



# **25th Annual Report**

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**California Board of Legal Specialization**

**The State Bar of California  
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# 25TH ANNUAL REPORT OF THE CALIFORNIA BOARD OF LEGAL SPECIALIZATION

January 1, 2011 – December 31, 2011

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## **BACKGROUND**

### **THE PROGRAM FOR CERTIFYING LEGAL SPECIALISTS**

The Legal Specialization program was created pursuant to California Supreme Court Rule 9.35 to provide a method for attorneys to earn the designation of certified legal specialist in particular areas of law for the purposes of increasing public protection and encouraging attorney competence.

The program was the first of its kind, and it has served as a model for other state programs for certifying legal specialists around the United States.

The program operates pursuant to the following regulatory structure:

- Rule 9.35, adopted by the Supreme Court, authorizes the State Bar of California to adopt rules to establish and administer a program to certify legal specialists;
- Rules Governing the State Bar of California Program for Certifying Legal Specialists ("Rules"), adopted by the State Bar of California Board of Trustees ("Trustees"), contain the framework for program operation; and
- Standards ("Standards") for Certification and Recertification provide details unique to each individual certified legal specialty, adopted by the State Bar of California Board of Trustees.

The general requirements to become a certified specialist include:

- passage of a written examination in the certified legal specialty area;
- completion of a course of continuing education in the area of specialty greater than that required of the general members of the Bar;
- demonstration of a broad-based and comprehensive experience in the certified legal specialty area based on completion of a variety of matters in the area of legal specialty; and
- favorable evaluation by other attorneys and judges familiar with the attorney's work in the certified legal specialty area of law.

Certification is valid for a five-year period. After the initial certification period, attorneys must apply for recertification by demonstrating that they have continued to meet task and education requirements similar to those for initial certification. Certified legal specialists are not, however, required to take the examination again after initial certification; instead, they are subject to a heightened education requirement.

The Rules mandate that the program for certifying legal specialists be self-supporting. As a result, program costs are paid for by annual fees paid to the program, as well as certification, recertification, education provider, and accreditation fees. The program is not funded by State Bar of California General Fund fees.

## **HISTORY**

The program was established to:

- give consumers a tool to use when selecting an attorney. Formal legal certification protects the public by regulating advertising of special skills by attorneys to assure that such claims are not misleading. Only attorneys who have earned the certified legal specialist designation may hold themselves out as “certified specialists.” The public may rely on the fact that certified legal specialists have taken the time and care to demonstrate their proficiency in their practice areas.
- "level the playing field" by allowing attorneys in small firms to better demonstrate their proficiency to the public.
- encourage attorney competence through the development of continuing legal education (CLE) programs. Specialists were required to take CLE in their areas of practice long before the inception of the MCLE requirement for all bar members. Even now, the CLE requirement for certified specialists is significantly higher than the general State Bar of California requirement.

## **TIMELINE**

- 1970 California became the first state to establish a system for "certifying" legal specialists. Based on a proposal by the Committee on Legal Specialization, the State Bar Board of Trustees adopted a "Pilot Program" to develop through experience the most feasible and useful certification program.
- 1972 The California Supreme Court approved the "Pilot Program," which certified specialists in Criminal Law, Taxation Law, and Workers' Compensation Law.
- 1973 The Program administered its first examinations in Criminal Law, Taxation Law and Workers' Compensation Law.
- 1979 Family Law was added to the Pilot Program.
- 1984 The Board of Trustees voted to recommend that the Supreme Court make the State Bar of California Program for Certifying Legal Specialists ("Program") permanent.
- 1985 The California Supreme Court approved the Program.
- 1986 Immigration and Nationality Law was added to the Program.
- 1988 Estate Planning, Trust and Probate Law was added to the Program.
- 1993 Personal and Small Business Bankruptcy Law was added to the Program.
- 1994 Based upon a proposal by the California Board of Legal Specialization ("CBLs") to streamline and standardize what had become an overly complex certification process, the Board of Trustees requested that the California Supreme Court repeal the Program and adopt new rule of court 983.5\* [Certifying Legal Specialists], an enabling rule containing a provision authorizing the State Bar to adopt rules to establish and administer a program for certifying legal specialists. *\*The Court renumbered the rule as 9.35 effective January 1, 2007.*

The Board of Trustees also approved new program rules and revised standards for certification and recertification in each specialty area.

