

**THE STATE BAR OF CALIFORNIA
STANDING COMMITTEE ON
PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND CONDUCT
FORMAL OPINION INTERIM NO. 19-0004**

ISSUES: What are the ethical obligations of lawyers with respect to retention and destruction of client files, materials, and property in closed civil and criminal matters?

DIGEST: California Rules of Professional Conduct do not specify a fixed retention period for closed client files.¹ A lawyer's file retention duties generally turn on the lawyer's obligations as the bailee of the client's papers and property and the lawyer's duty to avoid reasonably foreseeable prejudice to a former client. If not returned to the client, original documents, property furnished to the lawyer by the client, and items of intrinsic value must be retained by the lawyer and cannot be discarded or destroyed without the client's consent. In civil matters, absent an agreement to the contrary, other client materials and property may only be destroyed after the lawyer uses reasonable means to notify the client of their intended destruction and gives the client a reasonable time to respond. If a client cannot be located or fails to respond to reasonable notice of intended destruction of the file, the lawyer may destroy items whose retention is not required by law and is not necessary to avoid reasonably foreseeable prejudice to the client. Items that the lawyer believes are reasonably necessary to the representation may be preserved in electronic form only, unless the lawyer believes the loss of physical copies will prejudice the rights of the client.

In closed criminal matters, absent an agreement to the contrary, client files should not be destroyed without a client's express consent while the client is alive. California Penal Code section 1054.9 requires trial counsel to retain a copy of a client's files for the term of imprisonment where the client is convicted of a serious or violent felony resulting in a sentence of 15 years or more. California Penal Code section 1054.9(g). Section 1054.9, however, concerns a criminal defendant's access to discovery materials post-conviction in certain cases and does not address or govern a lawyer's ethical obligations with respect to closed client files. Because files relating to criminal matters may have future vitality even without a conviction, and even after judgment, sentence, and appeals, absent a contrary agreement or client consent, a lawyer should retain the files for the life of the client. The contents of the closed files in criminal matters may be retained in electronic form if every item is digitally copied and preserved, unless retention of the physical item is required by law or the item, by its nature, requires preservation in physical form, i.e., physical evidence.

¹ A lawyer may need to address the handling of closed files for both current and former clients. In this opinion, we use "client" or "former client" interchangeably in many places.

AUTHORITIES

INTERPRETED: Rules 1.4, 1.15, 1.16, and 3.8 of the Rules of Professional Conduct of the State Bar of California.²

Business and Professions Code section 6068, subdivision (e).

Penal Code section 1054.9.

STATEMENT OF FACTS

Lawyer A, a solo practitioner in general practice, plans to retire in the next few years. Lawyer A would like to dispose of the hundreds of boxes of closed client files in storage, some of which date back decades, with minimal time, effort, and expense. Lawyer A has not reviewed the files in storage in years, but each box is indexed for content, including the client/matter information and general descriptions (e.g., pleadings, discovery, transcripts, estate planning documents). There is no express file retention agreement as to these old files, but given their age, Lawyer A believes there is very little chance that any of the lawyer's former clients would have a need for the contents of the files. Lawyer A, therefore, plans to provide all of the boxes, without prior review, to a data management company for secure destruction.

Lawyer B handles a wide range of criminal matters, from serious felony to misdemeanor cases. Lawyer B is in the process of going paperless and disposing of closed client files. Lawyer B plans to digitize the contents of the files but only in closed felony cases before delivering them to a data management company for secure destruction. Lawyer B believes the files in closed misdemeanor cases and matters in which the client was arrested but never charged or tried are of no value to the former clients and, therefore, plans to have them destroyed without making a copy.

DISCUSSION

A. Background

Client file retention and disposal can be challenging for California lawyers due in no small part to the absence of a clear rule on the topic. The California Rules of Professional Conduct and the State Bar Act do not specify how long a lawyer must retain a client's file in a closed matter. They also do not provide when and how a lawyer may destroy the contents of closed client files.

Ethics opinions generally agree that absent an agreement or other legal proscription to the contrary, certain file contents in closed civil matters may be destroyed after the lawyer makes reasonable efforts to notify the client of their intended destruction, but they disagree on whether there should be a fixed, minimum retention period applicable to all file contents.³

² Unless otherwise indicated, all references to "rules" in this opinion will be to the Rules of Professional Conduct of the State Bar of California.

