

What Is A Senior Lawyer?

by William B. Smith

At the Virginia State Bar, a member of the Senior Lawyers Conference is age 55 or older and in good standing. This can be called a definition in form of “senior lawyer,” but what is a senior lawyer in substance?

Definitions of “senior” as an adjective include “older;” “ranking before others by virtue of tenure in office, position, or service;” and “of higher rank or standing.” As a noun, a senior is defined as “a person who is older than another;” “one ranking before others by virtue of tenure;” or “one of higher rank or standing.” Synonyms for “senior” are “higher ranking” and “leading” (adjectives) and “patriarch,” “dean” and “elder” (nouns).

In Virginia, an older lawyer sometimes is called a “senior member” of a law firm, without a specific definition. This appellation carries a mark of distinction; it means that he or she occupies a position of respect and authority.

A 55-year-old lawyer, in many cases, has been practicing for thirty years. Presumably, he or she has broad legal knowledge and extensive experience. He also has practical experience learned through interaction with lawyers and nonlawyers in the workplace and community.

Whether they work in private practice, a corporate law department, a government agency, or a public interest organization, senior lawyers have maturity, knowledge and experience beyond that of younger lawyers.

More than nine-thousand lawyers in all kinds of professional fields are members of the Senior Lawyers Conference. They offer a reservoir of maturity, experience, knowledge, and wisdom to the profession, to the legal system, and to the citizenry.

Lawyers who serve in SLC leadership, or who are otherwise involved in the conference’s activities, are ready, willing and able to contribute to SLC projects when asked. Many volunteer without being asked.

The challenges of the SLC are to develop a more organized way for the younger attorneys and members of the public involved with senior issues to obtain the benefits the senior lawyers offer, and to broaden SLC members’ participation in providing these benefits. Our conference is actively working towards these ends by:

- Providing information helpful to the profession and the public through our newsletter and Web site.
- Working with legal services programs to develop a plan for retired lawyers to provide pro bono legal help to indigent people.
- Publishing the *Senior Citizens Handbook* for Virginians.
- Serving on the Involuntary Commitments Procedures Study initiated by Chief Justice Leroy R. Hassell Sr. of the Supreme Court of Virginia.

- Planning to protect clients in the event of disability or death of their attorneys.
- Improving civility and professionalism in the practice of law.
- Developing better standards to regulate assisted living facilities.
- Developing a plan for senior lawyers to contribute to the defense of indigent people in criminal cases.

The SLC board is considering other suggestions, including:

- Sending lawyers to speak at senior care facilities.
- Providing SLC members to be available at senior services facilities at regular times to offer legal advice and answer legal questions.
- Helping members serve as mentors to younger lawyers.
- Encouraging senior lawyers to become more active in local bar activities, by serving on local bar governing boards or senior committees.

I hope that all Virginia lawyers will give thought to how the vast resources of seniors lawyers can be made more available to the profession and to the general public. This publication goes to some thirty-five thousand lawyers. I invite each of you to respond to the challenges with your thoughts and ideas, by phoning, writing, or e-mailing me or Frank Brown, our newsletter editor and Web site editor, at the addresses below.

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