- 1995 The Supreme Court repealed the Program and adopted rule 983.5.  
Appellate Law was added to the Program.
- 1996 Rule 983.5 and the new program rules and revised standards went into effect on January 1.
- 1997 The program rules and standards were revised again effective June 1. The changes were the result of an ongoing effort to make application and certification processes efficient and cost-effective. For the most part, the changes were "housekeeping" amendments aimed at providing answers to the most frequently asked questions about the Program, incorporating past administrative practices, and making other changes based upon the State Bar's experience operating the Program.
- New Rule of Professional Conduct 1-400(D)(6), approved by the Supreme Court on November 25, 1996, also became effective on June 1, 1997. The rule prohibits a member from advertising as a "certified specialist" unless the member is certified either by the California Board of Legal Specialization or by an entity accredited by the State Bar to designate specialists pursuant to standards adopted by the Board of Trustees (the accreditation standards became effective on June 1 as well). The rule also requires the member to state the complete name of the entity that granted certification.
- The National Board of Trial Advocacy's certification programs in civil and criminal trial advocacy were accredited by the State Bar.
- 1998 The American Board of Certification's programs in business bankruptcy law, consumer bankruptcy law, and creditor's' rights law and the National Elder Law Foundation's certification program in elder law were accredited by the State Bar.
- 1999 The National Board of Trial Advocacy's certification program in family law trial advocacy was accredited by the State Bar.
- 2002 The American Board of Professional Liability Attorneys' certification programs in accounting, legal malpractice, and medical malpractice were accredited by the State Bar.
- 2003 The program rules and standards were revised effective January 1. There were two significant changes to the rules: (1) an increase from three to five in the number of years during which the percentage of practice requirement applies; and (2) the addition of criteria relating to discipline and professional negligence that may be used in evaluating an applicant's proficiency and ethics, and the imposition on the applicant of a duty to disclose such criteria within a given time frame.

- 2004 The program rules were revised effective July 24 to (1) allow suspension and revocation of certification based on non-disciplinary regulatory actions; (2) give voting rights on the CBLS to all Advisory Commission chairs (prior to the change, only six of the eight chairs voted on a rotating basis); and (3) allow release of confidential information on an applicant's file to the Office of Chief Trial Counsel, which represents the CBLS when an applicant appeals the denial of his or her certification or recertification, without first having to request approval from the Board of Trustees. The Appellate Law Standards were also revised to clarify the education requirement.
- Effective September 11, the name of the Personal and Small Business Bankruptcy Law certified specialty was changed to Bankruptcy Law.
- 2005 The National Association of Counsel for Children's certification program in juvenile law (child welfare) was accredited by the State Bar.
- The program rules were revised effective October 22 to extend the approval period for CLE activities to two years and for approved providers to three years. This change conforms the approval periods to those for MCLE activities and providers.
- 2006 Franchise and Distribution Law was added to the program.
- 2007 The National Board of Trial Advocacy/National Board of Legal Specialty Certification's program in social security disability advocacy was accredited by the State Bar.
- 2008 Admiralty and Maritime Law and Legal Malpractice Law were added to the program
- 2009 The Program administered its first certified specialist examinations for Admiralty and Maritime law and Legal Malpractice Law.
- 2010 Alternate certification criteria were issued for Admiralty and Maritime Law
- 2011 The program begins an evaluation process to increase efficiency through improved use of technology. The first project adopted is paperless meeting technology for advisory commissions and the California Board of Legal Specialization.

