g., by making a device or important piece of software excessively difficult to use). A client may require the lawyer to implement special security measures not required by this rule or may give informed consent to forgo security measures that would otherwise be required by this rule. Whether a lawyer may be required to take additional steps to safeguard a client's information in order to comply with other law, for example state and federal laws that govern data privacy or that impose notification requirements on the loss of, or unauthorized access to,

electronic information, is beyond the scope of these rules. For a lawyer's duties when sharing information with nonlawyers outside the lawyer's own firm, see the comment to rule 4-5.3.

When transmitting a communication that includes information relating to the representation of a client, the lawyer must take reasonable precautions to prevent the information from coming into the hands of unintended recipients. This duty, however, does not require that the lawyer use special security measures if the method of communication affords a reasonable expectation of privacy. Special circumstances, however, may warrant special precautions. Factors to be considered in determining the reasonableness of the lawyer's expectation of confidentiality include the sensitivity of the information and the extent to which the privacy of the communication is protected by law or by a confidentiality agreement. A client may require the lawyer to implement special security measures not required by this rule or may give informed consent to the use of a means of communication that would otherwise be prohibited by this rule. Whether a lawyer may be required to take additional steps in order to comply with other law, for example state and federal laws that govern data privacy, is beyond the scope of these rules.

### **Former client**

The duty of confidentiality continues after the client-lawyer relationship has terminated. See rule 4-1.9 for the prohibition against using such information to the disadvantage of the former client.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended Oct. 20, 1994 (644 So.2d 282); March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417); amended July 7, 2011, effective October 1, 2011 (67 So. 3d 1037); amended May 29, 2014, effective June 1, 2014 (140 So. 3d 541); amended June 11, 2015, effective October 1, 2015 (167 So.3d 412); amended March 16, 2023, effective May 15, 2023 (SC22-1292); amended August 29, 2024, effective October 28, 2024 (SC2024-0032).

## **RULE 4-1.7 CONFLICT OF INTEREST; CURRENT CLIENTS**

**(a) Representing Adverse Interests.** Except as provided in subdivision (b), a lawyer must not represent a client if:

(1) the representation of 1 client will be directly adverse to another client; or

(2) there is a substantial risk that the representation of 1 or more clients will be materially limited by the lawyer's responsibilities to another client, a former client or a third person or by a personal interest of the lawyer.

**(b) Informed Consent.** Notwithstanding the existence of a conflict of interest under subdivision (a), a lawyer may represent a client if:

(1) the lawyer reasonably believes that the lawyer will be able to provide competent and diligent representation to each affected client;

(2) the representation is not prohibited by law;

(3) the representation does not involve the assertion of a position adverse to another client when the lawyer represents both clients in the same proceeding before a tribunal; and

(4) each affected client gives informed consent, confirmed in writing or clearly stated on the record at a hearing.

**(c) Explanation to Clients.** When representation of multiple clients in a single matter is undertaken, the consultation must include an explanation of the implications of the common representation and the advantages and risks involved.

**(d) Lawyers Related by Blood, Adoption, or Marriage.** A lawyer related by blood, adoption, or marriage to another lawyer as parent, child, sibling, or spouse must not represent a client in a representation directly adverse to a person who the lawyer knows is represented by the other lawyer except with the client's informed consent, confirmed in writing or clearly stated on the record at a hearing.

**(e) Representation of Insureds.** Upon undertaking the representation of an insured client at the expense of the insurer, a lawyer has a duty to ascertain whether the lawyer will be representing both the insurer and the insured as clients, or only the insured, and to inform both the insured and the insurer regarding the scope of the representation. All other Rules Regulating The Florida Bar related to conflicts of interest apply to the representation as they would in any other situation.

### **Comment**

#### **Loyalty to a client**

Loyalty and independent judgment are essential elements in the lawyer's relationship to a client. Conflicts of interest can arise from the lawyer's responsibilities to another client, a former client or a third person, or from the lawyer's own interests. For specific rules regarding certain conflicts of interest, see rule 4-1.8. For former client conflicts of interest, see rule 4-1.9. For conflicts of interest involving prospective clients, see rule 4-1.18. For definitions of "informed consent" and "confirmed in writing," see terminology.

An impermissible conflict of interest may exist before representation is undertaken, in which event the representation should be declined. If such a conflict arises after representation has been undertaken, the lawyer should withdraw from the representation. See rule 4-1.16. Where more than 1 client is involved and the lawyer withdraws because a conflict arises after representation, whether the lawyer may continue to represent any of the clients is determined by rule 4-1.9. As to whether a client-lawyer relationship exists or, having once been established, is continuing, see comment to rule 4-1.3 and scope.

As a general proposition, loyalty to a client prohibits undertaking representation directly adverse to that client's or another client's interests without the affected client's consent. Subdivision (a)(1) expresses that general rule. Thus, a lawyer ordinarily may not act as advocate against a person the lawyer represents in some other matter, even if it is wholly unrelated. On the other hand, simultaneous representation in unrelated matters

of clients whose interests are only generally adverse, such as competing economic enterprises, does not require consent of the respective clients. Subdivision (a)(1) applies only when the representation of 1 client would be directly adverse to the other and where the lawyer's responsibilities of loyalty and confidentiality of the other client might be compromised.

Loyalty to a client is also impaired when a lawyer cannot consider, recommend, or carry out an appropriate course of action for the client because of the lawyer's other responsibilities or interests. The conflict in effect forecloses alternatives that would otherwise be available to the client. Subdivision (a)(2) addresses such situations. A possible conflict does not itself preclude the representation. The critical questions are the likelihood that a conflict will eventuate and, if it does, whether it will materially interfere with the lawyer's independent professional judgment in considering alternatives or foreclose courses of action that reasonably should be pursued on behalf of the client. Consideration should be given to whether the client wishes to accommodate the other interest involved.

### **Consultation and consent**

A client may consent to representation notwithstanding a conflict. However, as indicated in subdivision (a)(1) with respect to representation directly adverse to a client and subdivision (a)(2) with respect to material limitations on representation of a client, when a disinterested lawyer would conclude that the client should not agree to the representation under the circumstances, the lawyer involved cannot properly ask for such agreement or provide representation on the basis of the client's consent. When more than 1 client is involved, the question of conflict must be resolved as to each client. Moreover, there may be circumstances where it is impossible to make the disclosure necessary to obtain consent. For example, when the lawyer represents different clients in related matters and 1 of the clients refuses to consent to the disclosure necessary to permit the other client to make an informed decision, the lawyer cannot properly ask the latter to consent.

## **Lawyer's interests**

The lawyer's own interests should not be permitted to have adverse effect on representation of a client. For example, a lawyer's need for income should not lead the lawyer to undertake matters that cannot be handled competently and at a reasonable fee. See rules 4-1.1 and 4-1.5. If the probity of a lawyer's own conduct in a transaction is in serious question, it may be difficult or impossible for the lawyer to give a client detached advice. A lawyer may not allow related business interests to affect representation, for example, by referring clients to an enterprise in which the lawyer has an undisclosed interest.

## **Conflicts in litigation**

Subdivision (a)(1) prohibits representation of opposing parties in litigation. Simultaneous representation of parties whose interests in litigation may conflict, such as co-plaintiffs or co-defendants, is governed by subdivisions (a), (b), and (c). An impermissible conflict may exist by reason of substantial discrepancy in the parties' testimony, incompatibility in positions in relation to an opposing party, or the fact that there are substantially different possibilities of settlement of the claims or liabilities in question. Such conflicts can arise in criminal cases as well as civil. The potential for conflict of interest in representing multiple defendants in a criminal case is so grave that ordinarily a lawyer should decline to represent more than 1 co-defendant. On the other hand, common representation of persons having similar interests is proper if the risk of adverse effect is minimal and the requirements of subdivisions (b) and (c) are met.

Ordinarily, a lawyer may not act as advocate against a client the lawyer represents in some other matter, even if the other matter is wholly unrelated. However, there are circumstances in which a lawyer may act as advocate against a client. For example, a lawyer representing an enterprise with diverse operations may accept employment as an advocate against the enterprise in an unrelated matter if doing so will not adversely affect the lawyer's relationship with the enterprise or conduct of the suit and if both clients consent upon consultation. By the same token, government lawyers in

some circumstances may represent government employees in proceedings in which a government agency is the opposing party. The propriety of concurrent representation can depend on the nature of the litigation. For example, a suit charging fraud entails conflict to a degree not involved in a suit for a declaratory judgment concerning statutory interpretation.

A lawyer may represent parties having antagonistic positions on a legal question that has arisen in different cases, unless representation of either client would be adversely affected. Thus, it is ordinarily not improper to assert such positions in cases pending in different trial courts, but it may be improper to do so in cases pending at the same time in an appellate court.

### **Interest of person paying for a lawyer's service**

A lawyer may be paid from a source other than the client, if the client is informed of that fact and consents and the arrangement does not compromise the lawyer's duty of loyalty to the client. See rule 4-1.8(f). For example, when an insurer and its insured have conflicting interests in a matter arising from a liability insurance agreement and the insurer is required to provide special counsel for the insured, the arrangement should assure the special counsel's professional independence. So also, when a corporation and its directors or employees are involved in a controversy in which they have conflicting interests, the corporation may provide funds for separate legal representation of the directors or employees, if the clients consent after consultation and the arrangement ensures the lawyer's professional independence.

### **Other conflict situations**

Conflicts of interest in contexts other than litigation sometimes may be difficult to assess. Relevant factors in determining whether there is potential for adverse effect include the duration and intimacy of the lawyer's relationship with the client or clients involved, the functions being performed by the lawyer, the likelihood that actual conflict will arise, and the likely prejudice to the client from the conflict if it does arise. The question is often one of proximity and degree.

For example, a lawyer may not represent multiple parties to a negotiation whose interests are fundamentally antagonistic to each other, but common representation is permissible where the clients are generally aligned in interest even though there is some difference of interest among them.

Conflict questions may also arise in estate planning and estate administration. A lawyer may be called upon to prepare wills for several family members, such as husband and wife, and, depending upon the circumstances, a conflict of interest may arise. In estate administration the identity of the client may be unclear under the law of some jurisdictions. In Florida, the personal representative is the client rather than the estate or the beneficiaries. The lawyer should make clear the relationship to the parties involved.

A lawyer for a corporation or other organization who is also a member of its board of directors should determine whether the responsibilities of the 2 roles may conflict. The lawyer may be called on to advise the corporation in matters involving actions of the directors. Consideration should be given to the frequency with which such situations may arise, the potential intensity of the conflict, the effect of the lawyer's resignation from the board, and the possibility of the corporation's obtaining legal advice from another lawyer in such situations. If there is material risk that the dual role will compromise the lawyer's independence of professional judgment, the lawyer should not serve as a director.

### **Conflict charged by an opposing party**

Resolving questions of conflict of interest is primarily the responsibility of the lawyer undertaking the representation. In litigation, a court may raise the question when there is reason to infer that the lawyer has neglected the responsibility. In a criminal case, inquiry by the court is generally required when a lawyer represents multiple defendants. Where the conflict is such as clearly to call in question the fair or efficient administration of justice, opposing counsel may properly raise the question. Such an objection should be viewed with caution, however, for it can be misused as a technique of harassment. See scope.

## **Family relationships between lawyers**

Rule 4-1.7(d) applies to related lawyers who are in different firms. Related lawyers in the same firm are also governed by rules 4-1.9 and 4-1.10. The disqualification stated in rule 4-1.7(d) is personal and is not imputed to members of firms with whom the lawyers are associated. The purpose of Rule 4-1.7(d) is to prohibit representation of adverse interests, unless informed consent is given by the client, by a lawyer related to another lawyer by blood, adoption, or marriage as a parent, child, sibling, or spouse so as to include those with biological or adopted children and within relations by marriage those who would be considered in-laws and stepchildren and stepparents.

## **Representation of insureds**

The unique tripartite relationship of insured, insurer, and lawyer can lead to ambiguity as to whom a lawyer represents. In a particular case, the lawyer may represent only the insured, with the insurer having the status of a non-client third party payor of the lawyer's fees. Alternatively, the lawyer may represent both as dual clients, in the absence of a disqualifying conflict of interest, upon compliance with applicable rules. Establishing clarity as to the role of the lawyer at the inception of the representation avoids misunderstanding that may ethically compromise the lawyer. This is a general duty of every lawyer undertaking representation of a client, which is made specific in this context due to the desire to minimize confusion and inconsistent expectations that may arise.

## **Consent confirmed in writing or stated on the record at a hearing**

Subdivision (b) requires the lawyer to obtain the informed consent of the client, confirmed in writing or clearly stated on the record at a hearing. With regard to being confirmed in writing, such a writing may consist of a document executed by the client or one that the lawyer promptly records and transmits to the client following an oral consent. See terminology. If it is not feasible to obtain or transmit the writing at the time the client gives informed consent, then the lawyer must obtain or transmit it within a

reasonable time afterwards. See terminology. The requirement of a writing does not supplant the need in most cases for the lawyer to talk with the client, to explain the risks and advantages, if any, of representation burdened with a conflict of interest, as well as reasonably available alternatives, and to afford the client a reasonable opportunity to consider the risks and alternatives and to raise questions and concerns. Rather, the writing is required in order to impress upon clients the seriousness of the decision the client is being asked to make and to avoid disputes or ambiguities that might later occur in the absence of a writing.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended January 23, 2003, effective July 1, 2003 (838 So.2d 1140); amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006, revised opinion issued June 29, 2006 (933 So.2d 417); amended May 29, 2014, effective June 1, 2014 (140 So.3d 541).

#### **RULE 4-1.8 CONFLICT OF INTEREST; PROHIBITED AND OTHER TRANSACTIONS**

**(a) Business Transactions With or Acquiring Interest Adverse to Client.** A lawyer is prohibited from entering into a business transaction with a client or knowingly acquiring an ownership, possessory, security, or other pecuniary interest adverse to a client, except a lien granted by law to secure a lawyer's fee or expenses, unless:

(1) the transaction and terms on which the lawyer acquires the interest are fair and reasonable to the client and are fully disclosed and transmitted in writing to the client in a manner that can be reasonably understood by the client;

(2) the client is advised in writing of the desirability of seeking and is given a reasonable opportunity to seek the advice of independent legal counsel on the transaction; and

(3) the client gives informed consent, in a writing signed by the client, to the essential terms of the transaction and the lawyer's role in the transaction, including whether the lawyer is representing the client in the transaction.

**(b) Using Information to Disadvantage of Client.** A lawyer is prohibited from using information relating to representation of a client to the disadvantage of the client unless the client gives informed consent, except as permitted or required by these rules.

**(c) Gifts to Lawyer or Lawyer's Family.** A lawyer is prohibited from soliciting any gift from a client, including a testamentary gift, or preparing on behalf of a client an instrument giving the lawyer or a person related to the lawyer any gift unless the lawyer or other recipient of the gift is related to the client. For purposes of this subdivision, related persons include a spouse, child, grandchild, parent, grandparent, or other relative with whom the lawyer or the client maintains a close, familial relationship.

**(d) Acquiring Literary or Media Rights.** Prior to the conclusion of representation of a client, a lawyer is prohibited from making or negotiating an agreement giving the lawyer literary or media rights to a portrayal or account based in substantial part on information relating to the representation.

**(e) Financial Assistance to Client.** A lawyer is prohibited from providing financial assistance to a client in connection with pending or contemplated litigation, except that:

(1) a lawyer may advance court costs and expenses of litigation, the repayment of which may be contingent on the outcome of the matter; and

(2) a lawyer representing an indigent client may pay court costs and expenses of litigation on behalf of the client.

**(f) Compensation by Third Party.** A lawyer is prohibited from accepting compensation for representing a client from one other than the client unless:

(1) the client gives informed consent;

(2) there is no interference with the lawyer's independence of professional judgment or with the client-lawyer relationship; and

(3) information relating to representation of a client is protected as required by rule 4-1.6.

**(g) Settlement of Claims for Multiple Clients.** A lawyer who represents 2 or more clients is prohibited from participating in making an aggregate settlement of the claims of or against the clients, or in a criminal case an aggregated agreement as to guilty or nolo contendere pleas, unless each client gives informed consent, in a writing signed by the client. The lawyer's disclosure must include the existence and nature of all the claims or pleas involved and of the participation of each person in the settlement.

**(h) Limiting Liability for Malpractice.** A lawyer is prohibited from making an agreement prospectively limiting the lawyer's liability to a client for malpractice unless permitted by law and the client is independently represented in making the agreement. A lawyer is prohibited from settling a claim for liability for malpractice with an unrepresented client or former client without first advising that person in writing that independent representation is appropriate in making the agreement.

**(i) Acquiring Proprietary Interest in Cause of Action.** A lawyer is prohibited from acquiring a proprietary interest in the cause of action or subject matter of litigation the lawyer is conducting for a client, except that the lawyer may:

(1) acquire a lien granted by law to secure the lawyer's fee or expenses; and

(2) contract with a client for a reasonable contingent fee.

**(j) Representation of Insureds.** When a lawyer undertakes the defense of an insured other than a governmental entity, at the expense of an insurance company, in regard to an action or claim for personal injury or for property damages, or for death or loss of services resulting from personal injuries based on tortious conduct, including product liability claims, the Statement of Insured Client's Rights must be provided to the insured at the commencement of the representation. The lawyer must sign the statement certifying the date on which the statement was provided to the insured. The lawyer must keep a copy of the signed statement in the client's file

and must retain a copy of the signed statement for 6 years after the representation is completed. The statement must be available for inspection at reasonable times by the insured, or by the appropriate disciplinary agency. Nothing in the Statement of Insured Client's Rights augments or detracts from any substantive or ethical duty of a lawyer or affect the extra disciplinary consequences of violating an existing substantive legal or ethical duty; nor does any matter set forth in the Statement of Insured Client's Rights give rise to an independent cause of action or create any presumption that an existing legal or ethical duty has been breached.

### **STATEMENT OF INSURED CLIENT'S RIGHTS**

An insurance company has selected a lawyer to defend a lawsuit or claim against you. This Statement of Insured Client's Rights is being given to you to assure that you are aware of your rights regarding your legal representation. This disclosure statement highlights many, but not all, of your rights when your legal representation is being provided by the insurance company.

**1. *Your Lawyer.*** If you have questions concerning the selection of the lawyer by the insurance company, you should discuss the matter with the insurance company and the lawyer. As a client, you have the right to know about the lawyer's education, training, and experience. If you ask, the lawyer should tell you specifically about the lawyer's actual experience dealing with cases similar to yours and give you this information in writing, if you request it. Your lawyer is responsible for keeping you reasonably informed regarding the case and promptly complying with your reasonable requests for information. You are entitled to be informed of the final disposition of your case within a reasonable time.

**2. *Fees and Costs.*** Usually the insurance company pays all of the fees and costs of defending the claim. If you are responsible for directly paying the lawyer for any fees or costs, your lawyer must promptly inform you of that.

**3. *Directing the Lawyer.*** If your policy, like most insurance policies, provides for the insurance company to control the defense

of the lawsuit, the lawyer will be taking instructions from the insurance company. Under these policies, the lawyer cannot act solely on your instructions, and at the same time, cannot act contrary to your interests. Your preferences should be communicated to the lawyer.

**4. *Litigation Guidelines.*** Many insurance companies establish guidelines governing how lawyers are to proceed in defending a claim. Sometimes those guidelines affect the range of actions the lawyer can take and may require authorization of the insurance company before certain actions are undertaken. You are entitled to know the guidelines affecting the extent and level of legal services being provided to you. On request, the lawyer or the insurance company should either explain the guidelines to you or provide you with a copy. If the lawyer is denied authorization to provide a service or undertake an action the lawyer believes necessary to your defense, you are entitled to be informed that the insurance company has declined authorization for the service or action.

**5. *Confidentiality.*** Lawyers have a general duty to keep secret the confidential information a client provides, subject to limited exceptions. However, the lawyer chosen to represent you also may have a duty to share with the insurance company information relating to the defense or settlement of the claim. If the lawyer learns of information indicating that the insurance company is not obligated under the policy to cover the claim or provide a defense, the lawyer's duty is to maintain that information in confidence. If the lawyer cannot do so, the lawyer may be required to withdraw from the representation without disclosing to the insurance company the nature of the conflict of interest which has arisen. Whenever a waiver of the lawyer-client confidentiality privilege is needed, your lawyer has a duty to consult with you and obtain your informed consent. Some insurance companies retain auditing companies to review the billings and files of the lawyers they hire to represent policyholders. If the lawyer believes a bill review or other action releases information in a manner that is contrary to your interests, the lawyer should advise you regarding the matter.

**6. *Conflicts of Interest.*** Most insurance policies state that the insurance company will provide a lawyer to represent your interests as well as those of the insurance company. The lawyer is responsible for identifying conflicts of interest and advising you of them. If at any time you believe the lawyer provided by the insurance company cannot fairly represent you because of conflicts of interest between you and the company (such as whether there is insurance coverage for the claim against you), you should discuss this with the lawyer and explain why you believe there is a conflict. If an actual conflict of interest arises that cannot be resolved, the insurance company may be required to provide you with another lawyer.

**7. *Settlement.*** Many policies state that the insurance company alone may make a final decision regarding settlement of a claim, but under some policies your agreement is required. If you want to object to or encourage a settlement within policy limits, you should discuss your concerns with your lawyer to learn your rights and possible consequences. No settlement of the case requiring you to pay money in excess of your policy limits can be reached without your agreement, following full disclosure.

**8. *Your Risk.*** If you lose the case, there might be a judgment entered against you for more than the amount of your insurance, and you might have to pay it. Your lawyer has a duty to advise you about this risk and other reasonably foreseeable adverse results.

**9. *Hiring Your Own Lawyer.*** The lawyer provided by the insurance company is representing you only to defend the lawsuit. If you desire to pursue a claim against the other side, or desire legal services not directly related to the defense of the lawsuit against you, you will need to make your own arrangements with this or another lawyer. You also may hire another lawyer, at your own expense, to monitor the defense being provided by the insurance company. If there is a reasonable risk that the claim made against you exceeds the amount of coverage under your policy, you should consider consulting another lawyer.

**10. *Reporting Violations.*** If at any time you believe that your lawyer has acted in violation of your rights, you have the right to

report the matter to The Florida Bar, the agency that oversees the practice and behavior of all lawyers in Florida. For information on how to reach The Florida Bar call (850) 561-5839 or you may access the bar at [www.floridabar.org](http://www.floridabar.org).

**IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS,  
PLEASE ASK FOR AN EXPLANATION.**

**CERTIFICATE**

The undersigned certifies that this Statement of Insured Client's Rights has been provided to .....(name of insured/client(s))..... by .....(mail/hand delivery)..... at .....(address of insured/client(s) to which mailed or delivered) on .....(date).....

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[Signature of Lawyer]

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[Print/Type Name]

Florida Bar No.: \_\_\_\_\_

**(k) Imputation of Conflicts.** While lawyers are associated in a firm, a prohibition in the foregoing subdivisions (a) through (i) that applies to any one of them applies to all of them.

**Comment**

**Business transactions between client and lawyer**

A lawyer's legal skill and training, together with the relationship of trust and confidence between lawyer and client, create the possibility of overreaching when the lawyer participates in a business, property, or financial transaction with a client. The requirements of subdivision (a) must be met even when the transaction is not closely related to the subject matter of the representation. The rule applies to lawyers engaged in the sale of goods or services related to the practice of law. See rule 4-5.7. It does not apply to ordinary fee arrangements between client and lawyer, which are governed by rule 4-1.5, although its requirements must be met when the lawyer accepts an interest in the client's

business or other nonmonetary property as payment for all or part of a fee. In addition, the rule does not apply to standard commercial transactions between the lawyer and the client for products or services that the client generally markets to others, for example, banking or brokerage services, medical services, products manufactured or distributed by the client, and utilities services. In these types of transactions the lawyer has no advantage in dealing with the client, and the restrictions in subdivision (a) are unnecessary and impracticable. Likewise, subdivision (a) does not prohibit a lawyer from acquiring or asserting a lien granted by law to secure the lawyer's fee or expenses.

Subdivision (a)(1) requires that the transaction itself be fair to the client and that its essential terms be communicated to the client, in writing, in a manner that can be reasonably understood. Subdivision (a)(2) requires that the client also be advised, in writing, of the desirability of seeking the advice of independent legal counsel. It also requires that the client be given a reasonable opportunity to obtain advice. Subdivision (a)(3) requires that the lawyer obtain the client's informed consent, in a writing signed by the client, both to the essential terms of the transaction and to the lawyer's role. When necessary, the lawyer should discuss both the material risks of the proposed transaction, including any risk presented by the lawyer's involvement, and the existence of reasonably available alternatives and should explain why the advice of independent legal counsel is desirable. See terminology (definition of informed consent).

The risk to a client is greatest when the client expects the lawyer to represent the client in the transaction itself or when the lawyer's financial interest otherwise poses a significant risk that the lawyer's representation of the client will be materially limited by the lawyer's financial interest in the transaction. Here the lawyer's role requires that the lawyer must comply, not only with the requirements of subdivision (a), but also with the requirements of rule 4-1.7. Under that rule, the lawyer must disclose the risks associated with the lawyer's dual role as both legal adviser and participant in the transaction, such as the risk that the lawyer will structure the transaction or give legal advice in a way that favors

the lawyer's interests at the expense of the client. The lawyer also must obtain the client's informed consent. In some cases, rule 4-1.7 will preclude the lawyer from seeking the client's consent to the transaction because of the lawyer's interest.

If the client is independently represented in the transaction, subdivision (a)(2) of this rule is inapplicable, and the subdivision (a)(1) requirement for full disclosure is satisfied either by a written disclosure by the lawyer involved in the transaction or by the client's independent counsel. The fact that the client was independently represented in the transaction is relevant in determining whether the agreement was fair and reasonable to the client as subdivision (a)(1) further requires.

### **Gifts to lawyers**

A lawyer may accept a gift from a client, if the transaction meets general standards of fairness and if the lawyer does not prepare the instrument bestowing the gift. For example, a simple gift such as a present given at a holiday or as a token of appreciation is permitted. If a client offers the lawyer a more substantial gift, subdivision (c) does not prohibit the lawyer from accepting it, although the gift may be voidable by the client under the doctrine of undue influence, which treats client gifts as presumptively fraudulent. In any event, due to concerns about overreaching and imposition on clients, a lawyer may not suggest that a gift be made to the lawyer or for the lawyer's benefit, except where the lawyer is related to the client as set forth in subdivision (c). If effectuation of a gift requires preparing a legal instrument such as a will or conveyance, however, the client should have the detached advice that another lawyer can provide and the lawyer should advise the client to seek advice of independent counsel. Subdivision (c) recognizes an exception where the client is related by blood or marriage to the donee.

This rule does not prohibit a lawyer or a partner or associate of the lawyer from serving as personal representative of the client's estate or in another potentially lucrative fiduciary position in connection with a client's estate planning. A lawyer may prepare a document that appoints the lawyer or a person related to the lawyer

to a fiduciary office if the client is properly informed, the appointment does not violate rule 4-1.7, the appointment is not the product of undue influence or improper solicitation by the lawyer, and the client gives informed consent, confirmed in writing. In obtaining the client's informed consent to the conflict, the lawyer should advise the client in writing concerning who is eligible to serve as a fiduciary, that a person who serves as a fiduciary is entitled to compensation, and that the lawyer may be eligible to receive compensation for serving as a fiduciary in addition to any attorney's fees that the lawyer or the lawyer's firm may earn for serving as a lawyer for the fiduciary.

### **Literary rights**

An agreement by which a lawyer acquires literary or media rights concerning the conduct of the representation creates a conflict between the interests of the client and the personal interests of the lawyer. Measures suitable in the representation of the client may detract from the publication value of an account of the representation. Subdivision (d) does not prohibit a lawyer representing a client in a transaction concerning literary property from agreeing that the lawyer's fee will consist of a share in ownership in the property if the arrangement conforms to rule 4-1.5 and subdivision (a) and (i).

### **Financial assistance**

Lawyers may not subsidize lawsuits or administrative proceedings brought on behalf of their clients, including making or guaranteeing loans to their clients for living expenses, because to do so would encourage clients to pursue lawsuits that might not otherwise be brought and because financial assistance gives lawyers too great a financial stake in the litigation. These dangers do not warrant a prohibition on a lawyer advancing a client court costs and litigation expenses, including the expenses of diagnostic medical examination used for litigation purposes and the reasonable costs of obtaining and presenting evidence, because these advances are virtually indistinguishable from contingent fees and help ensure access to the courts. Similarly, an exception allowing lawyers representing indigent clients to pay court costs

and litigation expenses regardless of whether these funds will be repaid is warranted.

### **Person paying for lawyer's services**

Lawyers are frequently asked to represent a client under circumstances in which a third person will compensate the lawyer, in whole or in part. The third person might be a relative or friend, an indemnitor (such as a liability insurance company), or a co-client (such as a corporation sued along with one or more of its employees). Because third-party payers frequently have interests that differ from those of the client, including interests in minimizing the amount spent on the representation and in learning how the representation is progressing, lawyers are prohibited from accepting or continuing these representations unless the lawyer determines that there will be no interference with the lawyer's independent professional judgment and there is informed consent from the client. See also rule 4-5.4(d) (prohibiting interference with a lawyer's professional judgment by one who recommends, employs or pays the lawyer to render legal services for another).

Sometimes, it will be sufficient for the lawyer to obtain the client's informed consent regarding the fact of the payment and the identity of the third-party payer. If, however, the fee arrangement creates a conflict of interest for the lawyer, then the lawyer must comply with rule 4-1.7. The lawyer must also conform to the requirements of rule 4-1.6 concerning confidentiality. Under rule 4-1.7(a), a conflict of interest exists if there is significant risk that the lawyer's representation of the client will be materially limited by the lawyer's own interest in the fee arrangement or by the lawyer's responsibilities to the third-party payer (for example, when the third-party payer is a co-client). Under rule 4-1.7(b), the lawyer may accept or continue the representation with the informed consent of each affected client, unless the conflict is nonconsentable under that subdivision. Under rule 4-1.7(b), the informed consent must be confirmed in writing or clearly stated on the record at a hearing.

## **Aggregate settlements**

Differences in willingness to make or accept an offer of settlement are among the risks of common representation of multiple clients by a single lawyer. Under rule 4-1.7, this is one of the risks that should be discussed before undertaking the representation, as part of the process of obtaining the clients' informed consent. In addition, rule 4-1.2(a) protects each client's right to have the final say in deciding whether to accept or reject an offer of settlement and in deciding whether to enter a guilty or nolo contendere plea in a criminal case. The rule stated in this subdivision is a corollary of both these rules and provides that, before any settlement offer or plea bargain is made or accepted on behalf of multiple clients, the lawyer must inform each of them about all the material terms of the settlement, including what the other clients will receive or pay if the settlement or plea offer is accepted. See also terminology (definition of informed consent). Lawyers representing a class of plaintiffs or defendants, or those proceeding derivatively, must comply with applicable rules regulating notification of class members and other procedural requirements designed to ensure adequate protection of the entire class.

## **Acquisition of interest in litigation**

Subdivision (i) states the traditional general rule that lawyers are prohibited from acquiring a proprietary interest in litigation. This general rule, which has its basis in common law champerty and maintenance, is subject to specific exceptions developed in decisional law and continued in these rules, such as the exception for reasonable contingent fees set forth in rule 4-1.5 and the exception for certain advances of the costs of litigation set forth in subdivision (e).

This rule is not intended to apply to customary qualification and limitations in legal opinions and memoranda.

## **Representation of insureds**

As with any representation of a client when another person or client is paying for the representation, the representation of an

insured client at the request of the insurer creates a special need for the lawyer to be cognizant of the potential for ethical risks. The nature of the relationship between a lawyer and a client can lead to the insured or the insurer having expectations inconsistent with the duty of the lawyer to maintain confidences, avoid conflicts of interest, and otherwise comply with professional standards. When a lawyer undertakes the representation of an insured client at the expense of the insurer, the lawyer should ascertain whether the lawyer will be representing both the insured and the insurer, or only the insured. Communication with both the insured and the insurer promotes their mutual understanding of the role of the lawyer in the particular representation. The Statement of Insured Client's Rights has been developed to facilitate the lawyer's performance of ethical responsibilities. The highly variable nature of insurance and the responsiveness of the insurance industry in developing new types of coverages for risks arising in the dynamic American economy render it impractical to establish a statement of rights applicable to all forms of insurance. The Statement of Insured Client's Rights is intended to apply to personal injury and property damage tort cases. It is not intended to apply to workers' compensation cases. Even in that relatively narrow area of insurance coverage, there is variability among policies. For that reason, the statement is necessarily broad. It is the responsibility of the lawyer to explain the statement to the insured. In particular cases, the lawyer may need to provide additional information to the insured.

Because the purpose of the statement is to assist laypersons in understanding their basic rights as clients, it is necessarily abbreviated. Although brevity promotes the purpose for which the statement was developed, it also necessitates incompleteness. For these reasons, it is specifically provided that the statement does not establish any legal rights or duties, nor create any presumption that an existing legal or ethical duty has been breached. As a result, the statement and its contents should not be invoked by opposing parties as grounds for disqualification of a lawyer or for procedural purposes. The purpose of the statement would be subverted if it could be used in such a manner.

The statement is to be signed by the lawyer to establish that it was timely provided to the insured, but the insured client is not required to sign it. It is in the best interests of the lawyer to have the insured client sign the statement to avoid future questions, but it is considered impractical to require the lawyer to obtain the insured client's signature in all instances.

Establishment of the statement and the duty to provide it to an insured in tort cases involving personal injury or property damage should not be construed as lessening the duty of the lawyer to inform clients of their rights in other circumstances. When other types of insurance are involved, when there are other third-party payors of fees, or when multiple clients are represented, similar needs for fully informing clients exist, as recognized in rules 4-1.7(c) and 4-1.8(f).

### **Imputation of prohibitions**

Under subdivision (k), a prohibition on conduct by an individual lawyer in subdivisions (a) through (i) also applies to all lawyers associated in a firm with the personally prohibited lawyer. For example, 1 lawyer in a firm may not enter into a business transaction with a client of another member of the firm without complying with subdivision (a), even if the first lawyer is not personally involved in the representation of the client.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended April 25, 2002 (820 So.2d 210); amended May 20, 2004 (875 So.2d 448); amended March 23, 2006, effective, May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417); amended November 19, 2009, effective February 1, 2010 (24 So.3d 63); amended November 9, 2017, effective February 1, 2018 (234 So. 3d 577).

### **RULE 4-1.9 CONFLICT OF INTEREST; FORMER CLIENT**

A lawyer who has formerly represented a client in a matter must not afterwards:

**(a)** represent another person in the same or a substantially related matter in which that person's interests are materially

adverse to the interests of the former client unless the former client gives informed consent;

**(b)** use information relating to the representation to the disadvantage of the former client except as these rules would permit or require with respect to a client or when the information has become generally known; or

**(c)** reveal information relating to the representation except as these rules would permit or require with respect to a client.

### **Comment**

After termination of a client-lawyer relationship, a lawyer may not represent another client except in conformity with this rule. The principles in rule 4-1.7 determine whether the interests of the present and former client are adverse. Thus, a lawyer could not properly seek to rescind on behalf of a new client a contract drafted on behalf of the former client. So also a lawyer who has prosecuted an accused person could not properly represent the accused in a subsequent civil action against the government concerning the same transaction.

The scope of a “matter” for purposes of rule 4-1.9(a) may depend on the facts of a particular situation or transaction. The lawyer’s involvement in a matter can also be a question of degree. When a lawyer has been directly involved in a specific transaction, subsequent representation of other clients with materially adverse interests clearly is prohibited. On the other hand, a lawyer who recurrently handled a type of problem for a former client is not precluded from later representing another client in a wholly distinct problem of that type even though the subsequent representation involves a position adverse to the prior client. Similar considerations can apply to the reassignment of military lawyers between defense and prosecution functions within the same military jurisdiction. The underlying question is whether the lawyer was so involved in the matter that the subsequent representation can be justly regarded as a changing of sides in the matter in question.

Matters are “substantially related” for purposes of this rule if they involve the same transaction or legal dispute, or if the current matter would involve the lawyer attacking work that the lawyer performed for the former client. For example, a lawyer who has previously represented a client in securing environmental permits to build a shopping center would be precluded from representing neighbors seeking to oppose rezoning of the property on the basis of environmental considerations; however, the lawyer would not be precluded, on the grounds of substantial relationship, from defending a tenant of the completed shopping center in resisting eviction for nonpayment of rent.

Lawyers owe confidentiality obligations to former clients, and thus information acquired by the lawyer in the course of representing a client may not subsequently be used by the lawyer to the disadvantage of the client without the former client’s consent. However, the fact that a lawyer has once served a client does not preclude the lawyer from using generally known information about that client when later representing another client. Information that has been widely disseminated by the media to the public, or that typically would be obtained by any reasonably prudent lawyer who had never represented the former client, should be considered generally known and ordinarily will not be disqualifying. The essential question is whether, but for having represented the former client, the lawyer would know or discover the information.

Information acquired in a prior representation may have been rendered obsolete by the passage of time. In the case of an organizational client, general knowledge of the client’s policies and practices ordinarily will not preclude a subsequent representation; on the other hand, knowledge of specific facts gained in a prior representation that are relevant to the matter in question ordinarily will preclude such a representation. A former client is not required to reveal the confidential information learned by the lawyer in order to establish a substantial risk that the lawyer has confidential information to use in the subsequent matter. A conclusion about the possession of such information may be based on the nature of the services the lawyer provided the former client and information

that would in ordinary practice be learned by a lawyer providing such services.

The provisions of this rule are for the protection of clients and can be waived if the former client gives informed consent. See terminology.

With regard to an opposing party's raising a question of conflict of interest, see comment to rule 4-1.7. With regard to disqualification of a firm with which a lawyer is associated, see rule 4-1.10.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended April 25, 2002 (820 So.2d 210); amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417); amended November 19, 2009, effective February 1, 2010 (24 So.3d 63); amended May 29, 2014, effective June 1, 2014 (140 So.3d 541).

#### **RULE 4-1.10 IMPUTATION OF CONFLICTS OF INTEREST; GENERAL RULE**

**(a) Imputed Disqualification of All Lawyers in Firm.** While lawyers are associated in a firm, none of them may knowingly represent a client when any 1 of them practicing alone would be prohibited from doing so by rule 4-1.7 or 4-1.9 except as provided elsewhere in this rule, or unless the prohibition is based on a personal interest of the prohibited lawyer and does not present a significant risk of materially limiting the representation of the client by the remaining lawyers in the firm.

**(b) Former Clients of Newly Associated Lawyer.** When a lawyer becomes associated with a firm, the firm may not knowingly represent a person in the same or a substantially related matter in which that lawyer, or a firm with which the lawyer was associated, had previously represented a client whose interests are materially adverse to that person and about whom the lawyer had acquired information protected by rules 4-1.6 and 4-1.9(b) and (c) that is material to the matter.