³ Compare Los Angeles County Bar Association Formal Opn. No. 475 (1994) (recommending five-year retention period for closed client files by analogy to five-year retention requirement for client accounting records), with Bar

Client files in closed criminal matters raise unique considerations due to the criminal defendant's liberty interests and the possibility of post-conviction review long after the representation ends. Accordingly, prior ethics opinions have uniformly recommended that the contents of a closed criminal file be retained for the life of the client, unless the client expressly consents to their destruction. (See Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 2001-157; Los Angeles County Bar Association Formal Opn. Nos. 420 (1983) & 475 (1994).)

Since then, there have been some new developments with respect to file retention duties in criminal matters. Effective January 1, 2019, California Penal Code section 1054.9, which concerns a criminal defendant's access to post-conviction discovery, was amended to include a file retention provision. Under the amended statute, trial counsel is now required to maintain a copy of a former client's files "for the term of that client's imprisonment" in cases where the defendant is convicted of a serious or violent felony and sentenced to 15 years or more. (Pen. Code, § 1054.9, subd. (g).) This file retention requirement, however, relates to a criminal defendant's access to post-conviction discovery rather than a lawyer's ethical obligations with respect to file retention and disposal.⁴

In June 2020, the California Supreme Court approved amendments to the Comments to rules 1.16 [Declining or Terminating Representation] and 3.8 [Special Duties of a Prosecutor], expressly reminding defense attorneys of their file retention obligations and prosecutors of their obligations to preserve evidence, respectively.⁵ However, neither amendment specifies the retention period nor addresses disposal of client files in closed criminal matters.

This committee last addressed a lawyer's ethical obligations relating to the retention and disposition of closed client files in its 2001 opinion, prior to the effective date of the current Rules of Professional Conduct and amended Penal Code section 1054.9. Given these changes, as well as great advances made

Association of San Francisco Formal Opn. No. 1996-1 (declining to suggest a bright-line rule relating to the retention of client files and concluding that a lawyer may dispose of any writing in the client file, except to the extent necessary to avoid reasonably foreseeable prejudice to the client's legal rights) and Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 2001-157 (declining to specify a fixed retention period).

⁴ The primary purpose of Penal Code section 1054.9 is to enable criminal defendants efficiently to reconstruct defense counsel's trial files that might have become lost or destroyed after trial and to access other materials to which trial counsel was legally entitled. See *In re Steele* (2004) 32 Cal.4th 682, 694 [10 Cal.Rptr.3d 536]; *Barnett v. Superior Court* (2010) 50 Cal.4th 890, 899–90 [114 Cal.Rptr.3d 576]. Discovery under Penal Code section 1054.9 requires a showing that "good faith efforts to obtain discovery materials from trial counsel were made and were unsuccessful, . . ." (Pen. Code, § 1054.9(a).) Accordingly, the California Supreme Court has noted that "[d]efendants should first seek to obtain their trial files from trial counsel," and ". . . if a defendant can show a legitimate reason for believing trial counsel's current files are incomplete . . . the defendant should be able to work with the prosecution to obtain copies of any missing discovery materials it had provided to the defense before trial." *Barnette, supra*, 50 Cal.4th at 898; see also *Rubio v. Superior Court* (2016) 244 Cal.App.4th 459, 469 [197 Cal.Rptr.3d 891]. Trial counsel's file retention duty under Penal Code section 1054.9, subdivision (g) should be read in this context.

⁵ These amendments resulted from the legislature's request, in connection with its enactment of the amendment to Penal Code section 1054.9, that the State Bar "study the issue of closed-client release and retention by defense attorneys and prosecutors in criminal cases." This committee studied the issue and recommended amendments to the Comments to rules 1.16 and 3.8, which were approved by the Board of Trustees and approved by the California Supreme Court on April 23, 2020, effective June 1, 2020.

in digital file storage since 2001, this opinion revisits a lawyer's file retention and disposal duties in closed or inactive civil and criminal matters where there is no existing agreement regarding the retention period and disposal of closed file contents.⁶

B. Contents of Closed "Client File"

A lawyer's file retention and release duties in closed matters stem from rule 1.16, which provides that upon the termination of a representation for any reason:

Subject to any applicable protective order, non-disclosure agreement, statute or regulation, the lawyer promptly shall release to the client, at the request of the client, all client materials and property. "Client materials and property" includes correspondence, pleadings, deposition transcripts, expert's reports and other writing, exhibits, and physical evidence, whether in tangible, electronic or other form, and other items reasonably necessary to the client's representation, whether the client has paid for them or not[.]

