

Ethical Rules for Lawyers

What happens if a lawyer engages in improper conduct?

Nearly 63,000 lawyers are licensed to practice law in Pennsylvania. All are governed by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court and by an ethical code adopted by the Court called the Rules of Professional Conduct.

The ethical rules closely follow a model code of conduct recommended by the American Bar Association. They require lawyers to meet high standards of integrity. Among other things, lawyers must handle client matters promptly and diligently, hold client information in confidence, safeguard client funds in escrow accounts, avoid conflicts of interest, avoid frivolous or bad-faith litigation and be truthful with the courts and with all parties in all legal proceedings.

If a question of unethical conduct arises, a complaint can be filed with the state Disciplinary Board, which enforces the Rules of Professional Conduct. The board is made up of 13 members, two of whom are non-lawyers appointed by the Supreme Court.

All complaints filed with the Disciplinary Board are referred to the Office of Disciplinary Counsel, an arm of the board, for investigation. The Office of Disciplinary Counsel can prosecute lawyers on misconduct charges before the Disciplinary Board when there is clear evidence of unethical behavior. If the board makes a finding of misconduct, it can issue a private or public reprimand to a lawyer, which generally occurs in relatively minor cases, or, in more serious case, it can refer the matter to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court can publicly censure, suspend or disbar lawyers who violate the Rules of Professional Conduct.

The standing and public disciplinary record of every lawyer, as well as other information about the disciplinary process, is available at the Disciplinary Board's website at www.padisciplinaryboard.org.

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