
Kaitlyn C. Kelly

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.law.uw.edu/wlr

Part of the Estates and Trusts Commons, and the Legal Profession Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.law.uw.edu/wlr/vol91/iss4/22

This Notes and Comments is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Reviews and Journals at UW Law Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Washington Law Review by an authorized editor of UW Law Digital Commons. For more information, please contact cnyberg@uw.edu.
PUT PRIVITY IN THE PAST:
A MODERN APPROACH FOR DETERMINING WHEN
WASHINGTON ATTORNEYS ARE LIABLE TO NONCLIENTS
FOR ESTATE PLANNING MALPRACTICE

Kaitlyn C. Kelly*

Abstract: Even in the best of circumstances, an estate plan may leave intended
beneficiaries frustrated. Occasionally, an attorney’s alleged mistake in the execution of a will
or administration of a trust sparks the beneficiaries’ anger. Under Washington law, it is
unclear whether intended beneficiaries may sue an estate planning attorney for malpractice.
Generally, an estate planning attorney’s client is a testator, not a testator’s intended
beneficiaries; thus, the intended beneficiaries are not in privity of contract with the attorney.
Rather, the only individual in privity with the accused attorney is usually deceased at the time
of a malpractice lawsuit. If a strict privity rule applies, courts will leave beneficiaries with
few options to hold attorneys accountable for costly mistakes in the drafting or execution of
estate planning documents. On the other hand, courts will expand the scope of liability too
far if they allow any nonclient to sue an estate planning attorney for malpractice.

First, this Comment traces trends in Washington estate planning malpractice law. The
discussion begins with two Washington State Supreme Court decisions that suggest a
balancing test, rather than a strict privity rule, defines the scope of attorney malpractice
liability to nonclients. Then it analyzes two Washington State court of appeals cases that
demonstrate how the balancing test still favors privity in its application. Second, this
Comment weighs the strengths and weaknesses of other jurisdictions’ approaches to attorney
malpractice liability to nonclients. Third, it considers different scenarios in which courts may
hold an estate planning attorney liable to nonclients under Washington law. Finally, this
Comment recommends that courts require nonclient intended beneficiaries to exhaust
Washington’s will and trust reformation statute before bringing a claim against an estate
planning attorney.

INTRODUCTION

Washington courts need clarity when determining whether an
intended beneficiary has standing to bring a malpractice action against
an estate planning attorney. While the Washington State Supreme Court
adopted a balancing test to address this issue,1 recent Washington State
court of appeals decisions suggest that a privity requirement remains in

* Thank you to Professor Karen Boxx for her thoughtful guidance and to the Washington Law
Review staff for their editing assistance.

to Washington’s balancing test as “the Trask balancing test.”
certain circumstances. The appellate decisions did not substantially change Washington law because the facts of each case addressed a narrow issue. The balancing test requires a case-by-case fact analysis, but with Washington courts seeing little variation in the facts that have come before them, they have not been able to develop case law applying the test’s factors to the larger range of possible facts they might face in the future.

This Comment considers fact patterns in which Washington’s balancing test may support a cause of action for a plaintiff who is not the defendant-attorney’s client (a “nonclient”). It recommends using Washington’s will and trust reformation statute as an exhaustion requirement before intended beneficiaries may bring malpractice actions against estate planning attorneys. This solution attempts to provide attorney accountability without extending attorney liability too far.

Consider an individual who obtained an attorney and created an estate plan. An intended beneficiary later discovers the attorney acted negligently. Maybe the attorney failed to have witnesses attest to the signatures on the will, wrote incorrect names in the will, or did not draft a will at all. Without a valid estate plan in place, the intended beneficiary does not receive her intended gift. She wants to hold the attorney accountable for the mistake, so she files a malpractice lawsuit against the attorney in a Washington court. However, the court dismisses her claim because it finds that intended beneficiaries have no standing to bring such a claim. In many circumstances, Washington courts would leave intended beneficiaries in exactly this type of confusing, infuriating situation.

The above hypothetical raises a few potential estate planning errors, but it is not exclusive. Possible claims against estate planning attorneys include error in document execution; failure to adhere to a testator’s goals or intent; error of law; failure to make necessary revisions to an estate plan when circumstances change; failure to properly investigate a testator’s heirs or assets; failure to advise the testator on tax consequences or disclaimer options; breach of contract to draft an estate planning document; negligent planning that increases taxes; error in document drafting; execution of documents when the testator lacks

4. Trask, 123 Wash. 2d at 842–43, 872 P.2d at 1084.
5. See infra Part IV.
6. See infra Part V.
testamentary capacity; delay in implementing an estate plan; failure to limit legal representation to discrete issues; and failure to meet deadlines. With so much room for error, legal malpractice liability is a paramount concern for estate planning attorneys.8

This Comment explores the scope of estate planning malpractice liability for attorneys in Washington and considers room for improvement from both attorneys’ and nonclients’ perspectives. Part I discusses Washington legal malpractice law. Part II analyzes the development of Washington estate planning legal malpractice case law, identifying the shift from a balancing test to an apparent requirement of privity between the nonclient-plaintiff and attorney-defendant. The discussion begins with Washington State Supreme Court cases Stangland v. Brock9 and Trask v. Butler.10 Next, this Comment discusses Washington court of appeals decisions Parks v. Fink11 and Linth v. Gay12 and analyzes where Washington law stands after the Linth decision. On one hand, the decision suggests that the Washington State courts of appeal returned to a privity rule when deciding whether estate planning attorneys owe nonclients a duty of care.13 On the other hand, the Washington State courts of appeal likely intended to limit their decisions in Parks and Linth to the narrow factual settings of each: the failure to promptly execute a will and the failure to promptly execute a trust.14

8. George King, Legal Malpractice—Estate, Will, and Succession Matters, in 24 AM. JUR. PROOF OF FACTS 584–85 (2d ed. 1980) (“The expansion of estate practice into highly complex areas, coupled with the increasingly prevalent use of paralegals and other personnel in estate planning and probate work, have made counsel practicing in this field increasingly subject to negligence suits. As has been noted: ‘Recent studies and experience indicate that malpractice exposure is substantially higher in the areas of estate planning and estate administration than in general. The increase in availability and quality of legal education materials, especially in the tax field, together with the relatively clear ground rules for the administration of decedents’ estates narrow the margin for error.’” (quoting James R. Wade, How to Avoid Probate Malpractice: A Probate Judge Offers Tips on Sidestepping Trouble in Estate Planning and Administration: Filing Delays Can Frequently Lead to Lawsuits, 2 NAT’l L.J. 17 (July 7, 1980))).
13. See infra section II.D
Part III studies the strengths and weaknesses of other jurisdictions’ approaches to attorney liability in estate planning malpractice lawsuits. If presented with an opportunity to revisit the issue, Washington courts may look to other jurisdictions for guidance. Few states adhere to a strict privity rule. Most jurisdictions recognize an exception to the privity rule based on a balancing test, a third party beneficiary contract theory, or a foreseeability of harm tort theory. Some states in the majority group limit the exception by only recognizing causes of action for intended beneficiaries expressly named in estate planning documents.

Part IV considers potential facts in which the Trask balancing test may dictate a different result than in the Parks and Linth decisions. Lower courts may appreciate this review of alternative facts because Parks and Linth both involved the narrow issue of prompt execution.

Part V recommends that nonclient intended beneficiaries who wish to bring malpractice actions against estate planning attorneys must first exhaust their remedies under Washington’s will and trust reformation statute. If intended beneficiaries prove by “clear, cogent, and convincing evidence” that an estate planning document does not reflect the testator’s intentions, then a court may reform the document. Therefore, courts have the power to make frustrated intended beneficiaries whole under the reformation statute without a malpractice action. Additionally, courts may hold estate planning attorneys accountable under the statute by imposing attorneys’ fees on the attorneys allegedly at fault. This solution strikes a balance between holding Washington attorneys to a high ethical standard and making intended beneficiaries whole, while limiting the reach of potential attorney malpractice liability.