## **NUMBER OF CERTIFIED SPECIALISTS**

As of December 31, 2011, the following were the number of certified specialists:

<b>Specialty Field</b>	<b>Number of Certified Specialists</b>
Admiralty & Maritime Law	14
Appellate Law	288
Bankruptcy Law	117
Criminal Law	368
Estate Planning, Trust & Probate Law	887
Family Law	1181
Franchise & Distribution Law	47
Immigration & Nationality Law	156
Legal Malpractice Law	71
Taxation Law	356
Workers' Compensation Law	1002
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4,487</b>

## **DUAL SPECIALISTS**

Ninety certified specialists hold dual certification: taxation/estate planning, trust and probate (69), followed by criminal/appellate (7), family/appellate (3), and family/estate planning, trust and probate (3); taxation/immigration and nationality (1), family/bankruptcy (1), family/taxation (1), family/workers' compensation (1), family/criminal (1), bankruptcy/estate planning, trust and probate (1), bankruptcy/taxation (1), and appellate/legal malpractice (1).

## **JUDICIAL SERVICE**

Certified specialists engaged in judicial service (those serving as judges of courts of record or in a quasi-judicial capacity, such as court commissioners or referees) are allowed under the program rules to have their certification "tolled." This waives the five-year recertification requirement and exempts judges from the annual certified legal specialist fee as long as they remain on judicial service. The program is honored to have 187 certified specialists who are currently on judicial service, 110 of whom are judges of courts of record. Among them are 77 certified specialists in family law, 66 in criminal law, 26 in workers' compensation law, 7 in appellate law, 5 in taxation law, 4 in immigration and nationality law, 2 in estate planning, trust and probate law.

## **VOLUNTEERS ARE CRITICAL TO THE PROGRAM'S SUCCESS**

From the development of the initial proposal to create a new certified legal specialty area to the administration of existing certified legal specialty areas, the Program is led by volunteers assisted by the Legal Specialization Department of the State Bar of California's Office of Admissions. During 2012, California Board of Legal Specialization ("CBLS") and the Advisory Commissions for each of eleven certified specialty areas administered the program

The CBLS and each of the Advisory Commissions met throughout the year in Northern and Southern California State Bar of California offices. Volunteers serve for three-year terms. In addition, consulting groups are appointed by the Board of Trustees on an ad hoc basis to develop and make recommendations on certification standards for potential new certified legal specialty areas.

### **California Board of Legal Specialization (CBLS)**

The CBLS, appointed by the Board of Trustees, performs overall administration of the program, recommends new certified specialty areas and modifications to existing certified legal specialty areas to the Board of Trustees, and acts upon the recommendations of the Advisory Commissions for approval or denial of certification and recertification. It is composed of 11 members, at least three of whom must be public members, and one advisor (traditionally the previous year's Chair). In addition, the Advisory Commission Chairs sit on the CBLS as voting members.

For the 2011-2012 committee year beginning September 2011, Hagop T. Bedoyan, Fresno, is serving as Chair, David Holmes, San Luis Obispo, as Vice-Chair, and Wesley H. Avery, Valencia, as Advisor.

### **Advisory Commissions**

The Advisory Commissions, also appointed by the Board of Trustees, develop and grade the certified specialty examinations, review certification and recertification applications, and act on applications from providers who wish to offer legal specialization educational credit. Each of the Advisory Commissions is composed of nine members, at least one of whom is a public member.

### **Council of Past Chairs**

In November 1996, the Board of Trustees created and appointed a Council of Past Chairs of the Board of Legal Specialization to advise and consult with the CBLS on an ad hoc basis. This year, Past Chairs Lester Friedman, John Munsill, and Alice O'Sullivan are serving on this Council.

(See Appendix A for CBLS, Advisory Commission, and Council of Past Chairs rosters.)

## **STAFF**

The CBLS is supported by State Bar staff located in The State Bar of California offices at 180 Howard Street in San Francisco, California.

The Legal Specialization program is administered by staff in the Legal Specialization Department of the State Bar's Office of Admissions. The day-to-day operations of the program include processing applications for certification and recertification, as well as applications to provide legal specialist continuing education. Staff also answers inquiries about the program from the public and members of the Bar, provides administrative support to the CBLS, Advisory Commissions, and Consulting Groups, maintains the Legal Specialization web site, and assists with program outreach.

