

Legal Client Safety Net

A lawyer takes a case, charges a client for legal services and then does nothing.

It doesn't happen often, but some victims of unscrupulous lawyers lose their savings and are left with no money to hire another lawyer much less go after the one that left them high and dry.

New Mexico's Client Protection Fund, set up to help reimburse client victims, has operated with little or no money for more than four years. But, the state Supreme Court and the New Mexico Bar Association have patched this safety net.

The Bar donated \$50,000 this year and last, and the Supreme Court earmarked \$339,000 to the fund Tuesday. The money comes from Minimum Continuing Legal Education sanction money — late fees paid by attorneys who have not received their continuing legal education credits in time.

When attorney misconduct is proven, the consequence can be disbarment or even criminal prosecution. Such punishment and deterrence serves justice, but can still leave victims out a chunk of money.

Setting aside money to help clients-turned-victims shows New Mexico's lawyers and judges understand the value in keeping the client protection fund and regard for their profession healthy.