15. See infra section III.A.
16. See infra section III.B.
17. See infra section III.B.
18. See infra Part IV.
19. See generally Linth, 190 Wash. App. 331, 360 P.3d 844 (discussing an attorney’s alleged failure to promptly execute trust documents); Parks, 173 Wash. App. 366, 293 P.3d 1275 (discussing an attorney’s alleged failure to promptly execute a will).
21. Id.
I. WASHINGTON LEGAL MALPRACTICE LIABILITY: AN OVERVIEW

Legal malpractice is defined as “[a] lawyer’s failure to render professional services with the skill, prudence, and diligence that an ordinary and reasonable lawyer would use under similar circumstances.”

Claims of legal malpractice arise out of many different situations and are based on three different legal theories: negligence, breach of fiduciary duty, and breach of contract. Under the now-disfavored common law approach, attorneys did not owe a duty of care to third parties. Therefore, such individuals did not have a cause of action against attorneys who allegedly harmed them. However, the modern trend is for courts to extend malpractice causes of action to nonclients under limited circumstances. Public policy considerations, the third party beneficiary doctrine in contract law, and tort theories support this modern trend.

To establish a malpractice claim in Washington, a plaintiff has the burden of establishing four elements: (1) the existence of an attorney-client relationship in which the attorney owes the client a duty of care; “(2) an act or omission by the attorney in breach of the duty of care; (3) damage to the client; and (4) proximate causation between the attorney’s breach of the duty and the damage incurred.” This Comment focuses on the first element, the attorney-client relationship, because that element generally requires privity of contract between the defendant and the plaintiff. However, a plaintiff may sometimes establish the first

25. See *infra* section III.B (discussing the modern majority approach).
27. *Id.*
element without a showing of privity.\textsuperscript{31} Even if a nonclient meets the first element without privity, a court may still dismiss the action if it finds that the attorney-defendant met the appropriate standard of care.\textsuperscript{32}

In Washington, attorneys meet the required standard of care by exercising “the degree of care, skill, diligence, and knowledge commonly possessed and exercised by a reasonable, careful, and prudent lawyer in the practice of law.”\textsuperscript{33} Regardless of practice area, attorneys must uphold this standard of care.\textsuperscript{34} While the standard of care is high, it is not so high as to include “mere error[s] in judgment . . . if acting in good faith and in an honest belief that those acts and advice are well-founded.”\textsuperscript{35} A poor legal outcome alone does not show that an attorney failed to meet his or her standard of care.\textsuperscript{36} However, the duty does require attorneys to exercise reasonable and diligent care in following the client’s instructions.\textsuperscript{37}

The duty of care owed to a client by an attorney is a question of law for the court.\textsuperscript{38} Disputes about whether two parties had an attorney-client relationship are questions of fact for a jury.\textsuperscript{39} The jury instruction on the issue of duty to nonclients explains that the nonclient-plaintiff has the burden of proving that the attorney-defendant and the testator-client intended to establish a relationship for the nonclient-plaintiff’s benefit.\textsuperscript{40} The instruction’s comments explain that courts rarely use the instruction because judges generally determine duty to nonclients as a matter of law in pretrial motions based on a balancing of factors, known as the \textit{Trask} factors.\textsuperscript{41} Because some of the \textit{Trask} factors are legal questions for a

\begin{small}
\textsuperscript{31} See DeWolf & Allen, supra note 29.
\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Stangland}, 109 Wash. 2d at 682–83, 747 P.2d at 468.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Hizey}, 119 Wash. 2d at 261, 830 P.2d at 652.
\textsuperscript{34} Karl B. Tegland, Standard of Care and Malpractice, in 15 \textit{WASHINGTON PRACTICE}, CIVIL PROCEDURE 421–22 (2d ed. 2016).
\textsuperscript{35} See id.
\textsuperscript{37} See Tegland, supra note 34, at 422.
\textsuperscript{40} See \textit{WASH. STATE SUPREME COURT COMM. ON JURY INSTRUCTIONS, DUTY TO NON-CLIENT}, 6 \textit{WASH. PRAC.}, \textit{WASHINGTON PATTERN JURY INSTR. CIV.} WPI 107.02 (6th ed. 2013).
\textsuperscript{41} See \textit{WASH. STATE SUPREME COURT COMM. ON JURY INSTRUCTIONS}, supra note 40, Note on Use.
\end{small}
judge to decide, courts should not give the *Trask* factors to the jury.\(^\text{42}\) Instead, the jury instruction should only relate to disputed issues of material fact regarding one or more of the *Trask* factors.\(^\text{43}\)

Like attorneys in all fields, estate planning attorneys may face malpractice liability for mistakes. Due to the technical nature of estate planning and the variety of knowledge required, attorneys in this area are particularly susceptible to malpractice liability.\(^\text{44}\) The emotions and financial stability of intended beneficiaries adds concern:

Heirs or beneficiaries who feel that they have not received that to which they are entitled, or who are financially disappointed, are psychologically hurt and are often dealing with deep-seated family issues that were not dealt with before the decedent’s death. This anger and frustration can finally be vented in a lawsuit against the family’s advisors.\(^\text{45}\)

In some estate planning malpractice cases outside of Washington State, courts have held that intended beneficiaries may sue an attorney for malpractice even though the attorney and individual are not in privity of contract.\(^\text{46}\) Under different circumstances, courts have held that intended beneficiaries may not sue estate planning attorneys for malpractice.\(^\text{47}\) Washington courts have yet to hold an estate planning

---

\(^{42}\). See *Wash. State Supreme Court Comm. on Jury Instructions*, *supra* note 40, Comments; DeWolf & Allen, *supra* note 29, at 720 (“The question of whether or not a duty is owed is a question of law for the court.”).

\(^{43}\). See *Wash. State Supreme Court Comm. on Jury Instructions*, *supra* note 40, Comments.

\(^{44}\). Casteel et al., *supra* note 7, at 49.

\(^{45}\). *Id.*

\(^{46}\). WILLIAM M. MCGOVERN, SHELDON F. KURTZ & DAVID M. ENGLISH, WILLS, TRUSTS, AND ESTATES INCLUDING TAXATION AND FUTURE INTERESTS, 530, 617–18 (4th ed. 2010); see, *e.g.*, Charleson v. Hardesty, 839 P.2d 1303, 1306–07 (Nev. 1992) (holding that attorneys who represent trustees in their trustee capacity owe a duty of care toward the trust’s beneficiaries as a matter of law); Elam v. Hyatt Legal Servs., 541 N.E.2d 616, 618 (Ohio 1989) (holding that nonclients had standing to sue the attorney because the nonclients had vested interests in the estate and were in privity with the attorney once their interests vested); see generally *Estate of Agnew v. Ross*, 110 A.3d 1020 (Pa. Super. Ct. 2015) (holding that nonclient intended beneficiaries of will and trust amendment had standing to sue the drafting attorney when the attorney failed to present the documents to the testator before death, the attorney admitted his mistake, and he was aware that the nonclients would benefit from the documents’ execution).

\(^{47}\). See, *e.g.*, Neal v. Baker, 551 N.E.2d 704, 706 (Ill. App. Ct. 1990) (holding that a nonclient intended beneficiary was unable to sue the estate executor’s attorney for legal malpractice because the attorney was not hired by the executor with the intent to directly benefit the beneficiary); Barcelo v. Elliott, 923 S.W.2d 575, 576–78 (Tex. 1996) (holding that an estate planning attorney was not liable to nonclient for malpractice and did not have a duty to foresee that his client’s grandchildren would be harmed from the trust’s invalidity).
attorney liable to nonclients for malpractice liability. However, under certain circumstances, Washington courts may reach a different result.