**(c) Representing Interests Adverse to Clients of Formerly Associated Lawyer.** When a lawyer has terminated an association

with a firm, the firm is not prohibited from thereafter representing a person with interests materially adverse to those of a client represented by the formerly associated lawyer unless:

(1) the matter is the same or substantially related to that in which the formerly associated lawyer represented the client; and

(2) any lawyer remaining in the firm has information protected by rules 4-1.6 and 4-1.9(b) and (c) that is material to the matter.

**(d) Waiver of Conflict.** A disqualification prescribed by this rule may be waived by the affected client under the conditions stated in rule 4-1.7.

**(e) Government Lawyers.** The disqualification of lawyers associated in a firm with former or current government lawyers is governed by rule 4-1.11.

## **Comment**

### **Definition of “firm”**

There is ordinarily no question that the members of an organization’s law department constitute a firm within the meaning of the Rules of Professional Conduct. However, there can be uncertainty as to the identity of the client. For example, it may not be clear whether the law department of a corporation represents a subsidiary or an affiliated corporation, as well as the corporation by which the members of the department are directly employed. A similar question can arise concerning an unincorporated association and its local affiliates.

Similar questions can also arise with respect to lawyers in legal aid. Lawyers employed in the same unit of a legal service organization constitute a firm, but not necessarily those employed in separate units. As in the case of independent practitioners, whether the lawyers should be treated as associated with each other can depend on the particular rule that is involved and on the specific facts of the situation.

Where a lawyer has joined a private firm after having represented the government, the situation is governed by rule 4-1.11(a) and (b); where a lawyer represents the government after having served private clients, the situation is governed by rule 4-1.11(d). The individual lawyer involved is bound by the rules generally, including rules 4-1.6, 4-1.7, and 4-1.9.

Different provisions are thus made for movement of a lawyer from 1 private firm to another and for movement of a lawyer between a private firm and the government. The government is entitled to protection of its client confidences and, therefore, to the protections provided in rules 4-1.6, 4-1.9, and 4-1.11. However, if the more extensive disqualification in rule 4-1.10 were applied to former government lawyers, the potential effect on the government would be unduly burdensome. The government deals with all private citizens and organizations and thus has a much wider circle of adverse legal interests than does any private law firm. In these circumstances, the government's recruitment of lawyers would be seriously impaired if rule 4-1.10 were applied to the government. On balance, therefore, the government is better served in the long run by the protections stated in rule 4-1.11.

### **Principles of imputed disqualification**

The rule of imputed disqualification stated in subdivision (a) gives effect to the principle of loyalty to the client as it applies to lawyers who practice in a law firm. These situations can be considered from the premise that a firm of lawyers is essentially 1 lawyer for purposes of the rules governing loyalty to the client or from the premise that each lawyer is vicariously bound by the obligation of loyalty owed by each lawyer with whom the lawyer is associated. Subdivision (a) operates only among the lawyers currently associated in a firm. When a lawyer moves from 1 firm to another the situation is governed by subdivisions (b) and (c).

The rule in subdivision (a) does not prohibit representation where neither questions of client loyalty nor protection of confidential information are presented. Where 1 lawyer in a firm could not effectively represent a given client because of strong political beliefs, for example, but that lawyer will do no work on the

case and the personal beliefs of the lawyer will not materially limit the representation by others in the firm, the firm should not be disqualified. On the other hand, if an opposing party in a case were owned by a lawyer in the law firm, and others in the firm would be materially limited in pursuing the matter because of loyalty to that lawyer, the personal disqualification of the lawyer would be imputed to all others in the firm.

The rule in subdivision (a) also does not prohibit representation by others in the law firm where the person prohibited from involvement in a matter is a nonlawyer, such as a paralegal or legal secretary. These persons, however, ordinarily must be screened from any personal participation in the matter to avoid communication to others in the firm of confidential information that both the nonlawyers and the firm have a legal duty to protect. See terminology and rule 4-5.3.

### **Lawyers moving between firms**

When lawyers have been associated in a firm but then end their association, however, the problem is more complicated. The fiction that the law firm is the same as a single lawyer is no longer wholly realistic. There are several competing considerations. First, the client previously represented must be reasonably assured that the principle of loyalty to the client is not compromised. Second, the rule of disqualification should not be so broadly cast as to preclude other persons from having reasonable choice of legal counsel. Third, the rule of disqualification should not unreasonably hamper lawyers from forming new associations and taking on new clients after having left a previous association. In this connection, it should be recognized that today many lawyers practice in firms, that many to some degree limit their practice to 1 field or another, and that many move from 1 association to another several times in their careers. If the concept of imputed disqualification were defined with unqualified rigor, the result would be radical curtailment of the opportunity of lawyers to move from 1 practice setting to another and of the opportunity of clients to change counsel.

Reconciliation of these competing principles in the past has been attempted under 2 rubrics. One approach has been to seek per se rules of disqualification. For example, it has been held that a partner in a law firm is conclusively presumed to have access to all confidences concerning all clients of the firm. Under this analysis, if a lawyer has been a partner in one law firm and then becomes a partner in another law firm, there is a presumption that all confidences known by a partner in the first firm are known to all partners in the second firm. This presumption might properly be applied in some circumstances, especially where the client has been extensively represented, but may be unrealistic where the client was represented only for limited purposes. Furthermore, such a rigid rule exaggerates the difference between a partner and an associate in modern law firms.

The other rubric formerly used for dealing with vicarious disqualification is the appearance of impropriety and was proscribed in former Canon 9 of the Code of Professional Responsibility. This rubric has a two-fold problem. First, the appearance of impropriety can be taken to include any new client-lawyer relationship that might make a former client feel anxious. If that meaning were adopted, disqualification would become little more than a question of subjective judgment by the former client. Second, since “impropriety” is undefined, the term “appearance of impropriety” is question-begging. It therefore has to be recognized that the problem of imputed disqualification cannot be properly resolved either by simple analogy to a lawyer practicing alone or by the very general concept of appearance of impropriety.

A rule based on a functional analysis is more appropriate for determining the question of vicarious disqualification. Two functions are involved: preserving confidentiality and avoiding positions adverse to a client.

## **Confidentiality**

Preserving confidentiality is a question of access to information. Access to information, in turn, is essentially a question of fact in particular circumstances, aided by inferences, deductions, or working presumptions that reasonably may be made

about the way in which lawyers work together. A lawyer may have general access to files of all clients of a law firm and may regularly participate in discussions of their affairs; it should be inferred that such a lawyer in fact is privy to all information about all the firm's clients. In contrast, another lawyer may have access to the files of only a limited number of clients and participate in discussion of the affairs of no other clients; in the absence of information to the contrary, it should be inferred that such a lawyer in fact is privy to information about the clients actually served but not information about other clients.

Application of subdivisions (b) and (c) depends on a situation's particular facts. In any inquiry, the burden of proof should rest on the firm whose disqualification is sought.

Subdivisions (b) and (c) operate to disqualify the firm only when the lawyer involved has actual knowledge of relevant information protected by rules 4-1.6 and 4-1.9(b) and (c). Thus, if a lawyer while with 1 firm acquired no knowledge or information relating to a particular client of the firm and that lawyer later joined another firm, neither the lawyer individually nor the second firm is disqualified from representing another client in the same or a related matter even though the interests of the 2 clients conflict.

Independent of the question of disqualification of a firm, a lawyer changing professional association has a continuing duty to preserve confidentiality of information about a client formerly represented. See rules 4-1.6 and 4-1.9.

### **Consent to conflict**

Rule 4-1.10(d) removes imputation with the informed consent of the affected client or former client under the conditions stated in rule 4-1.7. The conditions stated in rule 4-1.7 require the lawyer to determine that the representation is not prohibited by rule 4-1.7(b) and that each affected client or former client has given informed consent to the representation, confirmed in writing or clearly stated on the record. In some cases, the risk may be so severe that the conflict may not be cured by client consent. For a definition of informed consent, see terminology.

## **Imputation of conflicts in rule 4-1.8**

Where a lawyer is prohibited from engaging in certain transactions under rule 4-1.8, subdivision (k) of that rule, and not this rule, determines whether that prohibition also applies to other lawyers associated in a firm with the personally prohibited lawyer.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417); amended July 7, 2011, effective October 1, 2011 (67 So.3d 1037); amended May 29, 2014, effective June 1, 2014 (140 So. 3d 541); amended Jan. 4, 2019, effective March 5, 2019 (267 So.3d 891); amended March 3, 2022, effective May 2, 2022 (SC20-1467).

## **RULE 4-1.11 SPECIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST FOR FORMER AND CURRENT GOVERNMENT OFFICERS AND EMPLOYEES**

**(a) Representation of Private Client by Former Public Officer or Employee.** A lawyer who has formerly served as a public officer or employee of the government:

(1) is subject to rule 4-1.9(b) and (c); and

(2) shall not otherwise represent a client in connection with a matter in which the lawyer participated personally and substantially as a public officer or employee, unless the appropriate government agency gives its informed consent, confirmed in writing, to the representation.

**(b) Representation by Another Member of the Firm.** When a lawyer is disqualified from representation under subdivision (a), no lawyer in a firm with which that lawyer is associated may knowingly undertake or continue representation in such a matter unless:

(1) the disqualified lawyer is timely screened from any participation in the matter and is directly apportioned no part of the fee therefrom; and

(2) written notice is promptly given to the appropriate government agency to enable it to ascertain compliance with the provisions of this rule.

**(c) Use of Confidential Government Information.** A lawyer having information that the lawyer knows is confidential government information about a person acquired when the lawyer was a public officer or employee may not represent a private client whose interests are adverse to that person in a matter in which the information could be used to the material disadvantage of that person. As used in this rule, the term “confidential government information” means information that has been obtained under governmental authority and which, at the time this rule is applied, the government is prohibited by law from disclosing to the public or has a legal privilege not to disclose and which is not otherwise available to the public. A firm with which that lawyer is associated may undertake or continue representation in the matter only if the disqualified lawyer is screened from any participation in the matter and is apportioned no part of the fee therefrom.

**(d) Limits on Participation of Public Officer or Employee.** A lawyer currently serving as a public officer or employee:

(1) is subject to rules 4-1.7 and 4-1.9; and

(2) shall not:

(A) participate in a matter in which the lawyer participated personally and substantially while in private practice or nongovernmental employment, unless the appropriate government agency gives its informed consent; or

(B) negotiate for private employment with any person who is involved as a party or as attorney for a party in a matter in which the lawyer is participating personally and substantially.

**(e) Matter Defined.** As used in this rule, the term “matter” includes:

(1) any judicial or other proceeding, application, request for a ruling or other determination, contract, claim, controversy, investigation, charge, accusation, arrest, or other particular matter involving a specific party or parties; and

(2) any other matter covered by the conflict of interest rules of the appropriate government agency.

### **Comment**

A lawyer who has served or is currently serving as a public officer or employee is personally subject to the rules of professional conduct, including the prohibition against concurrent conflicts of interest stated in rule 4-1.7. In addition, such a lawyer may be subject to statutes and government regulations regarding conflict of interest. Such statutes and regulations may circumscribe the extent to which the government agency may give consent under this rule. See terminology for definition of informed consent.

Subdivisions (a)(1), (a)(2), and (d)(1) restate the obligations of an individual lawyer who has served or is currently serving as an officer or employee of the government toward a former government or private client. Rule 4-1.10 is not applicable to the conflicts of interest addressed by this rule. Rather, subdivision (b) sets forth a special imputation rule for former government lawyers that provides for screening and notice. Because of the special problems raised by imputation within a government agency, subdivision (d) does not impute the conflicts of a lawyer currently serving as an officer or employee of the government to other associated government officers or employees, although ordinarily it will be prudent to screen such lawyers.

Subdivisions (a)(2) and (d)(2) apply regardless of whether a lawyer is adverse to a former client and are thus designed not only to protect the former client, but also to prevent a lawyer from exploiting public office for the advantage of another client. For example, a lawyer who has pursued a claim on behalf of the government may not pursue the same claim on behalf of a later private client after the lawyer has left government service, except when authorized to do so by the government agency under

subdivision (a). Similarly, a lawyer who has pursued a claim on behalf of a private client may not pursue the claim on behalf of the government, except when authorized to do so by subdivision (d). As with subdivisions (a)(1) and (d)(1), rule 4-1.10 is not applicable to the conflicts of interest addressed by these subdivisions.

This rule represents a balancing of interests. On the one hand, where the successive clients are a government agency and another client, public or private, the risk exists that power or discretion vested in that agency might be used for the special benefit of the other client. A lawyer should not be in a position where benefit to the other client might affect performance of the lawyer's professional functions on behalf of the government. Also, unfair advantage could accrue to the other client by reason of access to confidential government information about the client's adversary obtainable only through the lawyer's government service. On the other hand, the rules governing lawyers presently or formerly employed by a government agency should not be so restrictive as to inhibit transfer of employment to and from the government. The government has a legitimate need to attract qualified lawyers as well as to maintain high ethical standards. Thus, a former government lawyer is disqualified only from particular matters in which the lawyer participated personally and substantially. The provisions for screening and waiver in subdivision (b) are necessary to prevent the disqualification rule from imposing too severe a deterrent against entering public service. The limitation of disqualification in subdivisions (a)(2) and (d)(2) to matters involving a specific party or parties, rather than extending disqualification to all substantive issues on which the lawyer worked, serves a similar function.

When a lawyer has been employed by 1 government agency and then moves to a second government agency, it may be appropriate to treat that second agency as another client for purposes of this rule, as when a lawyer is employed by a city and subsequently is employed by a federal agency. However, because the conflict of interest is governed by subdivision (d), the latter agency is not required to screen the lawyer as subdivision (b) requires a law firm to do. The question of whether 2 government

agencies should be regarded as the same or different clients for conflict of interest purposes is beyond the scope of these rules. See rule 4-1.13 comment, government agency.

Subdivisions (b) and (c) contemplate a screening arrangement. See terminology (requirements for screening procedures). These subdivisions do not prohibit a lawyer from receiving a salary or partnership share established by prior independent agreement, but that lawyer may not receive compensation directly relating the attorney's compensation to the fee in the matter in which the lawyer is disqualified.

Notice, including a description of the screened lawyer's prior representation and of the screening procedures employed, generally should be given as soon as practicable after the need for screening becomes apparent.

Subdivision (c) operates only when the lawyer in question has knowledge of the information, which means actual knowledge; it does not operate with respect to information that merely could be imputed to the lawyer.

Subdivisions (a) and (d) do not prohibit a lawyer from jointly representing a private party and a government agency when doing so is permitted by rule 4-1.7 and is not otherwise prohibited by law.

For purposes of subdivision (e) of this rule, a "matter" may continue in another form. In determining whether 2 particular matters are the same, the lawyer should consider the extent to which the matters involve the same basic facts, the same or related parties, and the time elapsed.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective Jan. 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417); amended July 7, 2011, effective October 1, 2011 (67 So.3d 1037).

## **RULE 4-1.12 FORMER JUDGE OR ARBITRATOR, MEDIATOR OR OTHER THIRD-PARTY NEUTRAL**

**(a) Representation of Private Client by Former Judge, Law Clerk, or Other Third-Party Neutral.** Except as stated in

subdivision (d), a lawyer shall not represent anyone in connection with a matter in which the lawyer participated personally and substantially as a judge or other adjudicative officer or law clerk to such a person or as an arbitrator, mediator, or other third-party neutral, unless all parties to the proceeding give informed consent, confirmed in writing.

**(b) Negotiation of Employment by Judge, Law Clerk, or Other Third-Party Neutral.** A lawyer shall not negotiate for employment with any person who is involved as a party or as attorney for a party in a matter in which the lawyer is participating personally and substantially as a judge or other adjudicative officer or as an arbitrator, mediator, or other third-party neutral. A lawyer serving as a law clerk to a judge or other adjudicative officer may negotiate for employment with a party or attorney involved in a matter in which the clerk is participating personally and substantially, but only after the lawyer has notified the judge or other adjudicative officer.

**(c) Imputed Disqualification of Law Firm.** If a lawyer is disqualified by subdivision (a), no lawyer in a firm with which that lawyer is associated may knowingly undertake or continue representation in the matter unless:

(1) the disqualified lawyer is timely screened from any participation in the matter and is directly apportioned no part of the fee therefrom; and

(2) written notice is promptly given to the parties and any appropriate tribunal to enable it to ascertain compliance with the provisions of this rule.

**(d) Exemption for Arbitrator as Partisan.** An arbitrator selected as a partisan of a party in a multimember arbitration panel is not prohibited from subsequently representing that party.

### **Comment**

This rule generally parallels rule 4-1.11. The term “personally and substantially” signifies that a judge who was a member of a multimember court, and thereafter left judicial office to practice

law, is not prohibited from representing a client in a matter pending in the court, but in which the former judge did not participate. So also the fact that a former judge exercised administrative responsibility in a court does not prevent the former judge from acting as a lawyer in a matter where the judge had previously exercised remote or incidental administrative responsibility that did not affect the merits. Compare the comment to rule 4-1.11. The term “adjudicative officer” includes such officials as judges pro tempore, referees, special masters, hearing officers, and other parajudicial officers and also lawyers who serve as part-time judges. Compliance Canons A(2), B(2), and C of Florida’s Code of Judicial Conduct provide that a part-time judge, judge pro tempore, or retired judge recalled to active service may not “act as a lawyer in a proceeding in which [the lawyer] has served as a judge or in any other proceeding related thereto.” Although phrased differently from this rule, those rules correspond in meaning.

Like former judges, lawyers who have served as arbitrators, mediators, or other third-party neutrals may be asked to represent a client in a matter in which the lawyer participated personally and substantially. This rule forbids such representation unless all of the parties to the proceedings give their informed consent, confirmed in writing. See terminology. Other law or codes of ethics governing third-party neutrals may impose more stringent standards of personal or imputed disqualification. See rule 4-2.4.

Although lawyers who serve as third-party neutrals do not have information concerning the parties that is protected under rule 4-1.6, they typically owe the parties an obligation of confidentiality under law or codes of ethics governing third-party neutrals. Thus, subdivision (c) provides that conflicts of the personally disqualified lawyer will be imputed to other lawyers in a law firm unless the conditions of this subdivision are met.

Requirements for screening procedures are stated in terminology. Subdivision (c)(1) does not prohibit the screened lawyer from receiving a salary or partnership share established by prior independent agreement, but that lawyer may not receive compensation directly related to the matter in which the lawyer is disqualified.

Notice, including a description of the screened lawyer's prior representation and of the screening procedures employed, generally should be given as soon as practicable after the need for screening becomes apparent.

A Florida Bar member who is a certified or court-appointed mediator is governed by the applicable law and rules relating to certified and court-appointed mediators.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective Jan. 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417); amended July 7, 2011, effective October 1, 2011 (67 So.3d 1037).

### **RULE 4-1.13 ORGANIZATION AS CLIENT**

**(a) Representation of Organization.** A lawyer employed or retained by an organization represents the organization acting through its duly authorized constituents.

**(b) Violations by Officers or Employees of Organization.** If a lawyer for an organization knows that an officer, employee, or other person associated with the organization is engaged in action, intends to act, or refuses to act in a matter related to the representation that is a violation of a legal obligation to the organization or a violation of law that reasonably might be imputed to the organization and is likely to result in substantial injury to the organization, the lawyer shall proceed as is reasonably necessary in the best interest of the organization. In determining how to proceed, the lawyer shall give due consideration to the seriousness of the violation and its consequences, the scope and nature of the lawyer's representation, the responsibility in the organization and the apparent motivation of the person involved, the policies of the organization concerning such matters, and any other relevant considerations. Any measures taken shall be designed to minimize disruption of the organization and the risk of revealing information relating to the representation to persons outside the organization. Such measures may include among others:

- (1) asking reconsideration of the matter;

(2) advising that a separate legal opinion on the matter be sought for presentation to appropriate authority in the organization; and

(3) referring the matter to higher authority in the organization, including, if warranted by the seriousness of the matter, referral to the highest authority that can act in behalf of the organization as determined by applicable law.

**(c) Resignation as Counsel for Organization.** If, despite the lawyer's efforts in accordance with subdivision (b), the highest authority that can act on behalf of the organization insists upon action, or a refusal to act, that is clearly a violation of law and is likely to result in substantial injury to the organization, the lawyer may resign in accordance with rule 4-1.16.

**(d) Identification of Client.** In dealing with an organization's directors, officers, employees, members, shareholders, or other constituents, a lawyer shall explain the identity of the client when the lawyer knows or reasonably should know that the organization's interests are adverse to those of the constituents with whom the lawyer is dealing.

**(e) Representing Directors, Officers, Employees, Members, Shareholders, or Other Constituents of Organization.** A lawyer representing an organization may also represent any of its directors, officers, employees, members, shareholders, or other constituents, subject to the provisions of rule 4-1.7. If the organization's consent to the dual representation is required by rule 4-1.7, the consent shall be given by an appropriate official of the organization other than the individual who is to be represented, or by the shareholders.

## **Comment**

### **The entity as the client**

An organizational client is a legal entity, but it cannot act except through its officers, directors, employees, shareholders, and other constituents. Officers, directors, employees, and shareholders are the constituents of the corporate organizational

client. The duties defined in this comment apply equally to unincorporated associations. “Other constituents” as used in this comment means the positions equivalent to officers, directors, employees, and shareholders held by persons acting for organizational clients that are not corporations.

When 1 of the constituents of an organizational client communicates with the organization’s lawyer in that person’s organizational capacity, the communication is protected by rule 4-1.6. Thus, by way of example, if an organizational client requests its lawyer to investigate allegations of wrongdoing, interviews made in the course of that investigation between the lawyer and the client’s employees or other constituents are covered by rule 4-1.6. This does not mean, however, that constituents of an organizational client are the clients of the lawyer. The lawyer may not disclose to such constituents information relating to the representation except for disclosures explicitly or impliedly authorized by the organizational client in order to carry out the representation or as otherwise permitted by rule 4-1.6.

When constituents of the organization make decisions for it, the decisions ordinarily must be accepted by the lawyer even if their utility or prudence is doubtful. Decisions concerning policy and operations, including ones entailing serious risk, are not as such in the lawyer’s province. However, different considerations arise when the lawyer knows that the organization may be substantially injured by action of a constituent that is in violation of law. In such a circumstance, it may be reasonably necessary for the lawyer to ask the constituent to reconsider the matter. If that fails, or if the matter is of sufficient seriousness and importance to the organization, it may be reasonably necessary for the lawyer to take steps to have the matter reviewed by a higher authority in the organization. Clear justification should exist for seeking review over the head of the constituent normally responsible for it. The stated policy of the organization may define circumstances and prescribe channels for such review, and a lawyer should encourage the formulation of such a policy. Even in the absence of organization policy, however, the lawyer may have an obligation to refer a matter to higher authority, depending on the seriousness of the matter and

whether the constituent in question has apparent motives to act at variance with the organization's interest. Review by the chief executive officer or by the board of directors may be required when the matter is of importance commensurate with their authority. At some point it may be useful or essential to obtain an independent legal opinion.

The organization's highest authority to whom a matter may be referred ordinarily will be the board of directors or similar governing body. However, applicable law may prescribe that under certain conditions highest authority reposes elsewhere; for example, in the independent directors of a corporation.

### **Relation to other rules**

The authority and responsibility provided in this rule are concurrent with the authority and responsibility provided in other rules. In particular, this rule does not limit or expand the lawyer's responsibility under rule 4-1.6, 4-1.8, 4-1.16, 4-3.3, or 4-4.1. If the lawyer's services are being used by an organization to further a crime or fraud by the organization, rule 4-1.2(d) can be applicable.

### **Government agency**

The duty defined in this rule applies to governmental organizations. However, when the client is a governmental organization, a different balance may be appropriate between maintaining confidentiality and assuring that the wrongful official act is prevented or rectified, for public business is involved. In addition, duties of lawyers employed by the government or lawyers in military service may be defined by statutes and regulation. Defining precisely the identity of the client and prescribing the resulting obligations of such lawyers may be more difficult in the government context and is a matter beyond the scope of these rules. Although in some circumstances the client may be a specific agency, it may also be a branch of the government, such as the executive branch, or the government as a whole. For example, if the action or failure to act involves the head of a bureau, either the department of which the bureau is a part or the relevant branch of government may be the client for purposes of this rule. Moreover,

in a matter involving the conduct of government officials, a government lawyer may have authority under applicable law to question such conduct more extensively than that of a lawyer for a private organization in similar circumstances. This rule does not limit that authority.

### **Clarifying the lawyer's role**

There are times when the organization's interest may be or becomes adverse to those of 1 or more of its constituents. In such circumstances the lawyer should advise any constituent whose interest the lawyer finds adverse to that of the organization of the conflict or potential conflict of interest that the lawyer cannot represent such constituent and that such person may wish to obtain independent representation. Care must be taken to assure that the constituent understands that, when there is such adversity of interest, the lawyer for the organization cannot provide legal representation for that constituent and that discussions between the lawyer for the organization and the constituent may not be privileged.

Whether such a warning should be given by the lawyer for the organization to any constituent may turn on the facts of each case.

### **Dual representation**

Subdivision (e) recognizes that a lawyer for an organization may also represent a principal officer or major shareholder.

### **Derivative actions**

Under generally prevailing law, the shareholders or members of a corporation may bring suit to compel the directors to perform their legal obligations in the supervision of the organization. Members of unincorporated associations have essentially the same right. Such an action may be brought nominally by the organization, but usually is, in fact, a legal controversy over management of the organization.

The question can arise whether counsel for the organization may defend such an action. The proposition that the organization

is the lawyer's client does not alone resolve the issue. Most derivative actions are a normal incident of an organization's affairs, to be defended by the organization's lawyer like any other suit. However, if the claim involves serious charges of wrongdoing by those in control of the organization, a conflict may arise between the lawyer's duty to the organization and the lawyer's relationship with the board. In those circumstances, rule 4-1.7 governs who should represent the directors and the organization.

### **Representing related organizations**

Consistent with the principle expressed in subdivision (a) of this rule, a lawyer or law firm who represents or has represented a corporation (or other organization) ordinarily is not presumed to also represent, solely by virtue of representing or having represented the client, an organization (such as a corporate parent or subsidiary) that is affiliated with the client. There are exceptions to this general proposition, such as, for example, when an affiliate actually is the alter ego of the organizational client or when the client has revealed confidential information to an attorney with the reasonable expectation that the information would not be used adversely to the client's affiliate(s). Absent such an exception, an attorney or law firm is not ethically precluded from undertaking representations adverse to affiliates of an existing or former client.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective Jan. 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417).

### **RULE 4-1.14 CLIENT WITH DIMINISHED CAPACITY**

**(a) Maintenance of Normal Relationship.** When a client's capacity to make adequately considered decisions in connection with the representation is diminished, whether because of minority, mental impairment, or for some other reason, the lawyer must maintain a normal client-lawyer relationship with the client as much as reasonably possible.

**(b) Protective Action.** A lawyer is not required to seek a determination of incapacity or the appointment of a guardian or take other protective action with respect to a client. However, when

the lawyer reasonably believes that the client has diminished capacity, is at risk of substantial physical, financial, or other harm unless action is taken and cannot adequately act in the client's own interest, the lawyer may take reasonably necessary protective action, such as, consulting with individuals or entities that have the ability to act to protect the client and, in appropriate cases, seek the appointment of a guardian ad litem or guardian. A lawyer must make reasonable efforts to exhaust all other available remedies to protect the client before seeking removal of any of the client's rights or the appointment of a guardian.

**(c) Confidentiality.** Information relating to the representation of a client with diminished capacity is protected by the rule on confidentiality of information. When taking protective action under this rule, the lawyer is impliedly authorized under the rule on confidentiality of information to reveal information about the client, but only to the extent reasonably necessary to protect the client's interests.

### **Comment**

The normal client-lawyer relationship is based on the assumption that the client, when properly advised and assisted, is capable of making decisions about important matters. When the client is a minor or has diminished capacity, however, maintaining the ordinary client-lawyer relationship may not be possible in all respects. In particular, an incapacitated person may have no power to make legally binding decisions. Nevertheless, a client with diminished capacity often has the ability to understand, deliberate on, and reach conclusions about matters affecting the client's own well-being. For example, children as young as 5 or 6 years of age, and certainly those of 10 or 12, are regarded as having opinions that are entitled to weight in legal proceedings concerning their custody. Some persons of advanced age are capable of handling routine financial matters while needing special legal protection concerning major transactions.

That a client has diminished capacity does not diminish the lawyer's obligation to treat the client with attention and respect. Even if the person has a legal representative, the lawyer should, as

far as possible, accord the represented person the status of client, particularly in maintaining communication.

**The client may wish to have family members or other persons participate in discussions with the lawyer. When necessary to assist in the representation, the presence of these persons furthers the rendition of legal services to the client and does not waive the attorney-client privilege. Nevertheless, the lawyer must keep the client's interests foremost and, except for protective action authorized under subdivision (b), must look to the client, and not family members, to make decisions on the client's behalf. A lawyer should be mindful of protecting the privilege when taking protective action.**

If a legal representative has already been appointed for the client, the lawyer should ordinarily look to the representative for decisions on behalf of the client. In matters involving a minor, whether the lawyer should look to the parents as natural guardians may depend on the type of proceeding or matter in which the lawyer is representing the minor. If the lawyer represents the guardian, as distinct from the ward, and is aware the guardian is acting adversely to the ward's interest, the lawyer may have an obligation to prevent or rectify the guardian's misconduct. See rule 4-1.2(d); *Saadeh v. Connors*, 166 So. 3d 959 (Fla. 4th DCA 2015); Fla. AGO 96-94, 1996 WL 680981.

### **Taking protective action**

If a lawyer reasonably believes that a client is at risk of substantial physical, financial, or other harm unless action is taken, and that a normal client-lawyer relationship cannot be maintained as provided in subdivision (a) because the client lacks sufficient capacity to communicate or make adequately considered decisions in connection with the representation, then subdivision (b) permits the lawyer to take protective measures deemed necessary. These measures could include: consulting with family members, using a reconsideration period to permit clarification or improvement of circumstances, using voluntary surrogate decision-making tools such as durable powers of attorney or consulting with support groups, professional services, adult-protective agencies, or

other individuals or entities that have the ability to protect the client. In taking any protective action, the lawyer should be guided by such factors as the wishes and values of the client to the extent known, the client's best interests, and the goals of intruding into the client's decision-making autonomy to the least extent feasible, maximizing client capacities, and respecting the client's family and social connections. Which factors the lawyer chooses to be guided by will depend on the nature of the protective action to be taken, some issues being governed by the client's substituted judgment and others by the client's best interests.

Whether the client's capacity has diminished may be shown by such factors as: the client's ability to articulate reasoning leading to a decision; variability of state of mind and ability to appreciate consequences of a decision; the substantive fairness of a decision; and the consistency of a decision with the known long-term commitments and values of the client. In appropriate circumstances, the lawyer may seek guidance from an appropriate diagnostician.

If a legal representative has not been appointed, the lawyer should consider whether appointment of a guardian ad litem or guardian is necessary to protect the client's interests. Thus, if a client with diminished capacity has substantial property that should be sold for the client's benefit, effective completion of the transaction may require appointment of a legal representative. In addition, rules of procedure in litigation sometimes provide that minors or persons with diminished capacity must be represented by a guardian or next friend. In many circumstances, however, appointment of a legal representative may be more expensive or traumatic for the client than circumstances require. Evaluation of circumstances is a matter entrusted to the lawyer's professional judgment. In considering alternatives, the lawyer should be aware of any law that requires the lawyer to advocate the least restrictive action on behalf of the client.

### **Disclosure of client's condition**

Disclosure of the client's diminished capacity could adversely affect the client's interests. For example, raising the question of

diminished capacity could, in some circumstances, lead to proceedings for involuntary commitment. Information relating to the representation is protected by rule 4-1.6. Therefore, unless authorized to do so, the lawyer may not disclose confidential information. When taking protective action under subdivision (b), the lawyer is impliedly authorized to make the necessary disclosures. Nevertheless, given the risks of disclosure, subdivision (c) limits what the lawyer may disclose in consulting with other individuals or entities or seeking the appointment of a legal representative. At the very least, the lawyer should determine whether it is likely the person or entity consulted with will act adversely to the client's interests before discussing matters related to the client. The lawyer's position in these cases is an unavoidably difficult one.

### **Emergency legal assistance**

A lawyer may, but is not required to, take legal action to protect a person with diminished capacity who is threatened with imminent and irreparable harm to the person's health, safety, or financial interests, even though the person is unable to establish a client-lawyer relationship or make or express considered judgments about the matter when the person or another acting in good faith on that person's behalf has consulted with the lawyer. Even in an emergency, however, the lawyer should not act unless the lawyer reasonably believes the person has no alternative available. The lawyer should take legal action on behalf of the person only to the extent reasonably necessary to maintain the status quo or otherwise avoid imminent and irreparable harm. A lawyer who undertakes to represent a person in an exigent situation has the same duties under these rules as the lawyer would with respect to a client.

A lawyer who acts on behalf of a person with diminished capacity in an emergency should keep the confidences of the person as if dealing with a client, disclosing them only to the extent necessary to accomplish the intended protective action. The lawyer may disclose to any tribunal involved and to any other counsel involved the nature of his or her relationship with the person while maintaining the person's confidential information.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252);  
amended March 3, 2022, effective May 2, 2022 (SC20-1467).

### **RULE 4-1.15 SAFEKEEPING PROPERTY**

**Compliance With Trust Accounting Rules.** A lawyer shall comply with The Florida Bar Rules Regulating Trust Accounts.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective Jan. 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252);, April 25, 2002 (820 So.2d 210).

### **RULE 4-1.16 DECLINING OR TERMINATING REPRESENTATION**

**(a) When Lawyer Must Decline or Terminate Representation.** Except as stated in subdivision (c), a lawyer shall not represent a client or, where representation has commenced, shall withdraw from the representation of a client if:

- (1) the representation will result in violation of the Rules of Professional Conduct or law;
- (2) the lawyer's physical or mental condition materially impairs the lawyer's ability to represent the client;
- (3) the lawyer is discharged;
- (4) the client persists in a course of action involving the lawyer's services that the lawyer reasonably believes is criminal or fraudulent, unless the client agrees to disclose and rectify the crime or fraud; or
- (5) the client has used the lawyer's services to perpetrate a crime or fraud, unless the client agrees to disclose and rectify the crime or fraud.

**(b) When Withdrawal Is Allowed.** Except as stated in subdivision (c), a lawyer may withdraw from representing a client if:

- (1) withdrawal can be accomplished without material adverse effect on the interests of the client;

(2) the client insists upon taking action that the lawyer considers repugnant, imprudent, or with which the lawyer has a fundamental disagreement;

(3) the client fails substantially to fulfill an obligation to the lawyer regarding the lawyer's services and has been given reasonable warning that the lawyer will withdraw unless the obligation is fulfilled;

(4) the representation will result in an unreasonable financial burden on the lawyer or has been rendered unreasonably difficult by the client; or

(5) other good cause for withdrawal exists.

**(c) Compliance With Order of Tribunal.** A lawyer must comply with applicable law requiring notice or permission of a tribunal when terminating a representation. When ordered to do so by a tribunal, a lawyer shall continue representation notwithstanding good cause for terminating the representation.

**(d) Protection of Client's Interest.** Upon termination of representation, a lawyer shall take steps to the extent reasonably practicable to protect a client's interest, such as giving reasonable notice to the client, allowing time for employment of other counsel, surrendering papers and property to which the client is entitled, and refunding any advance payment of fee or expense that has not been earned or incurred. The lawyer may retain papers and other property relating to or belonging to the client to the extent permitted by law.

### **Comment**

A lawyer should not accept representation in a matter unless it can be performed competently, promptly, without improper conflict of interest, and to completion. Ordinarily, a representation in a matter is completed when the agreed-upon assistance has been concluded. See rule 4-1.2, and the comment to rule 4-1.3.

## **Mandatory withdrawal**

A lawyer ordinarily must decline or withdraw from representation if the client demands that the lawyer engage in conduct that is illegal or violates the Rules of Professional Conduct or law. The lawyer is not obliged to decline or withdraw simply because the client suggests such a course of conduct; a client may make such a suggestion in the hope that a lawyer will not be constrained by a professional obligation. Withdrawal is also mandatory if the client persists in a course of action that the lawyer reasonably believes is criminal or fraudulent, unless the client agrees to disclose and rectify the crime or fraud. Withdrawal is also required if the lawyer's services were misused in the past even if that would materially prejudice the client.

When a lawyer has been appointed to represent a client, withdrawal ordinarily requires approval of the appointing authority. See also rule 4-6.2. Similarly, court approval or notice to the court is often required by applicable law before a lawyer withdraws from pending litigation. Difficulty may be encountered if withdrawal is based on the client's demand that the lawyer engage in unprofessional conduct. The court may request an explanation for the withdrawal, while the lawyer may be bound to keep confidential the facts that would constitute such an explanation. The lawyer's statement that professional considerations require termination of the representation ordinarily should be accepted as sufficient. Lawyers should be mindful of their obligations to both clients and the court under rules 4-1.6 and 4-3.3.

## **Discharge**

A client has a right to discharge a lawyer at any time, with or without cause, subject to liability for payment for the lawyer's services. Where future dispute about the withdrawal may be anticipated, it may be advisable to prepare a written statement reciting the circumstances.

Whether a client can discharge appointed counsel may depend on applicable law. A client seeking to do so should be given a full explanation of the consequences. These consequences may include

a decision by the appointing authority that appointment of successor counsel is unjustified, thus requiring the client to be self-represented.

If the client is mentally incompetent, the client may lack the legal capacity to discharge the lawyer, and in any event the discharge may be seriously adverse to the client's interests. The lawyer should make special effort to help the client consider the consequences and may take reasonably necessary protective action as provided in rule 4-1.14.

### **Optional withdrawal**

A lawyer may withdraw from representation in some circumstances. The lawyer has the option to withdraw if it can be accomplished without material adverse effect on the client's interests. The lawyer also may withdraw where the client insists on taking action that the lawyer considers repugnant, imprudent, or with which the lawyer has a fundamental disagreement.

A lawyer may withdraw if the client refuses to abide by the terms of an agreement relating to the representation, such as an agreement concerning fees or court costs or an agreement limiting the objectives of the representation.

### **Assisting the client upon withdrawal**

Even if the lawyer has been unfairly discharged by the client, a lawyer must take all reasonable steps to mitigate the consequences to the client. The lawyer may retain papers and other property as security for a fee only to the extent permitted by law.

### **Refunding advance payment of unearned fee**

Upon termination of representation, a lawyer should refund to the client any advance payment of a fee that has not been earned. This does not preclude a lawyer from retaining any reasonable nonrefundable fee that the client agreed would be deemed earned when the lawyer commenced the client's representation. See also rule 4-1.5.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended May 20, 2004 (875 So.2d 448); amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417).