Rule 1.16(e)(1).

A "client file" is not a "static" concept, and "its contents will change depending upon circumstances." (Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. Nos. 1994-134, fn. 1 & 2007-174.) In closed matters, a client's "client file" generally includes items necessary to avoid "reasonably foreseeable prejudice" to the rights of the client. (See rule. 1.16(d); Bar Association of San Francisco Formal Opn. No. 1996-1 [key to retention of client papers in a closed matter is the need to retain those papers that are necessary to preclude reasonably foreseeable prejudice to the client].)

While not exhaustive, the following items are typically considered part of the former client's "client materials and property" for purposes of release to the client at termination of representation:

⁶ There is no rule expressly permitting (or prohibiting) a file retention agreement, but ethics opinions have consistently recognized that a lawyer's file retention and disposal duties may be defined by an agreement with the client. See, e.g., Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 2001-157 (a file retention provision in a fee agreement specifying the duration of time for preserving closed client files may be appropriate in certain circumstances); Los Angeles County Bar Association Formal Opn. No. 475 (file retention recommendations stated in the opinion apply unless there is a contrary agreement with the client). Sample fee agreement provisions concerning file retention and disposal are provided on the State Bar website. See, Sample Fee Agreements forms and instructions, available at: <http://www.calbar.ca.gov/Attorneys/Attorney-Regulation/Mandatory-Fee-Arbitration/Forms-Resources> (last visited August 3, 2022).

In determining the appropriate retention period to specify in the file retention agreement, a lawyer should consider the potential consequences and material risks to the client arising from the disposal of the file contents. See Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 1996-1 (file retention period to be determined by factors relevant to determining whether prejudice to the client would arise by the destruction of the file contents). Additionally, a lawyer needs to consider whether the retention period comports with the lawyer's duty of competence. For example, a lawyer may violate the duty of competence if a file retention agreement permits disposal of client files that may be useful in the assertion or defense of the client's position in a matter for which the statute of limitations has not expired, including in a potential action against the lawyer. In criminal matters, the issue of retention period raises some unique concerns. A client's need for the file may change due to the possibility of post-conviction review, changes in the law, and other circumstances that may impact the client's liberty and other interests well after the file retention period specified in the agreement. See section D.1, *infra*.

- **Original client papers and property**—original materials furnished to the lawyer by the client or a third-party, on behalf of the client or related to the client matter.
- **Communications to and from lawyer**—communications to and from the client, opposing counsel, witnesses, or third parties, and records of those conversations.
- **Filed documents, discovery materials, and transcripts**—pleadings and other documents filed with the court, court orders and opinions, discovery, and verbatim transcripts of the proceedings.
- **Investigation and research reports**—investigation and research reports (both legal and factual) prepared by the lawyer or at the lawyer’s direction.
- **Attorney work product**⁷—research notes, notes regarding witnesses, strategy and tactics, and similar items generated in the course of the representation.
- **Electronic files and digital data**—intangible data concerning the matter in the form of electronic files and digital data, including emails, text messages, other SMS messages, whether stored on hard drives, local or remote servers, mobile devices, messaging apps, or cloud platforms, and whether maintained solely in electronic/digital format or copies of physical files.⁸

(See rule 1.16(e)(1); Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. Nos. 1994-134, fn. 1 [listing items considered contents of the client file in other ethics opinions] & 2007-174 [discussing a lawyer’s ethical obligation to release electronic items].)

C. File Retention Duties in Closed Civil Matters

Absent an agreement to the contrary, there is no blanket retention period applicable to the entire contents of a client file in a closed civil matter. (Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 2001-157.) Instead, the length of time that a lawyer must retain the file contents depends on the nature of the items, the nature of the services rendered to the client, and any other factors relevant to determining whether prejudice

⁷ Attorney work product must be released to the client if the information is “reasonably necessary to the client’s representation.” See rule 1.16(e)(1); San Diego Bar Association Formal Opn. No. 1997-1 (lawyer may not withhold work product “reasonably necessary” to client’s representation); Bar Association of San Francisco Formal Opn. Nos. 1990-1 & 1996-1. This opinion does not address whether a client is entitled to receive uncommunicated work product in circumstances where it is not “reasonably necessary to the representation” or might “result in reasonably foreseeable prejudice to the client if withheld.” See San Diego Bar Association Formal Opn. No. 1997-1; Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 2001-157; cf. *In the Matter of Regan* (Review Dept. 2005) 4 Cal. State Bar Ct. Rptr. 844, 855 (client file, “absent uncommunicated attorney work product,” must be surrendered to client upon termination of representation. For purposes of the facts presented in this opinion, it is assumed that closed client files consist only of the client’s “materials and property” which, had the former client requested them, would be required to be released to the former client under rule 1.16. This opinion concerns only an attorney’s ethical obligations and does not address discovery obligations in malpractice litigation.

