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# Amid Membership Challenges, Bar Associations Focus On 'How to Be Relevant'

Membership at the state and federal bar groups in New Jersey has increased over the past decade, but has been essentially flat in the last few years. Leaders, meanwhile, are focusing on the member experience as they look to the future.

By [David Gialanella](https://www.law.com/nljournal/author/profile/David-Gialanella/) | October 16, 2019 at 01:45 PM



Angela Scheck, executive director of the New Jersey State Bar Association, left, and Wilentz, Goldman & Spitzer's Edward Kole, president of the Association of the Federal Bar of New Jersey, right. Courtesy photos

Membership at New Jersey's state and federal bar associations has increased over the past decade, but has been essentially flat the last few years.

And in an era where membership growth or even steadiness can't be taken for granted at bar associations across the country, the New Jersey State Bar Association and the Association of the Federal Bar of New Jersey are increasingly cognizant of what they offer, particularly when it comes to attracting young lawyers.

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"It's an issue most associations are looking at: how to be relevant," said Angela Scheck, executive director of the NJSBA, in an interview, noting that the dialogue about how to better attract young attorneys goes back several years at the organization.

"We're always trying to grow membership," which is "a significant challenge," Scheck added. "You have to convince people every single year that it's worth their time and money. Many [bar associations] are experiencing pretty significant reductions in their membership."

The prime example: the American Bar Association's membership and revenue have both declined in recent years, leading to [an overhaul](https://www.law.com/2019/04/30/amid-shrinking-membership-aba-president-touts-new-dues-structure-and-focus/) in membership structure, including a reduction in dues and an increase in access to some sections and services.

The ABA's experience so far has not been mirrored by the NJSBA or the AFB-NJ, but neither organization can claim large gains in membership in recent years, according to data kept by those organizations.

The State Bar's membership, 17,737 as of January 2019, is about 17% larger than it was a decade ago (15,169 in January 2009).

Membership peaked at 18,139 in January 2016, and the association, since adding more than 2,000 members from 2010 to 2012, has maintained a membership of between 17,500 and 18,139 for the past eight years.

The Federal Bar's membership is smaller, but has seen a larger increase over the past decade than its state counterpart: Its 616 members as of March 1, 2019, is 48% more than it had in 2009 (415). (The association's membership year begins in March.)

But like the State Bar, the AFB-NJ's membership has flattened out. It peaked at 655 members in 2017, and has sat at or near 620 members in three of the past four years, according to the organization's numbers.

Edward Kole, AFB-NJ president, said the organization was never intended to be very large, given its focus on federal practitioners, but leaders have been working to enhance the member experience. The organization launched a young lawyers division several years ago and earlier this year hosted its first in-house counsel gathering for insights on better serving clients. It also has a website overhaul planned, and leaders want to create a digital "brief bank" for legal documents that could be helpful to members.

"We really have a steady, consistent membership," but nevertheless, "we're constantly looking for ways to enhance the experience," Kole said.

## Revenue

There have been no large gains in terms of revenue, either, according to tax forms filed on behalf of the organizations, which are stored on [an online database of nonprofit organization documents maintained by ProPublica](https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/) (Fiscal 2018 is the most recent available form for the NJSBA; for the AFB-NJ, it is fiscal 2017.)

The NJSBA's annual revenue has been between \$11 million and \$11.7 million over the past seven years, with the exception of fiscal 2017, when revenue was \$12.15 million, the forms indicate.

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(A more than doubling of revenue from 2010 to 2011 is attributable to the association's move to make the New Jersey Institute for Continuing Legal Education a division of the NJSBA, whereas previously it had been a separate entity, a joint venture with law schools, according to Scheck, who said half of the NJSBA's annual revenue comes from CLE programs of various types, while the other half comes from membership dues and events.)

And for the AFB-NJ, annual revenue over the 2007-17 decade crested at slightly more than \$200,000 in fiscal years 2013, 2015 and 2016, while more recently (2017) it was \$173,323. Four other years during that span saw a revenue figure of more than \$180,000 for the organization, according to its tax forms.

### 'The thing that you do'

While the state and federal associations in New Jersey haven't experienced a dramatic change, organization leaders nevertheless say they're intent on preparing for the future. Efforts to do so range from expanding offerings to controlling costs to examining the fundamental role of such professional groups for lawyers.

Scheck, who has spent 32 years at the NJSBA and became its executive director in 2007, said bar associations' place in the profession is changing.

Joining one's state, county and local bar groups on entering the legal profession as a matter of course is "not the thing that you do" any longer, Scheck said, adding that the NJSBA is "trying to create value for younger lawyers and trying to make sure they get involved in the community."

It appears the organization has taken measures toward that specific goal.

The association in 2018 launched the online "Mentor Match" program, which has matched mentors and mentees, as well as a community network that allows for members to join group dialogues, ask questions and seek subject-matter experts, and an online job board that is "fairly active" but has yet to fully take off, according to Scheck. There's also the "New Attorney Welcome Stream" on the association's website.

Web-based services for members are important because it mirrors the way young lawyers do everything from purchase auto insurance to date, she said. Still, the organization is doing its best to offer both live events and online services, Scheck said. "We feel strongly that we need to provide both in order to be relevant," she added, noting that CLE sessions come in both formats.

The NJSBA also is following a survey of its members from several years ago with a "deep dive" survey of young lawyers this year. The feedback has been showing that networking and "building of communities" matters to young lawyers, Scheck said.

The NJSBA's goal is get to 20,000 members in the near term, and to grow from there in the long term, she said.

Then there's the money.

The most recent dues increase came in 2015, but there has been no recent discussion of another increase. First-year attorneys are admitted free, with a staggered dues structure by which lawyers don't pay full dues until their sixth full year of membership, she said.

And CLE provides revenue, but there is ample competition, she noted.

Kole warned against seeing the organization as one that provides only networking

opportunities.

“There is a close-knit interaction between the federal bar and the federal bench in New Jersey,” said Kole, a partner and member of leadership at Wilentz, Goldman & Spitzer in Woodbridge. “We’re not built on a basis where we’re trying to provide marketing opportunities for attorneys. ... Our mission as I really see it is to assist the court ... and to maintain a great relationship between the bench and the bar.”

The federal court often looks for assistance with its pro bono program, and AFB-NJ members look to step up, Kole noted as an example.

Still, the Federal Bar is looking to bolster its offering of events. For example, it does lunches each year in each of the federal court’s three vicinages, which allows members to hear directly from the judges, and is looking to replicate that program for bankruptcy practitioners and judges, he said. “When we do events, it’s to educate people,” Kole said.

Both Scheck and Kole are optimistic about the future, though willingness to adapt appears to be part of the equation for both groups.

“You have to change your model,” Scheck said. “I’m confident that we’ll remain relevant. ... The key is to engage people.”

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## David Gialanella

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