#### **RULE 4-1.17 SALE OF LAW PRACTICE**

A lawyer or a law firm may sell or purchase a law practice, or an area of practice, including good will, provided that:

**(a) Sale of Practice or Area of Practice as an Entirety.** The entire practice, or the entire area of practice, is sold to 1 or more lawyers or law firms authorized to practice law in Florida.

**(b) Notice to Clients.** Written notice is served by certified mail, return receipt requested, on each of the seller's clients of:

(1) the proposed sale;

(2) the client's right to retain other counsel; and

(3) the fact that the client's consent to the substitution of counsel will be presumed if the client does not object within 30 days after being served with notice.

**(c) Court Approval Required.** If a representation involves pending litigation, there will be no substitution of counsel or termination of representation unless authorized by the court. The seller may disclose, in camera, to the court information relating to the representation only to the extent necessary to obtain an order authorizing the substitution of counsel or termination of representation.

**(d) Client Objections.** If a client objects to the proposed substitution of counsel, the seller must comply with the requirements of rule 4-1.16(d).

**(e) Consummation of Sale.** A sale of a law practice may not be consummated until:

(1) with respect to clients of the seller who were served with written notice of the proposed sale, the 30-day period referred to in subdivision (b)(3) has expired or all these clients have

consented to the substitution of counsel or termination of representation; and

(2) court orders have been entered authorizing substitution of counsel for all clients who could not be served with written notice of the proposed sale and whose representations involve pending litigation; provided, in the event the court fails to grant a substitution of counsel in a matter involving pending litigation, that matter may not be included in the sale and the sale otherwise will be unaffected. Further, the matters not involving pending litigation of any client who cannot be served with written notice of the proposed sale may not be included in the sale and the sale otherwise will be unaffected.

**(f) Existing Fee Contracts Controlling.** The purchaser must honor the fee agreements that were entered into between the seller and the seller's clients. The fees charged clients may not be increased by reason of the sale.

### **Comment**

The practice of law is a profession, not merely a business. Clients are not commodities that can be purchased and sold at will. In accordance with the requirements of this rule, when a lawyer or an entire firm sells the practice and other lawyers or firms take over the representation, the selling lawyer or firm may obtain compensation for the reasonable value of the practice as may withdrawing partners of law firms. See rules 4-5.4 and 4-5.6.

The requirement that all of the private practice, or all of an area of practice, be sold is satisfied if the seller in good faith makes the entire practice, or area of practice, available for sale to the purchasers. The fact that a number of the seller's clients decide not to be represented by the purchasers but take their matters elsewhere, therefore, does not result in a violation. Similarly, a violation does not occur merely because a court declines to approve the substitution of counsel in the cases of a number of clients who could not be served with written notice of the proposed sale.

## **Sale of entire practice or entire area of practice**

The rule requires that the seller's entire practice, or an area of practice, be sold. The prohibition against sale of less than an entire practice area protects those clients whose matters are less lucrative and who might find it difficult to secure other counsel if a sale could be limited to substantial fee-generating matters. The purchasers are required to undertake all client matters in the practice, or practice area, subject to client consent or court authorization. This requirement is satisfied, however, even if a purchaser is unable to undertake a particular client matter because of a conflict of interest.

## **Client confidences, consent, and notice**

Negotiations between seller and prospective purchaser prior to disclosure of information relating to a specific representation of an identifiable client do not violate the confidentiality provisions of rule 4-1.6 any more than do preliminary discussions concerning the possible association of another lawyer or mergers between firms, with respect to which client consent ordinarily is not required. See rule 4-1.6(c)(6). Providing the prospective purchaser access to detailed information relating to the representation, for example, the file, however, requires client consent or court authorization. See rule 4-1.6. Rule 4-1.17 provides that the seller must attempt to serve each client with written notice of the contemplated sale, including the identity of the purchaser and the fact that the decision to consent to the substitution of counsel or to make other arrangements must be made within 30 days. If nothing is heard within that time from a client who was served with written notice of the proposed sale, that client's consent to the substitution of counsel is presumed. However, with regard to clients whose matters involve pending litigation but who could not be served with written notice of the proposed sale, authorization of the court is required before the files and client-specific information relating to the representation of those clients may be disclosed by the seller to the purchaser and before counsel may be substituted.

A lawyer or law firm selling a practice cannot be required to remain in practice just because some clients cannot be served with

written notice of the proposed sale. Because these clients cannot themselves consent to the substitution of counsel or direct any other disposition of their representations and files, with regard to clients whose matters involve pending litigation the rule requires an order from the court authorizing the substitution (or withdrawal) of counsel. The court can be expected to determine whether reasonable efforts to locate the client have been exhausted, and whether the absent client's legitimate interests will be served by authorizing the substitution of counsel so that the purchaser may continue the representation. Preservation of client confidences requires that the petition for a court order be considered in camera. If, however, the court fails to grant substitution of counsel in a matter involving pending litigation, that matter may not be included in the sale and the sale may be consummated without inclusion of that matter.

The rule provides that matters not involving pending litigation of clients who could not be served with written notice may not be included in the sale. This is because the clients' consent to disclosure of confidential information and to substitution of counsel cannot be obtained and because the alternative of court authorization ordinarily is not available in matters not involving pending litigation. Although these matters may not be included in the sale, the sale may be consummated without inclusion of those matters.

If a client objects to the proposed substitution of counsel, the rule treats the seller as attempting to withdraw from representation of that client and, therefore, provides that the seller must comply with the provisions of rule 4-1.16 concerning withdrawal from representation. Additionally, the seller must comply with applicable requirements of law or rules of procedure.

All the elements of client autonomy, including the client's absolute right to discharge a lawyer and transfer the representation to another, survive the sale of the practice or an area of practice.

## **Fee arrangements between client and purchaser**

The sale may not be financed by increases in fees charged the clients of the practice. Existing agreements between the seller and the client as to fees and the scope of the work must be honored by the purchaser. This obligation of the purchaser is a factor that can be taken into account by seller and purchaser when negotiating the sale price of the practice.

## **Other applicable ethical standards**

Lawyers participating in the sale of a law practice or a practice area are subject to the ethical standards applicable to involving another lawyer in the representation of a client for all matters pending at the time of the sale. These include, for example, the seller's ethical obligation to exercise competence in identifying a purchaser qualified to assume the practice and the purchaser's obligation to undertake the representation competently (see rule 4-1.1); the obligation to avoid disqualifying conflicts, and to secure the client's informed consent for those conflicts that can be agreed to (see rule 4-1.7 regarding conflicts and see the terminology section of the preamble for the definition of informed consent); and the obligation to protect information relating to the representation (see rules 4-1.6, 4-1.8(b), and 4-1.9(b) and (c)). If the terms of the sale involve the division between purchaser and seller of fees from matters that arise subsequent to the sale, the fee-division provisions of rule 4-1.5 must be satisfied with respect to these fees. These provisions will not apply to the division of fees from matters pending at the time of sale.

If approval of the substitution of the purchasing attorney for the selling attorney is required by the rules of any tribunal in which a matter is pending, approval must be obtained before the matter can be included in the sale (see rule 4-1.16).

## **Applicability of this rule**

This rule applies, among other situations, to the sale of a law practice by representatives of a lawyer who is deceased, disabled, or has disappeared. It is possible that a nonlawyer, who is not subject to the Rules of Professional Conduct, might be involved in the sale.

When the practice of a lawyer who is deceased, is disabled, or has disappeared is being sold, the notice required by subdivision (b) of this rule must be given by someone who is legally authorized to act on the selling lawyer's behalf, for example, a personal representative or a guardian. This is because the sale of a practice and transfer of representation involve legal rights of the affected clients.

Bona fide admission to, withdrawal from, or retirement from a law partnership or professional association, retirement plans and similar arrangements, and a sale of tangible assets of a law practice, do not constitute a sale or purchase governed by this rule.

Added July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417); amended July 7, 2011, effective October 1, 2011 (67 So.3d 1037); amended June 11, 2015, effective October 1, 2015 (167 So.3d 412).

#### **RULE 4-1.18 DUTIES TO PROSPECTIVE CLIENT**

**(a) Prospective Client.** A person who consults with a lawyer about the possibility of forming a client-lawyer relationship with respect to a matter is a prospective client.

**(b) Confidentiality of Information.** Even when no client-lawyer relationship ensues, a lawyer who has learned information from a prospective client may not use or reveal that information, except as rule 4-1.9 would permit with respect to information of a former client.

**(c) Subsequent Representation.** A lawyer subject to subdivision (b) may not represent a client with interests materially adverse to those of a prospective client in the same or a substantially related matter if the lawyer received information from the prospective client that could be used to the disadvantage of that person in the matter, except as provided in subdivision (d). If a lawyer is disqualified from representation under this rule, no lawyer in a firm with which that lawyer is associated may knowingly undertake or continue representation in the matter, except as provided in subdivision (d).

**(d) Permissible Representation.** When the lawyer has received disqualifying information as defined in subdivision (c), representation is permissible if:

(1) both the affected client and the prospective client have given informed consent, confirmed in writing; or

(2) the lawyer who received the information took reasonable measures to avoid exposure to more disqualifying information than was reasonably necessary to determine whether to represent the prospective client; and

(A) the disqualified lawyer is timely screened from any participation in the matter and is apportioned no part of the fee therefrom; and

(B) written notice is promptly given to the prospective client.

### **Comment**

Prospective clients, like clients, may disclose information to a lawyer, place documents or other property in the lawyer's custody, or rely on the lawyer's advice. A lawyer's consultations with a prospective client usually are limited in time and depth and leave both the prospective client and the lawyer free (and the lawyer sometimes required) to proceed no further. Hence, prospective clients should receive some but not all of the protection afforded clients.

A person becomes a prospective client by consulting with a lawyer about the possibility of forming a client-lawyer relationship with respect to a matter. Whether communications, including written, oral, or electronic communications, constitute a consultation depends on the circumstances. For example, a consultation is likely to have occurred if a lawyer, either in person or through the lawyer's advertising in any medium, specifically requests or invites the submission of information about a potential representation without clear and reasonably understandable warnings and cautionary statements that limit the lawyer's obligations, and a person provides information in response. In

contrast, a consultation does not occur if a person provides information to a lawyer in response to advertising that merely describes the lawyer's education, experience, areas of practice, and contact information, or provides legal information of general interest. A person who communicates information unilaterally to a lawyer, without any reasonable expectation that the lawyer is willing to discuss the possibility of forming a client-lawyer relationship, is not a "prospective client" within the meaning of subdivision (a).

It is often necessary for a prospective client to reveal information to the lawyer during an initial consultation prior to the decision about formation of a client-lawyer relationship. The lawyer often must learn this information to determine whether there is a conflict of interest with an existing client and whether the matter is one that the lawyer is willing to undertake. Subdivision (b) prohibits the lawyer from using or revealing that information, except as permitted by rule 4-1.9, even if the client or lawyer decides not to proceed with the representation. The duty exists regardless of how brief the initial conference may be.

In order to avoid acquiring disqualifying information from a prospective client, a lawyer considering whether to undertake a new matter should limit the initial consultation to only information as reasonably appears necessary for that purpose. Where the information indicates that a conflict of interest or other reason for non-representation exists, the lawyer should so inform the prospective client or decline the representation. If the prospective client wishes to retain the lawyer, and if consent is possible under rule 4-1.7, then consent from all affected present or former clients must be obtained before accepting the representation.

A lawyer may condition a consultation with a prospective client on the person's informed consent that no information disclosed during the consultation will prohibit the lawyer from representing a different client in the matter. See terminology for the definition of informed consent. If the agreement expressly so provides, the prospective client may also consent to the lawyer's subsequent use of information received from the prospective client.

Even in the absence of an agreement, under subdivision (c), the lawyer is not prohibited from representing a client with interests adverse to those of the prospective client in the same or a substantially related matter unless the lawyer has received from the prospective client information that could be used to the disadvantage of the prospective client in the matter.

Under subdivision (c), the prohibition in this rule is imputed to other lawyers as provided in rule 4-1.10, but, under subdivision (d)(1), the prohibition and its imputation may be avoided if the lawyer obtains the informed consent, confirmed in writing, of both the prospective and affected clients. In the alternative, the prohibition and its imputation may be avoided if the conditions of subdivision (d)(2) are met and all disqualified lawyers are timely screened and written notice is promptly given to the prospective client. See terminology (requirements for screening procedures). Subdivision (d)(2)(i) does not prohibit the screened lawyer from receiving a salary or partnership share established by prior independent agreement, but that lawyer may not receive compensation directly related to the matter in which the lawyer is disqualified.

Notice, including a general description of the subject matter about which the lawyer was consulted, and of the screening procedures employed, generally should be given as soon as practicable after the need for screening becomes apparent.

The duties under this rule presume that the prospective client consults the lawyer in good faith. A person who consults a lawyer simply with the intent of disqualifying the lawyer from the matter, with no intent of possibly hiring the lawyer, has engaged in a sham and should not be able to invoke this rule to create a disqualification.

For the duty of competence of a lawyer who gives assistance on the merits of a matter to a prospective client, see rule 4-1.1. For a lawyer's duties when a prospective client entrusts valuables or papers to the lawyer's care, see chapter 5, Rules Regulating The Florida Bar.

Added March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417); amended November 19, 2009, effective February 1, 2010 (24 So.3d 63); amended May 21, 2015, corrected June 25, 2015, effective October 1, 2015 (164 So.3d 1217).

## **RULE 4-1.19 COLLABORATIVE LAW PROCESS IN FAMILY LAW**

**(a) Duty to Explain Process to Client.** A lawyer must obtain the informed consent of a client in a family law matter before proceeding in the collaborative law process after providing the client with sufficient information about the collaborative law process, including, but not limited to, the following:

- (1) the material benefits and risks of using the collaborative law process to resolve a family law matter;
- (2) the nature and scope of the matter to be resolved through the collaborative law process;
- (3) alternatives to the collaborative law process;
- (4) that participation in the collaborative law process is voluntary and any client may unilaterally terminate the collaborative law process for any reason;
- (5) that the collaborative law process will terminate if any participating client initiates a proceeding or seeks court intervention in a pending proceeding related to the collaborative law matter after the clients have signed the collaborative law agreement;
- (6) limitations on the lawyer's participation in subsequent proceedings imposed by family law court rules on the collaborative law process; and
- (7) fees and costs the client can reasonably expect to incur in the collaborative law process, including the fees of the lawyers, mental health professionals, and financial professionals.

**(b) Written Agreement Required.** A lawyer is prohibited from representing a client in the collaborative process in a family

law matter unless all participating lawyers and clients sign a written agreement that includes:

- (1) a statement of the clients' intent to resolve a matter through the collaborative law process under these rules;
- (2) a description of the nature and scope of the matter;
- (3) identification of the lawyers participating in the collaborative law process and which client(s) they represent;
- (4) that the clients will make timely, full, candid and informal disclosure of information related to the collaborative matter without formal discovery and will promptly update previously disclosed information that has materially changed;
- (5) that participation in the collaborative law process is voluntary and any client may unilaterally terminate the collaborative law process for any reason;
- (6) that the collaborative law process will terminate if any participating client initiates a proceeding or seeks court intervention in a pending proceeding related to the collaborative law matter after the clients have signed the collaborative law agreement; and
- (7) that the clients understand that their lawyers may not represent the clients or any other person before a court in a proceeding related to the collaborative law matter except as provided by court rule.

**(c) Duty to Address Domestic Violence.** A lawyer must reasonably inquire whether a client has a history of any coercive or violent relationship with another party in a family law matter before agreeing to represent a client in the collaborative law process and must make reasonable efforts to continue to assess whether a coercive or violent relationship exists between parties in a family law matter throughout the collaborative law process. A lawyer may not represent a client in the collaborative law process in a family law matter and must terminate the client-lawyer relationship in an existing collaborative law process in a family law matter if the

lawyer reasonably believes that the lawyer's client has a history of any coercive or violent relationship with another party in the matter unless:

(1) the client requests to begin or continue the collaborative law process; and

(2) the lawyer reasonably believes that the safety of the client can be protected during the collaborative law process.

### **Comment**

The collaborative law process involves the nonadversarial resolution of disputes through voluntary settlement procedures. Florida statutes and court rules permit collaborative law to resolve disputes in family law. Lawyers engaging in the collaborative law process in family law matters must comply with legislative and court requirements regarding the process. As part of this nonadversarial and voluntary resolution of disputes, lawyers who engage in the collaborative law process in a family law matter, and any other lawyers in that lawyer's firm, may not afterwards represent any party in any related proceeding except to request that a court approve the settlement reached during the collaborative law process or in specified emergency situations in accordance with family law court rules.

Before agreeing with the client to proceed in the collaborative law process in a family law matter, a lawyer should first consider whether a client is an appropriate candidate for the collaborative law process and must provide the client with sufficient information regarding the benefits and risks of the process, including the lawyer's limitations regarding subsequent proceedings. See also rules 4-1.4 and 4-1.2. To determine whether a client is a good candidate for the collaborative law process, the lawyer must inquire regarding any history of coercive or violent relationships with any other persons who would be parties to the collaborative law process in the family law matter. See also rules 4-1.1 and 4-1.2. The lawyer also must provide the client with information about other reasonably available alternatives to resolve the family law matter, which may include litigation, mediation, arbitration, or expert

evaluation. See also rule 4-1.4. The lawyer should assess whether the client is likely to cooperate in voluntary discovery and discuss that process with the client. See rules 4-1.1 and 4-1.2. The lawyer should also advise the client that the collaborative law process will terminate if any party initiates litigation or other court intervention in the matter after signing a collaborative law agreement. *Id.* The lawyer should discuss with the client the fact that the collaborative law process is voluntary and any party to a collaborative law agreement may terminate the process at any time. *Id.* The lawyer must provide the client with information about costs the client can reasonably expect to incur, including fees and costs of all professionals involved. See rules 4-1.4 and 4-1.5.

An agreement between a lawyer and client to engage in the collaborative law process is a form of limited representation which must comply with all requirements of limited scope representations, including the requirement that the client must give informed consent in writing. See rule 4-1.2(c). The agreement between lawyer and client should include the nature and scope of the matter to be resolved through the collaborative law process, the material benefits and risks to participating in the collaborative law process, and the limitations on the lawyer's representation.

If a client agrees to participate in the collaborative law process and then terminates the process or initiates litigation regarding the dispute, the lawyer should terminate the representation. See rule 4-1.16.

Added May 18, 2017, effective July 1, 2017 (218 So.3d 440); amended Jan. 4, 2019, effective March 5, 2019 (267 So.3d 891).

## **4-2. COUNSELOR**

### **RULE 4-2.1 ADVISER**

In representing a client, a lawyer shall exercise independent professional judgment and render candid advice. In rendering advice, a lawyer may refer not only to law but to other considerations such as moral, economic, social, and political factors that may be relevant to the client's situation.

## **Comment**

### **Scope of advice**

A client is entitled to straightforward advice expressing the lawyer's honest assessment. Legal advice often involves unpleasant facts and alternatives that a client may be disinclined to confront. In presenting advice, a lawyer endeavors to sustain the client's morale and may put advice in as acceptable a form as honesty permits. However, a lawyer should not be deterred from giving candid advice by the prospect that the advice will be unpalatable to the client.

Advice couched in narrowly legal terms may be of little value to a client, especially where practical considerations, such as cost or effects on other people, are predominant. Purely technical legal advice, therefore, can sometimes be inadequate. It is proper for a lawyer to refer to relevant moral and ethical considerations in giving advice. Although a lawyer is not a moral adviser as such, moral and ethical considerations impinge upon most legal questions and may decisively influence how the law will be applied.

A client may expressly or impliedly ask the lawyer for purely technical advice. When such a request is made by a client experienced in legal matters, the lawyer may accept it at face value. When such a request is made by a client inexperienced in legal matters, however, the lawyer's responsibility as adviser may include indicating that more may be involved than strictly legal considerations.

Matters that go beyond strictly legal questions may also be in the domain of another profession. Family matters can involve problems within the professional competence of psychiatry, clinical psychology, or social work; business matters can involve problems within the competence of the accounting profession or of financial specialists. Where consultation with a professional in another field is itself something a competent lawyer would recommend, the lawyer should make such a recommendation. At the same time, a lawyer's advice at its best often consists of recommending a course of action in the face of conflicting recommendations of experts.

## **Offering advice**

In general, a lawyer is not expected to give advice until asked by the client. However, when a lawyer knows that a client proposes a course of action that is likely to result in substantial adverse legal consequences to the client, the lawyer's duty to the client under rule 4-1.4 may require that the lawyer offer advice if the client's course of action is related to the representation. Similarly, when a matter is likely to involve litigation, it may be necessary under rule 4-1.4 to inform the client of forms of dispute resolution that might constitute reasonable alternatives to litigation. A lawyer ordinarily has no duty to initiate investigation of a client's affairs or to give advice that the client has indicated is unwanted, but a lawyer may initiate advice to a client when doing so appears to be in the client's interest.

Amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417).

### **RULE 4-2.2 OPEN/VACANT**

Formerly amended July 23, 1992, effective Jan. 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); deleted March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417).

### **RULE 4-2.3 EVALUATION FOR USE BY THIRD PERSONS**

**(a) When Lawyer May Provide Evaluation.** A lawyer may provide an evaluation of a matter affecting a client for the use of someone other than the client if:

- (1) the lawyer reasonably believes that making the evaluation is compatible with other aspects of the lawyer's relationship with the client; and
- (2) the client gives informed consent.

**(b) Limitation on Scope of Evaluation.** In reporting the evaluation, the lawyer shall indicate any material limitations that were imposed on the scope of the inquiry or on the disclosure of information.

**(c) Maintaining Client Confidences.** Except as disclosure is required in connection with a report of an evaluation, information relating to the evaluation is otherwise protected by rule 4-1.6.

## **Comment**

### **Definition**

An evaluation may be performed at the client's direction but for the primary purpose of establishing information for the benefit of third parties; for example, an opinion concerning the title of property rendered at the behest of a vendor for the information of a prospective purchaser or at the behest of a borrower for the information of a prospective lender. In some situations, the evaluation may be required by a government agency; for example, an opinion concerning the legality of the securities registered for sale under the securities laws. In other instances, the evaluation may be required by a third person, such as a purchaser of a business.

A legal evaluation should be distinguished from an investigation of a person with whom the lawyer does not have a client-lawyer relationship. For example, a lawyer retained by a purchaser to analyze a vendor's title to property does not have a client-lawyer relationship with the vendor. So also, an investigation into a person's affairs by a government lawyer, or by special counsel employed by the government, is not an evaluation as that term is used in this rule. The question is whether the lawyer is retained by the person whose affairs are being examined. When the lawyer is retained by that person, the general rules concerning loyalty to client and preservation of confidences apply, which is not the case if the lawyer is retained by someone else. For this reason, it is essential to identify the person by whom the lawyer is retained. This should be made clear not only to the person under examination, but also to others to whom the results are to be made available.

### **Duty to third person**

When the evaluation is intended for the information or use of a third person, a legal duty to that person may or may not arise.

That legal question is beyond the scope of this rule. However, since such an evaluation involves a departure from the normal client-lawyer relationship, careful analysis of the situation is required. The lawyer must be satisfied as a matter of professional judgment that making the evaluation is compatible with other functions undertaken in behalf of the client. For example, if the lawyer is acting as an advocate in defending the client against charges of fraud, it would normally be incompatible with that responsibility for the lawyer to perform an evaluation for others concerning the same or a related transaction. Assuming no such impediment is apparent, however, the lawyer should advise the client of the implications of the evaluation, particularly the lawyer's responsibilities to third persons and the duty to disseminate the findings.

### **Access to and disclosure of information**

The quality of an evaluation depends on the freedom and extent of the investigation upon which it is based. Ordinarily, a lawyer should have whatever latitude of investigation seems necessary as a matter of professional judgment. Under some circumstances, however, the terms of the evaluation may be limited. For example, certain issues or sources may be categorically excluded or the scope of search may be limited by time constraints or the noncooperation of persons having relevant information. Any such limitations that are material to the evaluation should be described in the report. If, after a lawyer has commenced an evaluation, the client refuses to comply with the terms upon which it was understood the evaluation was to have been made, the lawyer's obligations are determined by law, having reference to the terms of the client's agreement and the surrounding circumstances. In no circumstances is the lawyer permitted to knowingly make a false statement of material fact or law in providing an evaluation under this rule. See rule 4-4.1.

### **Financial auditors' requests for information**

When a question concerning the legal situation of a client arises at the instance of the client's financial auditor and the question is referred to the lawyer, the lawyer's response may be

made in accordance with procedures recognized in the legal profession. Such a procedure is set forth in the American Bar Association Statement of Policy Regarding Lawyers' Responses to Auditors' Requests for Information, adopted in 1975.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252);  
amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417).

#### **RULE 4-2.4 LAWYER SERVING AS THIRD-PARTY NEUTRAL**

**(a) Definition.** A lawyer serves as a third-party neutral when the lawyer assists 2 or more persons who are not clients of the lawyer to reach a resolution of a dispute or other matter that has arisen between them. Service as a third-party neutral may include service as an arbitrator, a mediator, or in such other capacity as will enable the lawyer to assist the parties to resolve the matter.

**(b) Communication With Unrepresented Parties.** A lawyer serving as a third-party neutral must inform unrepresented parties that the lawyer is not representing them. When the lawyer knows or reasonably should know that a party does not understand the lawyer's role in the matter, the lawyer must explain the difference between the lawyer's role as a third-party neutral and a lawyer's role as one who represents a client.

#### **Comment**

Alternative dispute resolution has become a substantial part of the civil justice system. Aside from representing clients in dispute-resolution processes, lawyers often serve as third-party neutrals. A third-party neutral is a person, such as a mediator, arbitrator, conciliator, or evaluator, who assists the parties, represented or unrepresented, in the resolution of a dispute or in the arrangement of a transaction. Whether a third-party neutral serves primarily as a facilitator, evaluator, or decision-maker depends on the particular process that is either selected by the parties or mandated by a court.

The role of a third-party neutral is not unique to lawyers, although, in some court-connected contexts, only lawyers are

allowed to serve in this role or to handle certain types of cases. In performing this role, the lawyer may be subject to court rules or other law that apply either to third-party neutrals generally or to lawyers serving as third-party neutrals. Lawyer-neutrals may also be subject to various codes of ethics, such as the Code of Ethics for Arbitration in Commercial Disputes prepared by a joint committee of the American Bar Association and the American Arbitration Association, or the Model Standards of Conduct for Mediators jointly prepared by the American Bar Association, the American Arbitration Association and Association for Conflict Resolution. A Florida Bar member who is a certified or court-appointed mediator is governed by the applicable law and rules relating to certified or court-appointed mediators.

Unlike nonlawyers who serve as third-party neutrals, lawyers serving in this role may experience unique problems as a result of differences between the role of a third-party neutral and a lawyer's service as a client representative. The potential for confusion is significant when the parties are unrepresented in the process. Thus, subdivision (b) requires a lawyer-neutral to inform unrepresented parties that the lawyer is not representing them. For some parties, particularly parties who frequently use dispute resolution processes, this information will be sufficient. For others, particularly those who are using the process for the first time, more information will be required. Where appropriate, the lawyer should inform unrepresented parties of the important differences between the lawyer's role as third-party neutral and a lawyer's role as a client representative, including the inapplicability of the attorney-client evidentiary privilege. The extent of disclosure required under this subdivision will depend on the particular parties involved and the subject matter of the proceeding, as well as the particular features of the dispute resolution process selected.

A lawyer who serves as a third-party neutral subsequently may be asked to serve as a lawyer representing a client in the same matter. The conflicts of interest that arise for both the individual lawyer and the lawyer's law firm are addressed in rule 4-1.12.

Added March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417); amended November 19, 2009, effective February 1, 2010 (24 So.3d 63); amended

July 7, 2011, effective October 1, 2011 (67 So.3d 1037); amended May 29, 2014, effective June 1, 2014 (140 So.3d 541).

### **4-3. ADVOCATE**

#### **RULE 4-3.1 MERITORIOUS CLAIMS AND CONTENTIONS**

A lawyer shall not bring or defend a proceeding, or assert or controvert an issue therein, unless there is a basis in law and fact for doing so that is not frivolous, which includes a good faith argument for an extension, modification, or reversal of existing law. A lawyer for the defendant in a criminal proceeding, or the respondent in a proceeding that could result in incarceration, may nevertheless so defend the proceeding as to require that every element of the case be established.

#### **Comment**

The advocate has a duty to use legal procedure for the fullest benefit of the client's cause, but also a duty not to abuse legal procedure. The law, both procedural and substantive, establishes the limits within which an advocate may proceed. However, the law is not always clear and never is static. Accordingly, in determining the proper scope of advocacy, account must be taken of the law's ambiguities and potential for change.

The filing of an action or defense or similar action taken for a client is not frivolous merely because the facts have not first been fully substantiated or because the lawyer expects to develop vital evidence only by discovery. What is required of lawyers, however, is that they inform themselves about the facts of their clients' cases and the applicable law and determine that they can make good faith arguments in support of their clients' positions. Such action is not frivolous even though the lawyer believes that the client's position ultimately will not prevail. The action is frivolous, however, if the lawyer is unable either to make a good faith argument on the merits of the action taken or to support the action taken by a good faith argument for an extension, modification, or reversal of existing law.

The lawyer's obligations under this rule are subordinate to federal or state constitutional law that entitles a defendant in a

criminal matter to the assistance of counsel in presenting a claim or contention that otherwise would be prohibited by this rule.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective Jan. 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417).

### **RULE 4-3.2 EXPEDITING LITIGATION**

A lawyer shall make reasonable efforts to expedite litigation consistent with the interests of the client.

#### **Comment**

Dilatory practices bring the administration of justice into disrepute. Although there will be occasions when a lawyer may properly seek a postponement for personal reasons, it is not proper for a lawyer to routinely fail to expedite litigation solely for the convenience of the advocates. Nor will a failure to expedite be reasonable if done for the purpose of frustrating an opposing party's attempt to obtain rightful redress or repose. It is not a justification that similar conduct is often tolerated by the bench and bar. The question is whether a competent lawyer acting in good faith would regard the course of action as having some substantial purpose other than delay. Realizing financial or other benefit from otherwise improper delay in litigation is not a legitimate interest of the client.

Amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417).

### **RULE 4-3.3 CANDOR TOWARD THE TRIBUNAL**

**(a) False Evidence; Duty to Disclose.** A lawyer shall not knowingly:

(1) make a false statement of fact or law to a tribunal or fail to correct a false statement of material fact or law previously made to the tribunal by the lawyer;

(2) fail to disclose a material fact to a tribunal when disclosure is necessary to avoid assisting a criminal or fraudulent act by the client;

(3) fail to disclose to the tribunal legal authority in the controlling jurisdiction known to the lawyer to be directly adverse to the position of the client and not disclosed by opposing counsel; or

(4) offer evidence that the lawyer knows to be false. A lawyer may not offer testimony that the lawyer knows to be false in the form of a narrative unless so ordered by the tribunal. If a lawyer, the lawyer's client, or a witness called by the lawyer has offered material evidence and the lawyer comes to know of its falsity, the lawyer shall take reasonable remedial measures including, if necessary, disclosure to the tribunal. A lawyer may refuse to offer evidence that the lawyer reasonably believes is false.

**(b) Criminal or Fraudulent Conduct.** A lawyer who represents a client in an adjudicative proceeding and who knows that a person intends to engage, is engaging, or has engaged in criminal or fraudulent conduct related to the proceeding shall take reasonable remedial measures, including, if necessary, disclosure to the tribunal.

**(c) Ex Parte Proceedings.** In an ex parte proceeding a lawyer shall inform the tribunal of all material facts known to the lawyer that will enable the tribunal to make an informed decision, whether or not the facts are adverse.

**(d) Extent of Lawyer's Duties.** The duties stated in this rule continue beyond the conclusion of the proceeding and apply even if compliance requires disclosure of information otherwise protected by rule 4-1.6.

### **Comment**

This rule governs the conduct of a lawyer who is representing a client in the proceedings of a tribunal. See terminology for the definition of "tribunal." It also applies when the lawyer is representing a client in an ancillary proceeding conducted pursuant to the tribunal's adjudicative authority, such as a deposition. Thus, for example, subdivision (a)(4) requires a lawyer to take reasonable remedial measures if the lawyer comes to know that a client who is testifying in a deposition has offered evidence that is false.

This rule sets forth the special duties of lawyers as officers of the court to avoid conduct that undermines the integrity of the adjudicative process. A lawyer acting as an advocate in an adjudicative proceeding has an obligation to present the client's case with persuasive force. Performance of that duty while maintaining confidences of the client is qualified by the advocate's duty of candor to the tribunal. Consequently, although a lawyer in an adversary proceeding is not required to present a disinterested exposition of the law or to vouch for the evidence submitted in a cause, the lawyer must not allow the tribunal to be misled by false statements of law or fact or evidence that the lawyer knows to be false.

Lawyers who represent clients in alternative dispute resolution processes are governed by the Rules of Professional Conduct. When the dispute resolution process takes place before a tribunal, as in binding arbitration (see terminology), the lawyer's duty of candor is governed by rule 4-3.3. Otherwise, the lawyer's duty of candor toward both the third-party neutral and other parties is governed by rule 4-4.1.

### **Representations by a lawyer**

An advocate is responsible for pleadings and other documents prepared for litigation, but is usually not required to have personal knowledge of matters asserted therein, for litigation documents ordinarily present assertions by the client, or by someone on the client's behalf, and not assertions by the lawyer. Compare rule 4-3.1. However, an assertion purporting to be on the lawyer's own knowledge, as in an affidavit by the lawyer or in a statement in open court, may properly be made only when the lawyer knows the assertion is true or believes it to be true on the basis of a reasonably diligent inquiry. There are circumstances where failure to make a disclosure is the equivalent of an affirmative misrepresentation. The obligation prescribed in rule 4-1.2(d) not to counsel a client to commit or assist the client in committing a fraud applies in litigation. Regarding compliance with rule 4-1.2(d), see the comment to that rule. See also the comment to rule 4-8.4(b).

## **Misleading legal argument**

Legal argument based on a knowingly false representation of law constitutes dishonesty toward the tribunal. A lawyer is not required to make a disinterested exposition of the law, but must recognize the existence of pertinent legal authorities. Furthermore, as stated in subdivision (a)(3), an advocate has a duty to disclose directly adverse authority in the controlling jurisdiction that has not been disclosed by the opposing party. The underlying concept is that legal argument is a discussion seeking to determine the legal premises properly applicable to the case.

## **False evidence**

Subdivision (a)(4) requires that the lawyer refuse to offer evidence that the lawyer knows to be false, regardless of the client's wishes. This duty is premised on the lawyer's obligation as an officer of the court to prevent the trier of fact from being misled by false evidence. A lawyer does not violate this rule if the lawyer offers the evidence for the purpose of establishing its falsity.

If a lawyer knows that the client intends to testify falsely or wants the lawyer to introduce false evidence, the lawyer should seek to persuade the client that the evidence should not be offered. If the persuasion is ineffective and the lawyer continues to represent the client, the lawyer must refuse to offer the false evidence. If only a portion of a witness's testimony will be false, the lawyer may call the witness to testify but may not elicit or otherwise permit the witness to present the testimony that the lawyer knows is false.

The duties stated in this rule apply to all lawyers, including defense counsel in criminal cases.

The prohibition against offering false evidence only applies if the lawyer knows that the evidence is false. A lawyer's reasonable belief that evidence is false does not preclude its presentation to the trier of fact.

The rule generally recognized is that, if necessary to rectify the situation, an advocate must disclose the existence of the client's

deception to the court. Such a disclosure can result in grave consequences to the client, including not only a sense of betrayal but also loss of the case and perhaps a prosecution for perjury. But the alternative is that the lawyer cooperate in deceiving the court, thereby subverting the truth-finding process that the adversary system is designed to implement. See rule 4-1.2(d). Furthermore, unless it is clearly understood that the lawyer will act upon the duty to disclose the existence of false evidence, the client can simply reject the lawyer's advice to reveal the false evidence and insist that the lawyer keep silent. Thus, the client could in effect coerce the lawyer into being a party to fraud on the court.

### **Remedial measures**

If perjured testimony or false evidence has been offered, the advocate's proper course ordinarily is to remonstrate with the client confidentially if circumstances permit. In any case, the advocate should ensure disclosure is made to the court. It is for the court then to determine what should be done--making a statement about the matter to the trier of fact, ordering a mistrial, or perhaps nothing. If the false testimony was that of the client, the client may controvert the lawyer's version of their communication when the lawyer discloses the situation to the court. If there is an issue whether the client has committed perjury, the lawyer cannot represent the client in resolution of the issue and a mistrial may be unavoidable. An unscrupulous client might in this way attempt to produce a series of mistrials and thus escape prosecution. However, a second such encounter could be construed as a deliberate abuse of the right to counsel and as such a waiver of the right to further representation. This commentary is not intended to address the situation where a client or prospective client seeks legal advice specifically about a defense to a charge of perjury where the lawyer did not represent the client at the time the client gave the testimony giving rise to the charge.

### **Refusing to offer proof believed to be false**

Although subdivision (a)(4) only prohibits a lawyer from offering evidence the lawyer knows to be false, it permits the lawyer to refuse to offer testimony or other proof that the lawyer

reasonably believes is false. Offering such proof may reflect adversely on the lawyer's ability to discriminate in the quality of evidence and thus impair the lawyer's effectiveness as an advocate.

A lawyer may not assist the client or any witness in offering false testimony or other false evidence, nor may the lawyer permit the client or any other witness to testify falsely in the narrative form unless ordered to do so by the tribunal. If a lawyer knows that the client intends to commit perjury, the lawyer's first duty is to attempt to persuade the client to testify truthfully. If the client still insists on committing perjury, the lawyer must threaten to disclose the client's intent to commit perjury to the judge. If the threat of disclosure does not successfully persuade the client to testify truthfully, the lawyer must disclose the fact that the client intends to lie to the tribunal and, per 4-1.6, information sufficient to prevent the commission of the crime of perjury.

The lawyer's duty not to assist witnesses, including the lawyer's own client, in offering false evidence stems from the Rules of Professional Conduct, Florida statutes, and caselaw.

Rule 4-1.2(d) prohibits the lawyer from assisting a client in conduct that the lawyer knows or reasonably should know is criminal or fraudulent.

Rule 4-3.4(b) prohibits a lawyer from fabricating evidence or assisting a witness to testify falsely.

Rule 4-8.4(a) prohibits the lawyer from violating the Rules of Professional Conduct or knowingly assisting another to do so.

Rule 4-8.4(b) prohibits a lawyer from committing a criminal act that reflects adversely on the lawyer's honesty, trustworthiness, or fitness as a lawyer.

Rule 4-8.4(c) prohibits a lawyer from engaging in conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit, or misrepresentation.

Rule 4-8.4(d) prohibits a lawyer from engaging in conduct that is prejudicial to the administration of justice.

Rule 4-1.6(b) requires a lawyer to reveal information to the extent the lawyer reasonably believes necessary to prevent a client from committing a crime.

