

RULE 1.15A  
SAFEGUARDING PROPERTY

(a) This Rule applies to (1) property of clients or third persons in a lawyer's possession in connection with a representation and (2) escrow and other funds held by a lawyer incidental to the closing of any real estate or personal property transaction. Additionally, for all transactions in which a lawyer has selected, prepared, or completed legal documents for use in the closing of any real estate or personal property transaction, the lawyer must ensure that all funds received or held by the Closing Firm incidental to the closing of the transaction, including advances for costs and expenses, are held and maintained as set forth in this rule or LPORPC 1.12A. The lawyer's duty to ensure that all funds received or held by the Closing Firm incidental to the closing of the transaction are held and maintained as set forth in this rule or LPORPC 1.12A shall not apply to a lawyer when that lawyer's participation in the matter is incidental to the closing and (i) the lawyer or lawyer's law firm has a preexisting client-lawyer relationship with a buyer or seller in the transaction, and (ii) neither the lawyer nor the lawyer's law firm has an existing client-lawyer relationship with the Closing Firm or an LPO participating in the closing.

(b) A lawyer must not use, convert, borrow or pledge client or third person property for the lawyer's own use.

(c) A lawyer must hold property of clients and third persons separate from the lawyer's own property.

(1) A lawyer must deposit and hold in a trust account funds subject to this Rule pursuant to paragraph (h) of this Rule.

(2) Except as provided in Rule 1.5(f), and subject to the requirements of paragraph (h) of this Rule, a lawyer shall deposit into a trust account legal fees and expenses that have been paid in advance, to be withdrawn by the lawyer only as fees are earned or expenses incurred.

(3) A lawyer must identify, label and appropriately safeguard any property of clients or third persons other than funds. The lawyer must keep records of such property that identify the property, the client or third person, the date of receipt and the location of safekeeping. The lawyer must preserve the records for seven years after return of the property.

(d) A lawyer must promptly notify a client or third person of receipt of the client or third person's property.

(e) A lawyer must promptly provide a written accounting to a client or third person after distribution of property or upon request. A lawyer must provide at least annually a written accounting to a client or third person for whom the lawyer is holding funds.

(f) Except as stated in this Rule, a lawyer must promptly pay or deliver to the client or third person the property which the client or third person is entitled to receive.

(g) If a lawyer possesses property in which two or more persons (one of which may be the lawyer) claim interests, the lawyer must maintain the property in trust until the dispute is resolved. The lawyer must promptly distribute all undisputed portions of the property. The lawyer must take reasonable action to resolve the dispute, including, when appropriate, interpleading the disputed funds.

(h) A lawyer must comply with the following for all trust accounts:

(1) No funds belonging to the lawyer may be deposited or retained in a trust account except as follows:

(i) funds to pay bank charges, but only in an amount reasonably sufficient for that purpose;

(ii) funds belonging in part to a client or third person and in part presently or potentially to the lawyer must be deposited and retained in a trust account, but any portion belonging to the lawyer must be withdrawn at the earliest reasonable time; or

(iii) funds necessary to restore appropriate balances.

(2) A lawyer must keep complete records as required by Rule 1.15B.

(3) A lawyer may withdraw funds when necessary to pay client costs. The lawyer may withdraw earned fees only after giving reasonable notice to the client of the intent to do so, through a billing statement or other document.

(4) Receipts must be deposited intact.

(5) All withdrawals must be made only to a named payee and not to cash. Withdrawals must be made by check or by bank transfer.

(6) Trust account records must be reconciled as often as bank statements are generated or at least quarterly. The lawyer must reconcile the check register balance to the bank statement balance and reconcile the check register balance to the combined total of all client ledger records required by Rule 1.15B(a)(2).

(7) A lawyer must not disburse funds from a trust account until deposits have cleared the banking process and been collected, unless the lawyer and the bank have a written agreement by which the lawyer personally guarantees all deposits to the account without recourse to the trust account.

(8) Disbursements on behalf of a client or third person may not exceed the funds of that person on deposit. The funds of a client or third person must not be used on behalf of anyone else.

(9) Only a lawyer admitted to practice law may be an authorized signatory on the account.