II. WASHINGTON’S ESTATE PLANNING MALPRACTICE
CASE LAW: THE SHIFT FROM PRIVITY TO POSSIBLE
ATTORNEY LIABILITY

This section analyzes four seminal cases in Washington’s estate planning legal malpractice law: Stangland v. Brock, Trask v. Butler, Parks v. Fink, and Linth v. Gay. Each of these cases involves estate planning attorney-defendants and frustrated intended beneficiary plaintiffs. The cases set forth the general rule of legal malpractice: only an attorney’s clients have standing to sue her for malpractice. Nevertheless, the cases recognize an exception to that general rule under tort and contract theories articulated in Stangland and a balancing test further defined in Trask (“the Trask balancing test”). However, the modern decisions of Parks and Linth suggest that privity is a de facto requirement under the Trask balancing test despite the Stangland and Trask Courts’ intentions to allow certain nonclients a cause of action.

A. The Stangland Court Relaxed the Privity Requirement and
Introduced a New Theory that Supports Nonclients’ Potential
Standing in Legal Malpractice Actions

The Stangland v. Brock plaintiffs, Alvin Stangland and Bruce Kintschi, brought malpractice claims against two attorneys, Norman Brock and Kenneth Carpenter, and their law firm, Underwood, Campbell, Brock, & Cerutti, P.S. Mr. Stangland and Mr. Kintschi


49. Trask, 123 Wash. 2d at 840, 872 P.2d at 1083; Stangland, 109 Wash. 2d at 679, 747 P.2d at 467; Linth, 190 Wash. App. at 337, 360 P.3d at 847; Parks, 173 Wash. App. at 377, 293 P.3d at 1280.

50. Trask, 123 Wash. 2d at 841, 872 P.2d at 1083; Stangland, 109 Wash. 2d at 680–81, 747 P.2d at 467.


52. Trask, 123 Wash. 2d at 843–44, 872 P.2d at 1084–85; Stangland, 109 Wash. 2d at 681, 747 P.2d at 468.

claimed that the attorneys’ negligence wrongfully limited their intended inheritance.54

The decedent, Ralph Schalock, hired Mr. Brock as his attorney to
draft a will leaving real property to Mr. Stangland and Mr. Kintschi and
the residue of his estate to two other individuals.55 When Mr. Brock
wrote the will, Mr. Schalock owned a valuable farm, which was intended
to be the real property devised to the plaintiffs. However, three years
after Mr. Brock wrote the will, Mr. Schalock hired another attorney from
the same firm, Mr. Carpenter, to prepare a real estate contract to sell his
farm.56 After the sale, a farm no longer existed to fulfill the gift in the
will.

When Mr. Schalock passed away, Mr. Stangland and Mr. Kintschi
sued the two attorneys and sought damages for the attorneys’ alleged
negligence.57 They alleged that the attorneys were negligent by not
fulfilling the decedent’s intent to convey the farm to them, not advising
the decedent about how the real estate sale would change his estate plan,
and disregarding the decedent’s testamentary intent.58 The attorney-
defendants responded with a motion to dismiss the complaint.59 The trial
court granted the attorneys’ motion to dismiss the plaintiffs’ negligence
claims for failure to state a claim upon which relief could be granted.60

On appeal, the Washington State Supreme Court focused on whether
the plaintiffs established that the attorneys owed them a duty of care and
had in fact breached that duty of care.61 The Court wrote:

Traditionally, privity of contract between the parties has been
required as a basis for establishing a duty in a legal malpractice
action. . . . However, . . . the modern trend is to relax the privity
requirement, allowing legal malpractice actions to be brought by
persons other than the clients of attorneys in some factual
situations.62

54. Id.
55. Id. at 677–78, 747 P.2d at 466. The two other individuals were Troy Rux and Joseph Kintschi.
Id. at 678, 747 P.2d at 466.
56. Id. at 678, 747 P.2d at 466. Mr. Schalock sold his farmland to Frank and Janet Titchenal. Id
57. Id. Before filing this lawsuit, the will was admitted to probate and the Stangland plaintiffs argued that they were entitled to the vendor’s interest in the sale of the farmland, while the residue beneficiaries argued that they were entitled to it instead. The parties ended up settling in that
dispute. Id.
58. Id.
59. Id. at 679, 747 P.2d at 466.
60. Id. The court of appeals certified the appeal to the Washington State Supreme Court. Id.
61. Id. at 679–80, 747 P.2d at 467.
62. Id.
Relying on a prior holding, the Court explained that an attorney might owe a duty to a nonclient under a multifactor balancing test or a third party beneficiary contract theory.\(^{63}\)

While the Court recognized that the attorneys in \textit{Stangland} might have owed a duty of care to nonclients Mr. Stangland and Mr. Kintschi, it held that the attorneys met the required standard of care imposed by that potential duty.\(^{64}\) The standard of professional care mandates attorneys to act with “that degree of care, skill, diligence and knowledge commonly possessed and exercised by a reasonable, careful and prudent lawyer in the practice of law.”\(^{65}\)

Regarding the claims against Mr. Brock, the Court reasoned that holding him to the plaintiffs’ suggested duty “would be expanding the obligation of a lawyer who drafts a will beyond reasonable limits.”\(^{66}\) The Court did not expect Mr. Brock to foresee the future when drafting Mr. Schalock’s will.\(^{67}\) He did not have notice that Mr. Schalock would sell the farm and did not need to provide legal advice about how that future sale would change the estate plan because he could not reasonably predict that the future sale would happen.\(^{68}\)

Looking at the claims against Mr. Carpenter, the Court held that he did not have a duty to advise the decedent about how the sale of the farmland would affect the decedent’s estate plan.\(^{69}\) The Court reasoned that this would require Mr. Carpenter to know the decedent’s estate plan.\(^{70}\) Mr. Carpenter could not reasonably have such knowledge as it “would impose potentially staggering responsibilities on attorneys ... and would markedly increase the cost of providing legal services.”\(^{71}\)

The \textit{Stangland} case marks an important point in the development of estate planning malpractice liability, even though the Court found that the attorneys in \textit{Stangland} did not breach a potential duty of care owed to the intended beneficiaries.\(^{72}\) The Court recognized the modern trend

\(^{63}\) Id. at 680–81, 747 P.2d at 467 (citing Bowman v. Two, 104 Wash. 2d 181, 188, 704 P.2d 140, 143 (1985)).
\(^{64}\) Id. at 682–83, 747 P.2d at 468.
\(^{65}\) Id. (citing Walker v. Bangs, 92 Wash. 2d 854, 859, 601 P.2d 1279, 1282 (1979)).
\(^{66}\) Id. at 684, 747 P.2d at 469.
\(^{67}\) Id.
\(^{68}\) Id.
\(^{69}\) Id. at 685–86, 747 P.2d at 469–70.
\(^{70}\) Id.
\(^{71}\) Id. at 685, 747 P.2d at 469–70.
\(^{72}\) Id. at 682–83, 747 P.2d at 468.
to relax the privity requirement for legal malpractice actions.\(^3\) Pointing to an earlier case, the \textit{Stangland} Court saw that the trend was slowly surfacing under theories of third party beneficiary contract law and a multifactor balancing test.\(^4\) The Court recognized that attorneys might have a duty of care to nonclients—given the right facts.\(^5\) The setting in \textit{Stangland} did not fit the mold, but the Court’s recognition of possible liability shows its willingness to expand the scope of estate planning malpractice liability.