⁸ A lawyer’s ethical obligation to release electronic items does not require the lawyer to *create* such items if they do not exist or to change the application or electronic formatting if they do exist. Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 2007-174.

to the client would arise from destruction of the items. (*Id.* See also Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 1996-1.) These obligations cannot be measured by a fixed retention period. (Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 2001-157; Bar Association of San Francisco Formal Opn. No. 1996-1.⁹)

Original papers and property. In the absence of an agreement to the contrary, a lawyer's obligations as to original papers and property received from a client are determined by the law of bailments or law of deposit. (See rule 1.15; Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 2001-157; Civ. Code, §§ 1813–1847.¹⁰) Unless the deposit is terminated as permitted by the governing statute, the lawyer remains responsible for the safekeeping of the items at all times and has no right to destroy them without the client's consent. (Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 2001-157.) For example, California probate law governs the preservation of estate planning documents held by attorneys for safekeeping, and a deposit of estate planning documents with counsel may only be terminated by complying with the statute. (See Prob. Code, §§ 730–735.) Thus, if a lawyer is in possession of an original will, digitizing it and purging the original would be prohibited.

Intrinsically valuable items. A lawyer may not destroy materials of intrinsic value without the client's consent. (Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 2001-157.) Citing to California's Unclaimed Property Law, Code of Civil Procedure sections 1500 et seq., Los Angeles County Bar Association Formal Opinion No. 475 defined "intrinsically valuable" as "those materials, such as money orders, traveler's checks, stocks, bonds, wills, original deeds, original notes, judgments and the like, which have value, or may have value, in and of themselves, or which themselves create or extinguish legal rights or obligations." (Los Angeles County Bar Association Formal Opn. No. 475 (1994).) Over time, as we continue to become less dependent on paper documents, what items are considered to be intrinsically valuable in their paper form will undoubtedly change.

Other file contents. Other materials and property that are reasonably necessary to the representation or will not otherwise prejudice the rights of the clients may be destroyed after the lawyer has used reasonable means to locate the client and notify the client of the existence of the file, of the client's right to examine and retrieve the contents, and of their intended destruction. (Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 2001-157; Los Angeles County Bar Association Formal Opn. No. 475 (1994).) On the other hand, where the lawyer has reason to believe that the file contains items that will reasonably be needed by the client or items required by law to be retained, the lawyer should inspect the file for such items and retain those items for the period required by law or according to the client's reasonably foreseeable needs. (Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 2001-157.) In evaluating the client's need for the closed files, a

⁹ Rule 1.15(d)(5) contains a five-year retention requirement for client *accounting records*. One California bankruptcy case has applied this five-year rule to client files but without analysis. *Ramirez v. Fuselier* (9th Cir. BAP 1995) 183 B.R. 583, 587 fn. 3. Ethics opinions disagree on whether rule 1.15 is intended to address retention duties with respect to client *files*. Los Angeles County Bar Association Formal Opn. No. 475 (recommending five-year retention period for client files "by analogy" to former rule 4-100(B)(3) (now rule 1.15(d)(5)); Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 2001-157 (5-year retention rule not intended to address client file retention obligation); Bar Association of San Francisco Formal Opn. No. 1996-1 (same; unless attorney and client otherwise agree, attorney may dispose of any writing except when needed to avoid reasonably foreseeable prejudice to client's rights under former rule). The committee sees no reason to deviate from its previous conclusion that the 5-year retention requirement under rule 1.15 does not apply to client files.

¹⁰ The retention period for certain estate planning documents delivered to a lawyer for safekeeping are also subject to the Probate Code sections 700 to 735, which provide, *inter alia*, that the deposit may be terminated only as permitted by Probate Code sections 731 to 735.

lawyer should consider whether the materials to be destroyed may still be useful in the assertion or defense of the client's position in a matter for which the statute of limitations has not expired, including any potential actions against the lawyer. The remaining items in the file may then be destroyed. *Id.* Where an item has no intrinsic value, but the lawyer nevertheless fears that loss of the item may injure the former client, the item should be preserved electronically/digitally unless retention of the physical item is required by law.

