For more information on organizing and managing your office's files or the State Bar of Georgia's Law Practice Management program, please contact:

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Organizing & Maintaining Files in a Small Law Office

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File Opening and Closing Checklists

When a new file is opened, the following should always be done:

- Create a new matter information sheet (filled out by the attorney or legal assistant) to place within the file.
- Enter all new client and matter information into your firm's billing and/or case management systems.
- If you do not have an automated system, set up important client information on a card, cross-reference it, and place in an "open file" box.
- *NEVER* open a file without associating it with some sort of calendar (tickler/deadline) entry on the firm's calendar.

For your own protection as well as the good organization of your office, adopt the following procedures for closing files:

- Clearly indicate that you want a file to be closed (use a form if necessary).
- Have the bookkeeper determine whether the client has paid in full; if the client hasn't paid, the file should be left open until payment is made. The trust balance should be zero.
- Archive case in billing and/or case management systems; remove from active file list and "open file" box.
- Have a checklist "travel" with the file so that each person involved can initial her step of the process.
- Store the closed files separately from the open files.
- Renumber closed files to indicate the date the file was closed.

File Organization and Maintenance

Several key components to a good filing system include:

- A master index or log of all files in the office maintained through your billing or case management software or manually if you do not have these processes automated.
- A log of all documents within each file.
- As far as organizing the material within the file goes, there are several adequate alternate methods, which include:
    - using the time-honored method of attaching a two-hole punch clip to either side of the file folder, and placing all correspondence in chronological order on one side, and all court documents in chronological order on the other.
    - using a more sophisticated (and more expensive) variation of the above, where each file has a divider or two in the middle, each of which has a two-hole clip in it.
    - using an accordion folder or some other "master file folder" and within it placing multiple small manila files labeled as to contents.
    - three-hole punching all material and keeping a case "notebook," with material organized chronologically behind tabs separating different topic areas.

File Location

Keep up with the files in your office by adhering to the following :

- All active files for a particular workgroup should be stored in a central location, regardless of which attorney is primarily responsible for them.
- Files should remain in the file storage area unless they are *currently being worked on.*
- Files that are *currently being worked on* should be on the desk of the attorney, legal assistant or secretary doing the work until, and only until, that work is completed. Files should be checked out to a particular person using a check-out log, card, or user-defined entry in a case management program.
- When work is completed on a file, it should be returned to the central storage area with a tickle date put into the case management system that shows when the file should be pulled next.
- Strongly discourage staff from taking files home with them.
- File clerks should not move whole files around; if a piece of information within the file needs to be copied, note the removal of the document in the file's internal log.
- As soon as a file is closed, it should be renumbered and transferred to a closed file storage location on-site.
- After a specific period of time, the file should be destroyed in accordance with your office's file retention and destruction policy.