This rule, 4-3.3(a)(2), requires a lawyer to reveal a material fact to the tribunal when disclosure is necessary to avoid assisting a criminal or fraudulent act by the client, and 4-3.3(a)(4) prohibits a lawyer from offering false evidence and requires the lawyer to take reasonable remedial measures when false material evidence has been offered.

Rule 4-1.16 prohibits a lawyer from representing a client if the representation will result in a violation of the Rules of Professional Conduct or law and permits the lawyer to withdraw from representation if the client persists in a course of action that the lawyer reasonably believes is criminal or fraudulent or repugnant or imprudent. Rule 4-1.16(c) recognizes that notwithstanding good cause for terminating representation of a client, a lawyer is obliged to continue representation if so ordered by a tribunal.

To permit or assist a client or other witness to testify falsely is prohibited by section 837.02, Florida Statutes (1991), which makes perjury in an official proceeding a felony, and by section 777.011, Florida Statutes (1991), which proscribes aiding, abetting, or counseling commission of a felony.

Florida caselaw prohibits lawyers from presenting false testimony or evidence. *Kneale v. Williams*, 30 So. 2d 284 (Fla. 1947), states that perpetration of a fraud is outside the scope of the professional duty of an attorney and no privilege attaches to communication between an attorney and a client with respect to transactions constituting the making of a false claim or the perpetration of a fraud. *Dodd v. The Florida Bar*, 118 So. 2d 17 (Fla. 1960), reminds us that “the courts are . . . dependent on members of the bar to . . . present the true facts of each cause . . . to enable the judge or the jury to [decide the facts] to which the law may be applied. When an attorney . . . allows false testimony . . . [the attorney] . . . makes it impossible for the scales [of justice] to balance.” See *The Fla. Bar v. Agar*, 394 So. 2d 405 (Fla. 1981), and *The Fla. Bar v. Simons*, 391 So. 2d 684 (Fla. 1980).

The United States Supreme Court in *Nix v. Whiteside*, 475 U.S. 157 (1986), answered in the negative the constitutional issue of whether it is ineffective assistance of counsel for an attorney to threaten disclosure of a client's (a criminal defendant's) intention to testify falsely.

### **Ex parte proceedings**

Ordinarily, an advocate has the limited responsibility of presenting 1 side of the matters that a tribunal should consider in reaching a decision; the conflicting position is expected to be presented by the opposing party. However, in an ex parte proceeding, such as an application for a temporary injunction, there is no balance of presentation by opposing advocates. The object of an ex parte proceeding is nevertheless to yield a substantially just result. The judge has an affirmative responsibility to accord the absent party just consideration. The lawyer for the represented party has the correlative duty to make disclosures of material facts known to the lawyer and that the lawyer reasonably believes are necessary to an informed decision.

Amended March 8, 1990 (557 So.2d 1368); July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); May 20, 2004 (875 So.2d 448); November 19, 2009, effective February 1, 2010 (24 So.3d 63).

### **RULE 4-3.4 FAIRNESS TO OPPOSING PARTY AND COUNSEL**

A lawyer must not:

**(a)** unlawfully obstruct another party's access to evidence or otherwise unlawfully alter, destroy, or conceal a document or other material that the lawyer knows or reasonably should know is relevant to a pending or a reasonably foreseeable proceeding; nor counsel or assist another person to do any such act;

**(b)** fabricate evidence, counsel or assist a witness to testify falsely, or offer an inducement to a witness, except a lawyer may pay a witness reasonable expenses incurred by the witness in attending or testifying at proceedings; a reasonable, noncontingent fee for professional services of an expert witness; and reasonable

compensation to a witness for the time spent preparing for, attending, or testifying at proceedings;

**(c)** knowingly disobey an obligation under the rules of a tribunal except for an open refusal based on an assertion that no valid obligation exists;

**(d)** in pretrial procedure, make a frivolous discovery request or intentionally fail to comply with a legally proper discovery request by an opposing party;

**(e)** in trial, state a personal opinion about the credibility of a witness unless the statement is authorized by current rule or case law, allude to any matter that the lawyer does not reasonably believe is relevant or that will not be supported by admissible evidence, assert personal knowledge of facts in issue except when testifying as a witness, or state a personal opinion as to the justness of a cause, the culpability of a civil litigant, or the guilt or innocence of an accused;

**(f)** request a person other than a client to refrain from voluntarily giving relevant information to another party unless the person is a relative or an employee or other agent of a client, and it is reasonable to believe that the person's interests will not be adversely affected by refraining from giving such information;

**(g)** present, participate in presenting, or threaten to present criminal charges solely to obtain an advantage in a civil matter; or

**(h)** present, participate in presenting, or threaten to present disciplinary charges under these rules solely to obtain an advantage in a civil matter.

### **Comment**

The procedure of the adversary system contemplates that the evidence in a case is to be marshalled competitively by the contending parties. Fair competition in the adversary system is secured by prohibitions against destruction or concealment of evidence, improperly influencing witnesses, obstructive tactics in discovery procedure, and the like.

Documents and other items of evidence are often essential to establish a claim or defense. Subject to evidentiary privileges, the right of an opposing party, including the government, to obtain evidence through discovery or subpoena is an important procedural right. The exercise of that right can be frustrated if relevant material is altered, concealed, or destroyed. Applicable law in many jurisdictions makes it an offense to destroy material for the purpose of impairing its availability in a pending proceeding or one whose commencement can be foreseen. Falsifying evidence is also generally a criminal offense. Subdivision (a) applies to evidentiary material generally, including computerized information.

With regard to subdivision (b), it is not improper to pay a witness's expenses or to compensate an expert witness on terms permitted by law. The common law rule in most jurisdictions is that it is improper to pay an occurrence witness any fee for testifying and that it is improper to pay an expert witness a contingent fee.

Previously, subdivision (e) also proscribed statements about the credibility of witnesses. However, in 2000, the Supreme Court of Florida entered an opinion in *Murphy v. International Robotic Systems, Inc.*, 766 So. 2d 1010 (Fla. 2000), in which the court allowed counsel in closing argument to call a witness a "liar" or to state that the witness "lied."

There the court stated: "First, it is not improper for counsel to state during closing argument that a witness 'lied' or is a 'liar,' provided such characterizations are supported by the record." *Murphy*, id., at 1028. Members of the bar are advised to check the status of the law in this area.

Subdivision (f) permits a lawyer to advise employees of a client to refrain from giving information to another party, for the employees may identify their interests with those of the client. See also rule 4-4.2.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended October 20, 1994 (644 So.2d 282); amended Sept. 24, 1998, effective Oct. 1, 1998 (718 So.2d 1179); amended October 6, 2005, effective

January 1, 2006 (916 So.2d 655); amended May 29, 2014, effective June 1, 2014 (140 So.3d 541).

#### **RULE 4-3.5 IMPARTIALITY AND DECORUM OF THE TRIBUNAL**

**(a) Influencing Decision Maker.** A lawyer shall not seek to influence a judge, juror, prospective juror, or other decision maker except as permitted by law or the rules of court.

**(b) Communication with Judge or Official.** In an adversary proceeding a lawyer shall not communicate or cause another to communicate as to the merits of the cause with a judge or an official before whom the proceeding is pending except:

(1) in the course of the official proceeding in the cause;

(2) in writing if the lawyer promptly delivers a copy of the writing to the opposing counsel or to the adverse party if not represented by a lawyer;

(3) orally upon notice to opposing counsel or to the adverse party if not represented by a lawyer; or

(4) as otherwise authorized by law.

**(c) Disruption of Tribunal.** A lawyer shall not engage in conduct intended to disrupt a tribunal.

**(d) Communication With Jurors.** A lawyer shall not:

(1) before the trial of a case with which the lawyer is connected, communicate or cause another to communicate with anyone the lawyer knows to be a member of the venire from which the jury will be selected;

(2) during the trial of a case with which the lawyer is connected, communicate or cause another to communicate with any member of the jury;

(3) during the trial of a case with which the lawyer is not connected, communicate or cause another to communicate with a juror concerning the case;

(4) after dismissal of the jury in a case with which the lawyer is connected, initiate communication with or cause another to initiate communication with any juror regarding the trial except to determine whether the verdict may be subject to legal challenge; provided, a lawyer may not interview jurors for this purpose unless the lawyer has reason to believe that grounds for such challenge may exist; and provided further, before conducting any such interview the lawyer must file in the cause a notice of intention to interview setting forth the name of the juror or jurors to be interviewed. A copy of the notice must be delivered to the trial judge and opposing counsel a reasonable time before such interview. The provisions of this rule do not prohibit a lawyer from communicating with members of the venire or jurors in the course of official proceedings or as authorized by court rule or written order of the court.

### **Comment**

Many forms of improper influence upon a tribunal are proscribed by criminal law. Others are specified in Florida's Code of Judicial Conduct, with which an advocate should be familiar. A lawyer is required to avoid contributing to a violation of such provisions.

The advocate's function is to present evidence and argument so that the cause may be decided according to law. Refraining from abusive or obstreperous conduct is a corollary of the advocate's right to speak on behalf of litigants. A lawyer may stand firm against abuse by a judge but should avoid reciprocation; the judge's default is no justification for similar dereliction by an advocate. An advocate can present the cause, protect the record for subsequent review, and preserve professional integrity by patient firmness no less effectively than by belligerence or theatrics.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective Jan. 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252).

## **RULE 4-3.6 TRIAL PUBLICITY**

**(a) Prejudicial Extrajudicial Statements Prohibited.** A lawyer shall not make an extrajudicial statement that a reasonable

person would expect to be disseminated by means of public communication if the lawyer knows or reasonably should know that it will have a substantial likelihood of materially prejudicing an adjudicative proceeding due to its creation of an imminent and substantial detrimental effect on that proceeding.

**(b) Statements of Third Parties.** A lawyer shall not counsel or assist another person to make such a statement. Counsel shall exercise reasonable care to prevent investigators, employees, or other persons assisting in or associated with a case from making extrajudicial statements that are prohibited under this rule.

### **Comment**

It is difficult to strike a balance between protecting the right to a fair trial and safeguarding the right of free expression. Preserving the right to a fair trial necessarily entails some curtailment of the information that may be disseminated about a party prior to trial, particularly where trial by jury is involved. If there were no such limits, the result would be the practical nullification of the protective effect of the rules of forensic decorum and the exclusionary rules of evidence. On the other hand, there are vital social interests served by the free dissemination of information about events having legal consequences and about legal proceedings themselves. The public has a right to know about threats to its safety and measures aimed at assuring its security. It also has a legitimate interest in the conduct of judicial proceedings, particularly in matters of general public concern. Furthermore, the subject matter of legal proceedings is often of direct significance in debate and deliberation over questions of public policy.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended Oct. 20, 1994 (644 So.2d 282).

### **RULE 4-3.7 LAWYER AS WITNESS**

**(a) When Lawyer May Testify.** A lawyer shall not act as advocate at a trial in which the lawyer is likely to be a necessary witness on behalf of the client unless:

(1) the testimony relates to an uncontested issue;

(2) the testimony will relate solely to a matter of formality and there is no reason to believe that substantial evidence will be offered in opposition to the testimony;

(3) the testimony relates to the nature and value of legal services rendered in the case; or

(4) disqualification of the lawyer would work substantial hardship on the client.

**(b) Other Members of Law Firm as Witnesses.** A lawyer may act as advocate in a trial in which another lawyer in the lawyer's firm is likely to be called as a witness unless precluded from doing so by rule 4-1.7 or 4-1.9.

### **Comment**

Combining the roles of advocate and witness can prejudice the tribunal and the opposing party and can also involve a conflict of interest between the lawyer and client.

The trier of fact may be confused or misled by a lawyer serving as both advocate and witness. The combination of roles may prejudice another party's rights in the litigation. A witness is required to testify on the basis of personal knowledge, while an advocate is expected to explain and comment on evidence given by others. It may not be clear whether a statement by an advocate-witness should be taken as proof or as an analysis of the proof.

To protect the tribunal, subdivision (a) prohibits a lawyer from simultaneously serving as advocate and necessary witness except in those circumstances specified. Subdivision (a)(1) recognizes that if the testimony will be uncontested, the ambiguities in the dual role are purely theoretical. Subdivisions (a)(2) and (3) recognize that, where the testimony concerns the extent and value of legal services rendered in the action in which the testimony is offered, permitting the lawyers to testify avoids the need for a second trial with new counsel to resolve that issue. Moreover, in such a situation the judge has first-hand knowledge of the matter in issue; hence, there

is less dependence on the adversary process to test the credibility of the testimony.

Apart from these 2 exceptions, subdivision (a)(4) recognizes that a balancing is required between the interests of the client and those of the tribunal and the opposing party. Whether the tribunal is likely to be misled or the opposing party is likely to suffer prejudice depends on the nature of the case, the importance and probable tenor of the lawyer's testimony, and the probability that the lawyer's testimony will conflict with that of other witnesses. Even if there is risk of such prejudice, in determining whether the lawyer should be disqualified, due regard must be given to the effect of disqualification on the lawyer's client. It is relevant that one or both parties could reasonably foresee that the lawyer would probably be a witness. The conflict of interest principles stated in rules 4-1.7, 4-1.9, and 4-1.10 have no application to this aspect of the problem.

Because the tribunal is not likely to be misled when a lawyer acts as advocate in a trial in which another lawyer in the lawyer's firm will testify as a necessary witness, subdivision (b) permits the lawyer to do so except in situations involving a conflict of interest.

In determining if it is permissible to act as advocate in a trial in which the lawyer will be a necessary witness, the lawyer must also consider that the dual role may give rise to a conflict of interest that will require compliance with rules 4-1.7 or 4-1.9. For example, if there is likely to be substantial conflict between the testimony of the client and that of the lawyer, the representation involves a conflict of interest that requires compliance with rule 4-1.7. This would be true even though the lawyer might not be prohibited by subdivision (a) from simultaneously serving as advocate and witness because the lawyer's disqualification would work a substantial hardship on the client. Similarly, a lawyer who might be permitted to simultaneously serve as an advocate and a witness by subdivision (a)(3) might be precluded from doing so by rule 4-1.9. The problem can arise whether the lawyer is called as a witness on behalf of the client or is called by the opposing party. Determining whether such a conflict exists is primarily the responsibility of the lawyer involved. If there is a conflict of interest,

the lawyer must secure the client's informed consent. In some cases, the lawyer will be precluded from seeking the client's consent. See rule 4-1.7. If a lawyer who is a member of a firm may not act as both advocate and witness by reason of conflict of interest, rule 4-1.10 disqualifies the firm also. See terminology for the definition of "confirmed in writing" and "informed consent."

Subdivision (b) provides that a lawyer is not disqualified from serving as an advocate because a lawyer with whom the lawyer is associated in a firm is precluded from doing so by subdivision (a). If, however, the testifying lawyer would also be disqualified by rule 4-1.7 or 4-1.9 from representing the client in the matter, other lawyers in the firm will be precluded from representing the client by rule 4-1.10 unless the client gives informed consent under the conditions stated in rule 4-1.7.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252);  
amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417).

### **RULE 4-3.8 SPECIAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF A PROSECUTOR**

The prosecutor in a criminal case must:

**(a)** refrain from prosecuting a charge that the prosecutor knows is not supported by probable cause;

**(b)** not seek to obtain from an unrepresented accused a waiver of important pre-trial rights such as a right to a preliminary hearing; and

**(c)** make timely disclosure to the defense of all evidence or information known to the prosecutor that tends to negate the guilt of the accused or mitigates the offense, and, in connection with sentencing, disclose to the defense and to the tribunal all unprivileged mitigating information known to the prosecutor, except when the prosecutor is relieved of this responsibility by a protective order of the tribunal.

## **Comment**

A prosecutor has the responsibility of a minister of justice and not simply that of an advocate. This responsibility carries with it specific obligations such as making a reasonable effort to assure that the accused has been advised of the right to and the procedure for obtaining counsel and has been given a reasonable opportunity to obtain counsel so that guilt is decided upon the basis of sufficient evidence. Precisely how far the prosecutor is required to go in this direction is a matter of debate. See also rule 4-3.3(d) governing ex parte proceedings, among which grand jury proceedings are included. Applicable law may require other measures by the prosecutor and knowing disregard of these obligations or systematic abuse of prosecutorial discretion could constitute a violation of rule 4-8.4.

Subdivision (b) does not apply to an accused appearing pro se with the approval of the tribunal, nor does it forbid the lawful questioning of a suspect who has knowingly waived the rights to counsel and silence.

The exception in subdivision (c) recognizes that a prosecutor may seek an appropriate protective order from the tribunal if disclosure of information to the defense could result in substantial harm to an individual or to the public interest.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252);  
amended March 16, 2023, effective May 15, 2023 (SC22-1292).

## **RULE 4-3.9 ADVOCATE IN NONADJUDICATIVE PROCEEDINGS**

A lawyer representing a client before a legislative body or administrative agency in a nonadjudicative proceeding shall disclose that the appearance is in a representative capacity and shall conform to the provisions of rules 4-3.3(a) through (d), and 4-3.4(a) through (c).

## **Comment**

In representation before bodies such as legislatures, municipal councils, and executive and administrative agencies acting in a

rule-making or policy-making capacity, lawyers present facts, formulate issues, and advance argument in the matters under consideration. The decision-making body, like a court, should be able to rely on the integrity of the submissions made to it. A lawyer appearing before such a body must deal with the tribunal honestly and in conformity with applicable rules of procedure. See rules 4-3.3(a) through (d), and 4-3.4(a) through (c).

Lawyers have no exclusive right to appear before nonadjudicative bodies, as they do before a court. The requirements of this rule therefore may subject lawyers to regulations inapplicable to advocates who are not lawyers. However, legislatures and administrative agencies have a right to expect lawyers to deal with them as they deal with courts.

This rule only applies when a lawyer represents a client in connection with an official hearing or meeting of a governmental agency or a legislative body to which the lawyer or the lawyer's client is presenting evidence or argument. It does not apply to representation of a client in a negotiation or other bilateral transaction with a governmental agency or in connection with an application for a license or other privilege or the client's compliance with generally applicable reporting requirements, such as the filing of income-tax returns. Nor does it apply to the representation of a client in connection with an investigation or examination of the client's affairs conducted by government investigators or examiners. Representation in such matters is governed by rules 4-4.1 through 4-4.4.

Amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417).

#### **4-4. TRANSACTIONS WITH PERSONS OTHER THAN CLIENTS**

##### **RULE 4-4.1 TRUTHFULNESS IN STATEMENTS TO OTHERS**

In the course of representing a client a lawyer shall not knowingly:

**(a)** make a false statement of material fact or law to a third person; or

**(b)** fail to disclose a material fact to a third person when disclosure is necessary to avoid assisting a criminal or fraudulent act by a client, unless disclosure is prohibited by rule 4-1.6.

## **Comment**

### **Misrepresentation**

A lawyer is required to be truthful when dealing with others on a client's behalf, but generally has no affirmative duty to inform an opposing party of relevant facts. A misrepresentation can occur if the lawyer incorporates or affirms a statement of another person that the lawyer knows is false. Misrepresentations can also occur by partially true but misleading statements or omissions that are the equivalent of affirmative false statements. For dishonest conduct that does not amount to a false statement or for misrepresentations by a lawyer other than in the course of representing a client, see rule 4-8.4.

### **Statements of fact**

This rule refers to statements of fact. Whether a particular statement should be regarded as one of fact can depend on the circumstances. Under generally accepted conventions in negotiation, certain types of statements ordinarily are not taken as statements of material fact. Estimates of price or value placed on the subject of a transaction and a party's intentions as to an acceptable settlement of a claim are ordinarily in this category, and so is the existence of an undisclosed principal except where nondisclosure of the principal would constitute fraud. Lawyers should be mindful of their obligations under applicable law to avoid criminal and tortious misrepresentation.

### **Crime or fraud by client**

Under rule 4-1.2(d), a lawyer is prohibited from counseling or assisting a client in conduct that the lawyer knows is criminal or fraudulent. Subdivision (b) states a specific application of the principle set forth in rule 4-1.2(d) and addresses the situation where a client's crime or fraud takes the form of a lie or misrepresentation. Ordinarily, a lawyer can avoid assisting a

client's crime or fraud by withdrawing from the representation. Sometimes it may be necessary for the lawyer to give notice of the fact of withdrawal and to disaffirm an opinion, document, affirmation or the like. In extreme cases, substantive law may require a lawyer to disclose information relating to the representation to avoid being deemed to have assisted the client's crime or fraud. If the lawyer can avoid assisting a client's crime or fraud only by disclosing this information, then under subdivision (b) the lawyer is required to do so, unless the disclosure is prohibited by rule 4-1.6.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended March 23, 2005, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417).

#### **RULE 4-4.2 COMMUNICATION WITH PERSON REPRESENTED BY COUNSEL**

**(a)** In representing a client, a lawyer must not communicate about the subject of the representation with a person the lawyer knows to be represented by another lawyer in the matter, unless the lawyer has the consent of the other lawyer. Notwithstanding the foregoing, a lawyer may, without such prior consent, communicate with another's client to meet the requirements of any court rule, statute or contract requiring notice or service of process directly on a person, in which event the communication is strictly restricted to that required by the court rule, statute or contract, and a copy must be provided to the person's lawyer.

**(b)** An otherwise unrepresented person to whom limited representation is being provided or has been provided in accordance with Rule Regulating The Florida Bar 4-1.2 is considered to be unrepresented for purposes of this rule unless the opposing lawyer knows of, or has been provided with, a written notice of appearance under which, or a written notice of the time period during which, the opposing lawyer is to communicate with the limited representation lawyer as to the subject matter within the limited scope of the representation.

## **Comment**

This rule contributes to the proper functioning of the legal system by protecting a person who has chosen to be represented by a lawyer in a matter against possible overreaching by other lawyers who are participating in the matter, interference by those lawyers with the client-lawyer relationship, and the uncounseled disclosure of information relating to the representation.

This rule applies to communications with any person who is represented by counsel concerning the matter to which the communication relates.

The rule applies even though the represented person initiates or consents to the communication. A lawyer must immediately terminate communication with a person if, after commencing communication, the lawyer learns that the person is one with whom communication is not permitted by this rule.

This rule does not prohibit communication with a represented person, or an employee or agent of such a person, concerning matters outside the representation. For example, the existence of a controversy between a government agency and a private party, or between 2 organizations, does not prohibit a lawyer for either from communicating with nonlawyer representatives of the other regarding a separate matter. Nor does this rule preclude communication with a represented person who is seeking advice from a lawyer who is not otherwise representing a client in the matter. A lawyer may not make a communication prohibited by this rule through the acts of another. See rule 4-8.4(a). Parties to a matter may communicate directly with each other, and a lawyer is not prohibited from advising a client concerning a communication that the client is legally entitled to make, provided that the client is not used to indirectly violate the Rules of Professional Conduct. Also, a lawyer having independent justification for communicating with the other party is permitted to do so. Permitted communications include, for example, the right of a party to a controversy with a government agency to speak with government officials about the matter.

In the case of a represented organization, this rule prohibits communications with a constituent of the organization who supervises, directs, or regularly consults with the organization's lawyer concerning the matter or has authority to obligate the organization with respect to the matter or whose act or omission in connection with the matter may be imputed to the organization for purposes of civil or criminal liability. Consent of the organization's lawyer is not required for communication with a former constituent. If a constituent of the organization is represented in the matter by the agent's or employee's own counsel, the consent by that counsel to a communication will be sufficient for purposes of this rule. Compare rule 4-3.4(f). In communication with a current or former constituent of an organization, a lawyer must not use methods of obtaining evidence that violate the legal rights of the organization. See rule 4-4.4.

The prohibition on communications with a represented person only applies in circumstances where the lawyer knows that the person is in fact represented in the matter to be discussed. This means that the lawyer has actual knowledge of the fact of the representation; but such actual knowledge may be inferred from the circumstances. See terminology. Thus, the lawyer cannot evade the requirement of obtaining the consent of counsel by closing eyes to the obvious.

In the event the person with whom the lawyer communicates is not known to be represented by counsel in the matter, the lawyer's communications are subject to rule 4-4.3.

Amended Oct. 10, 1991, effective Jan. 1, 1992 (587 So.2d 1121); amended July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended November 13, 2003, effective January 1, 2004 (860 So.2d 394); amended March 23, 2004, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417); amended May 20, 2004 (875 So.2d 448); amended May 29, 2014, effective June 1, 2014 (140 So.3d 541).

### **RULE 4-4.3 DEALING WITH UNREPRESENTED PERSONS**

**(a)** In dealing on behalf of a client with a person who is not represented by counsel, a lawyer shall not state or imply that the

lawyer is disinterested. When the lawyer knows or reasonably should know that the unrepresented person misunderstands the lawyer's role in the matter, the lawyer shall make reasonable efforts to correct the misunderstanding. The lawyer shall not give legal advice to an unrepresented person, other than the advice to secure counsel.

**(b)** An otherwise unrepresented person to whom limited representation is being provided or has been provided in accordance with Rule Regulating The Florida Bar 4-1.2 is considered to be unrepresented for purposes of this rule unless the opposing lawyer knows of, or has been provided with, a written notice of appearance under which, or a written notice of time period during which, the opposing lawyer is to communicate with the limited representation lawyer as to the subject matter within the limited scope of the representation.

### **Comment**

An unrepresented person, particularly one not experienced in dealing with legal matters, might assume that a lawyer is disinterested in loyalties or is a disinterested authority on the law even when the lawyer represents a client. In order to avoid a misunderstanding, a lawyer will typically need to identify the lawyer's client and, where necessary, explain that the client has interests opposed to those of the unrepresented person. For misunderstandings that sometimes arise when a lawyer for an organization deals with an unrepresented constituent, see rule 4-1.13(d).

This rule does not prohibit a lawyer from negotiating the terms of a transaction or settling a dispute with an unrepresented person. So long as the lawyer has explained that the lawyer represents an adverse party and is not representing the person, the lawyer may inform the person of the terms on which the lawyer's client will enter into an agreement or settle a matter, prepare documents that require the person's signature and explain the lawyer's own view of the meaning of the document or the lawyer's view of the underlying legal obligations.

Amended November 13, 2003, effective January 1, 2004 (860 So.2d 394);  
March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417).

#### **RULE 4-4.4 RESPECT FOR RIGHTS OF THIRD PERSONS**

**(a)** In representing a client, a lawyer may not use means that have no substantial purpose other than to embarrass, delay, or burden a third person or knowingly use methods of obtaining evidence that violate the legal rights of such a person.

**(b)** A lawyer who receives a document or electronically stored information relating to the representation of the lawyer's client and knows or reasonably should know that the document or electronically stored information was inadvertently sent must promptly notify the sender.

#### **Comment**

Responsibility to a client requires a lawyer to subordinate the interests of others to those of the client, but that responsibility does not imply that a lawyer may disregard the rights of third persons. It is impractical to catalogue all these rights, but they include legal restrictions on methods of obtaining evidence from third persons and unwarranted intrusions into privileged relationships, such as the client-lawyer relationship.

Subdivision (b) recognizes that lawyers sometimes receive a document or electronically stored information that was mistakenly sent or produced by opposing parties or their lawyers. A document or electronically stored information is inadvertently sent when it is accidentally transmitted, such as when an e-mail or letter is misaddressed or a document or electronically stored information is accidentally included with information that was intentionally transmitted. If a lawyer knows or reasonably should know that a document or electronically stored information was sent inadvertently, then this rule requires the lawyer to promptly notify the sender in order to permit that person to take protective measures. Whether the lawyer is required to take additional steps, such as returning the document or electronically stored information, is a matter of law beyond the scope of these rules, as is

the question of whether the privileged status of a document or electronically stored information has been waived. Similarly, this rule does not address the legal duties of a lawyer who receives a document that the lawyer knows or reasonably should know may have been wrongfully obtained by the sending person. For purposes of this rule, “document or electronically stored information” includes, in addition to paper documents, e-mail and other forms of electronically stored information, including embedded data (commonly referred to as “metadata”), that is subject to being read or put into readable form. Metadata in electronic documents creates an obligation under this rule only if the receiving lawyer knows or reasonably should know that the metadata was inadvertently sent to the receiving lawyer.

Some lawyers may choose to return a document or delete electronically stored information unread, for example, when the lawyer learns before receiving the document that it was inadvertently sent. Where a lawyer is not required by applicable law to do so, the decision to voluntarily return the document or delete electronically stored information is a matter of professional judgment ordinarily reserved to the lawyer. See rules 4-1.2 and 4-1.4.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417); amended May 21, 2015, corrected June 25, 2015, effective October 1, 2015 (164 So.3d 1217).

#### **4-5. LAW FIRMS AND ASSOCIATIONS**

##### **RULE 4-5.1 RESPONSIBILITIES OF PARTNERS, MANAGERS, AND SUPERVISORY LAWYERS**

**(a) Duties Concerning Adherence to Rules of Professional Conduct.** A partner in a law firm, and a lawyer who individually or together with other lawyers possesses comparable managerial authority in a law firm, must make reasonable efforts to ensure that the firm has in effect measures giving reasonable assurance that all lawyers therein conform to the Rules of Professional Conduct.

**(b) Supervisory Lawyer’s Duties.** Any lawyer having direct supervisory authority over another lawyer must make reasonable

efforts to ensure that the other lawyer conforms to the Rules of Professional Conduct.

**(c) Responsibility for Rules Violations.** A lawyer is responsible for another lawyer's violation of the Rules of Professional Conduct if:

(1) the lawyer orders the specific conduct or, with knowledge thereof, ratifies the conduct involved; or

(2) the lawyer is a partner or has comparable managerial authority in the law firm in which the other lawyer practices or has direct supervisory authority over the other lawyer, and knows of the conduct at a time when its consequences can be avoided or mitigated but fails to take reasonable remedial action.

### **Comment**

Subdivision (a) applies to lawyers who have managerial authority over the professional work of a firm. See terminology. This includes members of a partnership, the shareholders in a law firm organized as a professional corporation, and members of other associations authorized to practice law; lawyers having comparable managerial authority in a legal services organization or a law department of an enterprise or government agency, and lawyers who have intermediate managerial responsibilities in a firm. Subdivision (b) applies to lawyers who have supervisory authority over the work of other lawyers in a firm.

Subdivision (a) requires lawyers with managerial authority within a firm to make reasonable efforts to establish internal policies and procedures designed to provide reasonable assurance that all lawyers in the firm will conform to the Rules of Professional Conduct. Such policies and procedures include those designed to detect and resolve conflicts of interest, identify dates by which actions must be taken in pending matters, account for client funds and property, considering safeguards for the firm's use of technologies such as generative artificial intelligence, and ensure that inexperienced lawyers are properly supervised.

Other measures that may be required to fulfill the responsibility prescribed in subdivision (a) can depend on the firm's structure and the nature of its practice. In a small firm of experienced lawyers, informal supervision and periodic review of compliance with the required systems ordinarily will suffice. In a large firm, or in practice situations in which difficult ethical problems frequently arise, more elaborate measures may be necessary. Some firms, for example, have a procedure whereby junior lawyers can make confidential referral of ethical problems directly to a designated supervising lawyer or special committee. See rule 4-5.2. Firms, whether large or small, may also rely on continuing legal education in professional ethics. In any event the ethical atmosphere of a firm can influence the conduct of all its members and the partners may not assume that all lawyers associated with the firm will inevitably conform to the rules.

Subdivision (c) expresses a general principle of personal responsibility for acts of another. See also rule 4-8.4(a).

Subdivision (c)(2) defines the duty of a partner or other lawyer having comparable managerial authority in a law firm, as well as a lawyer having supervisory authority over performance of specific legal work by another lawyer. Whether a lawyer has such supervisory authority in particular circumstances is a question of fact. Partners and lawyers with comparable authority have at least indirect responsibility for all work being done by the firm, while a partner or manager in charge of a particular matter ordinarily also has supervisory responsibility for the work of other firm lawyers engaged in the matter. Appropriate remedial action by a partner or managing lawyer would depend on the immediacy of that lawyer's involvement and the seriousness of the misconduct. A supervisor is required to intervene to prevent avoidable consequences of misconduct if the supervisor knows that the misconduct occurred. Thus, if a supervising lawyer knows that a subordinate misrepresented a matter to an opposing party in negotiation, the supervisor as well as the subordinate has a duty to correct the resulting misapprehension.

Professional misconduct by a lawyer under supervision could reveal a violation of subdivision (b) on the part of the supervisory

lawyer even though it does not entail a violation of subdivision (c) because there was no direction, ratification, or knowledge of the violation.

Apart from this rule and rule 4-8.4(a), a lawyer does not have disciplinary liability for the conduct of a partner, shareholder, member of a limited liability company, officer, director, manager, associate, or subordinate. Whether a lawyer may be liable civilly or criminally for another lawyer's conduct is a question of law beyond the scope of these rules.

The duties imposed by this rule on managing and supervising lawyers do not alter the personal duty of each lawyer in a firm to abide by the Rules of Professional Conduct. See rule 4-5.2(a).

Amended July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended September 24, 1998, effective Oct. 1, 1998 (718 So.2d 1179); March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417); amended August 29, 2024, effective October 28, 2024 (SC2024-0032).

## **RULE 4-5.2 RESPONSIBILITIES OF A SUBORDINATE LAWYER**

**(a) Rules of Professional Conduct Apply.** A lawyer is bound by the Rules of Professional Conduct notwithstanding that the lawyer acted at the direction of another person.

**(b) Reliance on Supervisor's Opinion.** A subordinate lawyer does not violate the Rules of Professional Conduct if that lawyer acts in accordance with a supervisory lawyer's reasonable resolution of an arguable question of professional duty.

### **Comment**

Although a lawyer is not relieved of responsibility for a violation by the fact that the lawyer acted at the direction of a supervisor, that fact may be relevant in determining whether a lawyer had the knowledge required to render conduct a violation of the rules. For example, if a subordinate filed a frivolous pleading at the direction of a supervisor, the subordinate would not be guilty of a professional violation unless the subordinate knew of the document's frivolous character.

When lawyers in a supervisor-subordinate relationship encounter a matter involving professional judgment as to ethical duty, the supervisor may assume responsibility for making the judgment. Otherwise a consistent course of action or position could not be taken. If the question can reasonably be answered only 1 way, the duty of both lawyers is clear and they are equally responsible for fulfilling it. However, if the question is reasonably arguable, someone has to decide upon the course of action. That authority ordinarily reposes in the supervisor, and a subordinate may be guided accordingly. For example, if a question arises whether the interests of 2 clients conflict under rule 4-1.7, the supervisor's reasonable resolution of the question should protect the subordinate professionally if the resolution is subsequently challenged.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252).

### **RULE 4-5.3 RESPONSIBILITIES REGARDING NONLAWYER ASSISTANTS**

**(a) Use of Titles by Nonlawyer Assistants.** A person who uses the title of paralegal, legal assistant, or other similar term when offering or providing services to the public must work for or under the direction or supervision of a lawyer or law firm.

**(b) Supervisory Responsibility.** With respect to a nonlawyer employed or retained by or associated with a lawyer or an authorized business entity as defined elsewhere in these Rules Regulating The Florida Bar:

(1) a partner, and a lawyer who individually or together with other lawyers possesses comparable managerial authority in a law firm, must make reasonable efforts to ensure that the firm has in effect measures giving reasonable assurance that the person's conduct is compatible with the professional obligations of the lawyer;

(2) a lawyer having direct supervisory authority over the nonlawyer must make reasonable efforts to ensure that the person's

conduct is compatible with the professional obligations of the lawyer; and

(3) a lawyer is responsible for conduct of such a person that would be a violation of the Rules of Professional Conduct if engaged in by a lawyer if the lawyer:

(A) orders or, with the knowledge of the specific conduct, ratifies the conduct involved; or

(B) is a partner or has comparable managerial authority in the law firm in which the person is employed, or has direct supervisory authority over the person, and knows of the conduct at a time when its consequences can be avoided or mitigated but fails to take reasonable remedial action.

**(c) Ultimate Responsibility of Lawyer.** Although paralegals or legal assistants may perform the duties delegated to them by the lawyer without the presence or active involvement of the lawyer, the lawyer must review and be responsible for the work product of the paralegals or legal assistants.

### **Comment**

Lawyers generally employ assistants in their practice, including secretaries, investigators, law student interns, and paraprofessionals such as paralegals and legal assistants. Such assistants, whether employees or independent contractors, act for the lawyer in rendition of the lawyer's professional services. A lawyer must give such assistants appropriate instruction and supervision concerning the ethical aspects of their employment, particularly regarding the obligation not to disclose information relating to representation of the client. A lawyer should also consider safeguards when assistants use technologies such as generative artificial intelligence. The measures employed in supervising nonlawyers should take account of the level of their legal training and the fact that they are not subject to professional discipline. If an activity requires the independent judgment and participation of the lawyer, it cannot be properly delegated to a nonlawyer employee.

Subdivision (b)(1) requires lawyers with managerial authority within a law firm to make reasonable efforts to ensure that the firm has in effect measures giving reasonable assurance that nonlawyers in the firm and nonlawyers outside the firm who work on firm matters act in a way compatible with the professional obligations of the lawyer. See comment to rule 4-1.1 (retaining lawyers outside the firm) and comment to rule 4-5.1 (responsibilities with respect to lawyers within a firm). Subdivision (b)(2) applies to lawyers who have supervisory authority over nonlawyers within or outside the firm. Subdivision (b)(3) specifies the circumstances in which a lawyer is responsible for conduct of nonlawyers within or outside the firm that would be a violation of the Rules of Professional Conduct if engaged in by a lawyer.

Nothing provided in this rule should be interpreted to mean that a nonlawyer may have any ownership or partnership interest in a law firm, which is prohibited by rule 4-5.4. Additionally, this rule does not permit a lawyer to accept employment by a nonlawyer or group of nonlawyers, the purpose of which is to provide the supervision required under this rule. This conduct is prohibited by rules 4-5.4 and 4-5.5.

### **Nonlawyers Outside the Firm**

A lawyer may use nonlawyers outside the firm to assist the lawyer in rendering legal services to the client. Examples include the retention of an investigative or paraprofessional service, hiring a document management company to create and maintain a database for complex litigation, sending client documents to a third party for printing or scanning, using generative artificial intelligence, and using an Internet-based service to store client information. When using these services outside the firm, a lawyer must make reasonable efforts to ensure that the services are provided in a manner that is compatible with the lawyer's professional obligations. The extent of this obligation will depend on the circumstances, including the education, experience and reputation of the nonlawyer; the nature of the services involved; the terms of any arrangements concerning the protection of client information; and the legal and ethical environments of the jurisdictions in which the services will be performed, particularly with regard to

confidentiality. See also rules 4-1.1 (competence), 4-1.2 (allocation of authority), 4-1.4 (communication with client), 4-1.6 (confidentiality), 4-5.4 (professional independence of the lawyer), and 4-5.5 (unauthorized practice of law). When retaining or directing a nonlawyer outside the firm, a lawyer should communicate directions appropriate under the circumstances to give reasonable assurance that the nonlawyer's conduct is compatible with the professional obligations of the lawyer.