## **BUDGET/FISCAL MATTERS**

Section 20.8 of the Rules mandates that the program be self-supporting. It is completely funded by fees collected from applicants, certified specialists, education providers, and accredited organizations. The program is not subsidized by attorney dues or other general fund revenues collected by the State Bar of California.

The annual budget, which runs from January through December, is prepared in accordance with the State Bar of California's policies and directives and is subject to approval by the State Bar's Board of Trustees. For 2011, total expenses for the program were \$1,334,306 versus \$1,871,771 that was budgeted.

## ***ACTIVITIES OF THE PROGRAM***

### **CONTINUING LEGAL EDUCATION**

This program piloted the idea of requiring continuing education for attorneys long before there were general Minimum Continuing Legal Education requirements. The program encourages the creation of high-level educational courses that provide life-long learning for both new and experienced practitioners.

One of the important functions of each of the Advisory Commissions is to supervise the quality of proposed continuing legal education programs that may be attended by individuals who need to meet the requirements of certification or recertification. Applicants for certification are required to complete 45 hours of approved education activities during the three years immediately preceding the initial application. Applicants for recertification are required to complete 60 hours of education in the substantive area of their certified legal specialty during each five-year certification term.

The Advisory Commissions are authorized to approve providers of education programs for a period of up to three years. To qualify as a Multiple Activity Provider, the provider must demonstrate that, in the two years immediately preceding application, the provider presented at least four education programs that complied with the requirements for education program content. Like MCLE, Multiple Activity Legal Specialization Provider status allows providers to offer an unlimited number of substantively relevant programs for legal specialization credit for a specified three-year period.

The following statistics reflect the number of approved legal specialization providers as of December 31, 2011, and the number of applications for approval of individual CLE programs received during the period of January 1, 2011, through December 31, 2011:

<b>Advisory Commission</b>	<b># of Approved Providers</b>	<b># of Applications for Individual Programs</b>
Admiralty and Maritime Law	0	2
Appellate Law	20	15
Bankruptcy Law	5	9
Criminal Law	9	1
Estate Planning, Trust & Probate Law	34	34
Family Law	23	14
Franchise and Distribution Law	0	0
Immigration & Nationality Law	2	0
Legal Malpractice Law	0	5
Taxation Law	21	4
Workers' Compensation Law	17	19
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>103</b>

## **EXAMINATIONS**

Examinations take place in alternate odd-numbered years. An examination was administered to a record number of 694 applicants in Oakland and Pasadena on October 25, 2011. The next examination will be offered in 2013.

## **ACCREDITATION OF SPECIALTY CERTIFICATION PROGRAMS FOR ATTORNEYS**

Rule of Professional Conduct 1-400(D) (6) prohibits a member from advertising as a "certified specialist" unless the member is certified by the California Board of Legal Specialization or another entity accredited by the State Bar to evaluate applications to become certified legal specialists pursuant to standards adopted by the State Bar of California Board of Trustees. The following certification programs have been accredited pursuant to the Rules Governing Accreditation of Specialty Certification Programs for Attorneys:

<b>Certifying Organization</b>	<b>Certification Programs</b>	<b># of CA Attorneys Certified</b>
American Board of Certification	Business bankruptcy law Consumer bankruptcy law Creditors' rights law	36 14 8
American Board of Professional Liability Attorneys	Legal malpractice law Medical malpractice law	3 20
National Association of Counsel for Children	Juvenile law (child welfare)	96
National Board of Legal Specialty Certification	Civil trial advocacy Criminal trial advocacy Family law trial advocacy Social Security disability advocacy	97 11 4 5
National Elder Law Foundation	Elder law	30
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>324</b>

## **INTERNET**

The program's website can be reached from the main State Bar of California website, or by visiting [www.californiaspecialist.org](http://www.californiaspecialist.org). During 2011, the program redesigned its website to make it easier for members of the public, current certified specialists, and prospective applicants to find what they need. Soon after the redesign was unveiled, the number of general questions received via telephone or e-mail dropped substantially, suggesting that the website has become a more helpful resource to all.