(i) Trust accounts must be interest-bearing and allow withdrawals or transfers without any delay other than notice periods that are required by law or regulation and meet the requirements of ELC 15.7(d) and ELC 15.7(e). In the exercise of ordinary prudence, a lawyer may select any financial institution authorized by the Legal Foundation of Washington (Legal Foundation) under ELC 15.7(c). In selecting the type of trust account for the purpose of depositing and holding funds subject to this Rule, a lawyer shall apply the following criteria:

(1) When client or third-person funds will not produce a positive net return to the client or third person because the funds are nominal in amount or expected to be held for a short period of time the funds must be placed in a pooled interest-bearing trust account known as an Interest on Lawyer's Trust Account or IOLTA. The interest earned on IOLTA accounts shall be paid to, and the IOLTA program shall be administered by, the Legal Foundation of Washington in accordance with ELC 15.4 and ELC 15.7(e).

(2) Client or third-person funds that will produce a positive net return to the client or third person must be placed in one of the following two types of non-IOLTA trust accounts unless the client or third person requests that the funds be deposited in an IOLTA account:

(i) a separate interest-bearing trust account for the particular client or third person with earned interest paid to the client or third person; or

(ii) a pooled interest-bearing trust account with sub-accounting that allows for computation of interest earned by each client or third person's funds with the interest paid to the appropriate client or third person.

(3) In determining whether to use the account specified in paragraph (i)(1) or an account specified in paragraph (i)(2), a lawyer must consider only whether the funds will produce a positive net return to the client or third person, as determined by the following factors:

(i) the amount of interest the funds would earn based on the current rate of interest and the expected period of deposit;

(ii) the cost of establishing and administering the account, including the cost of the lawyer's services and the cost of preparing any tax reports required for interest accruing to a client or third person's benefit; and

(iii) the capability of financial institutions to calculate and pay interest to individual clients or third persons if the account in paragraph (i)(2)(ii) is used.

The provisions of paragraph (i) do not relieve a lawyer or law firm from any obligation imposed by these Rules.

#### Washington Comments

[1] A lawyer must also comply with the recordkeeping rule for trust accounts, Rule 1.15B.

[2] Client funds include, but are not limited to, the following: legal fees and costs that have been paid in advance other than retainers and flat fees complying with the requirements of Rule 1.5(f), funds received on behalf of a client, funds to be paid by a client to a third party through the lawyer, other funds subject to attorney and other liens, and payments received in excess of amounts billed for fees.

[3] This Rule applies to property held in any fiduciary capacity in connection with a representation, whether as trustee, agent, escrow agent, guardian, personal representative, executor, or otherwise.

[4] The inclusion of ethical obligations to third persons in the handling of trust funds and property is not intended to expand or otherwise affect existing law regarding a Washington lawyer's liability to third parties other than clients. See, e.g., *Trask v. Butler*, 123 Wn.2d 835, 872 P.2d 1080 (1994); *Hetzel v. Parks*, 93 Wn. App. 929, 971 P.2d 115 (1999).

[5] Property covered by this Rule includes original documents affecting legal rights such as wills or deeds.

[6] A lawyer has a duty to take reasonable steps to locate a client or third person for whom the lawyer is holding funds or property. If after taking reasonable steps, the lawyer is still unable to locate the client or third person, the lawyer should treat the funds as unclaimed property under the Uniform Unclaimed Property Act, RCW 63.29.

[7] A lawyer may not use as a trust account an account in which funds are periodically transferred by the financial institution between a trust account and an uninsured account or other account that would not qualify as a trust account under this Rule or ELC 15.7.

[8] If a lawyer accepts payment of an advanced fee deposit by credit card, the payment must be deposited directly into the trust account. It cannot be deposited into a general account and then transferred to the trust account. Similarly, credit card payments of earned fees, of retainers meeting the requirements of Rule 1.5(f)(1), and of flat fees meeting the requirements of Rule 1.5(f)(2) cannot be deposited into the trust account and then transferred to another account.

[9] Under paragraph (g), the extent of the efforts that a lawyer is obligated to take to resolve a dispute depend on the amount in dispute, the availability of methods for alternative dispute resolution, and the likelihood of informal resolution.

[10] The requirement in paragraph (h)(4) that receipts must be deposited intact means that a lawyer cannot deposit one check or negotiable instrument into two or more accounts at the same time, commonly known as a split deposit.