Where the client directs the selection of a particular nonlawyer service provider outside the firm, the lawyer ordinarily should agree with the client concerning the allocation of responsibility for monitoring as between the client and the lawyer. See Rule 1.2. When making this allocation in a matter pending before a tribunal, lawyers and parties may have additional obligations that are a matter of law beyond the scope of these rules.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended April 25, 2002 (820 So.2d 210); amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417); amended June 11, 2015, effective October 1, 2015 (167 So.3d 412).

#### **RULE 4-5.4 PROFESSIONAL INDEPENDENCE OF A LAWYER**

**(a) Sharing Fees with Nonlawyers.** A lawyer or law firm shall not share legal fees with a nonlawyer, except that:

(1) an agreement by a lawyer with the lawyer's firm, partner, or associate may provide for the payment of money, over a reasonable period of time after the lawyer's death, to the lawyer's estate or to 1 or more specified persons;

(2) a lawyer who undertakes to complete unfinished legal business of a deceased lawyer may pay to the estate of the deceased lawyer that proportion of the total compensation that fairly represents the services rendered by the deceased lawyer;

(3) a lawyer who purchases the practice of a deceased, disabled, or disappeared lawyer may, in accordance with the provisions of rule 4-1.17, pay to the estate or other legally

authorized representative of that lawyer the agreed upon purchase price;

(4) bonuses may be paid to nonlawyer employees for work performed, and may be based on their extraordinary efforts on a particular case or over a specified time period. Bonus payments shall not be based on cases or clients brought to the lawyer or law firm by the actions of the nonlawyer. A lawyer shall not provide a bonus payment that is calculated as a percentage of legal fees received by the lawyer or law firm; and

(5) a lawyer may share court-awarded fees with a nonprofit, pro bono legal services organization that employed, retained, or recommended employment of the lawyer in the matter.

**(b) Qualified Pension Plans.** A lawyer or law firm may include nonlawyer employees in a qualified pension, profit-sharing, or retirement plan, even though the lawyer's or law firm's contribution to the plan is based in whole or in part on a profit-sharing arrangement.

**(c) Partnership with Nonlawyer.** A lawyer shall not form a partnership with a nonlawyer if any of the activities of the partnership consist of the practice of law.

**(d) Exercise of Independent Professional Judgment.** A lawyer shall not permit a person who recommends, employs, or pays the lawyer to render legal services for another to direct or regulate the lawyer's professional judgment in rendering such legal services.

**(e) Nonlawyer Ownership of Authorized Business Entity.** A lawyer shall not practice with or in the form of a business entity authorized to practice law for a profit if:

(1) a nonlawyer owns any interest therein, except that a fiduciary representative of the estate of a lawyer may hold the stock or interest of the lawyer for a reasonable time during administration; or

(2) a nonlawyer is a corporate director or officer thereof or occupies the position of similar responsibility in any form of association other than a corporation; or

(3) a nonlawyer has the right to direct or control the professional judgment of a lawyer.

**(f) Nonlawyer Governance of Not-for-Profit Authorized Business Entity.**

(1) *Generally.* A lawyer may practice with a not-for-profit business entity authorized to practice law.

(2) *Definition of Not-for-Profit Business Entity.* A not-for-profit business entity is an organization providing pro and low bono legal services operating as a tax-exempt public charity authorized by section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code with the purpose of providing legal services to clients within 400% of the federal poverty level as defined by the United States Code of Federal Regulations. The lawyer's compensation by the not-for-profit business entity cannot be tied, directly or indirectly, to the client's ability to pay.

(3) *Form of authorized business entity.* For purposes of this rule and applicable to not-for-profit business entities only, the business entity may be formed as a corporation and a nonlawyer may be a member of the board of directors of the authorized business entity. However, a nonlawyer board member does not have the right to direct or control the professional judgment of a lawyer working with the not-for-profit business entity.

(4) *Obligations of Authorized Business Entity.* The not-for-profit business entity must:

(i) ensure that confidential information is inaccessible to board members of the not-for-profit business entity who are not engaged in legal services representation;

(ii) ensure that any communications which the lawyer intends to be kept protected under attorney-client privilege meet existing prerequisites for such privilege;

(iii) inform the client that all communications within the not-for-profit business entity may not fall under attorney-client privilege; and

(iv) ensure that all nonlawyers assisting the lawyer in providing legal services abide by the ethical standards governing the lawyer.

### **Comment**

The provisions of this rule express traditional limitations on sharing fees. These limitations are to protect the lawyer's professional independence of judgment. Where someone other than the client pays the lawyer's fee or salary, or recommends employment of the lawyer, that arrangement does not modify the lawyer's obligation to the client. As stated in subdivision (d), such arrangements should not interfere with the lawyer's professional judgment.

This rule also expresses traditional limitations on permitting a third party to direct or regulate the lawyer's professional judgment in rendering legal services to another. See also rule 4-1.8(f) (lawyer may accept compensation from a third party as long as there is no interference with the lawyer's independent professional judgment and the client gives informed consent).

The prohibition against sharing legal fees with nonlawyer employees is not intended to prohibit profit-sharing arrangements that are part of a qualified pension, profit-sharing, or retirement plan. Compensation plans, as opposed to retirement plans, may not be based on legal fees.

Subdivision (f) provides that if the law firm or authorized business entity is a not-for-profit entity, the entity may practice law in the form of a corporation. This creates an exception to the authorized forms of business entities set forth in rule 4-8.6 for purposes of not-for-profit firms only.

Amended June 8, 1989 (544 So.2d 193); amended July 23, 1992, effective Jan. 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended October 20, 1994 (644 So.2d 282); amended June 27, 1996, effective July 1, 1996 (677 So.2d 272); amended

October 6, 2005, effective January 1, 2006 (916 So.2d 655); amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417); amended June 2, 2022, effective August 1, 2022 (SC22-607).

**RULE 4-5.5 UNLICENSED PRACTICE OF LAW;  
MULTIJURISDICTIONAL PRACTICE OF LAW**

**(a) Practice of Law.** A lawyer may not practice law in a jurisdiction other than the lawyer's home state, in violation of the regulation of the legal profession in that jurisdiction, or in violation of the regulation of the legal profession in the lawyer's home state or assist another in doing so.

**(b) Prohibited Conduct.** A lawyer who is not admitted to practice in Florida may not:

(1) except as authorized by other law, establish an office or other regular presence in Florida for the practice of law;

(2) hold out to the public or otherwise represent that the lawyer is admitted to practice law in Florida; or

(3) appear in court, before an administrative agency, or before any other tribunal unless authorized to do so by the court, administrative agency, or tribunal under the applicable rules of the court, administrative agency, or tribunal.

**(c) Authorized Temporary Practice by Lawyer Admitted in Another United States Jurisdiction.** A lawyer admitted and authorized to practice law in another United States jurisdiction who has been neither disbarred or suspended from practice in any jurisdiction, nor disciplined or held in contempt in Florida by reason of misconduct committed while engaged in the practice of law permitted under this rule, may provide legal services on a temporary basis in Florida that are:

(1) undertaken in association with a lawyer who is admitted to practice in Florida and who actively participates in the matter; or

(2) in or reasonably related to a pending or potential proceeding before a tribunal in this or another jurisdiction, if the lawyer is authorized by law or order to appear in the proceeding or reasonably expects to be so authorized; or

(3) in or reasonably related to a pending or potential arbitration, mediation, or other alternative dispute resolution proceeding in this or another jurisdiction, the services are not services for which the forum requires pro hac vice admission, and the services:

(A) are performed for a client who resides in or has an office in the lawyer's home state; or

(B) arise from or are reasonably related to the lawyer's practice in a jurisdiction in which the lawyer is admitted to practice; or

(4) not within subdivisions (c)(2) or (c)(3), and:

(A) are performed for a client who resides in or has an office in the jurisdiction in which the lawyer is authorized to practice; or

(B) arise out of or are reasonably related to the lawyer's practice in a jurisdiction in which the lawyer is admitted to practice.

**(d) Authorized Temporary Practice by Lawyer Admitted in a Non-United States Jurisdiction.** A lawyer who is admitted only in a non-United States jurisdiction who is a member in good standing of a recognized legal profession in a foreign jurisdiction whose members are admitted to practice as lawyers or counselors at law or the equivalent and are subject to effective regulation and discipline by a duly constituted professional body or a public authority, and who has been neither disbarred or suspended from practice in any jurisdiction nor disciplined or held in contempt in Florida by reason of misconduct committed while engaged in the practice of law permitted under this rule, does not engage in the unlicensed practice of law in Florida when on a temporary basis the lawyer performs services in Florida that are:

(1) undertaken in association with a lawyer who is admitted to practice in Florida and who actively participates in the matter;

(2) in or reasonably related to a pending or potential proceeding before a tribunal held or to be held in a jurisdiction outside the United States if the lawyer, or a person the lawyer is assisting, is authorized by law or by order of the tribunal to appear in the proceeding or reasonably expects to be so authorized;

(3) in or reasonably related to a pending or potential arbitration, mediation, or other alternative dispute resolution proceeding held or to be held in Florida or another jurisdiction and the services are not services for which the forum requires pro hac vice admission if the services:

(A) are performed for a client who resides in or has an office in the jurisdiction in which the lawyer is admitted to practice; or

(B) arise out of or are reasonably related to the lawyer's practice in a jurisdiction in which the lawyer is admitted to practice;

(4) not within subdivisions (d)(2) or (d)(3) and:

(A) are performed for a client who resides or has an office in a jurisdiction in which the lawyer is authorized to practice to the extent of that authorization; or

(B) arise out of or are reasonably related to a matter that has a substantial connection to a jurisdiction in which the lawyer is authorized to practice to the extent of that authorization; or

(5) governed primarily by international law or the law of a non-United States jurisdiction in which the lawyer is a member.

### **Comment**

Subdivision (a) applies to unlicensed practice of law by a lawyer, whether through the lawyer's direct action or by the lawyer

assisting another person. A lawyer may practice law only in a jurisdiction in which the lawyer is authorized to practice. A lawyer may be admitted to practice law in a jurisdiction on a regular basis or may be authorized by court rule or order or by law to practice for a limited purpose or on a restricted basis. Regardless of whether the lawyer is admitted to practice law on a regular basis or is practicing as the result of an authorization granted by court rule or order or by the law, the lawyer must comply with the standards of ethical and professional conduct set forth in these Rules Regulating the Florida Bar.

The definition of the practice of law is established by law and varies from one jurisdiction to another. Whatever the definition, limiting the practice of law to members of the bar protects the public against rendition of legal services by unqualified persons. This rule does not prohibit a lawyer from employing the services of paraprofessionals and delegating functions to them, so long as the lawyer supervises the delegated work and retains responsibility for their work. See rule 4-5.3. Likewise, it does not prohibit lawyers from providing professional advice and instruction to nonlawyers whose employment requires knowledge of law; for example, claims adjusters, employees of financial or commercial institutions, social workers, accountants, and persons employed in government agencies. In addition, a lawyer may counsel nonlawyers who wish to proceed pro se.

Other than as authorized by law, a lawyer who is not admitted to practice in Florida violates subdivision (b) if the lawyer establishes an office or other regular presence in Florida for the practice of law. This prohibition includes establishing an office or other regular presence in Florida for the practice of the law of the state where the lawyer is admitted to practice. For example, a lawyer licensed to practice law in New York could not establish an office or regular presence in Florida to practice New York law. That activity would constitute the unlicensed practice of law. However, for purposes of this rule, a lawyer licensed in another jurisdiction who is in Florida for vacation or for a limited period of time, may provide services to their clients in the jurisdiction where admitted as this does not constitute a regular presence. The lawyer must not

hold out to the public or otherwise represent that the lawyer is admitted to practice law in Florida. Presence may be regular even if the lawyer is not physically present here. For purposes of this rule, a lawyer licensed in another United States jurisdiction does not have a regular presence in Florida for the practice of law when the lawyer works remotely while physically located in Florida for an extended period of time if the lawyer works exclusively on non-Florida matters, and neither the lawyer nor any firm employing the lawyer holds out to the public as having a Florida presence. See *Fla. Bar re Advisory Opinion—Out-of-State Att’y Working Remotely from Fla. Home*, 318 So. 3d 538 (Fla. 2021).

Subdivision (b) also prohibits a lawyer who is not admitted to practice in Florida from appearing in a Florida court, before an administrative agency, or before any other tribunal in Florida unless the lawyer has been granted permission to do so. In order to be granted the permission, the lawyer must follow the applicable rules of the court, agency, or tribunal including, without limitation, the Florida Rules of General Practice and Judicial Administration governing appearance by foreign lawyers. While admission by the Florida court or administrative agency for the particular case authorizes the lawyer’s appearance in the matter, it does not act as authorization to allow the establishment of an office in Florida for the practice of law. Therefore, a lawyer licensed in another jurisdiction admitted in a case in Florida may not establish an office in Florida while the case is pending and the lawyer is working on the case.

There are occasions in which a lawyer admitted and authorized to practice in another United States jurisdiction or in a non-United States jurisdiction may provide legal services on a temporary basis in Florida under circumstances that do not create an unreasonable risk to the interests of the lawyer’s clients, the public, or the courts. Subdivisions (c) and (d) identify these circumstances. As discussed with regard to subdivision (b) above, this rule does not authorize a lawyer to establish an office or other regular presence in Florida without being admitted to practice generally in Florida. Furthermore, no lawyer is authorized to provide legal services under this rule if the lawyer is disbarred or

suspended from practice in any jurisdiction or has been disciplined or held in contempt in Florida by reason of misconduct committed while engaged in the practice of law permitted under this rule. The contempt must be final and not reversed or abated.

There is no single test to determine whether a lawyer's services are provided on a "temporary basis" in Florida and may therefore be permissible under subdivision (c). Services may be "temporary" even though the lawyer provides services in Florida on a recurring basis or for an extended period of time, as when the lawyer is representing a client in a single lengthy negotiation or litigation.

Subdivision (c) applies to lawyers who are admitted to practice law in any United States jurisdiction, which includes the District of Columbia and any state, territory, or commonwealth of the United States. The word "admitted" in subdivision (c) contemplates that the lawyer is authorized to practice in the jurisdiction in which the lawyer is admitted and excludes a lawyer who while technically admitted is not authorized to practice because, for example, the lawyer is on inactive status. Subdivision (d) applies to lawyers who are admitted to practice law in a non-United States jurisdiction if the lawyer is a member in good standing of a recognized legal profession in a foreign jurisdiction, the members of which are admitted to practice as lawyers or counselors at law or the equivalent and subject to effective regulation and discipline by a duly constituted professional body or a public authority. Due to the similarities between the subdivisions, they will be discussed together. Differences will be noted.

Subdivisions (c)(1) and (d)(1) recognize that the interests of clients and the public are protected if a lawyer admitted only in another jurisdiction associates with a lawyer licensed to practice in Florida. For these subdivisions to apply, the lawyer admitted to practice in Florida could not serve merely as a conduit for the out-of-state lawyer, but would have to share actual responsibility for the representation and actively participate in the representation. To the extent that a court rule or other law of Florida requires a lawyer who is not admitted to practice in Florida to obtain admission pro hac vice before appearing in court or before a tribunal or to obtain admission under applicable rules before appearing before an

administrative agency, this rule requires the lawyer to obtain that authority.

Lawyers not admitted to practice generally in Florida may be authorized by law or order of a tribunal or an administrative agency to appear before the tribunal or agency. This authority may be granted under formal rules governing admission pro hac vice or formal rules of the agency. Under subdivision (c)(2), a lawyer does not violate this rule when the lawyer appears before a tribunal or agency under this authority. As with subdivisions (c)(1) and (d)(1), to the extent that a court rule or other law of Florida requires a lawyer who is not admitted to practice in Florida to obtain admission pro hac vice prior to appearing in court or before a tribunal or to obtain admission under applicable rules before appearing before an administrative agency, this rule requires the lawyer to obtain that authority.

Subdivision (c)(2) also provides that a lawyer rendering services in Florida on a temporary basis does not violate this rule when the lawyer engages in conduct in anticipation of a proceeding or hearing in a jurisdiction in which the lawyer is authorized to practice law or in which the lawyer reasonably expects to be admitted pro hac vice. Examples of this conduct include meetings with the client, interviews of potential witnesses, and the review of documents. Similarly, a lawyer admitted only in another jurisdiction may engage in conduct temporarily in Florida in connection with pending litigation in another jurisdiction in which the lawyer is or reasonably expects to be authorized to appear, including taking depositions in Florida.

Subdivision (d)(2) is similar to subdivision (c)(2), however, the authorization in (d)(2) only applies to pending or potential proceedings before a tribunal to be held outside of the United States.

Subdivisions (c)(3) and (d)(3) permit a lawyer admitted to practice law in another jurisdiction to perform services on a temporary basis in Florida if those services are in, or reasonably related to, a pending or potential arbitration, mediation, or other alternative dispute resolution proceeding in this or another

jurisdiction, if the services are performed for a client who resides in or has an office in the lawyer's home state, or if the services arise out of or are reasonably related to the lawyer's practice in a jurisdiction in which the lawyer is admitted to practice. The lawyer, however, must obtain admission pro hac vice in the case of a court-annexed arbitration or mediation if court rules or law so require. The lawyer must file a verified statement with The Florida Bar in arbitration proceedings as required by rule 1-3.11, unless the lawyer is appearing in an international arbitration as defined in the comment to that rule. A verified statement is not required if the lawyer first obtained the court's permission to appear pro hac vice and the court has retained jurisdiction over the matter. For purposes of this rule, a lawyer who is not admitted to practice law in Florida who files more than 3 demands for arbitration or responses to arbitration in separate arbitration proceedings in a 365-day period is presumed to be providing legal services on a regular, not temporary, basis; however, this presumption does not apply to a lawyer appearing in international arbitrations as defined in the comment to rule 1-3.11.

Subdivision (c)(4) permits a lawyer admitted in another jurisdiction to provide certain legal services on a temporary basis in Florida that are performed for a client who resides or has an office in the jurisdiction in which the lawyer is authorized to practice or arise out of or are reasonably related to the lawyer's practice in a jurisdiction in which the lawyer is admitted, but are not within subdivisions (c)(2) or (c)(3). These services include both legal services and services that nonlawyers may perform but that are considered the practice of law when performed by lawyers. When performing services which may be performed by nonlawyers, the lawyer remains subject to the Rules of Professional Conduct.

Subdivisions (c)(3), (d)(3), and (c)(4) require that the services arise out of or be reasonably related to the lawyer's practice in a jurisdiction in which the lawyer is admitted. A variety of factors evidence this relationship. The lawyer's client may have been previously represented by the lawyer, or may be resident in or have substantial contacts with the jurisdiction in which the lawyer is admitted. The matter, although involving other jurisdictions, may

have a significant connection with that jurisdiction. In other cases, significant aspects of the lawyer's work might be conducted in that jurisdiction or a significant aspect of the matter may involve the law of that jurisdiction. The necessary relationship might arise when the client's activities or the legal issues involve multiple jurisdictions, for example when the officers of a multinational corporation survey potential business sites and seek the services of their lawyer in assessing the relative merits of each. In addition, the services may draw on the lawyer's recognized expertise developed through regular practice of law in a body of law that is applicable to the client's particular matter.

Subdivision (d)(4) permits a lawyer admitted in a non-United States jurisdiction to provide certain services on a temporary basis in Florida that are performed for a client who resides in or has an office in the jurisdiction where the lawyer is authorized to practice or arise out of or are reasonably related to a matter that has a substantial connection to a jurisdiction in which the lawyer is authorized to practice to the extent of that authorization but are not within subdivisions (d)(2) and (d)(3). The scope of the work the lawyer could perform under this provision would be limited to the services the lawyer may perform in the authorizing jurisdiction. For example, if a German lawyer came to the United States to negotiate on behalf of a client in Germany, the lawyer would be authorized to provide only those services that the lawyer is authorized to provide for that client in Germany. Subdivision (d)(5) permits a lawyer admitted in a non-United States jurisdiction to provide services in Florida that are governed primarily by international law or the law of a non-United States jurisdiction in which the lawyer is a member.

A lawyer who practices law in Florida under subdivisions (c), (d), or otherwise is subject to the disciplinary authority of Florida. A lawyer who practices law in Florida under subdivision (c) must inform the client that the lawyer is not licensed to practice law in Florida.

The Supreme Court of Florida has determined that it constitutes the unlicensed practice of law for a lawyer admitted to practice law in a jurisdiction other than Florida to advertise to

provide legal services in Florida which the lawyer is not authorized to provide. The rule was adopted in 820 So. 2d 210 (Fla. 2002). The court first stated the proposition in 762 So. 2d 392, 394 (Fla. 1999). Subdivisions (c) and (d) do not authorize advertising legal services in Florida by lawyers who are admitted to practice in jurisdictions other than Florida. Whether and how lawyers may communicate the availability of their services in Florida is governed by subchapter 4-7.

A lawyer who practices law in Florida is subject to the disciplinary authority of Florida.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended May 12, 2005, effective September 14, 2006 (907 So.2d 1138); amended September 11, 2008, effective January 1, 2009 (991 So.2d 842); amended April 12, 2012, effective July 1, 2012 (101 So.3d 807); amended May 21, 2015, corrected June 25, 2015, effective October 1, 2015 (164 So.3d 1217); amended and effective February 17, 2022 (SC21-1379).

#### **RULE 4-5.6 RESTRICTIONS ON RIGHT TO PRACTICE**

A lawyer shall not participate in offering or making:

**(a)** a partnership, shareholders, operating, employment, or other similar type of agreement that restricts the rights of a lawyer to practice after termination of the relationship, except an agreement concerning benefits upon retirement; or

**(b)** an agreement in which a restriction on the lawyer's right to practice is part of the settlement of a client controversy.

#### **Comment**

An agreement restricting the right of lawyers to practice after leaving a firm not only limits their professional autonomy, but also limits the freedom of clients to choose a lawyer. Subdivision (a) prohibits such agreements except for restrictions incident to provisions concerning retirement benefits for service with the firm.

Subdivision (b) prohibits a lawyer from agreeing not to represent other persons in connection with settling a claim on behalf of a client.

This rule does not apply to prohibit restrictions that may be included in the terms of the sale of a law practice in accordance with the provisions of rule 4-1.17.

This rule is not a per se prohibition against severance agreements between lawyers and law firms. Severance agreements containing reasonable and fair compensation provisions designed to avoid disputes requiring time-consuming quantum meruit analysis are not prohibited by this rule. Severance agreements, on the other hand, that contain punitive clauses, the effect of which are to restrict competition or encroach upon a client's inherent right to select counsel, are prohibited. The percentage limitations found in rule 4-1.5(f)(4)(D) do not apply to fees divided pursuant to a severance agreement. No severance agreement shall contain a fee-splitting arrangement that results in a fee prohibited by the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended July 17, 1997 (697 So.2d 115); amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417).

#### **RULE 4-5.7 RESPONSIBILITIES REGARDING NONLEGAL SERVICES**

**(a) Services Not Distinct From Legal Services.** A lawyer who provides nonlegal services to a recipient that are not distinct from legal services provided to that recipient is subject to the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar with respect to the provision of both legal and nonlegal services.

**(b) Services Distinct From Legal Services.** A lawyer who provides nonlegal services to a recipient that are distinct from any legal services provided to the recipient is subject to the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar with respect to the nonlegal services if the lawyer knows or reasonably should know that the recipient

might believe that the recipient is receiving the protection of a client-lawyer relationship.

**(c) Services by Nonlegal Entity.** A lawyer who is an owner, controlling party, employee, agent, or otherwise is affiliated with an entity providing nonlegal services to a recipient is subject to the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar with respect to the nonlegal services if the lawyer knows or reasonably should know that the recipient might believe that the recipient is receiving the protection of a client-lawyer relationship.

**(d) Effect of Disclosure of Nature of Service.** Subdivision (b) or (c) does not apply if the lawyer makes reasonable efforts to avoid any misunderstanding by the recipient receiving nonlegal services. Those efforts must include advising the recipient, preferably in writing, that the services are not legal services and that the protection of a client-lawyer relationship does not exist with respect to the provision of nonlegal services to the recipient.

### **Comment**

For many years, lawyers have provided to their clients nonlegal services that are ancillary to the practice of law. A broad range of economic and other interests of clients may be served by lawyers participating in the delivery of these services. In recent years, however, there has been significant debate about the role the rules of professional conduct should play in regulating the degree and manner in which a lawyer participates in the delivery of nonlegal services. The ABA, for example, adopted, repealed, and then adopted a different version of ABA Model Rule 5.7. In the course of this debate, several ABA sections offered competing versions of ABA Model Rule 5.7.

One approach to the issue of nonlegal services is to try to substantively limit the type of nonlegal services a lawyer may provide to a recipient or the manner in which the services are provided. A competing approach does not try to substantively limit the lawyer's provision of nonlegal services, but instead attempts to clarify the conduct to which the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar

apply and to avoid misunderstanding on the part of the recipient of the nonlegal services. This rule adopts the latter approach.

### **The potential for misunderstanding**

Whenever a lawyer directly provides nonlegal services, there exists the potential for ethical problems. Principal among these is the possibility that the person for whom the nonlegal services are performed may fail to understand that the services may not carry with them the protection normally afforded by the client-lawyer relationship. The recipient of the nonlegal services may expect, for example, that the protection of client confidences, prohibitions against representation of persons with conflicting interests, and obligations of a lawyer to maintain professional independence apply to the provision of nonlegal services when that may not be the case. The risk of confusion is acute especially when the lawyer renders both types of services with respect to the same matter.

### **Providing nonlegal services that are not distinct from legal services**

Under some circumstances, the legal and nonlegal services may be so closely entwined that they cannot be distinguished from each other. In this situation, confusion by the recipient as to when the protection of the client-lawyer relationship applies is likely to be unavoidable. Therefore, this rule requires that the lawyer providing the nonlegal services adhere to all of the requirements of the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar.

In such a case, a lawyer will be responsible for assuring that both the lawyer's conduct and, to the extent required elsewhere in these Rules Regulating The Florida Bar, that of nonlawyer employees comply in all respects with the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar. When a lawyer is obliged to accord the recipients of such nonlegal services the protection of those rules that apply to the client-lawyer relationship, the lawyer must take special care to heed the proscriptions of the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar addressing conflict of interest and to scrupulously adhere to the requirements of the rule relating to disclosure of confidential information. The promotion of the nonlegal services must also in all

respects comply with the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar dealing with advertising and solicitation.

Subdivision (a) of this rule applies to the provision of nonlegal services by a lawyer even when the lawyer does not personally provide any legal services to the person for whom the nonlegal services are performed if the person is also receiving legal services from another lawyer that are not distinct from the nonlegal services.

### **Avoiding misunderstanding when a lawyer directly provides nonlegal services that are distinct from legal services**

Even when the lawyer believes that his or her provision of nonlegal services is distinct from any legal services provided to the recipient, there is still a risk that the recipient of the nonlegal services will misunderstand the implications of receiving nonlegal services from a lawyer; the recipient might believe that the recipient is receiving the protection of a client-lawyer relationship. Where there is such a risk of misunderstanding, this rule requires that the lawyer providing the nonlegal services adhere to all the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar, unless exempted by other provisions of this rule.

### **Avoiding misunderstanding when a lawyer is indirectly involved in the provision of nonlegal services**

Nonlegal services also may be provided through an entity with which a lawyer is somehow affiliated, for example, as owner, employee, controlling party, or agent. In this situation, there is still a risk that the recipient of the nonlegal services might believe that the recipient is receiving the protection of a client-lawyer relationship. Where there is such a risk of misunderstanding, this rule requires that the lawyer involved with the entity providing nonlegal services adhere to all the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar, unless exempted by another provision of this rule.

### **Avoiding the application of subdivisions (b) and (c)**

Subdivisions (b) and (c) specify that the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar apply to a lawyer who directly provides or is otherwise involved in the provision of nonlegal services if there is a risk that

the recipient might believe that the recipient is receiving the protection of a client-lawyer relationship. Neither the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar nor subdivisions (b) or (c) will apply, however, if pursuant to subdivision (d), the lawyer takes reasonable efforts to avoid any misunderstanding by the recipient. In this respect, this rule is analogous to the rule regarding respect for rights of third persons.

In taking the reasonable measures referred to in subdivision (d), the lawyer must communicate to the person receiving the nonlegal services that the relationship will not be a client-lawyer relationship. The communication should be made before entering into an agreement for the provision of nonlegal services, in a manner sufficient to assure that the person understands the significance of the communication, and preferably should be in writing.

The burden is upon the lawyer to show that the lawyer has taken reasonable measures under the circumstances to communicate the desired understanding. For instance, a sophisticated user of nonlegal services, such as a publicly held corporation, may require a lesser explanation than someone unaccustomed to making distinctions between legal services and nonlegal services, such as an individual seeking tax advice from a lawyer-accountant or investigative services in connection with a lawsuit.

### **The relationship between this rule and other Rules Regulating The Florida Bar**

Even before this rule was adopted, a lawyer involved in the provision of nonlegal services was subject to those Rules Regulating The Florida Bar that apply generally. For example, another provision of the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar makes a lawyer responsible for fraud committed with respect to the provision of nonlegal services. Such a lawyer must also comply with the rule regulating business transactions with a client. Nothing in this rule (Responsibilities Regarding Nonlegal Services) is intended to suspend the effect of any otherwise applicable Rules Regulating The Florida Bar, such as the rules on personal conflicts of interest, on

business transactions with clients, and engaging in conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit, or misrepresentation.

In addition to the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar, principles of law external to the rules, for example, the law of principal and agent, may govern the legal duties owed by a lawyer to those receiving the nonlegal services.

Added effective April 25, 2002 (820 So.2d 210).

#### **4-5.8 PROCEDURES FOR LAWYERS LEAVING LAW FIRMS AND DISSOLUTION OF LAW FIRMS**

**(a) Contractual Relationship Between Law Firm and Clients.** The contract for legal services creates the legal relationships between the client and law firm and between the client and individual members of the law firm, including the ownership of the files maintained by the lawyer or law firm. Nothing in these rules creates or defines those relationships.

**(b) Client's Right to Counsel of Choice.** Clients have the right to expect that they may choose counsel when legal services are required and, with few exceptions, nothing that lawyers and law firms do affects the exercise of that right.

**(c) Contact With Clients.**

(1) *Lawyers Leaving Law Firms.* Absent a specific agreement otherwise, a lawyer who is leaving a law firm may not unilaterally contact those clients of the law firm for purposes of notifying them about the anticipated departure or to solicit representation of the clients unless the lawyer has approached an authorized representative of the law firm and attempted to negotiate a joint communication to the clients concerning the lawyer leaving the law firm and bona fide negotiations have been unsuccessful.

(2) *Dissolution of Law Firm.* Absent a specific agreement otherwise, a lawyer involved in the dissolution of a law firm may not unilaterally contact clients of the law firm unless, after bona fide negotiations, authorized members of the law firm have been unable to agree on a method to provide notice to clients.

**(d) Form for Contact With Clients.**

(1) *Lawyers Leaving Law Firms.* When a joint response has not been successfully negotiated, unilateral contact by individual members or the law firm must give notice to clients that the lawyer is leaving the law firm and provide options to the clients to choose to remain a client of the law firm, to choose representation by the departing lawyer, or to choose representation by other lawyers or law firms.

(2) *Dissolution of Law Firms.* When a law firm is being dissolved and no procedure for contacting clients has been agreed to, unilateral contact by members of the law firm must give notice to clients that the firm is being dissolved and provide options to the clients to choose representation by any member of the dissolving law firm, or representation by other lawyers or law firms.

(3) *Liability for Fees and Costs.* In all instances, notice to the client required under this rule must provide information concerning potential liability for fees for legal services previously rendered, costs expended, and how any deposits for fees or costs will be handled. In addition, if appropriate, notice must be given that reasonable charges may be imposed to provide a copy of any file to a successor lawyer.

**(e) Nonresponsive Clients.**

(1) *Lawyers Leaving Law Firms.* In the event a client fails to advise the lawyers and law firm of the client's intention in regard to who is to provide future legal services when a lawyer is leaving the firm, the client remains a client of the firm until the client advises otherwise.

(2) *Dissolution of Law Firms.* In the event a client fails to advise the lawyers of the client's intention in regard to who is to provide future legal services when a law firm is dissolving, the client remains a client of the lawyer who primarily provided the prior legal services on behalf of the firm until the client advises otherwise.

## Comment

The current rule of law regarding ownership of client files is discussed in *Donahue v. Vaughn*, 721 So. 2d 356 (Fla. 5th DCA 1998), *Dowda & Fields, P.A. v. Cobb*, 452 So. 2d 1140 (Fla. 5th DCA 1984), and *Woodson v. Durocher*, 588 So. 2d 644 (Fla. 5th DCA 1991). A lawyer leaving a law firm should consult with the law firm regarding disposition of client files. Ownership of client files may be the subject of contract law and of the employment, partnership, or shareholder agreement between the lawyer and the law firm.

While clients have the right to choose counsel, that choice may implicate obligations such as a requirement to pay for legal services previously rendered and costs expended in connection with the representation as well as a reasonable fee for copying the client's file.

Whether individual members have any individual legal obligations to a client is a matter of contract law, tort law, or court rules that is outside the scope of rules governing lawyer conduct. Generally, individual lawyers have these obligations only if provided for in the contract for representation. Nothing in this rule or in the contract for representation may alter the ethical obligations that individual lawyers have to clients as provided elsewhere in these rules.

In most instances a lawyer leaving a law firm and the law firm should engage in bona fide, good faith negotiations and craft a joint communication providing adequate information to the client so that the client may make a fully informed decision concerning future representation. In those instances in which bona fide negotiations are unsuccessful, unilateral communication may be made by the departing lawyer or the law firm. In those circumstances, great care should be taken to meet the obligation of adequate communication and for this reason the specific requirements of subdivisions (d)(1) and (3) are provided.

Lawyers and firms should engage in bona fide, good faith negotiations within a reasonable period of time following their knowledge of either the anticipated change in firm composition or, if

the anticipated change is unknown, within a reasonable period of time after the change in firm composition. The actual notification to clients should also occur within a reasonable period of time. What is reasonable will depend on the circumstances, including the nature of the matters in which the lawyer represented the clients and whether the affected clients have deadlines that need to be met within a short period of time.

For purposes of this rule, clients who should be notified of the change in firm composition include current clients for whom the departing lawyer has provided significant legal services with direct client contact. Clients need not be notified of the departure of a lawyer with whom the client has had no direct contact. Clients whose files are closed need not be notified unless the former client contacts the firm, at which point the firm should notify the former client of the departure of any lawyer who performed significant legal services for that former client and had direct contact with that former client.

Although contact by telephone is not prohibited under this rule, proof of compliance with the requirements of this rule may be difficult unless the notification is in writing.

In order to comply with the requirements of this rule, both departing lawyers and the law firm should be given access to the names and contact information of all clients for whom the departing lawyer has provided significant legal services and with whom the lawyer has had direct contact.

If neither the departing lawyer nor the law firm intends to continue representation of the affected clients, they may either agree on a joint letter providing that information to those clients, or may separately notify the affected clients after bona fide, good faith negotiations have failed. Any obligation to give the client reasonable notice, protect the client's interests on withdrawal, and seek permission of a court to withdraw may apply to both the departing lawyer and lawyers remaining in the firm.

Most law firms have some written instrument creating the law firm and specifying procedures to be employed upon dissolution of

the firm. However, when such an instrument does not exist or does not adequately provide for procedures in the event of dissolution, the provisions of this rule are provided so that dissolution of the law firm does not disproportionately affect client rights.

As in instances of a lawyer departing a law firm, lawyers involved in the dissolution of law firms have a continuing obligation to provide adequate information to a client so that the client may make informed decisions concerning future representation.

The Florida Bar has sample forms for notice to clients and sample partnership and other contracts that are available to members. The forms may be accessed on the bar's website, *www.floridabar.org*, or by calling The Florida Bar headquarters in Tallahassee.

Lawyers involved in either a change in law firm composition or law firm dissolution may have duties to notify the court if the representation is in litigation. If the remaining law firm will continue the representation of the client, no notification of the change in firm composition to the court may be required, but such a notification may be advisable. If the departing lawyer will take over representation of the client, a motion for substitution of counsel or a motion by the firm to withdraw from the representation may be appropriate. If the departing lawyer and the law firm have made the appropriate request for the client to select either the departing lawyer or the law firm to continue the representation, but the client has not yet responded, the law firm should consider notifying the court of the change in firm composition, although under ordinary circumstances, absent an agreement to the contrary, the firm will continue the representation in the interim. If the departing lawyer and the law firm have agreed regarding who will continue handling the client's matters then, absent disagreement by the client, the agreement normally will determine whether the departing lawyer or the law firm will continue the representation.

Adopted effective January 1, 2006 (916 So.2d 655); amended November 9, 2017, effective February 1, 2018 (234 So. 3d 577); amended January 4, 2019, effective March 5, 2019 (267 So.3d 891); amended March 3, 2022, effective May 2, 2022 (SC20-1467).

**4-6. PUBLIC SERVICE**  
**RULE 4-6.1 PRO BONO PUBLIC SERVICE**

**(a) Professional Responsibility.** Each member of The Florida Bar in good standing, as part of that member's professional responsibility, should (1) render pro bono legal services to the poor and (2) participate, to the extent possible, in other pro bono service activities that directly relate to the legal needs of the poor. This professional responsibility does not apply to members of the judiciary or their staffs or to government lawyers who are prohibited from performing legal services by constitutional, statutory, rule, or regulatory prohibitions. Neither does this professional responsibility apply to those members of the bar who are retired, inactive, or suspended, or who have been placed on the inactive list for incapacity not related to discipline.

**(b) Discharge of the Professional Responsibility to Provide Pro Bono Legal Service to the Poor.** The professional responsibility to provide pro bono legal services as established under this rule is aspirational rather than mandatory in nature. The failure to fulfill one's professional responsibility under this rule will not subject a lawyer to discipline. The professional responsibility to provide pro bono legal service to the poor may be discharged by:

(1) annually providing at least 20 hours of pro bono legal service to the poor; or

(2) making an annual contribution of at least \$350 to a legal aid organization.

**(c) Collective Discharge of the Professional Responsibility to Provide Pro Bono Legal Service to the Poor.** Each member of the bar should strive to individually satisfy the member's professional responsibility to provide pro bono legal service to the poor. Collective satisfaction of this professional responsibility is permitted by law firms only under a collective satisfaction plan that has been filed previously with the circuit pro bono committee and only when providing pro bono legal service to the poor:

(1) in a major case or matter involving a substantial expenditure of time and resources; or

(2) through a full-time community or public service staff;  
or

(3) in any other manner that has been approved by the circuit pro bono committee in the circuit in which the firm practices.