The Court did not suggest that strict privity won the day. Instead, it expressed concern about expanding the obligations of a lawyer too far.\(^6\) These potentially expansive and nebulous obligations require the Court to define limits on lawyers’ obligations. Potential limits include foreseeability and the subject of attorney advice.\(^7\) Under the \textit{Stangland} rationale, the attorney only had a duty to give adequate legal advice on the issue he was aware of—the will’s execution—not the issue of how a potential sale of real estate would change the estate plan.\(^8\)

The attorneys’ alleged breach of duty in \textit{Stangland} was failure to give proper advice to a client, which in turn affected the intended beneficiaries.\(^9\) Attorneys cannot reasonably perform their duties to a client if the law requires them to be well-versed in areas outside the scope of the legal issue for which a client hired them.\(^10\) Just as the \textit{Stangland} Court did not expect the estate planning attorney to advise his client about real estate legal issues, it did not expect the real estate attorney to advise his client about estate planning issues.\(^11\)

The \textit{Stangland} Court’s analysis suggests that lower courts should apply a balancing test or third party beneficiary theory to similar cases in the future.\(^12\) Nevertheless, lower courts have placed the Court’s concerns

\(^3\) \textit{Id.} at 680, 747 P.2d at 467.
\(^4\) \textit{Id.} (citing Bowman v. Two, 104 Wash. 2d 181, 186–87, 704 P.2d 140, 142–43 (1985)).
\(^5\) \textit{Id.} at 680–83, 747 P.2d at 467–68.
\(^6\) \textit{Id.} at 684, 747 P.2d at 469.
\(^7\) \textit{Id.} at 683–84, 747 P.2d at 469.
\(^8\) \textit{Id.} at 683–86, 747 P.2d at 468–70.
\(^9\) \textit{Id.} at 678, 747 P.2d at 466.
\(^10\) \textit{Id.} at 684, 747 P.2d at 469 (“When an individual retains an attorney to draft his will, the attorney’s obligation is to use the care, skill, diligence and knowledge that a reasonable, prudent lawyer would exercise in order to draft the will . . . . Once that duty is accomplished, the attorney has no continuing obligation to monitor the testator’s management of his property to ensure that the scheme originally established in the will is maintained.”).
\(^11\) \textit{Id.} at 684–86, 747 P.2d at 469–70.
\(^12\) \textit{Id.} at 681, 747 P.2d at 467.
about “staggering responsibilities on attorneys” above the Court’s recognition of the privity requirement’s decreased significance. The upcoming analysis of Washington court of appeals cases discusses this priority placement.

B. The Trask Court Extended Stangland’s Rejection of Privity by Establishing a Balancing Test to Determine Attorneys’ Duty of Care to Nonclients

In Trask v. Butler, the Washington State Supreme Court held that an attorney hired by an estate’s personal representative did not owe a duty of care to an estate beneficiary. George Trask passed away, leaving two children, Laurel and Russell. As the appointed personal representative of her father’s estate, Laurel hired an attorney to represent her in a quiet title action for property that George quitclaimed to Russell without the signature of George’s wife. When George’s wife required medical care after his death, Laurel sold the family home to help with expenses and used the same attorney to assist her in that sale. After George’s wife also passed away, Russell filed a malpractice lawsuit against Laurel’s attorney, Richard Butler. Russell claimed that the advice to file a quiet title action for the quitclaimed property was negligent because it decreased the value of the land that was eventually sold for a bargain price.

The issue in Trask was whether Russell met the first element of a malpractice claim against Mr. Butler: “the existence of an attorney-client relationship which gives rise to a duty of care to the plaintiff.” As in Stangland, the Court noted that traditionally the only plaintiffs

83. Id. at 685, 747 P.2d at 467–70.
85. See infra sections II.C, II.D.
87. Id. at 837, 872 P.2d at 1081–82. Because some of the Trask parties share a surname, the author refers to the individuals by their first names to avoid confusion.
88. Id. at 837–38, 872 P.2d at 1082. Laurel hired Richard Butler as her attorney. Id. at 838, 872 P.2d at 1082.
89. Id. at 838, 872 P.2d at 1082. In 1986, the homestead was sold to the Turkheimers for $275,000. Id. In 1988, the sale was later litigated and set aside. Id. at 839, 872 P.2d at 1082.
90. Id. at 839, 872 P.2d at 1082.
91. Id.
92. Id. at 840, 872 P.2d at 1083.
93. Id. at 839, 872 P.2d at 1083.
who may bring malpractice lawsuits are those that were clients of the attorney-defendant, stating: “[u]nder traditional privity of contract rules Butler does not owe Russell, a nonclient, a duty of care.”

Again, like Stangland, the Court noted that courts relaxed the privity requirement and the first element may be met under a balancing test or third party beneficiary contract test without privity.

The Court further developed the legal theory under which a plaintiff could potentially meet the first element of a legal malpractice claim despite a lack of privity by combining the two leading approaches. In synthesizing the third party beneficiary contract law test with the multifactor balancing test, the Court reduced confusion and developed six clear factors (“the Trask factors”) to balance in determining whether an attorney owes a nonclient-plaintiff a duty of care. The Trask factors include the following:

1. the extent to which the transaction was intended to benefit the plaintiff;
2. the foreseeability of harm to the plaintiff;
3. the degree of certainty that the plaintiff suffered injury;
4. the closeness of the connection between the defendant’s conduct and the injury;
5. the policy of preventing future harm; and
6. the extent to which the profession would be unduly burdened by a finding of liability.

After applying the Trask balancing test, the Court found that Mr. Butler did not owe a duty of care to Russell. Still, the Trask factors are a significant development in Washington case law because they embody the trend in courts moving away from the privity requirement.

In Trask, the Court could not reasonably impose liability on the attorney-defendant because the beneficiaries were incidental rather than intended, the estate heirs could sue the personal representative instead of the attorney, and an unresolvable conflict of interest existed. For these reasons, the Court held that the Trask factors favored the attorney who

94. Id. at 840, 872 P.2d at 1083.
95. Id. at 840–44, 872 P.2d at 1083–85.
96. Id. at 842–43, 872 P.2d at 1084.
97. Id. at 843, 872 P.2d at 1084.
98. Id.
99. Id. at 845, 872 P.2d at 1085.
100. Id.
was hired by the estate’s personal representative. It addressed foreseeability concerns because the beneficiaries were incidental rather than intended. The Court also considered the availability of other means of justice and the desire to avoid potential conflicts of interest. It reasoned that there is “a risk of divided loyalties because of a conflicting interest” if lawyers have duties to both nonclients and clients.

The Trask Court provided lower courts with guidance by establishing the Trask factors to apply in similar cases. However, lower courts may feel pressure to find that the Trask factors weigh in favor of attorneys because of the Court’s concerns about attorney obligations and potential conflicts of interest. The next two sections discuss two cases in which the Washington State courts of appeal applied the Trask balancing test without any indication that the Trask factors may weigh in favor of the nonclient beneficiary.

C. The Parks Court Applied the Trask Balancing Test, but Still Held that the Estate Planning Attorney Did Not Owe a Duty of Care to Nonclients

In Parks v. Fink, the Washington Court of Appeals Division I held that an attorney did not owe a prospective beneficiary a duty of care to promptly execute a will. In 2005, John Balko, a terminal cancer patient, executed a valid will devising his estate. However, the will contained a typographical error: it left “Betty Rich” the residue of his estate instead of the intended “Betty Parks.”