As with certain original client documents (e.g., estate planning documents), some of the materials in the client file may include documents that must be retained for periods specified by state or federal law. (See Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 2001-157 (discussing law regulating employment records, tax and corporate records, records relating to environmental matters).) The committee recommends that lawyers verify that the disposal will not violate any state or federal document retention requirement.

D. File Retention Duties in Closed Criminal Matters

1. Duties of Defense Counsel

Client files in criminal matters “warrant especially cautious treatment” due to unique considerations pertaining to the former client’s liberty interest” and “the possibility of review of criminal convictions by appeal or writ (even many years after conviction).” (Los Angeles County Bar Association Formal Opn. No. 475 (1994).) In light of these interests, California ethics opinions have consistently concluded that absent a file retention agreement to the contrary, client files relating to all types of criminal matters must be retained *for the life of the client*, unless the client expressly authorizes the destruction of the files.¹¹ (See Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 2001-157; Los Angeles County Bar Association Formal Opn. No. 420 (1983); Los Angeles County Bar Association Formal Opn. No. 475 (1994).)

As noted in Section A, *supra*, amended Penal Code section 1054.9 provides a different measure for the retention period. Under this section, in cases in which “a defendant is or has ever been convicted of a serious felony or a violent felony resulting in a sentence of 15 years or more,” trial counsel must retain a copy of the client’s files for “the term of [that former] client’s imprisonment.” (Pen. Code, § 1054.9, subd. (g).¹²) During this retention period, counsel may maintain the file in electronic form but “only if every item in the file is digitally copied and preserved.” (*Id.* (emphasis added).)

In the committee’s view, the file retention period specified in Penal Code section 1054.9 is distinct from a lawyer’s ethical obligations with respect to client files in closed criminal matters. Section 1054.9 is a post-conviction discovery statute, the purpose of which is to ensure a criminal defendant’s reasonable

¹¹ The committee recognizes that, in many circumstances, the “life of the client” may be longer than the life of the lawyer or law firm who represented the client. While no specific California rule requires that a California lawyer adopt a succession plan, existing rules, including the duties of competence and diligence, can be interpreted as imposing a duty on lawyers to take reasonable steps to protect the clients’ interests during the course of the representation, including in the event of a lawyer’s sudden inability to continue to practice law. Because a failure to properly plan or prepare for both anticipated and unexpected departures from a lawyer’s practice may expose clients to significant damage or prejudice, lawyers should consider their file retention duties in light of the possibility that the lawyer may or may not outlive their client.

¹² Trial counsel in these cases, thus, must not destroy the file contents for the duration of the former client’s imprisonment, regardless of the file retention period specified in any agreement with the client/former client.

access to discovery materials in certain post-conviction proceedings. (See footnote 4, *supra*.) Accordingly, the statutory file retention requirement for trial counsel serves this particular purpose only and is not tied to a lawyer's *ethical* obligations, which are governed by the need to protect the interests of the former client. To that end, a lawyer must consider the former client's need for the contents of the closed file, which may be difficult to do due to the possibility of post-conviction review (even long after the representation ends), as well as changes in criminal law that may impact the former client's liberty and other interests in the future.¹³ Because a lawyer "cannot foresee the future utility of information contained in the file" after the representation ends, a lawyer should not undertake the destruction of the files absent "specific written instruction from the client authorizing the destruction of the file." (Los Angeles County Bar Association Formal Opn. No. 420 (1983).)

2. Duties of prosecutor

In light of their responsibility to see that justice is done, prosecutors owe certain ethical, constitutional, and statutory duties with respect to evidence in criminal proceedings. (See rule. 3.8.) However, there is no specific Rule of Professional Conduct or ethics opinion directly addressing prosecutors' duty to preserve their files or other relevant evidence.¹⁴

Penal Code section 1054.9 provides that, upon the criminal defendant's showing that good faith efforts to obtain "discovery materials" from trial counsel were made but were unsuccessful, the defendant shall be provided reasonable access to "discovery materials," which is defined as "materials in the possession of the prosecution and law enforcement authorities to which the same defendant would have been entitled at time of trial." (Penal Code, § 1054.9, subds. (a) and (c).) But section 1054.9 also expressly notes that the statute "does not require the retention of any discovery materials not otherwise required by law or court order." (Penal Code, § 1054.9, subd. (f).) Aside from section 1054.9, there does not appear to be any authority that imposes any post-conviction discovery obligations. (But see *People v. Curl* (2006) 140 Cal.App.4th 310, 318 [44 Cal.Rptr.3d 320] [Even "after a conviction the prosecutor . . . is

¹³ The following examples illustrate this point.