(d) Reporting Requirement. **Each member of the bar must annually report whether the member has satisfied the member's professional responsibility to provide pro bono legal services to the poor through the member's annual membership fees statement as developed by The Florida Bar. At minimum, the statement must include the number of hours of pro bono legal services provided and the dollar amount of contributions to pro bono legal services organizations.**

The failure to report this information constitutes a disciplinary offense under these rules.

**(e) Credit Toward Professional Responsibility in Future Years.** In the event that more than 20 hours of pro bono legal service to the poor are provided and reported in any 1 year, the hours in excess of 20 hours may be carried forward and reported as such for up to 2 succeeding years for the purpose of determining whether a lawyer has fulfilled the professional responsibility to provide pro bono legal service to the poor in those succeeding years.

**(f) Out-of-State Members of the Bar.** Out-of-state members of the bar may fulfill their professional responsibility in the states in which they practice or reside.

### **Comment**

Pro bono legal service to the poor is an integral and particular part of a lawyer's pro bono public service responsibility. As our society has become one in which rights and responsibilities are increasingly defined in legal terms, access to legal services has become of critical importance. This is true for all people, be they

rich, poor, or of moderate means. However, because the legal problems of the poor often involve areas of basic need, their inability to obtain legal services can have dire consequences. The vast unmet legal needs of the poor in Florida have been recognized by the Supreme Court of Florida and by several studies undertaken in Florida over the past 2 decades. The Supreme Court of Florida has further recognized the necessity of finding a solution to the problem of providing the poor greater access to legal service and the unique role of lawyers in our adversarial system of representing and defending persons against the actions and conduct of governmental entities, individuals, and nongovernmental entities. As an officer of the court, each member of The Florida Bar in good standing has a professional responsibility to provide pro bono legal service to the poor. Certain lawyers, however, are prohibited from performing legal services by constitutional, statutory, rule, or other regulatory prohibitions. Consequently, members of the judiciary and their staffs, government lawyers who are prohibited from performing legal services by constitutional, statutory, rule, or regulatory prohibitions, members of the bar who are retired, inactive, or suspended, or who have been placed on the inactive list for incapacity not related to discipline are deferred from participation in this program.

In discharging the professional responsibility to provide pro bono legal service to the poor, each lawyer should furnish a minimum of 20 hours of pro bono legal service to the poor annually or contribute \$350 to a legal aid organization. "Pro bono legal service" means legal service rendered without charge or expectation of a fee for the lawyer at the time the service commences. Legal services written off as bad debts do not qualify as pro bono service. Most pro bono service should involve civil proceedings given that government must provide indigent representation in most criminal matters. Pro bono legal service to the poor is to be provided not only to those persons whose household incomes are below the federal poverty standard but also to those persons frequently referred to as the "working poor." Lawyers providing pro bono legal service on their own need not undertake an investigation to determine client eligibility. Rather, a good faith determination by the lawyer of client eligibility is sufficient. Pro bono legal service to

the poor need not be provided only through legal services to individuals; it can also be provided through legal services to charitable, religious, or educational organizations whose overall mission and activities are designed predominately to address the needs of the poor. For example, legal service to organizations such as a church, civic, or community service organizations relating to a project seeking to address the problems of the poor would qualify.

While the personal involvement of each lawyer in the provision of pro bono legal service to the poor is generally preferable, such personal involvement may not always be possible or produce the ultimate desired result, that is, a significant maximum increase in the quantity and quality of legal service provided to the poor. The annual contribution alternative recognizes a lawyer's professional responsibility to provide financial assistance to increase and improve the delivery of legal service to the poor when a lawyer cannot or decides not to provide legal service to the poor through the contribution of time. Also, there is no prohibition against a lawyer contributing a combination of hours and financial support. The limited provision allowing for collective satisfaction of the 20-hour standard recognizes the importance of encouraging law firms to undertake the pro bono legal representation of the poor in substantial, complex matters requiring significant expenditures of law firm resources and time and costs, such as class actions and post-conviction death penalty appeal cases, and through the establishment of full-time community or public service staffs. When a law firm uses collective satisfaction, the total hours of legal services provided in such substantial, complex matters or through a full-time community or public service staff should be credited among the firm's lawyers in a fair and reasonable manner as determined by the firm.

The reporting requirement is designed to provide a sound basis for evaluating the results achieved by this rule, reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the pro bono plan, and to remind lawyers of their professional responsibility under this rule. The fourth alternative of the reporting requirements allows members to indicate that they have fulfilled their service in some manner not specifically envisioned by the plan.

The 20-hour standard for the provision of pro bono legal service to the poor is a minimum. Additional hours of service are to be encouraged. Many lawyers will, as they have before the adoption of this rule, contribute many more hours than the minimum. To ensure that a lawyer receives credit for the time required to handle a particularly involved matter, this rule provides that the lawyer may carry forward, over the next 2 successive years, any time expended in excess of 20 hours in any 1 year.

Former Rule 4-6.1 deleted June 23, 1993, effective Oct. 1, 1993. New Rule 4- 6.1 adopted June 23, 1993, effective October 1, 1993 (630 So.2d 501); amended Sept. 24, 1998, effective Oct. 1, 1998 (718 So.2d 1179); amended March 3, 2022, effective May 2, 2022 (SC20-1467).

### **RULE 4-6.2 ACCEPTING APPOINTMENTS**

A lawyer shall not seek to avoid appointment by a tribunal to represent a person except for good cause, such as when:

**(a)** representing the client is likely to result in violation of the Rules of Professional Conduct or of the law;

**(b)** representing the client is likely to result in an unreasonable financial burden on the lawyer; or

**(c)** the client or the cause is so repugnant to the lawyer as to be likely to impair the client-lawyer relationship or the lawyer's ability to represent the client.

### **Comment**

A lawyer ordinarily is not obliged to accept a client whose character or cause the lawyer regards as repugnant. The lawyer's freedom to select clients is, however, qualified. All lawyers have a responsibility to assist in providing pro bono public service as provided in these rules. See rule 4-6.1. In the course of fulfilling a lawyer's obligation to provide legal services to the poor, a lawyer should not avoid or decline representation of a client simply because a client is unpopular or involved in unpopular matters. Although these rules do not contemplate court appointment as a primary means of achieving pro bono service, a lawyer may be

subject to appointment by a court to serve unpopular clients or persons unable to afford legal services.

For good cause a lawyer may seek to decline an appointment to represent a person who cannot afford to retain counsel or whose cause is unpopular. Good cause exists if the lawyer could not handle the matter competently, see rule 4-1.1, or if undertaking the representation would result in an improper conflict of interest, for example, when the client or the cause is so repugnant to the lawyer as to be likely to impair the client-lawyer relationship or the lawyer's ability to represent the client. A lawyer may also seek to decline an appointment if acceptance would be unreasonably burdensome, for example, when it would impose a financial sacrifice so great as to be unjust.

An appointed lawyer has the same obligations to the client as retained counsel, including the obligations of loyalty and confidentiality, and is subject to the same limitations on the client-lawyer relationship, such as the obligation to refrain from assisting the client in violation of the rules.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252);  
amended June 23, 1993, effective October 1, 1993 (630 So.2d 501).

### **RULE 4-6.3 MEMBERSHIP IN LEGAL SERVICES ORGANIZATION**

A lawyer may serve as a director, officer, or member of a legal services organization, apart from the law firm in which the lawyer practices, notwithstanding that the organization serves persons having interests adverse to the client of the lawyer. The lawyer shall not knowingly participate in a decision or action of the organization:

**(a)** if participating in the decision would be incompatible with the lawyer's obligations to a client under rule 4-1.7; or

**(b)** where the decision could have a material adverse effect on the representation of a client of the organization whose interests are adverse to a client of the lawyer.

## **Comment**

Lawyers should be encouraged to support and participate in legal service organizations. A lawyer who is an officer or a member of such an organization does not thereby have a client-lawyer relationship with persons served by the organization. However, there is potential conflict between the interests of such persons and the interests of the lawyer's clients. If the possibility of such conflict disqualified a lawyer from serving on the board of a legal services organization, the profession's involvement in such organizations would be severely curtailed.

It may be necessary in appropriate cases to reassure a client of the organization that the representation will not be affected by conflicting loyalties of a member of the board. Established, written policies in this respect can enhance the credibility of such assurances.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective January 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252).

## **RULE 4-6.4 LAW REFORM ACTIVITIES AFFECTING CLIENT INTERESTS**

A lawyer may serve as a director, officer, or member of an organization involved in reform of the law or its administration notwithstanding that the reform may affect the interests of a client of the lawyer. When the lawyer knows that the interests of a client may be materially affected by a decision in which the lawyer participates, the lawyer shall disclose that fact but need not identify the client.

## **Comment**

Lawyers involved in organizations seeking law reform generally do not have a client-lawyer relationship with the organization. Otherwise, it might follow that a lawyer could not be involved in a bar association law reform program that might indirectly affect a client. See also rule 4-1.2(b). For example, a lawyer specializing in antitrust litigation might be regarded as disqualified from participating in drafting revisions of rules governing that subject.

In determining the nature and scope of participation in such activities, a lawyer should be mindful of obligations to clients under other rules, particularly rule 4-1.7. A lawyer is professionally obligated to protect the integrity of the program by making an appropriate disclosure within the organization when the lawyer knows a private client might be materially affected.

Amended July 17, 1986, effective January 1, 1987 (494 So.2d 977).

### **RULE 4-6.5 VOLUNTARY PRO BONO PLAN**

**(a) Purpose.** The purpose of the voluntary pro bono lawyer plan is to increase the availability of legal service to the poor and expand pro bono legal service programs.

**(b) Standing Committee on Pro Bono Legal Service.** The president-elect of The Florida Bar appoints the standing committee on pro bono legal service to the poor.

(1) *Composition of the Standing Committee.* The standing committee consists of no more than 25 members and includes, but is not limited to:

(A) 5 past or current members of the board of governors The Florida Bar, 1 of whom is the chair or a member of the access to the legal system committee of the board of governors;

(B) 5 past or current directors of The Florida Bar Foundation;

(C) 1 trial judge and 1 appellate judge;

(D) 2 representatives of civil legal assistance providers;

(E) 2 representatives from local and statewide voluntary bar associations;

(F) 2 public members, 1 of whom is a representative of the poor;

(G) the president or designee of the Board of Directors of Florida Legal Services, Inc.;

(H) 1 representative of the Out-of-State Division of The Florida Bar; and

(I) the president or designee of the Young Lawyers Division of The Florida Bar.

(2) *Responsibilities of the Standing Committee.* The standing committee will:

(A) identify, encourage, support, and assist statewide and local pro bono projects and activities;

(B) receive reports from circuit committees submitted on standardized forms developed by the standing committee;

(C) review and evaluate circuit court pro bono plans;

(D) submit an annual report on the activities and results of the pro bono plan to the board of governors of The Florida Bar, the Florida Bar Foundation, and the Supreme Court of Florida;

(E) present to the board of governors of The Florida Bar and to the Supreme Court of Florida any suggested changes or modifications to the pro bono rules.

**(c) Circuit Pro Bono Committees.** The chief judge of each circuit, or the chief judge's designee, appoints the circuit pro bono committee members, and the committee will appoint its chair.

(1) *Composition of Circuit Court Pro Bono Committee.* Each circuit pro bono committee is composed of:

(A) the chief judge of the circuit or the chief judge's designee;

(B) to the extent feasible, 1 or more representatives from each voluntary bar association, including each federal bar

association, recognized by The Florida Bar and 1 representative from each pro bono and legal assistance provider in the circuit nominated by the association or provider; and

(C) at least 1 public member and at least 1 client-eligible member nominated by the other members of the circuit pro bono committee.

Each circuit pro bono committee determines its own governance and terms of service.

(2) *Responsibilities of Circuit Pro Bono Committee.* The circuit pro bono committee will:

(A) prepare in written form a circuit pro bono plan after evaluating the needs of the circuit and making a determination of present available pro bono services;

(B) implement the plan and monitor its results;

(C) submit an annual report to The Florida Bar standing committee;

(D) use current legal assistance and pro bono programs in each circuit, to the extent possible, to implement and operate circuit pro bono plans and provide the necessary coordination and administrative support for the circuit pro bono committee;

(E) encourage more lawyers to participate in pro bono activities by preparing a plan that provides for various support and educational services for participating pro bono attorneys, which, to the extent possible, should include:

(i) intake, screening, and referral of prospective clients;

(ii) matching cases with individual lawyer expertise, including the establishment of practice area panels;

(iii) resources for litigation and out-of-pocket expenses for pro bono cases;

(iv) legal education and training for pro bono attorneys in particular areas of law useful in providing pro bono legal service;

(v) consultation with lawyers who have expertise in areas of law with respect to which a volunteer lawyer is providing pro bono legal service;

(vi) malpractice insurance for volunteer pro bono lawyers with respect to their pro bono legal service;

(vii) procedures to ensure adequate monitoring and follow-up for assigned cases and to measure client satisfaction; and

(viii) recognition of pro bono legal service by lawyers.

**(d) Pro Bono Service Opportunities.** The following are suggested pro bono service opportunities that should be included in each circuit plan:

(1) represent clients through case referral;

(2) interview prospective clients;

(3) participate in pro se clinics and other clinics in which lawyers provide advice and counsel;

(4) act as co-counsel on cases or matters with legal assistance providers and other pro bono lawyers;

(5) provide consultation services to legal assistance providers for case reviews and evaluations;

(6) participate in policy advocacy;

(7) provide training to the staff of legal assistance providers and other volunteer pro bono attorneys;

(8) make presentations to groups of poor persons regarding their rights and obligations under the law;

- (9) provide legal research;
- (10) provide guardian ad litem services;
- (11) provide assistance in the formation and operation of legal entities for groups of poor persons; and
- (12) serve as a mediator or arbitrator at no fee to the client-eligible party.

Added June 23, 1993, effective Oct. 1, 1993 (630 So.2d 501); amended December 20, 2007, effective March 1, 2008 (978 So.2d 91); amended May 29, 2014, effective June 1, 2014 (140 So.3d 541); amended May 21, 2015, corrected June 25, 2015, effective October 1, 2015 (164 So.3d 1217); amended January 4, 2019, effective March 5, 2019 (267 So.3d 891).

#### **RULE 4-6.6 SHORT-TERM LIMITED LEGAL SERVICES PROGRAMS**

**(a)** A lawyer who, under the auspices of a program sponsored by a nonprofit organization, court, government agency, bar association or an American Bar Association-accredited law school, provides short-term limited legal services to a client without expectation by either the lawyer or the client that the lawyer will provide continuing representation in the matter:

(1) is subject to rules 4-1.7 and 4-1.9(a) only if the lawyer knows that the representation of the client involves a conflict of interest; and

(2) is subject to rule 4-1.10 only if the lawyer knows that another lawyer associated with the lawyer in a law firm is disqualified by rule 4-1.7 or 4-1.9(a) with respect to the matter.

**(b)** Except as provided in subdivision (a)(2), rule 4-1.10 is inapplicable to a representation governed by this rule.

#### **Comment**

Legal services organizations, courts, government agencies, local and voluntary bar associations, law schools and various nonprofit organizations have established programs through which

lawyers provide short-term limited legal services, such as advice or the completion of legal forms, that will assist persons to address their legal problems without further representation by a lawyer. In these programs, such as legal-advice hotlines, advice-only clinics or pro se counseling programs, a client-lawyer relationship is established, but there is no expectation that the lawyer's representation of the client will continue beyond the limited consultation. These programs are normally operated under circumstances in which it is not feasible for a lawyer to systematically screen for conflicts of interest as is generally required before undertaking a representation. See, e.g., rules 4-1.7, 4-1.9 and 4-1.10.

A lawyer who provides short-term limited legal services under this rule must obtain the client's informed consent to the limited scope of the representation. See rule 4-1.2(c). However, a lawyer is not required to obtain the consent in writing. *Id.* If a short-term limited representation would not be reasonable under the circumstances, the lawyer may offer advice to the client but must also advise the client of the need for further assistance of counsel. Except as provided in this rule, the Rules of Professional Conduct, including rules 4-1.6 and 4-1.9(b) and (c), are applicable to the limited representation.

Because a lawyer who is representing a client in the circumstances addressed by this rule ordinarily is not able to check systematically for conflicts of interest, subdivision (a) requires compliance with rules 4-1.7 or 4-1.9(a) only if the lawyer knows that the representation presents a conflict of interest for the lawyer, and with rule 4-1.10 only if the lawyer knows that another lawyer in the lawyer's firm is disqualified by rules 4-1.7 or 4-1.9(a) in the matter.

Because the limited nature of the services significantly reduces the risk of conflicts of interest with other matters being handled by the lawyer's firm, subdivision (b) provides that rule 4-1.10 is inapplicable to a representation governed by this rule except as provided by subdivision (a)(2). Subdivision (a)(2) requires the participating lawyer to comply with rule 4-1.10 when the lawyer knows that the lawyer's firm is disqualified by rules 4-1.7 or 4-

1.9(a). Because of subdivision (b), however, a lawyer's participation in a short-term limited legal services program will not preclude the lawyer's firm from undertaking or continuing the representation of a client with interests adverse to a client being represented under the program's auspices. Nor will the personal disqualification of a lawyer participating in the program be imputed to other lawyers participating in the program.

If, after commencing a short-term limited representation in accordance with this rule, a lawyer undertakes to represent the client in the matter on an ongoing basis, rules 4-1.7, 4-1.9(a) and 4-1.10 become applicable.

Added November 20, 2017 (228 So.3d 1117).

#### **4-7. INFORMATION ABOUT LEGAL SERVICES**

##### **RULE 4-7.1 OPEN/VACANT**

Deleted January 31, 2013, effective May 1, 2013 (SC11-1327).

##### **RULE 4-7.2 OPEN/VACANT**

Deleted January 31, 2013, effective May 1, 2013 (SC11-1327).

##### **RULE 4-7.3 OPEN/VACANT**

Deleted January 31, 2013, effective May 1, 2013 (SC11-1327).

##### **RULE 4-7.4 OPEN/VACANT**

Deleted January 31, 2013, effective May 1, 2013 (SC11-1327).

##### **RULE 4-7.5 OPEN/VACANT**

Deleted January 31, 2013, effective May 1, 2013 (SC11-1327).

##### **RULE 4-7.6 OPEN/VACANT**

Deleted January 31, 2013, effective May 1, 2013 (SC11-1327).

### **RULE 4-7.7 OPEN/VACANT**

Deleted January 31, 2013, effective May 1, 2013 (SC11-1327).

### **RULE 4-7.8 OPEN/VACANT**

Adopted January 31, 2013, effective May 1, 2013 (SC11-1327).

### **RULE 4-7.9 OPEN/VACANT**

Deleted January 31, 2013, effective May 1, 2013 (SC11-1327).

### **RULE 4-7.10 OPEN/VACANT**

Deleted January 31, 2013, effective May 1, 2013 (SC11-1327).

### **RULE 4-7.11 APPLICATION OF RULES**

**(a) Type of Media.** Unless otherwise indicated, this subchapter applies to all forms of communication in any print or electronic forum, including but not limited to newspapers, magazines, brochures, flyers, television, radio, direct mail, electronic mail, and Internet, including banners, pop-ups, websites, social networking, and video sharing media. The terms “advertising” and “advertisement” as used in chapter 4-7 refer to all forms of communication seeking legal employment, both written and spoken.

**(b) Lawyers.** This subchapter applies to lawyers, whether or not admitted to practice in Florida or other jurisdictions, who advertise that the lawyer provides legal services in Florida or who target advertisements for legal employment at Florida residents. The term “lawyer” as used in subchapter 4-7 includes 1 or more lawyers or a law firm. This rule does not permit the unlicensed practice of law or advertising that the lawyer provides legal services that the lawyer is not authorized to provide in Florida.

**(c) Referral Sources.** This subchapter applies to communications made to referral sources about legal services.

## **Comment**

### **Websites**

Websites are subject to the general lawyer advertising requirements in this subchapter and are treated the same as other advertising media. Websites of multistate firms present specific regulatory concerns. Subchapter 4-7 applies to portions of a multistate firm that directly relate to the provision of legal services by a member of the firm who is a member of The Florida Bar. Additionally, subchapter 4-7 applies to portions of a multistate firm's website that relate to the provision of legal services in Florida, e.g., where a multistate firm has offices in Florida and discusses the provision of legal services in those Florida offices. Subchapter 4-7 does not apply to portions of a multistate firm's website that relate to the provision of legal services by lawyers who are not admitted to The Florida Bar and who do not provide legal services in Florida. Subchapter 4-7 does not apply to portions of a multistate firm's website that relate to the provision of legal services in jurisdictions other than Florida.

### **Lawyers Admitted in Other Jurisdictions**

Subchapter 4-7 does not apply to any advertisement broadcast or disseminated in another jurisdiction in which a Florida Bar member is admitted to practice if the advertisement complies with the rules governing lawyer advertising in that jurisdiction and is not broadcast or disseminated within the state of Florida or targeted at Florida residents. Subchapter 4-7 does not apply to such advertisements appearing in national media if the disclaimer "cases not accepted in Florida" is plainly noted in the advertisement. Subchapter 4-7 also does not apply to a website advertisement that does not offer the services of a Florida Bar member, a lawyer located in Florida, or a lawyer offering to provide legal services in Florida.

Subchapter 4-7 applies to advertisements by lawyers admitted to practice law in jurisdictions other than Florida who have established a regular and/or permanent presence in Florida for the practice of law as authorized by other law and who solicit or advertise for legal employment in Florida or who target solicitations or advertisements for legal employment at Florida residents.

For example, in the areas of immigration, patent, and tax, a lawyer from another jurisdiction may establish a regular or permanent presence in Florida to practice only that specific federal practice as authorized by federal law. Such a lawyer must comply with this subchapter for all advertisements disseminated in Florida or that target Florida residents for legal employment. Such a lawyer must include in all advertisements that the lawyer is “Not a Member of The Florida Bar” or “Admitted in [jurisdiction where admitted] Only” or the lawyer’s limited area of practice, such as “practice limited to [area of practice] law.” See *Fla. Bar v. Kaiser*, 397 So. 2d 1132 (Fla. 1981).

A lawyer from another jurisdiction is not authorized to establish a regular or permanent presence in Florida to practice law in an area in which that lawyer is not authorized to practice or to advertise for legal services the lawyer is not authorized to provide in Florida. For example, although a lawyer from another state may petition a court to permit admission pro hac vice on a specific Florida case, no law authorizes a pro hac vice practice on a general or permanent basis in the state of Florida. A lawyer cannot advertise for Florida cases within the state of Florida or target advertisements to Florida residents, because such an advertisement in and of itself constitutes the unlicensed practice of law.

A lawyer from another jurisdiction may be authorized to provide Florida residents legal services in another jurisdiction. For example, if a class action suit is pending in another state, a lawyer from another jurisdiction may represent Florida residents in the litigation. Any such advertisements disseminated within the state of Florida or targeting Florida residents must comply with this subchapter.

Adopted January 31, 2013, effective May 1, 2013 (108 So.3d 609).

#### **RULE 4-7.12 REQUIRED CONTENT**

**(a) Name and Office Location.** All advertisements for legal employment must include:

(1) the name of at least 1 lawyer, the law firm, the lawyer referral service if the advertisement is for the lawyer referral service, the qualifying provider if the advertisement is for the qualifying provider, or the lawyer directory if the advertisement is for the lawyer directory, responsible for the content of the advertisement; and

(2) the city, town, or county of 1 or more bona fide office locations of the lawyer who will perform the services advertised.

**(b) Referrals.** If the case or matter will be referred to another lawyer or law firm, the advertisement must include a statement to this effect.

**(c) Languages Used in Advertising.** Any words or statements required by this subchapter to appear in an advertisement must appear in the same language in which the advertisement appears. If more than 1 language is used in an advertisement, any words or statements required by this subchapter must appear in each language used in the advertisement.

**(d) Clear and Conspicuous and Legibility.** Any information required by these rules to appear in an advertisement must be clear and conspicuous and must be clearly legible if written, or intelligible if spoken. Information is clear and conspicuous if it is written, displayed, or presented in such a way that a reasonable person should notice it.

## **Comment**

### **Name of lawyer or lawyer referral service**

All advertisements are required to contain the name of at least 1 lawyer who is responsible for the content of the advertisement. For purposes of this rule, including the name of the law firm is sufficient. A lawyer referral service, qualifying provider or lawyer directory must include its actual legal name or a registered fictitious name in all advertisements in order to comply with this requirement.

## **Geographic location**

For the purposes of this rule, a bona fide office is defined as a physical location maintained by the lawyer or law firm where the lawyer or law firm reasonably expects to furnish legal services in a substantial way on a regular and continuing basis.

An office in which there is little or no full-time staff, the lawyer is not present on a regular and continuing basis, and where a substantial portion of the necessary legal services will not be provided, is not a bona fide office for purposes of this rule. An advertisement cannot state or imply that a lawyer has offices in a location where the lawyer has no bona fide office. However, an advertisement may state that a lawyer is “available for consultation” or “available by appointment” or has a “satellite” office at a location where the lawyer does not have a bona fide office, if the statement is true.

## **Referrals to other lawyers**

If the advertising lawyer knows at the time the advertisement is disseminated that the lawyer intends to refer some cases generated from an advertisement to another lawyer, the advertisement must state that fact. An example of an appropriate disclaimer is as follows: “Your case may be referred to another lawyer.”

## **Language of advertisement**

Any information required by these rules to appear in an advertisement must appear in all languages used in the advertisement. If a specific disclaimer is required in order to avoid the advertisement misleading the viewer, the disclaimer must be made in the same language that the statement requiring the disclaimer appears.

## **Clear and conspicuous**

**Information required by these rules to appear in an advertisement must be clear and conspicuous. If a disclaimer is required to modify specific written text, generally it will be**

**clear and conspicuous if it receives equal or greater prominence, presentation, and placement and appears in close proximity relative to the text to be modified. For example, if a disclaimer is required to modify specific written text, generally it will be clear and conspicuous if it appears in the same or larger size text and immediately together with the text to be modified. If a disclaimer is required to modify spoken words, generally it will be clear and conspicuous if spoken at the same volume, tone, and speed as the words it modifies. If a disclaimer appears in text to modify spoken words, generally it will be clear and conspicuous if displayed in sufficiently large text that a reasonable person should notice it, at the same time the words it modifies are spoken, and for the duration of the time as the words it modifies. The overarching consideration for required information or a disclaimer is that consumers notice it, read or hear it, and understand it.**

Adopted January 31, 2013, effective May 1, 2013 (108 So.3d 609), amended March 8, 2018, effective April 30, 2018 (238 So.3d 164); amended June 22, 2023, effective August 21, 2023 (SC22-1294).

#### **RULE 4-7.13 DECEPTIVE AND INHERENTLY MISLEADING ADVERTISEMENTS**

A lawyer may not engage in deceptive or inherently misleading advertising.

**(a) Deceptive and Inherently Misleading Advertisements.**

An advertisement is deceptive or inherently misleading if it:

- (1) contains a material statement that is factually or legally inaccurate;
- (2) omits information that is necessary to prevent the information supplied from being misleading; or
- (3) implies the existence of a material nonexistent fact.

**(b) Examples of Deceptive and Inherently Misleading Advertisements.** Deceptive or inherently misleading advertisements include, but are not limited to, advertisements that contain:

(1) statements or information that a prospective client can reasonably interpret as a prediction or guaranty of success or specific results;

(2) references to past results, unless the information is objectively verifiable, subject to rule 4-7.14;

(3) comparisons of lawyers or statements, words, or phrases that characterize a lawyer's or law firm's skills, experience, reputation, or record, unless the characterization is objectively verifiable;

(4) references to areas of practice in which the lawyer or law firm does not practice or intend to practice at the time of the advertisement;

(5) a voice or image that creates the erroneous impression that the person speaking or shown is the advertising lawyer or a lawyer or employee of the advertising firm unless the advertisement contains a clear and conspicuous disclaimer that the person is not an employee or member of the law firm;

(6) a dramatization of an actual or fictitious event that a reasonable viewer would not know is a dramatization from the context of the advertisement, unless the dramatization contains a clear and conspicuous disclaimer that it is a dramatization of either a real or fictitious event;

(7) an actor purporting to be engaged in a particular profession or occupation that a reasonable viewer would not know is a fictitious portrayal, unless the advertisement includes a clear and conspicuous disclaimer that the advertisement is using an actor to portray a person in the occupation or profession;

(8) statements, trade names, telephone numbers, Internet addresses, images, sounds, videos, or dramatizations that

state or imply the lawyer will engage in conduct or tactics that are prohibited by the Rules of Professional Conduct or any law or court rule;

(9) a testimonial:

(A) regarding matters on which the person making the testimonial is unqualified to evaluate;

(B) that is not the actual experience of the person making the testimonial;

(C) that does not represent what clients of that lawyer or law firm generally experience;

(D) that has been written or drafted by the lawyer;

(E) in exchange for which the person making the testimonial has been given something of value; or

(F) that does not include the disclaimer that the prospective client may not obtain the same or similar results;

(10) a statement or implication that The Florida Bar has approved an advertisement or a lawyer, except a statement that the lawyer is licensed to practice in Florida or has been certified under chapter 6, Rules Regulating The Florida Bar;

(11) a judicial, executive, or legislative branch title, unless accompanied by clear modifiers and placed after the person's name in reference to a current, former or retired judicial, executive, or legislative branch official currently engaged in the practice of law; or

(12) a statement or implication that another lawyer or law firm is part of, is associated with, or affiliated with the advertising law firm when that is not the case, including contact or other information presented in a way that misleads a person searching for a particular lawyer or law firm, or for information regarding a particular lawyer or law firm, to unknowingly contact a different lawyer or law firm.

## **Comment**

### **Material omissions**

An example of a material omission is stating “over 20 years’ experience” when the experience is the combined experience of all lawyers in the advertising firm. Another example is a lawyer who states “over 20 years’ experience” when the lawyer includes within that experience time spent as a paralegal, investigator, police officer, or other nonlawyer position.

### **Implied existence of nonexistent fact**

An example of the implied existence of a nonexistent fact is an advertisement stating that a lawyer has offices in multiple states if the lawyer is not licensed in those states or is not authorized to practice law. Such a statement implies the nonexistent fact that a lawyer is licensed or is authorized to practice law in the states where offices are located.

Another example of the implied existence of a nonexistent fact is a statement in an advertisement that a lawyer is a founding member of a legal organization when the lawyer has just begun practicing law. Such a statement falsely implies that the lawyer has been practicing law longer than the lawyer actually has.

### **Predictions of success**

Statements that promise a specific result or predict success in a legal matter are prohibited because they are misleading. Examples of statements that impermissibly predict success include: “I will save your home,” “I can save your home,” “I will get you money for your injuries,” and “Come to me to get acquitted of the charges pending against you.”

Statements regarding the legal process as opposed to a specific result generally will be considered permissible. For example, a statement that the lawyer or law firm will protect the client’s rights, protect the client’s assets, or protect the client’s family do not promise a specific legal result in a particular matter. Similarly, a statement that a lawyer will prepare a client to effectively handle

cross-examination is permissible, because it does not promise a specific result, but describes the legal process.

Aspirational statements are generally permissible as such statements describe goals that a lawyer or law firm will try to meet. Examples of aspirational words include “goal,” “strive,” “dedicated,” “mission,” and “philosophy.” For example, the statement, “My goal is to achieve the best possible result in your case,” is permissible. Similarly, the statement, “If you’ve been injured through no fault of your own, I am dedicated to recovering damages on your behalf,” is permissible.

Modifying language can be used to prevent language from running afoul of this rule. For example, the statement, “I will get you acquitted of the pending charges,” would violate the rule as it promises a specific legal result. In contrast, the statement, “I will pursue an acquittal of your pending charges,” does not promise a specific legal result. It merely conveys that the lawyer will try to obtain an acquittal on behalf of the prospective client. The following list is a nonexclusive list of words that generally may be used to modify language to prevent violations of the rule: try, pursue, may, seek, might, could, and designed to.

General statements describing a particular law or area of law are not promises of specific legal results or predictions of success. For example, the following statement is a description of the law and is not a promise of a specific legal result: “When the government takes your property through its eminent domain power, the government must provide you with compensation for your property.”

### **Past results**

The prohibitions in subdivisions (b)(1) and (b)(2) of this rule preclude advertisements about results obtained on behalf of a client, such as the amount of a damage award or the lawyer’s record in obtaining favorable verdicts, if the results are not objectively verifiable or are misleading, either alone or in the context in which they are used. For example, an advertised result that is atypical of persons under similar circumstances is likely to be

misleading. A result that omits pertinent information, such as failing to disclose that a specific judgment was uncontested or obtained by default, or failing to disclose that the judgment is far short of the client's actual damages, is also misleading. The information may create the unjustified expectation that similar results can be obtained for others without reference to the specific factual and legal circumstances. An example of a past result that can be objectively verified is that a lawyer has obtained acquittals in all charges in 4 criminal defense cases. On the other hand, general statements such as, "I have successfully represented clients," or "I have won numerous appellate cases," may or may not be sufficiently objectively verifiable. For example, a lawyer may interpret the words "successful" or "won" in a manner different from the average prospective client. In a criminal law context, the lawyer may interpret the word "successful" to mean a conviction to a lesser charge or a lower sentence than recommended by the prosecutor, while the average prospective client likely would interpret the words "successful" or "won" to mean an acquittal.

Rule 4-1.6(a), Rules Regulating The Florida Bar, prohibits a lawyer from voluntarily disclosing any information regarding a representation without a client's informed consent, unless one of the exceptions to rule 4-1.6 applies. A lawyer who wishes to advertise information about past results must have the affected client's informed consent. The fact that some or all of the information a lawyer may wish to advertise is in the public record does not obviate the need for the client's informed consent.

## **Comparisons**

The prohibition against comparisons that cannot be factually substantiated would preclude a lawyer from representing that the lawyer or the lawyer's law firm is "the best," or "one of the best," in a field of law.

On the other hand, statements that the law firm is the largest in a specified geographic area, or is the only firm in a specified geographic area that devotes its services to a particular field of practice are permissible if they are true, because they are comparisons capable of being factually substantiated.

## **Characterization of skills, experience, reputation or record**

The rule prohibits statements that characterize skills, experience, reputation, or record that are not objectively verifiable. Statements of a character trait or attribute are not statements that characterize skills, experience, or record. For example, a statement that a lawyer is aggressive, intelligent, creative, honest, or trustworthy is a statement of a lawyer's personal attribute, but does not characterize the lawyer's skills, experience, reputation, or record. These statements are permissible.

Descriptive statements characterizing skills, experience, reputation, or a record that are true and factually verified are permissible. For example, the statement "Our firm is the largest firm in this city that practices exclusively personal injury law," is permissible if true, because the statement is objectively verifiable. Similarly, the statement, "I have personally handled more appeals before the First District Court of Appeal than any other lawyer in my circuit," is permissible if the statement is true, because the statement is objectively verifiable.

Descriptive statements that are misleading are prohibited by this rule. Descriptive statements such as "the best," "second to none," or "the finest" will generally run afoul of this rule, as such statements are not objectively verifiable and are likely to mislead prospective clients as to the quality of the legal services offered.

Aspirational statements are generally permissible as such statements describe goals that a lawyer or law firm will try to meet. Examples of aspirational words include "goal," "dedicated," "mission," and "philosophy." For example, the statement, "I am dedicated to excellence in my representation of my clients," is permissible as a goal. Similarly, the statement, "My goal is to provide high quality legal services," is permissible.

## **Areas of practice**

This rule is not intended to prohibit lawyers from advertising for areas of practice in which the lawyer intends to personally handle cases, but does not yet have any cases of that particular type.

## **Dramatizations**

A re-creation or staging of an event where it is not clear from the context of the advertisement that the portrayal is a re-creation or staging of an event must contain a clear and conspicuous disclaimer. For example, a re-creation of a car accident must contain an appropriate clear and conspicuous disclaimer if the context of the advertisement makes the re-creation appear to be a matter handled by that law firm. A re-enactment of lawyers visiting the re-construction of an accident scene must contain an appropriate clear and conspicuous disclaimer if it is not clear from the advertisement that it is a re-enactment.

If an actor is used in an advertisement purporting to be engaged in a particular profession or occupation who is acting as a spokesperson for the lawyer or in any other circumstances where the viewer could be misled, a disclaimer must be used. However, an authority figure such as a judge or law enforcement officer, or an actor portraying an authority figure, may not be used in an advertisement to endorse or recommend a lawyer, or to act as a spokesperson for a lawyer under rule 4-7.15.

## **Implying lawyer will violate rules of conduct or law**

Advertisements which state or imply that the advertising lawyers will engage in conduct that violates the Rules of Professional Conduct are prohibited. The Supreme Court of Florida found that lawyer advertisements containing an illustration of a pit bull canine and the telephone number 1-800-pitbull were false, misleading, and manipulative, because use of that animal implied that the advertising lawyers would engage in “combative and vicious tactics” that would violate the Rules of Professional Conduct. *Fla. Bar v. Pape*, 918 So. 2d 240 (Fla.2005).

## **Testimonials**

A testimonial is a personal statement, affirmation, or endorsement by any person other than the advertising lawyer or a member of the advertising lawyer’s firm regarding the quality of the lawyer’s services or the results obtained through the representation. Clients as consumers are well-qualified to opine on matters such as

courtesy, promptness, efficiency, and professional demeanor. Testimonials by clients on these matters, as long as they are truthful and are based on the actual experience of the person giving the testimonial, are beneficial to prospective clients and are permissible. A current or former client who is a celebrity may offer a truthful testimonial if the testimonial complies with the requirements of this rule.

### **Florida bar approval of ad or lawyer**

An advertisement may not state or imply that either the advertisement or the lawyer has been approved by The Florida Bar. Such a statement or implication implies that The Florida Bar endorses a particular lawyer. Statements prohibited by this provision include, “This advertisement was approved by The Florida Bar.” A lawyer referral service also may not state that it is a “Florida Bar approved lawyer referral service,” unless the service is a not-for-profit lawyer referral service approved under chapter 8 of the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar. A qualifying provider also may not state that it is a “Florida Bar approved qualifying provider” or that its advertising is approved by The Florida Bar.

### **Judicial, executive, and legislative titles**

This rule prohibits use of a judicial, executive, or legislative branch title, unless accompanied by clear modifiers and placed after the person’s name, when used to refer to a current or former officer of the judicial, executive, or legislative branch. Use of a title before a name is inherently misleading in that it implies that the current or former officer has improper influence. Thus, the titles Senator Doe, Representative Smith, Judge Doe (Retired), Former Justice Doe, Retired Judge Smith, Justice Smith (Retired), Governor (Retired) Doe, Former Senator Smith, and other similar titles used as titles in conjunction with the lawyer’s name are prohibited by this rule. This includes, but is not limited to, use of the title in advertisements and written communications, computer-accessed communications, letterhead, and business cards.