[11] Paragraph (h)(7) permits Washington lawyers to enter into written agreements with the trust account financial institution to provide for disbursement of trust deposits prior to formal notice of dishonor or collection. In essence the trust account bank is agreeing to or has guaranteed a loan to the lawyer and the client for the amount of the trust deposit pending collection of that deposit from the institution upon which the instrument was written. A Washington lawyer may only enter into such an arrangement if 1) there is a formal written agreement between the attorney and the trust account institution, and 2) the trust account financial institution provides the lawyer with written assurance that in the event of dishonor of the deposited instrument or other difficulty in collecting the deposited funds, the financial institution will not have recourse to the trust account to obtain the funds to reimburse the financial institution. A lawyer must never use one client's money to pay for withdrawals from the trust account on behalf of another client who is paid subject to the lawyer's guarantee. The trust account financial institution must agree that the institution will not seek to fund the guaranteed withdrawal from the trust account, but will instead look to the lawyer for payment of uncollectible funds. Any such agreement must ensure that the trust account funds or deposits of any other client's or third person's money into the trust account would not be affected by the guarantee.

[12] The Legal Foundation of Washington was established by Order of the Supreme Court of Washington.

[13] A lawyer may, but is not required to, notify the client of the intended use of funds paid to the Foundation.

[14] If the client or third person requests that funds that would be deposited in a non-IOLTA trust account under paragraph (i)(2) instead be held in the IOLTA account, the lawyer should document this request in the lawyer's trust account records and preferably should confirm the request in writing to the client or third person.

[15] A lawyer may not receive from financial institutions earnings credits or any other benefit from the financial institution based on the balance maintained in a trust account.

[16] The term "Closing Firm" as used in this rule has the same definition as in ELPOC 1.3(g).

[17] The lawyer may satisfy the requirement of paragraph (a), that the lawyer must ensure that all funds received or held by the Closing Firm incidental to the closing of the transaction including advances for costs and expenses, are held and maintained as set forth in this rule or LPORPC 1.12A, by obtaining a certification or other reasonable assurance from the Closing Firm that the funds are being held in accordance with RPC 1.15A and/or LPORPC 1.12A. The lawyer is not required to personally inspect the books and records of the Closing Firm.

The last sentence of Paragraph (a) is intended to relieve a lawyer from the duties of paragraph (a) only if the lawyer or the lawyer's law firm has a previous client-lawyer relationship with one of the parties to the transaction and that party is a buyer or seller. Lawyers may be called on by clients to review deeds prepared during the escrow process, or may be asked to prepare special deeds such as personal representative's deeds for use in the closing. A lawyer may also be asked by a client to review documents such as settlement statements or tax affidavits that have been prepared for the closing. Such activities are limited in scope and are only incidental to the closing. The exception stated in the last sentence of paragraph (a) does not apply if the lawyer or the lawyer's law firm has an existing client-lawyer relationship with the Closing Firm or with a limited practice officer who is participating in the closing.

[18] When selecting a financial institution for purposes of depositing and holding funds in a trust account, a lawyer is obligated to exercise ordinary prudence under paragraph (i). All trust accounts must be insured by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation or the National Credit Union Administration up to the limit established by law for those types of accounts or be backed by United States Government Securities. Trust account funds must not be placed in

stocks, bonds, mutual funds that invest in stock or bonds, or similar uninsured investments. See ELC 15.7(d).

[19] Only those financial institutions authorized by the Legal Foundation of Washington (Legal Foundation) are eligible to offer trust accounts to Washington lawyers. To become authorized, the financial institution must satisfy the Legal Foundation that it qualifies as an authorized financial institution under ELC 15.7(c) and must have on file with the Legal Foundation a current Overdraft Notification Agreement under ELC 15.4. A list of all authorized financial institutions is maintained and published by the Legal Foundation and is available to any person on request.

[20] Upon receipt of a notification of a trust account overdraft, a lawyer must comply with the duties set forth in ELC 15.4(d) (lawyer must promptly notify the Office of Disciplinary Counsel of the Washington State Bar Association and include a full explanation of the cause of the overdraft).

[21] A unilateral deposit of funds belonging in part to a client or third party into a lawyer's non-trust account does not constitute a violation of paragraph (c) of this Rule if the lawyer promptly identifies the portion of the funds belonging to the client or third party, deposits those funds into a trust account, and notifies the client or third party of the deposit. A unilateral deposit of funds belonging in part to a lawyer into a trust account does not constitute a violation of paragraph (h) of this Rule if the lawyer promptly identifies the lawyer-owned funds and withdraws them from the trust account. For purposes of this provision, a unilateral deposit refers to funds deposited directly by a client or third party by means of electronic funds transfer where the lawyer has not directed, invited, or encouraged a deposit that would constitute a violation of this Rule and has taken reasonable precautions to prevent such a deposit.

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