

## Welcome to the Attorney Referral Service!

**A**S CO-CHAIRPERSONS FOR THE PAST FOUR years of the SFVBA Attorney Referral Service (ARS) Committee, we have been humbled by the many brilliant lawyers who have both dedicated their talents and time to make the Valley a better place for those seeking legal services. The ARS is positioned to provide the maximum benefit to those we serve and to provide meaningful referrals to our highly qualified members. This includes, on occasion, a seven figure case.

We still find it incredible that the ARS remains largely unknown or misunderstood by our members at-large. When we speak to members, we receive many questions. Isn't that just a free legal service? How does it work? Where does the money go? These are all legitimate questions and concerns and this article should help you answer them and reach the conclusion that the existence of the ARS is a win-win for lawyers and the community.

For those of you who have not really considered the ARS, here are the basics. The ARS is a panel of San Fernando Valley lawyers that must meet basic qualifications in their respective areas of law. It is not automatic that an applicant will be accepted onto a respective panel. The ARS committee considers applicants' backgrounds and experience before allowing attorneys' participation. ARS panel members must meet ethical guidelines and carry the requisite malpractice insurance. Depending on the particular area of law, applicants must have real world trial experience or a significant number of verifiable cases demonstrating expertise in that area. When a referral is made to an ARS panel member, the prospective client does not get a novice!

The ARS annual membership fee is negligible and the "payback" to the bar association is only 15%, far less than most private referral arrangements. There is no good argument against receiving such referrals. In addition, panel members have benefitted from some absolutely blockbuster referrals. A recent case was settled for seven figures and an important and valuable class action is working its way towards a resolution. While not all referrals from ARS are blockbusters, the majority mirror the types of cases and referrals a lawyer or law firm receives over time.

The money received by the ARS sustains the program and provides funds for low-cost or free legal services and charities for those in need. It truly is a public service that you can feel great about joining!

[www.sfvba.org](http://www.sfvba.org)

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In addition to pre-qualifying panel members, the ARS Committee oversees the marketing to the public to make them aware of this extremely valuable service. The ARS posts phone numbers at local courthouses and participates in other local outreach programs. In the past, the ARS could simply sponsor a community event or purchase a booth at a farmer's market. Because the public needed access and had little in the way of options, the ARS was a natural fit and answer to these concerns. Times, however, have changed and the ARS is coming around to meet 21<sup>st</sup> century marketing needs.

Admittedly, the ARS was slow to adapt to the new marketing reality that many people find lawyers online and that law firms guard referrals as a valuable source of revenue and reciprocal cooperation. But the ARS is a valuable spoke in the wheel of this changing model.

Recently, the ARS Committee rolled out its new, fully optimized website which can compete with the largest and best funded law firms. The website is informative and easy to use. It cuts across many disciplines and provides the public with an extremely viable online option from a trusted and verified source. The hook is that ARS lawyers are vetted, qualified and insured! Other law firms online are really just advertising in comparison.

Hands down, the best source of referrals to the ARS is other lawyers and law firms. Invariably, a member of the public will call your law office and inquire about an area of law you do not handle. Of course, you may refer the matter to a colleague who may pay you a referral fee or provide reciprocal referrals. We are not asking anyone to change this process, though we always appreciate those first line referrals. We are asking for all San Fernando Valley lawyers and law firms to commit to referring all other inquiries and cases directly to the ARS. Every law firm receptionist should have the ARS phone number handy and be able to direct a call in an instant.

So where does the ARS fit into your marketing plan? All lawyers should consider the ARS as a valuable tool in the arsenal of their plan to get new clients. Experienced solo practitioners and established law firms should be throwing their hats into the mix. And young lawyers should be contacting the ARS to find out what requirements are necessary to qualify, and then, as soon as possible, try to join the ARS as a panel member. This is a great way to expand your new practice and gain access to clients. The ARS is a viable low-cost addition and there is simply no reason for a Valley lawyer not to join the ARS panel. 