- In November 2014, California voters passed Proposition 47, which changed certain low-level crimes from potential felonies to misdemeanors, unless the defendant has prior conviction for certain serious or violent crimes. Because the law is retroactive, it also requires anyone currently serving a sentence for a felony of the included offenses (without prior serious or violent offenses) to be resentenced to a misdemeanor. A former client may need the contents of the closed file pertaining to the included offense. Since California employers may inquire into a job applicant's conviction record after a conditional offer of employment, including the nature and severity of the offense, this law has implications beyond the former client's liberty interest.
- A former client may need the contents of the closed file in connection with a petition for a certificate of factual innocence. Under California Penal Code section 851.8, a person can seek a petition for factual innocence where they have been detained by police but not arrested for a crime; has been arrested but not formally charged; was formally charged for a crime but the charges were later dismissed; or was formally charged for a crime and tried for that crime but there was no criminal conviction. Where the petition is granted, the police agencies must seal and destroy all records of the arrest. Because the person bringing the petition bears the burden of showing factual innocence, a former client seeking a finding of factual innocence may need the contents of a closed file.

¹⁴ As representatives of "The People of the State of California," the files kept by prosecutors are not true "client" files. Rather, these files would more aptly be called "case files." This portion of the opinion discusses the ethical duties of prosecutors with respect to their case files.

bound by the ethics of his office to inform the appropriate authority of . . . information that casts doubt upon the correctness of the conviction.].) This sentiment expressed in *Curl* is reflected in rule 3.8(f), which lists certain ethical duties specifically related to prosecutors, including an affirmative, ongoing duty to promptly disclose “new, credible and material evidence creating a reasonable likelihood that a convicted defendant did not commit an offense of which the defendant was convicted,” when such evidence is known to the prosecutor. Rule 3.8 is silent on obligations to retain any portion of the prosecutor’s case file, however.

Effective June 1, 2020, rule 3.8 was amended to add the following two new sentences to Comment [7]:

Statutes may require a prosecutor to preserve certain types of evidence in criminal matters. (See Pen. Code, §§ 1417.1–1417.9.) In addition, prosecutors must obey file preservation orders concerning rights of discovery guaranteed by the Constitution and statutory provisions. (See *People v. Superior Court (Morales)* (2017) 2 Cal.5th 523 [213 Cal.Rptr.3d 581]; *Shorts v. Superior Court* (2018) 24 Cal.App.5th 709 [234 Cal.Rptr.3d 392].)

This amendment resulted from Assembly Bill 1987 amending Penal Code section 1054.9, by which the legislature requested that the State Bar “study the issue of closed-client file release and retention by defense attorneys and prosecutors in criminal cases.”¹⁵ While the amended Comment does not create new file preservation duties, the added sentences highlight prosecutors’ existing obligations regarding the disposition of evidence in criminal matters and compliance with file preservation orders.¹⁶

E. Duties Relating to Disposal of Closed Client Files

The California Rules of Professional Conduct and the State Bar Act are also silent on the destruction of closed client files. Regardless, before disposing of any item in a closed client file, a lawyer must take certain precautions to prevent any reasonably foreseeable prejudice to the former client.

¹⁵ Uncodified section 3 of Assembly Bill 1987 provides in full:

Consistent with the obligation of the State Bar of California to make public protection its highest priority, the State Bar is requested to study the issue of closed-client file release and retention by defense attorneys and prosecutors in criminal cases. If the State Bar studies the issue, it shall ascertain whether an attorney’s duties related to file release and retention upon the finality of a case or the termination of the attorney-client relationship are clear in light of the Rules of Professional Conduct that become operative on November 1, 2018. To the extent the State Bar finds there are generally applicable file release and retention duties that are not sufficiently apparent in the specific context of post-conviction discovery, the State Bar shall consider issuing an advisory ethics opinion that makes those duties evident. If the State Bar finds that any file release or retention duties in the new rules are deficient in protecting clients and the public in the context of post conviction discovery, the State Bar shall consider adopting an appropriate new or amended Rule of Professional Conduct for submission to the Supreme Court of California for the Supreme Court’s consideration and possible approval.