Visitors to the State Bar's Web site can access information about the Legal Specialization Program and search for a certified specialist by area of law and geography both from the Attorney Search Function and from the Legal Specialization portal. Attorneys interested in becoming certified can use the Legal Specialization Portal to learn about the application process, the program's rules and regulations, and the standards for certification.

## **PUBLIC AWARENESS**

The program continued its established public awareness activities:

- ads and articles in the California Bar eJournal
- funding of public radio program, Your Legal Rights, on KALW 91.7, San Francisco, hosted by Chuck Finney, a weekly call-in format that features certified specialists as guests at least once a month and Call A Lawyer Night featuring certified specialists, available on KALW 91.7 FM San Francisco and via NPR.org podcast.
- publication of the Legal Specialization Digest
- publication of consumer pamphlets that certified legal specialists and others can use to communicate the benefits of certified legal specialization

- recognizing specialists who have been certified for 20 and 30 years
- creating a new outreach course designed to acquaint new attorneys with the Program for Certifying Legal Specialists, first offered at the 2011 State Bar Annual Meeting
- distributing information at local bars and relevant conferences to increase program awareness
- creating social media pages via services such as LinkedIn to increase public and attorney awareness of the program
- redesigning website to create a more user friendly experience
- upgrading the State Bar certified specialist search to allow for searches on a number of criteria in addition to the previously available county search

## **CBLS LOGO**



The CBLS logo is registered as a certification mark with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. Under California Rule of Professional Conduct 1-400(D) (6), attorneys who hold themselves out as certified specialists must identify the certifying body. Certified specialists may use the logo in their advertising instead of, or in addition to, spelling out "The State Bar of California Board of Legal

Specialization." Use of the logo is intended to present a consistent, identifiable image for specialization apart from regular Bar membership in order to promote recognition of certified legal specialist certification among both attorneys and consumers of legal services.

## **RECOGNITION PROGRAMS**

The Board of Legal Specialization has established recognition programs for certified specialists who have been continuously certified by the CBLS in a particular specialty area for 20 and 30 years and for those on judicial service.

Those honored in 2011 were 123 certified specialists who reached the 30-year mark, including one certified criminal law specialist, four certified workers' compensation law specialists, and 118 certified family law specialists. The 116 twenty-year honorees included one certified workers' compensation law specialist, three certified criminal law specialists, 11 certified taxation law specialists, 16 certified immigration and nationality law specialists, 22 certified family law specialists, and 63 certified estate planning, trust and probate law specialists.

## ***IDENTIFICATION OF PROBLEM AREAS AND RECOMMENDATIONS***

Section 21.0 of the Rules requires that the CBLS Annual Report identify problem areas and recommend appropriate solutions. During this reporting period of January 1, 2011 to December 31, 2011, the CBLS has identified the following continuing areas for further study and potential action.

## **INCREASING PUBLIC AND ATTORNEY AWARENESS**

The CBLS continues to explore ways to reach practitioners, consumers, and education providers to increase awareness of the program and its benefits. During 2011, the following goals were achieved:

- *Built upon outreach efforts to attorneys that are already in place.* Staff attended a number of professional and education conferences during the year. Business cards were collected from interested attorneys who attended these events and the Program established a database of attorneys interested in becoming certified, the majority of whom took the examination offered in October 2011.
- *Updated current application forms.*
- Increased outreach to new attorneys through seminars, electronic means, and updated printed materials

In 2012, additional methods for outreach will be considered, including:

- Continued updating of internal systems to reduce costs, increase efficiency and increase member satisfaction
- Publicizing the program at law schools to encourage attorneys to set goals for certification early, thus increasing public protection at the earliest possible opportunity
- Increasing electronic outreach
- Attending outreach events at minority and local bar associations

## **STREAMLINING THE ADMINISTRATIVE PROCESS**

Ways to make the examination and application process more efficient continue to be explored. Whenever possible, communication is through electronic means; open agenda items are sent via e-mail, and orientation materials, reminders, and the Legal Specialization Digest are also distributed electronically. The 2011 Legal Specialist Examination application was made available online as well.

In 2012, fillable application forms will be created, and online application processing will be explored.

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Board Year 2011-2012

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