An attorney, Janyce Fink, legally advised Mr. Balko in various roles over six years. She met with a hospitalized Mr. Balko to discuss this
error and prepare a new will to correct it.110 On April 26, 2006, Ms. Fink brought a new will to the hospital with several blank spaces for Mr. Balko to complete.111 Mr. Balko and Ms. Fink filled in the blank spaces on a new will and Mr. Balko signed the draft in Ms. Fink’s presence.112 One space that Mr. Balko filled in stated: “If Betty Parks does not survive me, I give the residue of my estate as follows: Terry Parks (son of Betty Parks).”113

Ms. Fink did not intend that draft to be the final version of the will because neither a witness nor notary was present.114 She allegedly explained to Mr. Balko that a will remains invalid until it is signed, witnessed, and notarized.115 She advised Mr. Balko to sign a final version of the draft with the proper formalities but he declined several times because he wanted to wait until he was in better health.116 In July 2007, Mr. Balko passed away before formally executing the April 2006 draft, meaning it did not revoke his previous will, dated 2005.117

Mr. Terry Parks, who would have benefitted from formal execution of the April 2006 draft, filed a malpractice claim against Ms. Fink and Fink Law Group PLLC.118 The trial court granted Ms. Fink’s summary judgment motion because Mr. Parks did not have standing.119

On appeal, the court of appeals affirmed, holding that Ms. Fink did not owe Mr. Parks a duty of care.120 The court emphasized the type of malpractice alleged here: failure to promptly execute a will.121 This kind of error is distinct from the duty of an attorney to ensure that a will meets the required formalities when executed and does not contain drafting errors.122 It differs largely because holding an attorney to this

110. Id.
111. Id.
112. Id.
113. Id. at 368–69, 293 P.3d at 1276 (italics in original).
114. Id. at 369, 293 P.3d at 1277.
115. Id.
116. Id. at 370, 293 P.3d at 1277.
117. Id. at 373, 293 P.3d at 1278.
118. Id. at 373, 293 P.3d at 1279. Under the first will, Mr. Craig Eckland was the will’s beneficiary after Betty Parks’s death. Id. at 370, 293 P.3d at 1277. Under the proposed change to the will, Mr. Terry Parks would have taken Mr. Eckland’s position. Id.
119. Id. at 373, 293 P.3d at 1279.
120. Id. at 389, 293 P.3d at 1287.
121. Id. at 378–79, 293 P.3d at 1281–82.
122. Id.; cf. Biakanja v. Irving, 320 P.2d 16, 18 (Cal. 1958) (holding that the defendant negligently failed to have decedent’s will properly attested); Licata v. Spector, 225 A.2d 28, 30–31
standard of care for a nonclient’s benefit conflicts with an attorney’s duty of undivided loyalty to his or her client.\(^{123}\)

The *Parks* Court applied the *Trask* balancing test, but it only discussed two of the six *Trask* factors and made a quick determination that the attorney did not owe the nonclient a duty of care.\(^{124}\) After weighing the *Trask* factors, the court held that imposing a duty of care on Ms. Fink to the nonclient, Mr. Parks, “would severely compromise the attorney’s duty of undivided loyalty to the client and impose an untenable burden on the attorney-client relationship.”\(^{125}\) Because attorneys primarily owe a duty of loyalty to their clients, it would be difficult for attorneys to also follow intended beneficiaries’ desires; while the beneficiaries may want a will executed swiftly to ensure their benefits, a client may wish to take extra time to consider his or her testamentary intentions.\(^{126}\)

Cases from several other jurisdictions were persuasive authority in the *Parks* Court’s decision that an attorney does not owe nonclients a duty of prompt will execution.\(^{127}\) The court aligned itself with the majority of other jurisdictions\(^{128}\) and upheld Washington ethics rules while doing so.\(^{129}\) Washington’s ethics rules require attorneys to provide undivided loyalty to their clients, which attorneys should not sacrifice to meet another’s needs or wishes.\(^{130}\)

The *Parks* decision provides lower courts with persuasive authority, but Washington case law provides little additional explanation of the *Trask* factors outside of this fact pattern. The *Parks* holding is likely limited to situations where the claim at issue is the failure to promptly execute an estate planning document, such as a will. If lower courts face

\(^{123}\) *Parks*, 173 Wash. App. at 378–79, 293 P.3d at 1281–82.

\(^{124}\) *Id.* at 377–78, 293 P.3d at 1280–81. The *Trask* factors discussed by the court were “the policy of preventing future harm” and “the extent to which the profession would be unduly burdened by a finding of liability.” *Id.* at 377, 293 P.2d at 1281.

\(^{125}\) *Id.* at 368, 293 P.3d at 1276.

\(^{126}\) See *id.* at 379–83, 293 P.3d at 1282–84.


\(^{128}\) See infra section III.B

\(^{129}\) *Parks*, 173 Wash. App. at 388, 293 P.3d at 1286.

\(^{130}\) *Id.* at 388–89, 293 P.3d at 1286–87; see also Tank v. State Farm Fire & Cas. Co., 105 Wash. 2d 381, 388, 715 P.2d 1133, 1137 (1986).
facts similar to Parks—a nonclient sues an estate planning attorney because the attorney failed to execute an estate planning document before the testator’s death—then the courts have clear guidance on how the Trask balancing test applies. Essentially, those facts require privity and the application of the Trask balancing test is a mere formality—as the following discussion of another court of appeals decision confirms. However, under different facts, lower courts question whether the Trask balancing test remains a mere formality.

D. The Linth Court’s Recent Holding Confirms that Washington Is Reaching Strict Privity Outcomes Even While Applying the Trask Balancing Test

In Linth v. Gay, the Washington State Court of Appeals Division II found Parks controlling in a malpractice claim brought by a trust beneficiary. The court held that the attorney-defendant in Linth did not owe the nonclient trust beneficiary a duty of care where the attorney did not promptly execute trust documents.

In 2000, Evelyn Plant hired Carl Gay to create a living trust that provided $100,000 and a life estate in a portion of property to Jennifer Linth. Later that year, Ms. Plant amended the trust and appointed Daniel Doran as the new trustee after resigning from the position herself. The amendment provided that $50,000 and Ms. Plant’s property was to be given to a foundation in Ms. Plant’s name after Ms. Linth’s life estate terminated. The amendment referenced a document that would set the terms of the nonprofit foundation. However, the attorney failed to attach the document to the trust amendment.

While Ms. Plant was living, the attorney drafted some plans for the foundation, none of which the attorney formally executed. When Ms. Plant passed away, the amendment’s validity was disputed because the

131. See infra section II.D.
132. See infra Part IV.
134. Id.
135. Id. at 333, 360 P.3d at 845–46.
136. Id. at 334, 360 P.3d at 846.
137. Id. The foundation was the Evelyn Plant Green Point Foundation. Id. at 333, 360 P.3d at 845.
138. Id. at 334, 360 P.3d at 846.
139. Id.
140. Id.
attorney never completed nor attached the referenced plans. In 2009, Ms. Linth, as a trust beneficiary, initiated malpractice claims against Mr. Gay, alleging that he had a duty to attach the foundation plans to the trust amendment before his client’s death. The superior court granted Mr. Gay’s motion for summary judgment, holding that Mr. Gay did not owe a duty to Ms. Linth. Ms. Linth appealed her claims to the Washington State court of appeals. 

Ms. Linth also alleged that Mr. Gay negligently represented the successor trustee, Mr. Doran, after Ms. Plant passed away. The court dismissed these claims based on the Trask decision. Because Ms. Linth had alternative methods of holding Mr. Gay accountable for his duties to Mr. Doran, the court found the following concern expressed in Trask inapplicable: “[i]n finding a duty to beneficiaries under the multi-factor balancing test, we recognized ‘if the beneficiaries could not recover for the attorney’s alleged negligence, no one could.’”

The Linth Court found Parks controlling. The issue in Linth was very similar to that in Parks; however, it revolved around the prompt execution of trust documents rather than the prompt execution of a will. Because the facts closely resembled Parks, the court found its holding determinative. The court stated, “as in Parks, the Trust documents were not properly executed before Plant’s death.”

The Linth decision steered the direction of Washington case law toward requiring privity and continued the line of reasoning in Parks. As in Parks, the Trask balancing test took a backseat to privity in Linth. The court noted that alternative methods of justice for plaintiffs weighed in favor of dismissing the claims against the attorney.

---

141. Id. at 335, 360 P.3d at 846. Ms. Linth signed a Nonjudicial Dispute Resolution Agreement (NDRA) to resolve the Trust and Estate Dispute Resolution Act (TEDRA) action between her and Crista Ministries, a beneficiary under the original trust. Mr. Doran was removed as trustee in the NDRA. Id.