However, an accurate representation of one’s judicial, executive, or legislative experience is permitted if the reference is

after the lawyer's name and is clearly modified by terms such as "former" or "retired." For example, a former judge may state "Jane Doe, Florida Bar member, former circuit judge" or "Jane Doe, retired circuit judge."

As another example, a former state representative may not include "Representative Smith (former)" or "Representative Smith, retired" in an advertisement, letterhead, or business card. However, a former representative may state, "John Smith, Florida Bar member, former state representative."

Further, an accurate representation of one's judicial, executive, or legislative experience is permitted in reference to background and experience in biographies, curriculum vitae, and resumes if accompanied by clear modifiers and placed after the person's name. For example, the statement "John Jones was governor of the State of Florida from [ . . . years of service . . . ]" would be permissible.

Also, the rule governs lawyer advertising. It does not apply to pleadings filed in a court. A practicing lawyer who is a former or retired judge may not use the title in any form in a court pleading. A former or retired judge who uses that former or retired judge's previous title of "Judge" in a pleading could be sanctioned.

### **Implication of association or affiliation with another lawyer or law firm**

This rule prohibits any statement or implication that a lawyer or law firm is affiliated or associated with the advertising lawyer or law firm when that is not the case. Lawyers may not state or imply another lawyer is part of the advertising firm if the statement or implication is untrue. For example, when a lawyer leaves a law firm, the firm must remove the lawyer's name from the firm's letterhead, website, advertisements, and other communications about the law firm. An example of impermissible advertising would be including the name of a lawyer or law firm that is not part of the advertising law firm in an Internet advertisement or sponsored link that is displayed when the non-affiliated lawyer or law firm's name is used as a search term when the advertisement does not clearly

indicate that the non-affiliated lawyer or law firm is not part of the advertising law firm. Another example of impermissible conduct is use of another lawyer or law firm name as an Internet search term that triggers the display of an advertisement that does not clearly indicate that the advertisement is for a lawyer or law firm that is not the lawyer or law firm used as the search term. The triggered advertisement would not be misleading if the first text displayed is the name of the advertising lawyer or law firm and, if the displayed law firm name is a trade name that does not contain the name of a current or deceased partner, the name of the lawyer responsible for the advertisement is also displayed as the first text.

Adopted January 31, 2013, effective May 1, 2013 (108 So.3d 609); amended March 8, 2018, effective April 30, 2018 (238 So.3d 164); amended March 3, 2022, effective May 2, 2022 (SC20-1467); amended June 22, 2023, effective August 21, 2023 (SC22-1294).

#### **RULE 4-7.14 POTENTIALLY MISLEADING ADVERTISEMENTS**

A lawyer may not engage in potentially misleading advertising.

**(a) Potentially Misleading Advertisements.** Potentially misleading advertisements include, but are not limited to:

(1) advertisements that are subject to varying reasonable interpretations, 1 or more of which would be materially misleading when considered in the relevant context;

(2) advertisements that are literally accurate, but could reasonably mislead a prospective client regarding a material fact;

(3) references to a lawyer's membership in, or recognition by, an entity that purports to base the membership or recognition on a lawyer's ability or skill, unless the entity conferring the membership or recognition is generally recognized within the legal profession as being a bona fide organization that makes its selections based on objective and uniformly applied criteria, and that includes among its members or those recognized a reasonable cross-section of the legal community the entity purports to cover;

(4) a statement that a lawyer is board certified or other variations of that term unless:

(A) the lawyer has been certified under the Florida Certification Plan as set forth in chapter 6, Rules Regulating The Florida Bar and the advertisement includes the area of certification and that The Florida Bar is the certifying organization;

(B) the lawyer has been certified by an organization whose specialty certification program has been accredited by the American Bar Association or The Florida Bar as provided elsewhere in these rules and the advertisement includes the area of certification and the name of the certifying organization; or

(C) the lawyer has been certified by another state bar if the state bar program grants certification on the basis of standards reasonably comparable to the standards of the Florida Certification Plan set forth in chapter 6 of these rules and the advertisement includes the area of certification and the name of the certifying organization;

(5) a statement that the lawyer is a specialist or an expert in an area of practice, or other variations of those terms, unless the lawyer is certified under the Florida Certification Plan or an American Bar Association or Florida Bar accredited certification plan or the lawyer can objectively verify the claim based on the lawyer's education, training, experience, or substantial involvement in the area of practice in which specialization or expertise is claimed;

(6) a statement that a law firm specializes or has expertise in an area of practice, or other variations of those terms, unless the law firm can objectively verify the claim as to at least 1 of the lawyers who are members of or employed by the law firm as set forth in subdivision (a)(5) above, but if the law firm cannot objectively verify the claim for every lawyer employed by the firm, the advertisement must contain a clear and conspicuous disclaimer that not all lawyers in the firm specialize or have expertise in the area of practice in which the firm claims specialization or expertise; or

(7) information about the lawyer’s fee, including those that indicate no fee will be charged in the absence of a recovery, unless the advertisement discloses all fees and expenses for which the client might be liable and any other material information relating to the fee. A lawyer who advertises a specific fee or range of fees for a particular service must honor the advertised fee or range of fees for at least 90 days unless the advertisement specifies a shorter period; provided that, for advertisements in the yellow pages of telephone directories or other media not published more frequently than annually, the advertised fee or range of fees must be honored for no less than 1 year following publication.

**(b) Clarifying Information.** A lawyer may use an advertisement that would otherwise be potentially misleading if the advertisement contains information or statements that adequately clarify the potentially misleading issue.

### **Comment**

#### **Awards, honors, and ratings**

Awards, honors, and ratings are not subjective statements characterizing a lawyer’s skills, experience, reputation, or record. Instead, they are statements of objectively verifiable facts from which an inference of quality may be drawn. It is therefore permissible under the rule for a lawyer to list bona fide awards, honors, and recognitions using the name or title of the actual award and the date it was given. If the award was given in the same year that the advertisement is disseminated or the advertisement references a rating that is current at the time the advertisement is disseminated, the year of the award or rating is not required.

For example, the following statements are permissible:

“John Doe is AV rated by Martindale-Hubbell. This rating is Martindale-Hubbell’s highest rating.”

“Jane Smith was named a 2008 Florida Super Lawyer by Super Lawyers Magazine.”

## **Claims of board certification, specialization or expertise**

This rule permits a lawyer or law firm to indicate areas of practice in communications about the lawyer's or law firm's services, provided the advertising lawyer or law firm actually practices in those areas of law at the time the advertisement is disseminated. If a lawyer practices only in certain fields, or will not accept matters except in those fields, the lawyer is permitted to indicate that. A lawyer also may indicate that the lawyer concentrates in, focuses on, or limits the lawyer's practice to particular areas of practice as long as the statements are true. A lawyer who is not certified by The Florida Bar, by another state bar with comparable standards, or an organization accredited by the American Bar Association or The Florida Bar may not be described to the public as "certified" or "board certified" or any variation of similar import. A lawyer may indicate that the lawyer concentrates in, focuses on, or limits the lawyer's practice to particular areas of practice as long as the statements are true.

Certification is specific to individual lawyers; a law firm cannot be certified in an area of practice per subdivision (c) of rule 6-3.4. Therefore, an advertisement may not state that a law firm is certified in any area of practice.

A lawyer can only state or imply that the lawyer is "certified" in the actual area(s) of practice in which the lawyer is certified. A lawyer who is board certified in civil trial law, may state that, but may not state that the lawyer is certified in personal injury.

The criteria set forth in the Florida Certification Plan is designed to establish a reasonable degree of objectivity and uniformity so that the use of the terms "specialization," "expertise," or other variations of those terms, conveys some meaningful information to the public and is not misleading. A lawyer who meets the criteria for certification in a particular field automatically qualifies to state that the lawyer is a specialist or expert in the area of certification. However, a lawyer making a claim of specialization or expertise is not required to be certified in the claimed field of specialization or expertise or to have met the specific criterion for certification if the lawyer can demonstrate that the lawyer has the

education, training, experience, or substantial involvement in the area of practice commensurate with specialization or expertise.

A law firm claim of specialization or expertise may be based on 1 lawyer who is a member of or employed by the law firm either having the requisite board certification or being able to objectively verify the requisite qualifications enumerated in this rule. For purposes of this rule, a lawyer's "of counsel" relationship with a law firm is a sufficiently close relationship to permit a law firm to claim specialization or expertise based on the "of counsel" lawyer's board certification or qualifications only if the "of counsel" practices law solely through the law firm claiming specialization or expertise and provides substantial legal services through the firm as to allow the firm to reasonably rely on the "of counsel" qualifications in making the claim.

**A disclaimer that not all lawyers in the firm specialize or have expertise when a firm claims specialization or expertise is clear and conspicuous when it is written, displayed, or presented in the same or larger text if appearing immediately together with the text making the claim of firm specialization or expertise; spoken in the same volume, tone, and speed as the claim of firm specialization or expertise and at the same time as or immediately after the claim of firm specialization or expertise if spoken aloud; or any other way that a reasonable consumer should notice it, read or hear it, and understand it.**

### **Fee and cost information**

Every advertisement that contains information about the lawyer's fee, including a contingent fee, must disclose all fees and costs that the client will be liable for. If the client is, in fact, not responsible for any costs in addition to the fee, then no disclosure is necessary. For example, if a lawyer charges a flat fee to create and execute a will and there are no costs associated with the services, the lawyer's advertisement may state only the flat fee for that service.

However, if there are costs for which the client is responsible, the advertisement must disclose this fact. For example, if fees are

contingent on the outcome of the matter, but the client is responsible for costs regardless of the matter's outcome, the following statements are permissible: "No Fee if No Recovery, but Client is Responsible for Costs," "No Fee if No Recovery, Excludes Costs," "No Recovery, No Fee, but Client is Responsible for Costs" and other similar statements.

On the other hand, if both fees and costs are contingent on the outcome of a personal injury case, the statements "No Fees or Costs If No Recovery" and "No Recovery - No Fees or Costs" are permissible.

Adopted January 31, 2013, effective May 1, 2013 (108 So.3d 609);  
amended June 27, 2019, effective August 26, 2019 (274 So.3d 1046);  
amended June 22, 2023, effective August 21, 2023 (SC22-1294).

#### **RULE 4-7.15 UNDULY MANIPULATIVE OR INTRUSIVE ADVERTISEMENTS**

A lawyer may not engage in unduly manipulative or intrusive advertisements. An advertisement is unduly manipulative if it:

**(a)** uses an image, sound, video or dramatization in a manner that is designed to solicit legal employment by appealing to a prospective client's emotions rather than to a rational evaluation of a lawyer's suitability to represent the prospective client;

**(b)** uses an authority figure such as a judge or law enforcement officer, or an actor portraying an authority figure, to endorse or recommend the lawyer or act as a spokesperson for the lawyer;

**(c)** contains the voice or image of a celebrity, except that a lawyer may use the:

(1) the voice or image of a local announcer, disc jockey or radio personality who regularly records advertisements so long as the person recording the announcement does not endorse or offer a testimonial on behalf of the advertising lawyer or law firm, or

(2) testimonial of a celebrity who is a current or former client is the testimonial complies with the requirements of this subchapter; or

(d) offers consumers an economic incentive to employ the lawyer or review the lawyer's advertising; provided that this rule does not prohibit a lawyer from offering a discounted fee or special fee or cost structure as otherwise permitted by these rules and does not prohibit the lawyer from offering free legal advice or information that might indirectly benefit a consumer economically.

### **Comment**

#### **Unduly manipulative sounds and images**

Illustrations that are informational and not misleading are permissible. As examples, a graphic rendering of the scales of justice to indicate that the advertising lawyer practices law, a picture of the lawyer, or a map of the office location are permissible illustrations.

An illustration that provides specific information that is directly related to a particular type of legal claim is permissible. For example, a photograph of an actual medication to illustrate that the medication has been linked to adverse side effects is permissible. An x-ray of a lung that has been damaged by asbestos would also be permissible. A picture or video that illustrates the nature of a particular claim or practice, such as a person on crutches or in jail, is permissible.

An illustration or photograph of a car that has been in an accident would be permissible to indicate that the lawyer handles car accident cases. Similarly, an illustration or photograph of a construction site would be permissible to show either that the lawyer handles construction law matters or workers' compensation matters. An illustration or photograph of a house with a foreclosure sale sign is permissible to indicate that the lawyer handles foreclosure matters. An illustration or photograph of a person with a stack of bills to indicate that the lawyer handles bankruptcy is also permissible. An illustration or photograph of a person being arrested, a person in jail, or an accurate rendering of a traffic stop

also is permissible. An illustration, photograph, or portrayal of a bulldozer to indicate that the lawyer handles eminent domain matters is permissible. Illustrations, photographs, or scenes of doctors examining x-rays are permissible to show that a lawyer handles medical malpractice or medical products liability cases. An image, dramatization, or sound of a car accident actually occurring would also be permissible, as long as it is not unduly manipulative.

Although some illustrations are permissible, an advertisement that contains an image, sound or dramatization that is unduly manipulative is not. For example, a dramatization or illustration of a car accident occurring in which graphic injuries are displayed is not permissible. A depiction of a child being taken from a crying mother is not permissible because it seeks to evoke an emotional response and is unrelated to conveying useful information to the prospective client regarding hiring a lawyer. Likewise, a dramatization of an insurance adjuster persuading an accident victim to sign a settlement is unduly manipulative, because it is likely to convince a viewer to hire the advertiser solely on the basis of the manipulative advertisement.

Some illustrations are used to seek attention so that viewers will receive the advertiser's message. So long as those illustrations, images, or dramatizations are not unduly manipulative, they are permissible, even if they do not directly relate to the selection of a particular lawyer.

### **Use of celebrities**

A lawyer or law firm advertisement may not contain the voice or image of a celebrity with limited exceptions. A celebrity is an individual who is known to the target audience and whose voice or image is recognizable to the intended audience. A person can be a celebrity on a regional or local level, not just a national level. Local announcers or disc jockeys and radio personalities are regularly used to record advertisements. Use of a local announcer or disc jockey or a radio personality to record an advertisement is permissible under this rule as long as the person recording the announcement does not endorse or offer a testimonial on behalf of the advertising lawyer or law firm. Additionally, an advertisement

may include the testimonial of a celebrity who is a current or former client of the advertising lawyer or law firm if the testimonial complies with all other applicable requirements of this subchapter.

Adopted January 31, 2013, effective May 1, 2013 (108 So.3d 609), amended August 29, 2024, effective October 28, 2024 (SC2024-0032).

#### **RULE 4-7.16 PRESUMPTIVELY VALID CONTENT**

The following information in advertisements is presumed not to violate the provisions of rules 4-7.11 through 4-7.15:

**(a) Lawyers and Law Firms.** A lawyer or law firm may include the following information in advertisements and unsolicited written communications:

(1) the name of the lawyer or law firm subject to the requirements of this rule and rule 4-7.21, a listing of lawyers associated with the firm, office locations and parking arrangements, disability accommodations, telephone numbers, website addresses, and electronic mail addresses, office and telephone service hours, social media contact information including social media icons or logos, and a designation such as “attorney” or “law firm”;

(2) date of admission to The Florida Bar and any other bars, current membership or positions held in The Florida Bar or its sections or committees or those of other state bars, former membership or positions held in The Florida Bar or its sections or committees with dates of membership or those of other state bars, former positions of employment held in the legal profession with dates the positions were held, years of experience practicing law, number of lawyers in the advertising law firm, and a listing of federal courts and jurisdictions other than Florida where the lawyer is licensed to practice;

(3) technical and professional licenses granted by the state or other recognized licensing authorities and educational degrees received, including dates and institutions;

(4) military service, including branch and dates of service;

(5) foreign language ability;

(6) fields of law in which the lawyer practices, including official certification logos, subject to the requirements of this subchapter regarding use of terms such as certified, specialist, and expert;

(7) prepaid or group legal service plans in which the lawyer participates;

(8) acceptance of credit cards;

(9) fee for initial consultation and fee schedule, subject to the requirements of this subchapter regarding cost disclosures and honoring advertised fees;

(10) common salutary language such as “best wishes,” “good luck,” “happy holidays,” “pleased to announce,” or “proudly serving your community”;

(11) punctuation marks and common typographical marks;

(12) an illustration of the scales of justice not deceptively similar to official certification logos or The Florida Bar logo, a gavel, traditional renditions of Lady Justice, the Statue of Liberty, the American flag, the American eagle, the State of Florida flag, an unadorned set of law books, the inside or outside of a courthouse, column(s), diploma(s), or a photograph of the lawyer or lawyers who are members of, or employed by, the firm against a plain background such as a plain unadorned office or a plain unadorned set of law books.

**(b) Lawyer Referral Services and Qualifying Providers.** A lawyer referral service or qualifying provider may advertise its name, location, telephone number, the fee charged, its hours of operation, the process by which referrals or matches are made, the areas of law in which referrals or matches are offered, the geographic area in which the lawyers practice to whom those responding to the advertisement will be referred or matched. The Florida Bar’s lawyer referral service or a lawyer referral service

approved by The Florida Bar under chapter 8 of the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar also may advertise the logo of its sponsoring bar association and its nonprofit status.

### **Comment**

The presumptively valid content creates a safe harbor for lawyers. A lawyer desiring a safe harbor from discipline may choose to limit the content of an advertisement to the information listed in this rule and, if the information is true, the advertisement complies with these rules. However, a lawyer is not required to limit the information in an advertisement to the presumptively valid content, as long as all information in the advertisement complies with these rules.

Adopted January 31, 2013, effective May 1, 2013 (108 So.3d 609); amended March 8, 2018, effective April 30, 2018 (238 So.3d 164); amended June 22, 2023, effective (SC22-1294).

### **RULE 4-7.17 PAYMENT FOR ADVERTISING AND PROMOTION**

**(a) Payment by Other Lawyers.** No lawyer may, directly or indirectly, pay all or a part of the cost of an advertisement by a lawyer not in the same firm. Rule 4-1.5(f)(4)(D) (regarding the division of contingency fees) is not affected by this provision even though the lawyer covered by subdivision (f)(4)(D)(ii) of rule 4-1.5 advertises.

**(b) Payment for Referrals.** A lawyer may not give anything of value to a person for recommending the lawyer's services, except that a lawyer may pay the reasonable cost of advertising permitted by these rules, may pay the usual charges of a lawyer referral service, lawyer directory, qualifying provider or other legal service organization, and may purchase a law practice in accordance with rule 4-1.17.

**(c) Payment by Nonlawyers.** A lawyer may not permit a nonlawyer to pay all or a part of the cost of an advertisement by that lawyer.

## Comment

### **Paying for the Advertisements of Another Lawyer**

A lawyer is not permitted to pay for the advertisements of another lawyer not in the same firm. This rule is not intended to prohibit more than 1 law firm from advertising jointly, but the advertisement must contain all required information as to each advertising law firm.

### **Paying Others for Recommendations**

A lawyer is allowed to pay for advertising permitted by this rule and for the purchase of a law practice in accordance with the provisions of rule 4-1.17, but otherwise is not permitted to pay or provide other tangible benefits to another person for procuring professional work. However, a legal aid agency or prepaid legal services plan may pay to advertise legal services provided under its auspices. Likewise, a lawyer may participate in lawyer referral programs, qualifying providers, or lawyer directories and pay the usual fees charged by such programs, subject, however, to the limitations imposed by rule 4-7.22. This rule does not prohibit paying regular compensation to an assistant, such as a secretary or advertising consultant, to prepare communications permitted by this rule.

Adopted January 31, 2013, effective May 1, 2013 (108 So.3d 609);  
amended March 8, 2018, effective April 30, 2018 (238 So.3d 164).

## **RULE 4-7.18 DIRECT CONTACT WITH PROSPECTIVE CLIENTS**

**(a) Solicitation.** Except as provided in subdivision (b) of this rule, a lawyer may not:

(1) solicit in person, or permit employees or agents of the lawyer to solicit in person on the lawyer's behalf, professional employment from a prospective client with whom the lawyer has no family or prior professional relationship when a significant motive for the lawyer's doing so is the lawyer's pecuniary gain. The term "solicit" includes contact in person, by telephone, by electronic means that include real-time communication face-to-face such as

video telephone or video conference, or by other communication directed to a specific recipient that does not meet the requirements of subdivision (b) of this rule and rules 4-7.11 through 4-7.17 of these rules; and

(2) enter into an agreement for, charge, or collect a fee for professional employment obtained in violation of this rule.

**(b) Written Communication.**

(1) A lawyer may not send, or knowingly permit to be sent, on the lawyer's behalf or on behalf of the lawyer's firm or partner, an associate, or any other lawyer affiliated with the lawyer or the lawyer's firm, a written communication directly or indirectly to a prospective client for the purpose of obtaining professional employment if:

(A) the written communication concerns an action for personal injury or wrongful death or otherwise relates to an accident or disaster involving the person to whom the communication is addressed or a relative of that person, unless the accident or disaster occurred more than 30 days prior to the mailing of the communication;

(B) the written communication concerns a specific matter and the lawyer knows or reasonably should know that the person to whom the communication is directed is represented by a lawyer in the matter;

(C) it has been made known to the lawyer that the person does not want to receive such communications from the lawyer;

(D) the communication involves coercion, duress, fraud, overreaching, harassment, intimidation, or undue influence;

(E) the communication violates rules 4-7.11 through 4-7.17 of these rules;

(F) the lawyer knows or reasonably should know that the physical, emotional, or mental state of the person makes it

unlikely that the person would exercise reasonable judgment in employing a lawyer; or

(G) the communication concerns a request for an injunction for protection against any form of physical violence and is addressed to the respondent in the injunction petition, if the lawyer knows or reasonably should know that the respondent named in the injunction petition has not yet been served with notice of process in the matter.

(2) Written communications to prospective clients for the purpose of obtaining professional employment that are not prohibited by subdivision (b)(1) are subject to the following requirements:

(A) These communications are subject to the requirements of 4-7.11 through 4-7.17 of these rules.

(B) Each separate enclosure of the communication and the face of an envelope containing the communication must be clearly and conspicuously marked “advertisement.” If the written communication is in the form of a self-mailing brochure or pamphlet, the “advertisement” mark must be clearly and conspicuously marked on the address panel of the brochure or pamphlet, on the inside of the brochure or pamphlet, and on each separate enclosure. If the written communication is sent via email, the subject line of the email must begin with the word “Advertisement,” and any attachment to the email must also be clearly and conspicuously marked “advertisement.” The term “advertisement” is sufficiently clear and conspicuous if it is written, displayed, or presented in larger and contrasting text relative to other text appearing on the page or any other way that a reasonable consumer should notice it.

(C) Every written communication must include a written statement detailing the background, training and experience of the lawyer or law firm. This statement must include information about the specific experience of the advertising lawyer or law firm in the area or areas of law for which professional employment is sought. Every written communication disseminated by a lawyer

referral service must include a written statement detailing the background, training, and experience of each lawyer to whom the recipient may be referred.

(D) If a contract for representation accompanies the written communication, the top of each page of the contract must be marked “SAMPLE” in red ink in a type size one size larger than the largest type used in the contract and the words “DO NOT SIGN” must appear on the client signature line.

(E) Written communications must not resemble legal pleadings or other legal documents.

(F) If a lawyer other than the lawyer whose name or signature appears on the communication will actually handle the case or matter, or if the case or matter will be referred to another lawyer or law firm, any written communication concerning a specific matter must include a statement so advising the client.

(G) Any written communication prompted by a specific occurrence and directed to a recipient that the lawyer knows or reasonably should know directly involves or affects the intended recipient of the communication or a family member must disclose how the lawyer obtained the information prompting the communication. The disclosure required by this rule must be specific enough to enable the recipient to understand the extent of the lawyer’s knowledge regarding the recipient’s particular situation.

(H) A written communication prompted by a specific occurrence and directed to a recipient that the lawyer knows or reasonably should know directly involves or affects the intended recipient or a family member in a specific matter must not reveal on the envelope, or on the outside of a self-mailing brochure or pamphlet, the nature of the recipient’s legal problem.

(3) The requirements in subdivision (b)(2) of this rule do not apply to communications between lawyers, between lawyers and their own current and former clients, or between lawyers and their own family members, or to communications by the lawyer at a prospective client’s request.

## Comment

### Permissible contact

**A lawyer may initiate the routine mutual exchange of contact information with prospective clients who are attending the same business or professional conference or meeting or business-related social gathering if the lawyer initiates no further discussion of a specific legal matter. Similarly, a lawyer may initiate the exchange of contact information and profiles via a specific social media platform that is established for the purpose of businesses and professionals exchanging this type of information if the lawyer initiates no discussion of specific legal matters. If a prospective client then initiates discussion of a specific legal matter, the lawyer should decline to discuss the matter at the initial contact and defer further discussion to a more appropriate location when the discussion would endanger a prospective client's confidentiality. Lawyers should not interpret the above to allow a lawyer who knows a person has a specific legal problem to go to a specific conference or meeting where that prospective client will be in attendance in order to initiate the exchange of contact information. An accident scene, a hospital room of an injured person, or a doctor's office are not business or professional conferences or meetings within the meaning of the discussion above.**

### Prior professional relationship

Persons with whom the lawyer has a prior professional relationship are exempted from the general prohibition against direct, in-person solicitation. A prior professional relationship requires that the lawyer personally had a direct and continuing relationship with the person in the lawyer's capacity as a professional. Thus, a lawyer with a continuing relationship as the patient of a doctor, for example, does not have the professional relationship contemplated by the rule because the lawyer is not involved in the relationship in the lawyer's professional capacity. Similarly, a lawyer who is a member of a charitable organization totally unrelated to the practice of law and who has a direct

personal relationship with another member of that organization does not fall within the definition.

On the other hand, a lawyer who is the legal advisor to a charitable board and who has direct, continuing relationships with members of that board does have prior professional relationships with those board members as contemplated by the rule. Additionally, a lawyer who has a direct, continuing relationship with another professional where both are members of a trade organization related to both the lawyer's and the nonlawyer's practices would also fall within the definition. A lawyer's relationship with a doctor because of the doctor's role as an expert witness is another example of a prior professional relationship as provided in the rule.

A lawyer who merely shared a membership in an organization in common with another person without any direct, personal contact would not have a prior professional relationship for purposes of this rule. Similarly, a lawyer who speaks at a seminar does not develop a professional relationship within the meaning of the rule with seminar attendees merely by virtue of being a speaker.

### **Disclosing where the lawyer obtained information**

In addition, the lawyer or law firm should reveal the source of information used to determine that the recipient has a potential legal problem. Disclosure of the information source will help the recipient to understand the extent of knowledge the lawyer or law firm has regarding the recipient's particular situation and will avoid misleading the recipient into believing that the lawyer has particularized knowledge about the recipient's matter if the lawyer does not. The lawyer or law firm must disclose sufficient information or explanation to allow the recipient to locate the information that prompted the communication from the lawyer.

Alternatively, the direct mail advertisement would comply with this rule if the advertisement discloses how much information the lawyer has about the matter.

For example, a direct mail advertisement for criminal defense matters would comply if it stated that the lawyer's only knowledge

about the prospective client's matter is the client's name, contact information, date of arrest, and charge. In the context of securities arbitration, a direct mail advertisement would comply with this requirement by stating, if true, that the lawyer obtained information from a list of investors, and the only information on that list is the prospective client's name, address, and the fact that the prospective client invested in a specific company.

### **Disclosing the nature of the prospective client's legal problem**

This requirement does not apply where a written communication is prompted by a specific occurrence with widespread impact, such as a hurricane or a flood, where although the communication has been prompted by a specific occurrence, the lawyer neither knows nor has reason to know that the intended recipient was in fact affected by the specific occurrence.

### **Group or prepaid legal services plans**

This rule would not prohibit a lawyer from contacting representatives of organizations or groups that may be interested in establishing a group or prepaid legal plan for its members, insureds, beneficiaries, or other third parties for the purpose of informing such entities of the availability of, and details concerning, the plan or arrangement that the lawyer or the lawyer's law firm is willing to offer. This form of communication is not directed to a specific prospective client known to need legal services related to a particular matter. Rather, it is usually addressed to an individual acting in a fiduciary capacity seeking a supplier of legal services for others who may, if they choose, become clients of the lawyer. Under these circumstances, the activity that the lawyer undertakes in communicating with these representatives and the type of information transmitted to the individual are functionally similar to and serve the same purpose as advertising permitted under other rules in this subchapter.

Adopted January 31, 2013, effective May 1, 2013 (108 So.3d 609), amended November 9, 2017, effective February 1, 2018; amended March 3, 2022, effective May 2, 2022 (SC20-1467); amended June 22, 2023, effective August 21, 2023 (SC22-1294).

## **RULE 4-7.19 EVALUATION OF ADVERTISEMENTS**

**(a) Filing Requirements.** Subject to the exemptions stated in rule 4-7.20, any lawyer who advertises services must file with The Florida Bar a copy of each advertisement at least 20 days prior to the lawyer's first dissemination of the advertisement. The advertisement must be filed with The Florida Bar in the manner specified by The Florida Bar as posted on its website.

**(b) Evaluation by The Florida Bar.** The Florida Bar will evaluate all advertisements filed with it under this rule for compliance with the applicable provisions set forth in rules 4-7.11 through 4-7.15 and 4-7.18(b)(2). If The Florida Bar does not send any communication to the filer within 15 days of receipt by The Florida Bar of a complete filing, or within 15 days of receipt by The Florida Bar of additional information when requested within the initial 15 days, the lawyer will not be subject to discipline by The Florida Bar, except if The Florida later notifies the lawyer of noncompliance, the lawyer may be subject to discipline for dissemination of the advertisement after the notice of noncompliance.

**(c) Preliminary Opinions.** A lawyer may obtain an advisory opinion concerning the compliance of a contemplated advertisement prior to production of the advertisement by submitting to The Florida Bar a draft or script that includes all spoken or printed words appearing in the advertisement, a description of any visual images to be used in the advertisement, and the fee specified in this rule. The voluntary prior submission does not satisfy the filing and evaluation requirements of these rules, but once completed, The Florida Bar will not charge an additional fee for evaluation of the completed advertisement.

**(d) Opinions on Exempt Advertisements.** A lawyer may obtain an advisory opinion concerning the compliance of an existing or contemplated advertisement intended to be used by the lawyer seeking the advisory opinion that is not required to be filed for review by submitting the material and fee specified in this rule to The Florida Bar, except that a lawyer may not file an entire website for review. Instead, a lawyer may obtain an advisory opinion

concerning the compliance of a specific page, provision, statement, illustration, or photograph on a website.

**(e) Facial Compliance.** Evaluation of advertisements is limited to determination of facial compliance with rules 4-7.11 through 4-7.15 and 4-7.18(b)(2), and notice of compliance does not relieve the lawyer of responsibility for the accuracy of factual statements.

**(f) Notice of Compliance and Disciplinary Action.** A finding of compliance by The Florida Bar will be binding on The Florida Bar in a grievance proceeding unless the advertisement contains a misrepresentation that is not apparent from the face of the advertisement. The Florida Bar has a right to change its finding of compliance and, in those circumstances, must notify the lawyer of the finding of noncompliance, after which the lawyer may be subject to discipline for continuing to disseminate the advertisement. A lawyer will be subject to discipline as provided in these rules for:

(1) failing to timely file the advertisement with The Florida Bar;

(2) disseminating a noncompliant advertisement in the absence of a finding of compliance by The Florida Bar;

(3) filing an advertisement that contains a misrepresentation that is not apparent from the face of the advertisement;

(4) disseminating an advertisement for which the lawyer has a finding of compliance by The Florida Bar more than 30 days after the lawyer has been notified that The Florida Bar has determined that the advertisement does not comply with this subchapter; or

(5) disseminating portions of a lawyer's Internet website(s) that are not in compliance with rules 4-7.14 and 4-7.15 only after 15 days have elapsed since the date of The Florida Bar's notice of noncompliance sent to the lawyer's official bar address.

**(g) Notice of Noncompliance.** If The Florida Bar determines that an advertisement does not comply with the applicable rules, The Florida Bar will advise the lawyer that dissemination or continued dissemination of the advertisement may result in professional discipline.

**(h) Contents of Filing.** A filing with The Florida Bar as required or permitted by this rule must include:

(1) a copy of the advertisement in the form or forms in which it is to be disseminated, that is readily capable of duplication by The Florida Bar (e.g., video, audio, print media, photographs of outdoor advertising);

(2) a transcript, if the advertisement is in electronic format;

(3) a printed copy of all text used in the advertisement, including both spoken language and on-screen text;

(4) an accurate English translation of any portion of the advertisement that is in a language other than English;

(5) a sample envelope in which the written advertisement will be enclosed, if the advertisement is to be mailed;

(6) a statement listing all media in which the advertisement will appear, the anticipated frequency of use of the advertisement in each medium in which it will appear, and the anticipated time period during which the advertisement will be used;

(7) the name of at least 1 lawyer who is responsible for the content of the advertisement;

(8) a fee paid to The Florida Bar, in an amount set by the bar's executive director as approved by the Board of Governors. The Florida Bar will provide the Florida Supreme Court with 30 days' notice prior to the effectiveness of any increase in the amount of a fee or the imposition of any new fee. These fees will be used to offset

the cost of evaluation and review of advertisements submitted under these rules and the cost of enforcing these rules; and

(9) additional information as necessary to substantiate representations made or implied in an advertisement if requested by The Florida Bar.

**(i) Change of Circumstances; Refiling Requirement.** If a change of circumstances occurs after The Florida Bar evaluates an advertisement that raises a substantial possibility that the advertisement has become false or misleading as a result of the change in circumstances, the lawyer must promptly re-file the advertisement or a modified advertisement in the manner specified by The Florida Bar as posted on its website along with an explanation of the change in circumstances and an additional fee set by the Board of Governors, which will not exceed \$100.

**(j) Maintaining Copies of Advertisements.** A copy or recording of an advertisement must be submitted to The Florida Bar under this rule, and the lawyer must retain a copy or recording for 3 years after its last dissemination along with a record of when and where it was used. If identical advertisements are sent to 2 or more prospective clients, the lawyer may comply with this requirement by filing 1 of the identical advertisements and retaining for 3 years a single copy, together with a list of the names and addresses of persons to whom the advertisement was sent.

### **Comment**

All advertisements must be filed for review under this rule, unless the advertisement is exempt from filing under rule 4-7.20. Even where an advertisement is exempt from filing under rule 4-7.20, a lawyer who wishes to obtain a safe harbor from discipline may submit the lawyer's advertisement that is exempt from the filing requirement and obtain The Florida Bar's opinion before disseminating the advertisement. A lawyer who files an advertisement and obtains a notice of compliance is therefore immune from grievance liability, unless the advertisement contains a misrepresentation that is not apparent from the face of the advertisement. Subdivision (d) of this rule precludes a lawyer from

filing an entire website as an advertising submission, but a lawyer may submit a specific page, provision, statement, illustration, or photograph on a website. A lawyer who wishes to rely on The Florida Bar's opinion as demonstrating the lawyer's good faith effort to comply with these rules has the responsibility of supplying The Florida Bar with all information necessary to determine whether an advertisement is false or misleading.

Adopted January 31, 2013, effective May 1, 2013 (108 So.3d 609); amended and effective September 9, 2021 (SC21-775); amended May 15, 2025, effective July 14, 2025 (SC2025-0018).

### **RULE 4-7.20 EXEMPTIONS FROM THE FILING AND REVIEW REQUIREMENT**

The following are exempt from the filing requirements of rule 4-7.19:

**(a)** an advertisement in any of the public media that contains no illustrations and no information other than that set forth in rule 4-7.16;

**(b)** a brief announcement that identifies a lawyer or law firm as a contributor to a specified charity or as a sponsor of a public service announcement or a specified charitable, community, or public interest program, activity, or event, provided that the announcement contains no information about the lawyer or law firm other than the permissible content of advertisements listed in rule 4-7.16, and the fact of the sponsorship or contribution. In determining whether an announcement is a public service announcement, the following criteria may be considered:

(1) whether the content of the announcement appears to serve the particular interests of the lawyer or law firm as much as or more than the interests of the public;

(2) whether the announcement concerns a legal subject;

(3) whether the announcement contains legal advice;

and

(4) whether the lawyer or law firm paid to have the announcement published;

(c) a listing or entry in a law list or bar publication;

(d) a communication mailed only to existing clients, former clients, or other lawyers;

(e) a written or recorded communication requested by a prospective client;

(f) professional announcement cards stating new or changed associations, new offices, and similar changes relating to a lawyer or law firm, and that are mailed only to other lawyers, relatives, close personal friends, and existing or former clients; and

(g) information contained on the lawyer's Internet website(s); and

(h) advertisements and other communications regarding legal services made by or on behalf of a legal aid organization, which is a not-for-profit business entity as defined elsewhere in these rules.

Adopted January 31, 2013, effective May 1, 2013 (108 So.3d 609);  
amended May 15, 2025, effective July 14, 2025 (SC2025-0018).

#### **RULE 4-7.21 FIRM NAMES AND LETTERHEAD**

**(a) False, Misleading, or Deceptive Firm Names.** A lawyer may not use a firm name, letterhead, or other professional designation that violates rules 4-7.11 through 4-7.15.

**(b) Trade Names.** A lawyer may practice under a trade name if the name is not deceptive and does not imply a connection with a government agency or with a public or charitable legal services organization, does not imply that the firm is something other than a private law firm, and is not otherwise in violation of rules 4-7.11 through 4-7.15. A lawyer in private practice may use the term "legal clinic" or "legal services" in conjunction with the lawyer's own name if the lawyer's practice is devoted to providing routine legal services

for fees that are lower than the prevailing rate in the community for those services.

**(c) Advertising Under Trade Names.** A lawyer may not advertise under a trade or fictitious name, except that a lawyer who actually practices under a trade name as authorized by subdivision (b) may use that name in advertisements. A lawyer who advertises under a trade or fictitious name is in violation of this rule unless the same name is the law firm name that appears on the lawyer's letterhead, business cards, office sign, and fee contracts, and appears with the lawyer's signature on pleadings and other legal documents.

**(d) Law Firm with Offices in Multiple Jurisdictions.** A law firm with offices in more than 1 jurisdiction may use the same name in each jurisdiction, but identification of the lawyers in an office of the firm must indicate the jurisdictional limitations on those not licensed to practice in the jurisdiction where the office is located.

**(e) Name of Public Officer in Firm Name.** The name of a lawyer holding a public office may not be used in the name of a law firm, or in communications on its behalf, during any substantial period in which the lawyer is not actively and regularly practicing with the firm.

**(f) Partnerships and Business Entities.** A name, letterhead, business card or advertisement may not imply that lawyers practice in a partnership or authorized business entity when they do not.