¹⁶ These obligations include the duty to preserve materially exculpatory evidence in the government’s possession, which must be disclosed to the defense (*Brady v. Maryland* (1963) 373 U.S. 83 [83 S.Ct. 1194]) and the duty to preserve and promptly return a crime victim’s property to the victim when it is no longer needed as evidence (Cal. Const., art. I, § 28, subd. (b), par. (14)).

Before disposing of any item in a closed civil file, absent an agreement to the contrary, a lawyer must make reasonable efforts to locate and notify the former client of the existence of the file, of the client's right to examine and retrieve the file, and of the intended destruction.¹⁷ (Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 2001-157. See also rule 1.4; Los Angeles County Bar Association Formal Opn. No. 491 (1998).) If, after diligent efforts to notify the former client, a lawyer cannot locate the client or obtain clear instructions from the client, the closed client files in civil matters may be destroyed except for "intrinsically valuable materials" (e.g., money orders, traveler's checks, stocks, bonds, original notes, original deeds, judgments), unless the lawyer has a reason to believe that a file contains items required by law to be retained (e.g., original client papers, including wills) or that the client will reasonably need to establish a right or defense to a claim, always exercising good commonsense judgment. (Los Angeles County Bar Association Formal Opn. No. 475 (1994); Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. 2001-157. See also ABA Informal Opn. 1384 (1977).)

If the lawyer is without personal knowledge of the contents of the file, the lawyer should consider whether to examine the file to determine whether there are any items that must be retained (as described above) or might result in reasonably foreseeable prejudice to the client if destroyed.¹⁸ In order to make a determination about whether a particular document is permitted to be destroyed, the lawyer should consider, among other things: (i) the age of a document; (ii) whether the document has any ongoing effect; (iii) whether subsequent developments render a document outdated or superseded; (iv) whether limitations periods affect the ongoing effectiveness of a document; (v) whether related disputes are known to be ongoing; and/or (vi) whether related future disputes are anticipated. In closed civil matters, if the lawyer has a question about whether the destruction of a document may cause the client prejudice, the lawyer should err on the side of caution and consider whether it can be preserved electronically.

In closed criminal matters, absent an express written consent from the former client, a lawyer should not destroy the client's file as long as they reasonably believe the client is still alive. (Los Angeles County Bar Association Formal Opn. No. 420 (1983); Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. 2001-157.)

As discussed above, in criminal matters involving a conviction for a serious or violent felony that results in a sentence of 15 years or more, trial counsel must retain a copy of the former client's files for the

¹⁷ In the event a former client requests release of the closed file, a lawyer should take reasonable steps to remove any confidential information about the lawyer's other clients. Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. Nos. 2010-179 & 2012-184. If a client is deceased, notice must be given to the client's legal representative, heirs and/or beneficiaries, unless there is no reasonably foreseeable possibility that the file may be necessary to pursue or protect the deceased client's legal interests, and the file contains no documents of significant pecuniary or intrinsic value. The deceased client's legal representative, heirs, and/or beneficiaries may take possession of the file, subject to the attorney's duty of confidentiality. Los Angeles County Bar Association Formal Opn. No. 491 (1998). A lawyer may charge the client (or the client's legal representative, heirs, etc.) for copying the file if the fee agreement so provides, but the lawyer cannot condition delivery of the file on the client's payment of copying expenses. Rule 1.16, Cmt. [6]. See also Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 2007-174, fn. 3 (interpreting former rule 3-700(D)).

¹⁸ The committee previously opined that in such circumstances, "it *may* be necessary to examine the file before concluding whether there is reason to believe that the client will foreseeably have need of the contents." Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 2001-157 (emphasis added). This committee believes that a lawyer cannot determine whether the closed file contains any item that the client may need if the lawyer is without personal knowledge of the contents of the file. The committee thus recommends that, in such an instance, the lawyer examine the file.

term of the former client's imprisonment. Thus, the files in such cases cannot be destroyed under any circumstances—even if authorized by the former client—during the client's imprisonment. (Pen. Code, § 1054.9, subd. (g).) The file may be maintained in electronic form “only if every item in the file is digitally copied and preserved.” (*Id.*¹⁹)

Any decision regarding the disposal of closed client files must also reflect due consideration of the duty of confidentiality mandated by Business and Professions Code section 6068, subdivision (e), which requires a lawyer “[t]o maintain inviolate the confidence, and at every peril to himself or herself to preserve the secrets, of his or her client.”