142. Id. at 337, 360 P.3d at 848. Ms. Linth and Mr. Gay agreed to toll the statute of limitations for Ms. Linth’s claims against Mr. Gay. Id. at 335, 360 P.3d at 846.

143. Id. at 335, 360 P.3d at 846–47.

144. Id.

145. Id. at 341, 360 P.3d at 849.

146. Id. at 341–42, 360 P.3d at 849–50.

147. Id. at 341, 360 P.3d at 850.

148. Id. at 339, 360 P.3d at 849.

149. Id. at 333–34, 360 P.3d at 846.

150. Id. at 338–39, 360 P.3d at 848–49.

151. Id. at 339, 360 P.3d at 848–49.

152. Id. at 342, 360 P.3d at 850.
acknowledged that the *Trask* balancing test existed for a reason: to give nonclients some limited opportunities to sue for legal malpractice. However, merely acknowledging the possibility of standing under the *Trask* balancing test does not give plaintiffs hope that they may actually have it.

As of summer 2016, Washington courts have not found in favor of nonclient-plaintiffs in estate planning cases under the *Trask* balancing test. The lack of precedent in favor of nonclients suggests that Washington is adhering more to strict privity than court opinions indicate. However, the possibility remains that under the right facts, a nonclient-plaintiff may have standing.

III. STATES VARY WIDELY IN THEIR APPROACHES TO ESTATE PLANNING ATTORNEYS’ DUTIES TO NONCLIENTS

Jurisdictions across the nation address the issue of nonclient standing in malpractice actions using a range of methods. If Washington has an opportunity to address the issue again, courts will likely turn to leading cases in other jurisdictions for guidance. Important states to look to include California, Connecticut, Illinois, New Hampshire, and Pennsylvania because Washington relied on these jurisdictions when deciding *Stangland*, *Trask*, *Parks*, and *Linth*.

### A. A Minority of States Adheres to the Strict Privity Rule and Holds that Nonclients Cannot Sue Estate Planning Attorneys for Malpractice

A minority of states adheres to the strict privity rule. These states include Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Maryland,

---

Massachusetts, Nebraska, Ohio, and Virginia. Under the strict privity rule, nonclients only have a cause of action against attorneys when the attorney commits fraud or a malicious or tortious act, such as negligent misrepresentation. Otherwise, “[a] person authorized to practice law owes no duty except that arising from contract or from a gratuitous undertaking.” Maine, New York, and Texas apply the strict privity rule with a limited exception allowing a legal malpractice cause of action by an estate’s personal representative against an estate planning attorney.

Despite being a minority position, the strict privity rule is justified by confidentiality, predictability, and fairness principles. One court noted, “the greater good is served by preserving a bright-line privity rule which denies a cause of action to all beneficiaries whom the attorney did not represent.” Many courts applying the strict privity rule support the position by arguing that without it, the law would deny parties’ freedom of contract and the potential liability would impose a significant burden on the parties in contract. Strict privity protects the attorney-client relationship and confidential attorney-client communications. It also

170. See Belt v. Oppenheimer, Blend, Harrison & Tate, Inc., 192 S.W.3d 780, 782 (Tex. 2006); Barcelo v. Elliot, 923 S.W.2d 575, 582 (Tex. 1996) (Spector, J., dissenting).
171. Barcelo, 923 S.W.2d at 577–79; see also Baker v. Wood, Ris & Hames, Prof’l Corp., 2016 CO 5 ¶ 23 (quoting Noble v. Bruce, 709 A.2d 1264, 1270 (Md. 1998)) (“While the testator/client is alive, the lawyer owes him or her a duty of complete and undivided loyalty. The strict privity rule protects an attorney’s obligation to direct his or her full attention to the needs of the client. An attorney’s preoccupation or concern with potential negligence claims by third parties might result in a diminution in the quality of the legal services received by the client as the attorney might weigh the client’s interests against the attorney’s fear of liability to a third party.”).
172. Joan Teshima, Attorney’s Liability, to One Other Than Immediate Client, for Negligence in Connection with Legal Duties, 61 A.L.R. 4th 615, 624 (originally published in 1988).
173. Casteel et al., supra note 7, at 47.
limits the number of parties with standing, thereby decreasing lawsuits and promoting efficiency. 174

Notwithstanding its benefits, the strict privity rule may allow a negligent attorney to escape liability when intended beneficiaries only realize the attorney’s mistake after a client’s death. New York describes the tug-of-war at play between attorney liability and lack of accountability: “This rule effectively protects attorneys from legal malpractice suits by indeterminate classes of plaintiffs whose interests may be at odds with the interests of the client-decedent. However, it also leaves the estate with no recourse against an attorney who planned the estate negligently.” 175 Because of strict privity’s constraints, most jurisdictions recognize an exception to privity under certain circumstances.

B. A Majority of States Recognizes a Possible Cause of Action by Nonclients Under a Third Party Contract Theory, a Negligence Tort Theory, or a Balancing Test

The majority of states recognizes an exception to the strict privity rule based on one of three theories: (1) a third party beneficiary contract theory; (2) the foreseeable harm to third parties doctrine in tort law; or (3) a balancing test of several factors. The majority group includes the following states: California, 176 Connecticut, 177 Delaware, 178 District of Columbia, 179 Florida, 180 Georgia, 181 Hawaii, 182 Idaho, 183 Illinois, 184

174. See id.
177. Krawczyk v. Stingle, 543 A.2d 733, 735 (Conn. 1988) (“[A] number of jurisdictions have recognized an exception to this general rule [of no liability] when the plaintiff can demonstrate that he or she was the intended or foreseeable beneficiary of the attorney’s services.”). See generally Stowe v. Smith, 441 A.2d 81 (Conn. 1981); Licata v. Spector, 225 A.2d 28 (Conn. C.P. 1966).
182. See Blair v. Ing, 21 P.3d 452, 464–68 (Haw. 2001) (applying a balancing test after recognizing a cause of action was possible under both tort theories and contract theories).
Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Washington, West Virginia,


184. See Ogle v. Fuiten, 466 N.E.2d 224, 227 (Ill. 1984) (applying a third party contract theory, but suggesting that a tort theory may support a cause of action, too); Pelham v. Griesheimer, 440 N.E.2d 96, 100 (Ill. 1982) (“We conclude that, for a nonclient to succeed in a negligence action against an attorney, he must prove that the primary purpose and intent of the attorney-client relationship itself was to benefit or influence the third party.”); Neal v. Baker, 551 N.E.2d 704, 706 (Ill. App. Ct. 1990) (“Plaintiff’s mere assertion that the attorney was hired with the intent to directly benefit plaintiff is not sufficient to state a cause of action. The intent plaintiff referred to in her complaint was nothing more than the general intent implicit in an executor hiring an attorney to assist in administering an estate. We hold no duty extends to a beneficiary under these circumstances.”).

185. See Walker v. Lawson, 526 N.E.2d 968, 968 (Ind. 1988) (applying a third party contract theory); Ferguson v. O’Bryan, 996 N.E.2d 428, 433 (Ind. Ct. App. 2013) (holding that a drafting attorney who is aware that intended beneficiaries exist may be liable to nonclients).


200. See Fabian v. Lindsay, 765 S.E.2d 132, 141 (S.C. 2014) (recognizing claims under both tort and third-party beneficiary theories).
Wisconsin, and Wyoming. Mississippi has completely rid itself of the privity doctrine through legislation. Other jurisdictions have not directly addressed the issue. These states include: Arizona, Alaska, Delaware, Nevada, New Jersey, North Carolina, North Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, and Vermont.