**(g) Insurance Staff Attorneys.** Where otherwise consistent with these rules, lawyers who practice law as employees within a separate unit of a liability insurer representing others pursuant to policies of liability insurance may practice under a name that does not constitute a material misrepresentation. In order for the use of a name other than the name of the insurer not to constitute a material misrepresentation, all lawyers in the unit must comply with all of the following:

(1) the firm name must include the name of a lawyer who has supervisory responsibility for all lawyers in the unit;

(2) the office entry signs, letterhead, business cards, websites, announcements, advertising, and listings or entries in a law list or bar publication bearing the name must disclose that the lawyers in the unit are employees of the insurer;

(3) the name of the insurer and the employment relationship must be disclosed to all insured clients and prospective clients of the lawyers, and must be disclosed in the official file at the lawyers' first appearance in the tribunal in which the lawyers appear under such name;

(4) the offices, personnel, and records of the unit must be functionally and physically separate from other operations of the insurer to the extent that would be required by these rules if the lawyers were private practitioners sharing space with the insurer; and

(5) additional disclosure should occur whenever the lawyer knows or reasonably should know that the lawyer's role is misunderstood by the insured client or prospective clients.

### **Comment**

#### **Misleading Firm Name**

A firm may be designated by the names of all or some of its members, by the names of deceased members where there has been a continuing succession in the firm's identity, or by a trade name such as "Family Legal Clinic." Although the United States Supreme Court has held that legislation may prohibit the use of trade names in professional practice, use of such names in a law practice is acceptable so long as it is not misleading. If a private firm uses a trade name that includes a geographical name such as "Springfield Legal Clinic," an express disclaimer that it is not a public legal aid agency may be required to avoid a misleading implication. It may be observed that any firm name including the name of a deceased partner is, strictly speaking, a trade name. The use of such names to designate law firms has proven a useful means of identification. However, it is misleading to use the name of a lawyer not associated with the firm or a predecessor of the firm.

A sole practitioner may not use the term “and Associates” as part of the firm name, because it is misleading where the law firm employs no associates in violation of rule 4-7.13. *See Fla. Bar v. Fetterman*, 439 So. 2d 835 (Fla. 1983). Similarly, a sole practitioner’s use of “group” or “team” implies that more than one lawyer is employed in the advertised firm and is therefore misleading.

Subdivision (a) precludes use in a law firm name of terms that imply that the firm is something other than a private law firm. Three examples of such terms are “academy,” “institute” and “center.” Subdivision (b) precludes use of a trade or fictitious name suggesting that the firm is named for a person when in fact such a person does not exist or is not associated with the firm. An example of such an improper name is “A. Aaron Able.” Although not prohibited per se, the terms “legal clinic” and “legal services” would be misleading if used by a law firm that did not devote its practice to providing routine legal services at prices below those prevailing in the community for like services.

### **Trade Names**

Subdivision (c) of this rule precludes a lawyer from advertising under a nonsense name designed to obtain an advantageous position for the lawyer in alphabetical directory listings unless the lawyer actually practices under that nonsense name. Advertising under a law firm name that differs from the firm name under which the lawyer actually practices violates both this rule and the prohibition against false, misleading, or deceptive communications as set forth in these rules.

With regard to subdivision (f), lawyers sharing office facilities, but who are not in fact partners, may not denominate themselves as, for example, “Smith and Jones,” for that title suggests partnership in the practice of law.

All lawyers who practice under trade or firm names are required to observe and comply with the requirements of the Rules Regulating the Florida Bar, including but not limited to, rules

regarding conflicts of interest, imputation of conflicts, firm names and letterhead, and candor toward tribunals and third parties.

### **Insurance Staff Lawyers**

Some liability insurers employ lawyers on a full-time basis to represent their insured clients in defense of claims covered by the contract of insurance. Use of a name to identify these lawyers is permissible if there is such physical and functional separation as to constitute a separate law firm. In the absence of such separation, it would be a misrepresentation to use a name implying that a firm exists. Practicing under the name of a lawyer inherently represents that the identified person has supervisory responsibility. Practicing under a name prohibited by subdivision (f) is not permitted. Candor requires disclosure of the employment relationship on letterhead, business cards, and in certain other communications that are not presented to a jury. The legislature of the State of Florida has enacted, as public policy, laws prohibiting the joinder of a liability insurer in most such litigation, and Florida courts have recognized the public policy of not disclosing the existence of insurance coverage to juries. Requiring lawyers who are so employed to disclose to juries the employment relationship would negate Florida public policy. For this reason, the rule does not require the disclosure of the employment relationship on all pleadings and papers filed in court proceedings. The general duty of candor of all lawyers may be implicated in other circumstances, but does not require disclosure on all pleadings.

Adopted January 31, 2013, effective May 1, 2013 (108 So.3d 609).

### **RULE 4-7.22 REFERRALS, DIRECTORIES AND POOLED ADVERTISING**

**(a) Applicability of Rule.** A lawyer is prohibited from participation with any qualifying provider that does not meet the requirements of this rule and any other applicable Rule Regulating The Florida Bar.

**(b) Qualifying Providers.** A qualifying provider is any person, group of persons, association, organization, or entity that receives

any benefit or consideration, monetary or otherwise, for the direct or indirect referral of prospective clients to lawyers or law firms, including but not limited to:

(1) matching or other connecting of a prospective client to a lawyer drawn from a specific group or panel of lawyers or who matches a prospective client with lawyers or law firms;

(2) a group or pooled advertising program, offering to refer, match or otherwise connect prospective legal clients with lawyers or law firms, in which the advertisements for the program use a common telephone number or website address and prospective clients are then matched or referred only to lawyers or law firms participating in the group or pooled advertising program;

(3) publishing in any media a listing of lawyers or law firms together in one place; or

(4) providing tips or leads for prospective clients to lawyers or law firms.

**(c) Entities that are not Qualifying Providers.** The following are not qualifying providers under this rule:

(1) a pro bono referral program, in which the participating lawyers do not pay a fee or charge of any kind to receive referrals or to belong to the referral panel, and are undertaking the referred matters without expectation of remuneration; and

(2) a local or voluntary bar association solely for listing its members on its website or in its publications.

**(d) When Lawyers May Participate with Qualifying Providers.** A lawyer may participate with a qualifying provider as defined in this rule only if the qualifying provider:

(1) engages in no communication with the public and in no direct contact with prospective clients in a manner that would violate the Rules of Professional Conduct if the communication or contact were made by the lawyer;

(2) receives no fee or charge that is a division or sharing of fees, unless the qualifying provider is The Florida Bar Lawyer Referral Service or a lawyer referral service approved by The Florida Bar pursuant to chapter 8 of these rules;

(3) refers, matches or otherwise connects prospective clients only to persons lawfully permitted to practice law in Florida when the services to be rendered constitute the practice of law in Florida;

(4) does not directly or indirectly require the lawyer to refer, match or otherwise connect prospective clients to any other person or entity for other services or does not place any economic pressure or incentive on the lawyer to make such referrals, matches or other connections;

(5) provides The Florida Bar, on no less than an annual basis, with the names and Florida bar membership numbers of all lawyers participating in the service unless the qualifying provider is The Florida Bar Lawyer Referral Service or a lawyer referral service approved by The Florida Bar pursuant to chapter 8 of these rules;

(6) provides the participating lawyer with documentation that the qualifying provider is in compliance with this rule unless the qualifying provider is The Florida Bar Lawyer Referral Service or a lawyer referral service approved by The Florida Bar pursuant to chapter 8 of these rules;

(7) responds in writing, within 15 days, to any official inquiry by bar counsel when bar counsel is seeking information described in this subdivision or conducting an investigation into the conduct of the qualifying provider or a lawyer who participates with the qualifying provider;

(8) neither represents nor implies to the public that the qualifying provider is endorsed or approved by The Florida Bar, unless the qualifying provider is The Florida Bar Lawyer Referral Service or a lawyer referral service approved by The Florida Bar pursuant to chapter 8 of these rules;

(9) uses its actual legal name or a registered fictitious name in all communications with the public;

(10) affirmatively discloses to the prospective client at the time a referral, match or other connection is made of the location of a bona fide office by city, town or county of the lawyer to whom the referral, match or other connection is being made;

(11) does not use a name or engage in any communication with the public that could lead prospective clients to reasonably conclude that the qualifying provider is a law firm or directly provides legal services to the public; and

(12) has lawyers from at least 4 different law firms participating in the panel or group of lawyers to whom clients are referred.

**(e) Responsibility of Lawyer.** A lawyer who participates with a qualifying provider:

(1) must report to The Florida Bar within 15 days of agreeing to participate or ceasing participation with a qualifying provider unless the qualifying provider is The Florida Bar Lawyer Referral Service or a lawyer referral service approved by The Florida Bar pursuant to chapter 8 of these rules; and

(2) is responsible for the qualifying provider's compliance with this rule if:

(A) the lawyer does not engage in due diligence in determining the qualifying provider's compliance with this rule before beginning participation with the qualifying provider; or

(B) The Florida Bar notifies the lawyer that the qualifying provider is not in compliance and the lawyer does not cease participation with the qualifying provider and provide documentation to The Florida Bar that the lawyer has ceased participation with the qualifying provider within 30 days of The Florida Bar's notice.

## **Comment**

Every citizen of the state should have access to the legal system. A person's access to the legal system is enhanced by the assistance of a qualified lawyer. Citizens often encounter difficulty in identifying and locating lawyers who are willing and qualified to consult with them about their legal needs. It is the policy of The Florida Bar to encourage qualifying providers to: (a) make legal services readily available to the general public through a referral method that considers the client's financial circumstances, spoken language, geographical convenience, and the type and complexity of the client's legal problem; (b) provide information about lawyers and the availability of legal services that will aid in the selection of a lawyer; and (c) inform the public where to seek legal services.

Subdivision (b)(3) addresses the publication of a listing of lawyers or law firms together in any media. Any media includes but is not limited to print, Internet, or other electronic media.

A lawyer may not participate with a qualifying provider that receives any fee that constitutes a division of legal fees with the lawyer, unless the qualifying provider is The Florida Bar Lawyer Referral Service or a lawyer referral service approved by The Florida Bar pursuant to chapter 8 of these rules. A fee calculated as a percentage of the fee received by a lawyer, or based on the success or perceived value of the case, would be an improper division of fees. Additionally, a fee that constitutes an improper division of fees occurs when the qualifying provider directs, regulates, or influences the lawyer's professional judgment in rendering legal services to the client. See e.g. rules 4-5.4 and 4-1.7(a)(2). Examples of direction, regulation or influence include when the qualifying provider places limits on a lawyer's representation of a client, requires or prohibits the performance of particular legal services or tasks, or requires the use of particular forms or the use of particular third party providers, whether participation with a particular qualifying provider would violate this rule requires a case-by-case determination.

Division of fees between lawyers in different firms, as opposed to any monetary or other consideration or benefit to a qualifying provider, is governed by rule 4-1.5(g) and 4-1.5(f)(4)(D).

If a qualifying provider has more than 1 advertising or other program that the lawyer may participate in, the lawyer is responsible for the qualifying provider's compliance with this rule solely for the program or programs that the lawyer agrees to participate in. For example, there are qualifying providers that provide a directory service and a matching service. If the lawyer agrees to participate in only one of those programs, the lawyer is responsible for the qualifying provider's compliance with this rule solely for that program.

A lawyer who participates with a qualifying provider should engage in due diligence regarding compliance with this rule before beginning participation. For example, the lawyer should ask The Florida Bar whether the qualifying provider has filed any annual reports of participating lawyers, whether the qualifying provider has filed any advertisements for evaluation, and whether The Florida Bar has ever made inquiry of the qualifying provider to which the qualifying provider has failed to respond. If the qualifying provider has filed advertisements, the lawyer should ask either The Florida Bar or the qualifying provider for copies of the advertisement(s) and The Florida Bar's written opinion(s). The lawyer should ask the qualifying provider to provide documentation that the provider is in full compliance with this rule, including copies of filings with the state in which the qualifying provider is incorporated to establish that the provider is using either its actual legal name or a registered fictitious name. The lawyer should also have a written agreement with the qualifying provider that includes a clause allowing immediate termination of the agreement if the qualifying provider does not comply with this rule.

A lawyer participating with a qualifying provider continues to be responsible for the lawyer's compliance with all Rules Regulating the Florida Bar. For example, a lawyer may not make an agreement with a qualifying provider that the lawyer must refer clients to the qualifying provider or another person or entity designated by the qualifying provider in order to receive referrals or leads from the

qualifying provider. See rule 4-7.17(b). A lawyer may not accept referrals or leads from a qualifying provider if the provider interferes with the lawyer's professional judgment in representing clients, for example, by requiring the referral of the lawyer's clients to the qualifying provider, a beneficial owner of the qualifying provider, or an entity owned by the qualifying provider or a beneficial owner of the qualifying provider. See rule 4-1.7(a)(2). A lawyer also may not refer clients to the qualifying provider, a beneficial owner of the qualifying provider, or an entity owned by the qualifying provider or a beneficial owner of the qualifying provider, unless the requirements of rules 4-1.7 and 4-1.8 are met and the lawyer provides written disclosure of the relationship to the client and obtains the client's informed consent confirmed in writing. A lawyer participating with a qualifying provider may not pass on to the client the lawyer's costs of doing business with the qualifying provider. See rules 4-1.7(a)(2) and 4-1.5(a).

Adopted January 31, 2013, effective May 1, 2013 (108 So.3d 609), amended March 8, 2018, effective April 30, 2018 (238 So.3d 164); amended June 22, 2023, effective August 21, 2023 (SC22-1294).

## **4-8. MAINTAINING THE INTEGRITY OF THE PROFESSION**

### **RULE 4-8.1 BAR ADMISSION AND DISCIPLINARY MATTERS**

An applicant for admission to the bar, or a lawyer in connection with a bar admission application or in connection with a disciplinary matter, shall not:

- (a)** knowingly make a false statement of material fact;
- (b)** fail to disclose a fact necessary to correct a misapprehension known by the person to have arisen in the matter or knowingly fail to respond to a lawful demand for information from an admissions or disciplinary authority, except that this rule does not require disclosure of information otherwise protected by rule 4-1.6; or
- (c)** commit an act that adversely reflects on the applicant's fitness to practice law. An applicant who commits such an act

before admission, but which is discovered after admission, shall be subject to discipline under these rules.

### **Comment**

The duty imposed by this rule extends to persons seeking admission to the bar as well as to lawyers. Hence, if a person makes a material false statement in connection with an application for admission, it may be the basis for subsequent disciplinary action if the person is admitted and in any event may be relevant in a subsequent admission application. The duty imposed by this rule applies to a lawyer's own admission or discipline as well as that of others. Thus, it is a separate professional offense for a lawyer to knowingly make a misrepresentation or omission in connection with a disciplinary investigation of the lawyer's own conduct. Subdivision (b) of this rule also requires correction of any prior misstatement in the matter that the applicant or lawyer may have made and affirmative clarification of any misunderstanding on the part of the admissions or disciplinary authority of which the person involved becomes aware.

This rule is subject to the provisions of the fifth amendment of the United States Constitution and the corresponding provisions of the Florida Constitution. A person relying on such a provision in response to a question, however, should do so openly and not use the right of nondisclosure as a justification for failure to comply with this rule.

A lawyer representing an applicant for admission to the bar, or representing a lawyer who is the subject of a disciplinary inquiry or proceeding, is governed by the rules applicable to the client-lawyer relationship, including rule 4-1.6 and, in some cases, rule 4-3.3.

An applicant for admission may commit acts that adversely reflect on the applicant's fitness to practice law and which are discovered only after the applicant becomes a member of the bar. This rule provides a means to address such misconduct in the absence of such a provision in the Rules of the Supreme Court Relating to Admissions to the Bar.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective Jan. 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended October 6, 2005, effective January 1, 2006 (916 So.2d 655); amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417).

## **RULE 4-8.2 JUDICIAL AND LEGAL OFFICIALS**

**(a) Impugning Qualifications and Integrity of Judges or Other Officers.** A lawyer shall not make a statement that the lawyer knows to be false or with reckless disregard as to its truth or falsity concerning the qualifications or integrity of a judge, mediator, arbitrator, adjudicatory officer, public legal officer, juror or member of the venire, or candidate for election or appointment to judicial or legal office.

**(b) Candidates for Judicial Office; Code of Judicial Conduct Applies.** A lawyer who is a candidate for judicial office shall comply with the applicable provisions of Florida's Code of Judicial Conduct.

### **Comment**

Assessments by lawyers are relied on in evaluating the professional or personal fitness of persons being considered for election or appointment to judicial office and to public legal offices, such as attorney general, prosecuting attorney, and public defender. Expressing honest and candid opinions on such matters contributes to improving the administration of justice. Conversely, false statements by a lawyer can unfairly undermine public confidence in the administration of justice.

False statements or statements made with reckless disregard for truth or falsity concerning potential jurors, jurors serving in pending cases, or jurors who served in concluded cases undermine the impartiality of future jurors who may fear to execute their duty if their decisions are ridiculed. Lawyers may not make false statements or any statement made with the intent to ridicule or harass jurors.

When a lawyer seeks judicial office, the lawyer should be bound by applicable limitations on political activity.

To maintain the fair and independent administration of justice, lawyers are encouraged to continue traditional efforts to defend judges and courts unjustly criticized.

Amended and effective June 8, 1989 (544 So.2d 193); amended July 23, 1992, effective Jan. 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252).

### **RULE 4-8.3 REPORTING PROFESSIONAL MISCONDUCT**

**(a) Reporting Misconduct of Other Lawyers.** A lawyer who knows that another lawyer has committed a violation of the Rules of Professional Conduct that raises a substantial question as to that lawyer's honesty, trustworthiness, or fitness as a lawyer in other respects must inform the appropriate professional authority.

**(b) Reporting Misconduct of Judges.** A lawyer who knows that a judge has committed a violation of applicable rules of judicial conduct that raises a substantial question as to the judge's fitness for office must inform the appropriate authority.

**(c) Confidences Preserved.** This rule does not require disclosure of information:

(1) otherwise protected by rule 4-1.6;

(2) gained by a lawyer while serving as a mediator or mediation participant if the information is privileged or confidential under applicable law; or

(3) gained by a lawyer or judge while participating in an approved lawyers assistance program unless the lawyer's participation in an approved lawyers assistance program is part of a disciplinary sanction, in which case a report about the lawyer who is participating as part of a disciplinary sanction must be made to the appropriate disciplinary agency.

**(d) Limited Exception for Florida Bar Established Law Practice Management Program.** A lawyer employed by or acting on behalf of the law practice management advice and education program established and supervised by the board of governors is exempt from the obligation to disclose knowledge of the conduct of

another member of The Florida Bar that raises a substantial question as to the other lawyer's fitness to practice, if the lawyer employed by or acting on behalf of the program acquired the knowledge while engaged in the course of the lawyer's regular job duties as an employee of the program.

### **Comment**

Self-regulation of the legal profession requires that members of the profession initiate disciplinary investigation when they know of a violation of the Rules of Professional Conduct. Lawyers have a similar obligation with respect to judicial misconduct. An apparently isolated violation may indicate a pattern of misconduct that only a disciplinary investigation can uncover. Reporting a violation is especially important where the victim is unlikely to discover the offense.

A report about misconduct is not required where it would involve violation of rule 4-1.6. However, a lawyer should encourage a client to consent to disclosure where prosecution would not substantially prejudice the client's interests.

If a lawyer were obliged to report every violation of the rules, the failure to report any violation would itself be a professional offense. Such a requirement existed in many jurisdictions, but proved to be unenforceable. This rule limits the reporting obligation to those offenses that a self-regulating profession must vigorously endeavor to prevent. A measure of judgment is, therefore, required in complying with the provisions of this rule. The term "substantial" refers to the seriousness of the possible offense and not the quantum of evidence of which the lawyer is aware.

The duty to report professional misconduct does not apply to a lawyer retained to represent a lawyer whose professional conduct is in question. Such a situation is governed by the rules applicable to the client-lawyer relationship.

Generally, Florida statutes provide that information gained through a "mediation communication" is privileged and confidential, including information which discloses professional misconduct occurring outside the mediation. However, professional misconduct

occurring during the mediation is not privileged or confidential under Florida statutes.

Information about a lawyer's or judge's misconduct or fitness may be received by a lawyer in the course of that lawyer's participation in an approved lawyers or judges assistance program. In that circumstance, providing for an exception to the reporting requirements of subdivisions (a) and (b) of this rule encourages lawyers and judges to seek treatment through such a program. Conversely, without such an exception, lawyers and judges may hesitate to seek assistance from these programs, which may then result in additional harm to their professional careers and additional injury to the welfare of clients and the public. These rules do not otherwise address the confidentiality of information received by a lawyer or judge participating in an approved lawyers assistance program; such an obligation, however, may be imposed by the rules of the program or other law.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective Jan. 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended and effective Feb. 8, 2001 (795 So.2d 1); amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417); amended April 12, 2012, effective July 1, 2012 (101 So.3d 807); amended November 9, 2017, effective February 1, 2018 (234 So.3d 632); amended January 4, 2019, effective March 5, 2019 (267 So.3d 891).

#### **RULE 4-8.4 MISCONDUCT**

A lawyer shall not:

**(a)** violate or attempt to violate the Rules of Professional Conduct, knowingly assist or induce another to do so, or do so through the acts of another;

**(b)** commit a criminal act that reflects adversely on the lawyer's honesty, trustworthiness, or fitness as a lawyer in other respects;

**(c)** engage in conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit, or misrepresentation, except that it shall not be professional misconduct for a lawyer for a criminal law enforcement agency or regulatory agency to advise others about or to supervise another in

an undercover investigation, unless prohibited by law or rule, and it shall not be professional misconduct for a lawyer employed in a capacity other than as a lawyer by a criminal law enforcement agency or regulatory agency to participate in an undercover investigation, unless prohibited by law or rule;

**(d)** engage in conduct in connection with the practice of law that is prejudicial to the administration of justice, including to knowingly, or through callous indifference, disparage, humiliate, or discriminate against litigants, jurors, witnesses, court personnel, or other lawyers on any basis, including, but not limited to, on account of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, national origin, disability, marital status, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, employment, or physical characteristic;

**(e)** state or imply an ability to influence improperly a government agency or official or to achieve results by means that violate the Rules of Professional Conduct or other law;

**(f)** knowingly assist a judge or judicial officer in conduct that is a violation of applicable rules of judicial conduct or other law;

**(g)** fail to respond, in writing, to any official inquiry by bar counsel or a disciplinary agency, as defined elsewhere in these rules, when bar counsel or the agency is conducting an investigation into the lawyer's conduct. A written response shall be made:

(1) within 15 days of the date of the initial written investigative inquiry by bar counsel, grievance committee, or board of governors;

(2) within 10 days of the date of any follow-up written investigative inquiries by bar counsel, grievance committee, or board of governors;

(3) within the time stated in any subpoena issued under these Rules Regulating The Florida Bar (without additional time allowed for mailing);

(4) as provided in the Florida Rules of Civil Procedure or order of the referee in matters assigned to a referee; and

(5) as provided in the Florida Rules of Appellate Procedure or order of the Supreme Court of Florida for matters pending action by that court.

Except as stated otherwise herein or in the applicable rules, all times for response shall be calculated as provided elsewhere in these Rules Regulating The Florida Bar and may be extended or shortened by bar counsel or the disciplinary agency making the official inquiry upon good cause shown.

Failure to respond to an official inquiry with no good cause shown may be a matter of contempt and processed in accordance with rule 3-7.11(f) of these Rules Regulating The Florida Bar.

**(h)** willfully refuse, as determined by a court of competent jurisdiction, to timely pay a child support obligation; or

**(i)** engage in sexual conduct with a client or a representative of a client that exploits or adversely affects the interests of the client or the lawyer-client relationship.

If the sexual conduct commenced after the lawyer-client relationship was formed it shall be presumed that the sexual conduct exploits or adversely affects the interests of the client or the lawyer-client relationship. A lawyer may rebut this presumption by proving by a preponderance of the evidence that the sexual conduct did not exploit or adversely affect the interests of the client or the lawyer-client relationship.

The prohibition and presumption stated in this rule do not apply to a lawyer in the same firm as another lawyer representing the client if the lawyer involved in the sexual conduct does not personally provide legal services to the client and is screened from access to the file concerning the legal representation.

## Comment

Lawyers are subject to discipline when they violate or attempt to violate the Rules of Professional Conduct, knowingly assist or induce another to do so, or do so through the acts of another, as when they request or instruct an agent to do so on the lawyer's behalf. Subdivision (a), however, does not prohibit a lawyer from advising a client concerning action the client is legally entitled to take, provided that the client is not used to indirectly violate the Rules of Professional Conduct.

Many kinds of illegal conduct reflect adversely on fitness to practice law, such as offenses involving fraud and the offense of willful failure to file an income tax return. However, some kinds of offense carry no such implication. Traditionally, the distinction was drawn in terms of offenses involving "moral turpitude." That concept can be construed to include offenses concerning some matters of personal morality, such as adultery and comparable offenses, that have no specific connection to fitness for the practice of law. Although a lawyer is personally answerable to the entire criminal law, a lawyer should be professionally answerable only for offenses that indicate lack of those characteristics relevant to law practice. Offenses involving violence, dishonesty, or breach of trust or serious interference with the administration of justice are in that category. A pattern of repeated offenses, even ones of minor significance when considered separately, can indicate indifference to legal obligation.

A lawyer may refuse to comply with an obligation imposed by law upon a good faith belief that no valid obligation exists. The provisions of rule 4-1.2(d) concerning a good faith challenge to the validity, scope, meaning, or application of the law apply to challenges of legal regulation of the practice of law.

Subdivision (c) recognizes instances where lawyers in criminal law enforcement agencies or regulatory agencies advise others about or supervise others in undercover investigations, and provides an exception to allow the activity without the lawyer engaging in professional misconduct. The exception acknowledges current, acceptable practice of these agencies. Although the

exception appears in this rule, it is also applicable to rules 4-4.1 and 4-4.3. However, nothing in the rule allows the lawyer to engage in such conduct if otherwise prohibited by law or rule.

Subdivision (d) of this rule proscribes conduct that is prejudicial to the administration of justice. Such proscription includes the prohibition against discriminatory conduct committed by a lawyer while performing duties in connection with the practice of law. The proscription extends to any characteristic or status that is not relevant to the proof of any legal or factual issue in dispute. Such conduct, when directed towards litigants, jurors, witnesses, court personnel, or other lawyers, whether based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, national origin, disability, marital status, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, employment, physical characteristic, or any other basis, subverts the administration of justice and undermines the public's confidence in our system of justice, as well as notions of equality. This subdivision does not prohibit a lawyer from representing a client as may be permitted by applicable law, such as, by way of example, representing a client accused of committing discriminatory conduct.

Lawyers holding public office assume legal responsibilities going beyond those of other citizens. A lawyer's abuse of public office can suggest an inability to fulfill the professional role of attorney. The same is true of abuse of positions of private trust such as trustee, executor, administrator, guardian, or agent and officer, director, or manager of a corporation or other organization.

A lawyer's obligation to respond to an inquiry by a disciplinary agency is stated in subdivision (g) of this rule and subdivision (h)(2) of rule 3-7.6. While response is mandatory, the lawyer may deny the charges or assert any available privilege or immunity or interpose any disability that prevents disclosure of a certain matter. A response containing a proper invocation thereof is sufficient under the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar. This obligation is necessary to ensure the proper and efficient operation of the disciplinary system.

Subdivision (h) of this rule was added to make consistent the treatment of attorneys who fail to pay child support with the

treatment of other professionals who fail to pay child support, in accordance with the provisions of section 61.13015, Florida Statutes. That section provides for the suspension or denial of a professional license due to delinquent child support payments after all other available remedies for the collection of child support have been exhausted. Likewise, subdivision (h) of this rule should not be used as the primary means for collecting child support, but should be used only after all other available remedies for the collection of child support have been exhausted. Before a grievance may be filed or a grievance procedure initiated under this subdivision, the court that entered the child support order must first make a finding of willful refusal to pay. The child support obligation at issue under this rule includes both domestic (Florida) and out-of-state (URESA) child support obligations, as well as arrearages.

Subdivision (i) proscribes exploitation of the client or the lawyer-client relationship by means of commencement of sexual conduct. The lawyer-client relationship is grounded on mutual trust. A sexual relationship that exploits that trust compromises the lawyer-client relationship. Attorneys have a duty to exercise independent professional judgment on behalf of clients. Engaging in sexual relationships with clients has the capacity to impair the exercise of that judgment.

Sexual conduct between a lawyer and client violates this rule, regardless of when the sexual conduct began when compared to the commencement of the lawyer-client relationship, if the sexual conduct exploits the lawyer-client relationship, negatively affects the client's interest, creates a conflict of interest between the lawyer and client, or negatively affects the exercise of the lawyer's independent professional judgment in representing the client.

Subdivision (i) creates a presumption that sexual conduct between a lawyer and client exploits or adversely affects the interests of the client or the lawyer-client relationship if the sexual conduct is entered into after the lawyer-client relationship begins. A lawyer charged with a violation of this rule may rebut this presumption by a preponderance of the evidence that the sexual conduct did not exploit the lawyer-client relationship, negatively affect the client's interest, create a conflict of interest between the

lawyer and client, or negatively affect the exercise of the lawyer's independent professional judgment in representing the client.

For purposes of this rule, a "representative of a client" is an agent of the client who supervises, directs, or regularly consults with the organization's lawyer concerning a client matter or has authority to obligate the organization with respect to the matter, or whose act or omission in connection with the matter may be imputed to the organization for purposes of civil or criminal liability.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective Jan. 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended July 1, 1993 (621 So.2d 1032); amended July 1, 1993, effective. Jan. 1, 1994 (624 So.2d 720); amended Feb. 9, 1995 (649 So.2d 868); amended July 20, 1995 (658 So.2d 930); amended Sept. 24, 1998, effective Oct. 1, 1998 (718 So.2d 1179); Feb. 8, 2001 (795 So.2d 1); May 20, 2004 (SC03-705), 875 So.2d 448); amended October 6, 2005, effective January 1, 2006 (916 So.2d 655); amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417); amended November 19, 2009, effective February 1, 2010 (24 So.3d 63).

## **RULE 4-8.5 JURISDICTION**

A lawyer admitted to practice in this jurisdiction is subject to the disciplinary authority of this jurisdiction although engaged in practice elsewhere.

### **Comment**

In modern practice lawyers frequently act outside the territorial limits of the jurisdiction in which they are licensed to practice, either in another state or outside the United States. In doing so, they remain subject to the governing authority of the jurisdiction in which they are licensed to practice. If their activity in another jurisdiction is substantial and continuous, it may constitute the practice of law in that jurisdiction. See rule 4-5.5.

If the Rules of Professional Conduct in the 2 jurisdictions differ, principles of conflict of laws may apply. Similar problems can arise when a lawyer is licensed to practice in more than 1 jurisdiction.

Where the lawyer is licensed to practice law in 2 jurisdictions that impose conflicting obligations, applicable rules of choice of law may govern the situation. A related problem arises with respect to practice before a federal tribunal where the general authority of the states to regulate the practice of law must be reconciled with such authority as federal tribunals may have to regulate practice before them.

Amended July 23, 1992, effective Jan. 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252).

### **RULE 4-8.6 AUTHORIZED BUSINESS ENTITIES**

**(a) Authorized Business Entities.** Lawyers may practice law in the form of professional service corporations, professional limited liability companies, sole proprietorships, general partnerships, or limited liability partnerships organized or qualified under applicable law, or not-for-profit authorized business entities as defined elsewhere in these rules. These forms of practice are authorized business entities under these rules.

**(b) Practice of Law Limited to Members of The Florida Bar.** No authorized business entity may engage in the practice of law in the state of Florida or render advice under or interpretations of Florida law except through officers, directors, partners, managers, agents, or employees who are qualified to render legal services in this state.

#### **(c) Titles and Management of Authorized Business Entities.**

(1) Only a person legally qualified to render legal services in Florida or as authorized by rule 4-5.4(f) or a person licensed to practice law in another jurisdiction acting through a bona fide interstate law firm, may serve as a partner, member, shareholder, president, or equity owner, or perform any policy-making function, in an authorized business entity that is engaged in the practice of law in Florida.

(2) Only a person legally qualified to render legal services in Florida or as authorized by rule 4-5.4(f) may serve as an officer,

director, vice-president, or any similar title that implies control over the policies or management of an authorized business entity unless any mention of the person's title includes a clear and conspicuous statement of the jurisdiction(s) where the person is licensed or that the person is not licensed in Florida.

(3) Only a person legally qualified to render legal services in Florida may direct the legal services or professional judgement of a lawyer engaged in the practice of law in Florida.

**(d) Violation of Statute or Rule.** A lawyer is subject to disciplinary action if that lawyer violates or sanctions the violation of the authorized business entity statutes or the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar, while acting as a shareholder, member, officer, director, partner, proprietor, manager, agent, or employee of that authorized business entity that is engaged in the practice of law in Florida.

**(e) Disqualification of Shareholder, Member, Proprietor, or Partner; Severance of Financial Interests.** Whenever a shareholder of a professional service corporation, a member of a professional limited liability company, proprietor, or partner in a limited liability partnership becomes legally disqualified to render legal services in this state, that shareholder, member, proprietor, or partner immediately must sever all employment with and financial interests in the authorized business entity. For purposes of this rule the term "legally disqualified" does not include suspension from the practice of law for a period of time less than 91 days. Severance of employment and financial interests required by this rule will not preclude the shareholder, member, proprietor, or partner from receiving compensation based on legal fees generated for legal services performed during the time when the shareholder, member, proprietor, or partner was legally qualified to render legal services in this state. This provision will not prohibit employment of a legally disqualified shareholder, member, proprietor, or partner in a position that does not render legal service nor payment to an existing profit sharing or pension plan to the extent permitted in rules 3-6.1 and 4-5.4(a)(3), or as required by applicable law.

**(f) Cessation of Legal Services.** Whenever all shareholders of a professional service corporation, or all members of a professional limited liability company, the proprietor of a solo practice, or all partners in a limited liability partnership become legally disqualified to render legal services in this state, the authorized business entity must cease rendering legal services in Florida.

**(g) Application of Statutory Provisions.** Unless otherwise provided in this rule, each shareholder, member, proprietor, or partner of an authorized business entity will possess all rights and benefits and will be subject to all duties applicable to that shareholder, member, proprietor, or partner provided by the statutes under which the authorized business entity was organized or qualified.

### **Comment**

In 1961 this court recognized the authority of the legislature to enact statutory provisions creating corporations, particularly professional service corporations. But this court also noted that “[e]nabling action by this Court is therefore an essential condition precedent to authorize members of The Florida Bar to qualify under and engage in the practice of their profession pursuant to The 1961 Act.” *In Re The Florida Bar*, 133 So. 2d 554, at 555 (Fla. 1961).

The same is true today, whatever the form of business entity created by legislative enactment. Hence, this rule is adopted to continue authorizing members of the bar to practice law in the form of a professional service corporation, a professional limited liability company, or a limited liability partnership. This rule also permits a member of the bar to practice law as a sole proprietor or as a member of a general partnership. These types of entities are collectively referred to as authorized business entities.

### **Limitation on rendering legal services**

No person may render legal services on behalf of an authorized business entity unless that person is otherwise authorized to do so via membership in the bar or through a motion for leave to appear.

Neither the adoption of this rule nor the statutory provisions alter this limitation.

### **Employment by and financial interests in an authorized business entity**

This rule and the statute require termination of employment of a shareholder, member, proprietor, or partner when that person is “legally disqualified” to render legal services. The purpose of this provision is to prohibit compensation based on fees for legal services rendered at a time when the shareholder, member, proprietor, or partner cannot render the same type of services. Continued engagement in capacities other than rendering legal services with the same or similar compensation would allow circumvention of prohibitions of sharing legal fees with one not qualified to render legal services. Other rules prohibit the sharing of legal fees with nonlawyers, and this rule continues to apply that type of prohibition. However, nothing in this rule or the statute prohibits payment to the disqualified shareholder, member, proprietor, or partner for legal services rendered while the shareholder, member, proprietor, or partner was qualified to render those legal services, even though payment for the legal services is not received until the shareholder, member, proprietor, or partner is legally disqualified.

Similarly, this rule and the statute require the severance of “financial interests” of a legally disqualified shareholder, member, proprietor, or partner. The same reasons apply to severance of financial interests as those that apply to severance of employment. Other provisions of these rules proscribe limits on employment and the types of duties that a legally disqualified shareholder, member, proprietor, or partner may be assigned.

Practical application of the statute and this rule to the requirements of the practice of law mandates exclusion of short term, temporary removal of qualifications to render legal services. Hence, any suspension of less than 91 days, including membership fees delinquency suspensions, is excluded from the definition of the term. These are temporary impediments to the practice of law resulting in automatic reinstatement to the practice of law with the

passage of time or the completion of ministerial acts. Severe tax consequences would result from forced severance and subsequent reestablishment (on reinstatement of qualifications) of all financial interests in these instances.

However, excluding these suspensions from the definition of the term does not authorize the payment to the disqualified shareholder, member, proprietor, or partner of compensation based on fees for legal services rendered during the time when the shareholder, member, proprietor, or partner is not personally qualified to render the services. Continuing the employment of a legally disqualified shareholder, member, proprietor, or partner during the term of a suspension of less than 91 days requires the authorized business entity to take steps to avoid the practice of law by the legally disqualified shareholder, member, proprietor, or partner, the ability of the legally disqualified shareholder, member, proprietor, or partner to control the actions of members of the bar qualified to render legal services, and payment of compensation to the legally disqualified shareholder, member, proprietor, or partner based on legal services rendered while the legally disqualified shareholder, member, proprietor, or partner is not qualified to render them. Mere characterization of continued compensation, which is the same or similar to that the legally disqualified shareholder, member, proprietor, or partner received when qualified to render legal services, is not sufficient to satisfy the requirements of this rule.

### **Profit sharing or pension plans**

To the extent that applicable law requires continued payment to existing profit sharing or pension plans, nothing in this rule or the statute may abridge those payments. However, if permitted under applicable law, the amount paid to the plan for a legally disqualified shareholder, member, proprietor, or partner will not include payments based on legal services rendered while the legally disqualified shareholder, member, proprietor, or partner was not qualified to render legal services.

## **Interstate practice**

This rule permits members of The Florida Bar to engage in the practice of law with lawyers licensed to practice elsewhere in an authorized business entity organized under the laws of another jurisdiction and qualified under the laws of Florida (or vice-versa), but nothing in this rule is intended to affect the ability of non-members of The Florida Bar to practice law in Florida. See, e.g., *Fla. Bar v. Savitt*, 363 So. 2d 559 (Fla. 1978).

The terms qualified and legally disqualified are imported from the Professional Service Corporation Act (Chapter 621, Florida Statutes).

Added June 8, 1989 (544 So.2d 193); amended July 23, 1992, effective Jan. 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended June 27, 1996, effective July 1, 1996 (677 So.2d 272); amended Sept. 24, 1998, effective Oct. 1, 1998 (718 So.2d 1179); amended May 20, 2004 (875 So.2d 448); amended October 6, 2005, effective January 1, 2006 (916 So.2d 655); amended May 29, 2014; effective June 1, 2014 (140 So.3d 541); amended December 18, 2025, effective February 16, 2026 (SC2025-1180).