Comment [4] to rule 1.16 reminds lawyers that, in complying with rule 1.16, they must also comply with Business and Professions Code section 6068, subdivision (e), which requires lawyers, at every peril to themselves, to preserve and protect the confidential information of the client. (See generally *Oasis West Realty, LLC v. Goldman* (2011) 51 Cal.4th 811, 821 [124 Cal.Rptr.3d 256] [confirming a lawyer's continuing duty to protect the confidential information of a former client].) Thus, a lawyer must use a method of destruction “that will ensure no breach of confidentiality.” (Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 2001-157, fn. 9.) Discarding the client files into the garbage, for example, would not protect client confidentiality and, therefore, would not be appropriate. On the other hand, “shredding, incinerating or employing a commercial service that guarantees confidential disposal of documents would be sufficient.” (D.C. Bar Formal Opn. 283, fn. 14 (1998).)

F. Analysis of Facts

Lawyer A should not dispose of the closed client files without first determining their contents. The facts indicate that, as a solo practitioner in general practice, Lawyer A handled various civil matters, including estate planning matters. Notwithstanding Lawyer A's belief that there is very little chance that any of the lawyer's former clients would have a need for the contents of the files, and therefore, will not be prejudiced by their destructions, Lawyer A's file retention duties with respect to client's original papers and property, including testamentary documents, are governed by the law of bailments/deposit. (Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 2001-157; Cal. Civ. Code, §§ 1813-1847.) Unless the deposit is terminated as permitted by the governing statute, the lawyer remains responsible for the safekeeping of the items at all times until they are returned to the client and has no right to destroy them without the client's consent.

With respect to other client materials and property, Lawyer A must make reasonable efforts to locate and notify the former clients of the existence of the file, of the client's right to examine and retrieve the file, and of the intended destruction. (Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 2001-157. See also rule 1.4; Los Angeles County Bar Association Formal Opn. No. 491 (1998).) If, after diligent efforts to notify the former client, a lawyer cannot locate the client or obtain clear instructions from the client, the closed client files in civil matters may be destroyed if the lawyer reasonably believes its destruction will not result in prejudice to the rights of the client. Since Lawyer A is without personal knowledge of the contents of the boxes in storage, Lawyer A should, at a minimum, review the contents of the files to determine whether any of the materials or property are permitted to be destroyed.

¹⁹ For lawyers wishing to go paperless, in light of this requirement, it would be prudent to have a clear digitization plan and follow it, for example, scanning all incoming documents and returning originals to the client immediately (unless the original is needed for representation).

Because Lawyer B may not be able to foresee the future utility of the information contained in any of their closed criminal files, Lawyer B must retain the closed files of all current and former clients for the life of the client unless the client authorizes the destruction of the file, and this is only permitted in some circumstances. For example, under Penal Code section 1054.9, Lawyer B would be required to retain a copy of a client's files "for the term of that client's imprisonment" in cases where the defendant is convicted of a serious or violent felony and sentenced to 15 years or more. As such, in addition to violating the statute, a lawyer's failure to maintain a copy of that client's file for this minimum period of time would result in "reasonably foreseeable prejudice to the rights of the client." (See rule 1.16(d).) Lawyer B may retain the files in electronic form, provided that *every* item is digitally copied and preserved, unless retention of the physical item is required by law.

For both Lawyer A and Lawyer B, when destroying the contents of any client file (with the client's express authorization and only when permitted by law), they should do so in a manner consistent with the lawyer's ongoing duty of confidentiality to these clients.

CONCLUSION

Understanding a lawyer's ethical obligations with respect to client file retention and disposal can be challenging. In determining the appropriate file retention period and disposal of closed client files, a lawyer should be guided by the overriding considerations of what is reasonably necessary to the client's representation, the lawyer's duty to avoid reasonably foreseeable prejudice to the client, and duties of competence and confidentiality. In the absence of an agreement to the contrary, a lawyer's obligations as to original papers and property received from a client in closed matters are generally determined by the law of bailments or the law of deposit. A lawyer may not destroy materials of intrinsic value without the former client's consent unless those items can be electronically maintained without prejudice to the rights of the client. With respect to closed client files in criminal matters, an especially cautious approach is required to ensure that no portion of the file is destroyed prematurely or improperly, and the file should be retained, in some form, throughout the life of the former client. The contents of the closed files in criminal matters may be retained in electronic form if every item is digitally copied and preserved, unless retention of the physical item is required by law or the item, by its nature, requires preservation in physical form, i.e., physical evidence.