Under what is known as the “Florida-Iowa Rule,” some jurisdictions hold that nonclients may only bring a lawsuit against an estate planning attorney if the testator named the nonclients in the will or trust. In Florida, liability only arises if “due to the attorney’s professional negligence, the testamentary intent, as expressed in the will, is frustrated, and the beneficiary’s legacy is lost or diminished as a direct result of that negligence.” Likewise, in Iowa, liability only arises when “as a direct result of the lawyer’s professional negligence the testator’s intent as

201. See Friske v. Hogan, 2005 SD 70, ¶¶ 12–20, 698 N.W.2d 526, 530–31 (applying a third party beneficiary theory and holding that an attorney-client relationship was formed under a tort theory).


206. See MISS. CODE ANN. § 11-7-20 (2016).


208. See Petrisilo v. Bachenberg, 655 A.2d 1354, 1361–62 (N.J. 1995) (holding a real estate attorney may owe a duty of care to a nonclient relying on the attorney’s reports under a tort theory).

209. See Wright v. Linebarger Gogean Blair & Sampson, LLP, 782 F. Supp. 2d 593, 612 (W.D. Tenn. 2011) (holding law firm was not liable to third party, yet recognizing that an attorney may be liable to third parties for negligent preparation of real estate documents under Tennessee law); Harriet & Henderson Yarns, Inc. v. Castle, 75 F. Supp. 2d 818, 824–25 (W.D. Tenn. 1999) (holding that nonclients could not bring a negligence cause of action against an attorney because they were neither the attorney’s clients nor third party intended beneficiaries).

210. See Winters v. Schulman, 1999 UT App 119, ¶¶ 24–26, 977 P.2d 1218, 1225 (holding that a nonclient may not recover from attorney for negligence under third party beneficiary theory unless the nonclient proves that the primary intent of the client’s relationship with the attorney was for the nonclient’s benefit).

211. See Hedges v. Durrance, 2003 VT 63, 175 Vt. 588, 590–91, 834 A.2d 1, 4–5 (holding that an attorney did not owe a duty of care to a nonclient in a different context).


213. See DeMaris, 426 So.2d at 1154 (emphasis in original).
expressed in the testamentary instruments is frustrated in whole or in part and the beneficiary’s interest in the estate is either lost, diminished, or unrealized. Several states in the majority group have adopted this rule to limit the causes of action brought by nonclients. These states include: California, Florida, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and South Dakota.


The Washington State Supreme Court relied on California, Connecticut, Illinois, and Pennsylvania when it decided

214. See Schreiner, 410 N.W.2d at 683.
215. See Hall v. Kalfayan, 118 Cal. Rptr. 3d 629, 636 (Cal. Ct. App. 2010) (holding that a court-appointed attorney did not owe a duty of care to a prospective beneficiary’s conservator when the will did not name the prospective beneficiary).
216. See Espinosa v. Sparber, Shevin, Shapo & Heilbronner, 612 So. 2d 1378, 1380 (Fla. 1993); Babcock v. Malone, 760 So. 2d 1056, 1056 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 2000) (holding that nonclient-plaintiffs could not sue the drafting attorney because the testator’s will did not name them and the testator’s intent was unclear).
217. See Young v. Van Buren, No. 28543, 2010 WL 4278321, at *3–4 (Haw. Ct. App. Oct. 29, 2010), as corrected (Nov. 23, 2010) (In an unpublished disposition, the court rejected malpractice claims brought by a testator’s son because the son was not the intended beneficiary of the trust amendments and thus, the attorney did not owe him any duty.).
218. See Soignier v. Fletcher, 256 P.3d 730, 733–34 (Idaho 2011) (“Attorneys do not have to postulate whether a testator intended to do something other than what is expressed in the will. . . . [And] attorneys have no ongoing duty to monitor the legal status of the property mentioned in a testamentary instrument.”); Harrigfeld v. Hancock, 90 P.3d 884, 888 (Idaho 2004).
219. See Schreiner, 410 N.W.2d at 682 (holding that “a lawyer owes a duty of care to the direct, intended, and specifically identifiable beneficiaries of the testator as expressed in the testator’s testamentary instruments”).
220. See Guy v. Liederbach, 459 A.2d 744, 746 (Pa. 1983) (holding that while California’s balancing test was too broad, a nonclient may bring a cause of action if the client’s will expressly named the nonclient intended beneficiaries and the testator’s intent was to benefit the intended beneficiaries).
221. See Fabian v. Lindsay, 765 S.E.2d 132, 140 (S.C. 2014) (holding that beneficiaries named or identified in the estate planning document could bring a malpractice cause of action against the attorney for poor drafting).
222. See Friske v. Hogan, 2005 SD 70, ¶¶ 10–17, 698 N.W.2d 526, 529–31 (holding that there is an exception to the privity rule when a nonclient is the direct, intended beneficiary of the lawyer’s services to the testator).
Stangland and Trask. The court of appeals similarly relied on California,\textsuperscript{227} Connecticut,\textsuperscript{228} and New Hampshire,\textsuperscript{229} when deciding Parks. The leading cases in each of these jurisdictions may help predict how the Trask balancing test will apply in the future Washington cases.

1. California’s Balancing Test Is a Model for Many States, Including Washington

California leads other jurisdictions in estate planning malpractice liability because of its early decision to overrule the strict privity rule and create a balancing test to determine whether nonclients have standing to sue estate planning attorneys.\textsuperscript{230} The balancing test, first set forth in Lucas v. Hamm,\textsuperscript{231} considers the extent to which the testator intended the transaction to affect the beneficiary; the foreseeability of harm to the beneficiary; the degree of certainty that the beneficiary suffered the harm; the closeness of connection between the attorney’s conduct and the injury; and the policy of preventing future harm.\textsuperscript{232} In creating this test, California overruled a previous decision holding that a lack of privity between will beneficiaries and the drafting attorneys precludes the beneficiaries from having a cause of action against the attorneys.\textsuperscript{233}

\textsuperscript{224} Stangland, 109 Wash. 2d at 681, 747 P.2d at 467 (citing Stowe v. Smith, 441 A.2d 81 (Conn. 1981)).


\textsuperscript{226} Stangland, 109 Wash. 2d at 681, 747 P.2d at 467 (citing Guy v. Liederbach, 459 A.2d 744 (Pa. 1983)).


\textsuperscript{228} Parks, 173 Wash. App. at 379, 382, 293 P.3d at 1282, 1283 (citing Krawczyk v. Stingle, 543 A.2d 733 (Conn. 1988); Licata v. Spector, 225 A.2d 28 (Conn. C.P. 1966)).

\textsuperscript{229} Parks, 173 Wash. App. at 382–83, 293 P.3d at 1283–84 (citing Sisson v. Jankowski, 809 A.2d 1265 (N.H. 2002)).

\textsuperscript{230} Lucas v. Hamm, 364 P.2d 685, 687–88 (Cal. 1961) (overruling Buckley v. Gray, 42 P. 900 (Cal. 1895)).

\textsuperscript{231} Id.

\textsuperscript{232} Id.

\textsuperscript{233} Id. (overruling Buckley v. Gray, 42 P. 900 (Cal. 1895)).
California’s multifactor balancing test has become a model for other jurisdictions. California courts have held that the test weighs in favor of the nonclients on some occasions and in favor of the attorney on other occasions. California’s balancing test dictates that attorneys do not owe intended beneficiaries the duty to promptly execute a will or trust. Because of California’s leading position in this area of the law, Washington’s balancing factors mirror California’s factors. Likewise, in the prompt execution context, Washington applies the balancing test as California applies it—attorney-defendants are not liable to nonclients if the claim regards prompt execution.

2. Connecticut’s Precedent Involving Prompt Execution of Estate Planning Documents Persuaded Washington Courts to Deny Attorney Liability for Failure to Promptly Execute Documents

Connecticut’s third party beneficiary theory, which supports the finding of a duty of care between attorneys and nonclients in limited circumstances, is persuasive authority in Washington decisions. As in several other jurisdictions, Connecticut holds that attorneys do not owe a duty of care to third parties for the prompt execution of estate planning documents.

---


235. See, e.g., Heyer v. Flaig, 449 P.2d 161, 162 (Cal. 1969) (holding that the attorney violated his duty of care because he negligently failed to advise his client of the effects of a post-testamentary marriage, causing the nonclient-plaintiffs to suffer “irremediable” damages).

236. See, e.g., Hall v. Kalfayan, 118 Cal. Rptr. 3d 629, 636 (Cal. Ct. App. 2010) (holding an attorney did not owe a duty of care to a prospective beneficiary to have a will executed before the testator’s death); Goldberg v. Frye, 266 Cal. Rptr. 483, 489 (Cal. Ct. App. 1990) (holding that legatees could not sue the estate administrator’s attorney because the primary purpose of the attorney-client relationship was not for the legatees’ benefit).

237. See Hall, 118 Cal. Rptr. 3d at 636 (holding an attorney did not owe a duty of care to a prospective beneficiary to have a will executed before the testator’s death).

238. Trask v. Butler, 123 Wash. 2d 835, 843, 872 P.2d 1080, 1084 (1994). The Trask factors include the extent to which the transaction was intended to benefit the plaintiff; the foreseeability of harm to the plaintiff; the degree of certainty that the plaintiff suffered injury; the closeness of the connection between the defendant’s conduct and the injury; the policy of preventing future harm; and the extent to which the profession would be unduly burdened by a finding of liability. Id.


documents. In *Krawczyk v. Stingle*, an attorney’s client expressed a desire to execute a trust to replace an existing will. However, the client was hospitalized and passed away shortly after conveying that desire. Because of the short amount of time, the client never signed the trust documents. While the client’s inability to sign the documents was unfortunate, the Court held that the attorney was not liable to the trust’s intended beneficiaries for failure to execute the trust documents swiftly before the client’s death.

The Washington State court of appeals relied on the *Krawczyk* Court’s reasoning when determining that estate planning attorneys did not owe a duty to nonclients to have estate planning documents promptly executed. Unlike cases in which attorneys fail to supervise a will’s execution, the issue in *Krawczyk*, as well as *Parks* and *Linth*, was “whether such liability should be further expanded to encompass negligent delay in completing and furnishing estate planning documents for execution by the client.” The *Krawczyk* Court distinguished the claim at issue from other claims of legal malpractice with widely persuasive reasoning.

3. **New Hampshire Authority Also Persuaded Washington to Deny Attorney Liability for Failure to Promptly Execute Estate Planning Documents**

The Washington State court of appeals viewed an influential New Hampshire case, *Sisson v. Jankowski*, as persuasive authority. In *Sisson*, the Supreme Court of New Hampshire held that an attorney did not owe a duty of care to prospective will beneficiaries to see that the testator promptly executed the will in question. The *Sisson* Court relied on different factors than those of other jurisdictions such as: “the

---

242. *Id.*
243. *Id.* at 734.
244. *Id.*
245. *Id.*
246. *Id.* at 736.
249. *Krawczyk*, 543 A.2d at 735.
250. 809 A.2d 1265 (N.H. 2002).
societal interest involved, the severity of the risk, the likelihood of the occurrence, the relationship between the parties, and the burden upon the defendant.”

Outside of the prompt execution context, New Hampshire recognizes that a nonclient does not necessarily need a privity relationship with the attorney-defendant to bring a legal malpractice claim for negligent will drafting. Like other jurisdictions, New Hampshire found an exception to the privity rule appropriate under the third party beneficiary contract theory. The Court justified the exception, stating, “the obvious foreseeability of injury to the beneficiary demands an exception to the privity rule.”

4. **Illinois’s Third Party Beneficiary Theory was Synthesized with a Balancing Test to Form Washington’s Modern Balancing Test**

Illinois’s authority on the third party beneficiary theory was persuasive authority in both the *Stangland* and *Trask* decisions. The test set forth in *Neal v. Baker* requires a nonclient to establish that both the primary purpose and intent of the attorney-client relationship was for the nonclient’s benefit. *Neal’s* test was previously established in *Pelham v. Griesheimer*. The *Trask* Court compared the third party beneficiary test to a balancing test, stating “[t]he two tests are indistinguishable in that their primary inquiry focuses on the purpose for establishing the attorney-client relationship . . . [t]o eliminate any confusion to trial courts we combine the two tests.” Washington combined this third party beneficiary concept with a multifactor balancing test and synthesized the important factors in determining whether an attorney owes a duty to a nonclient.

253. *Id.* at 1267 (citing Hungerford v. Jones, 722 A.2d 478 (N.H. 1998)).
255. *Id.*
256. *Id.* at 322.
259. *Id.* at 705–06.
260. 440 N.E.2d 96, 100 (Ill. 1982) (“We conclude that, for a nonclient to succeed in a negligence action against an attorney, he must prove that the primary purpose and intent of the attorney-client relationship itself was to benefit or influence the third party.”).
261. *Trask*, 123 Wash. 2d at 842, 872 P.2d at 1084.
262. *Id.* at 842–43, 872 P.2d at 1084.

Washington noted an important early Pennsylvania decision, in which the court recognized an attorney’s possible liability to nonclients for poor will drafting.\(^{263}\) In *Guy v. Liederbach*,\(^{264}\) the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania held that named beneficiaries in a will could bring a cause of action against an attorney who failed to properly draft the will.\(^{265}\) Rather than abolishing privity, Pennsylvania held that for a nonclient-plaintiff to maintain a lawsuit based in assumpsit, she must either show an attorney-client relationship exists or an attorney specifically undertook to furnish professional services.\(^{266}\) Under this reasoning, an unintended beneficiary of an estate planning document cannot sue an attorney for negligent drafting of the document.\(^{267}\) In acknowledging *Guy*, the *Stangland* Court further supported its notion that the privity trend was diminishing, largely because of the third party beneficiary theory on which *Guy* relied.\(^{268}\)

IV. WASHINGTON COURTS NEED CLARITY: UNDER WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES MIGHT THE TRASK BALANCING TEST WEIGH IN FAVOR OF A NONCLIENT?

Washington is not in the strict privity camp, so the state may recognize a nonclient’s cause of action against an attorney for legal malpractice. Yet, the breadth of that recognition remains undefined. In particular, the courts have not established whether it will limit causes of action to nonclients expressly named in estate planning documents or whether unnamed nonclients may also have causes of action.

The *Trask* balancing test requires a case-by-case analysis and has the potential to elicit different results under different facts.\(^{269}\) However, Washington case law lacks clarity regarding the *Trask* balancing test’s application because the facts in precedent cases are similar and


\(^{264}\) 459 A.2d 744 (Pa. 1983).

\(^{265}\) Id. at 752–53.

\(^{266}\) Id. at 750.

\(^{267}\) Id. at 751. See also Hess v. Fox Rothschild, LLP, 925 A.2d 798, 806–07 (Pa. 2007).

\(^{268}\) Stangland, 109 Wash. 2d at 681, 747 P.2d at 467.

\(^{269}\) See supra Part I; section II.B.
narrow. As seen in Parks and Linth, in the case of prompt execution of estate planning documents, the Trask balancing test clearly weighs in favor of the attorney. But Washington lower courts find themselves in the dark when applying the Trask balancing test in estate planning cases dealing with issues other than prompt execution. If such a case makes its way to the Washington State Supreme Court, the Court will have the opportunity to clarify the Trask balancing test and opine as to whether the test weighs in favor of the nonclient. The following fact patterns, which have appeared before other jurisdictions, may shift the weight on the Trask scale.

A. If There Is a Delay in the Execution of Estate Planning Documents, the Trask Factors Likely Favor the Attorney

In situations where a nonclient claims an estate planning attorney breached a duty of care by failing to promptly execute an estate planning document, the Trask factors and similar balancing tests in other jurisdictions come out the same way: courts do not hold attorneys liable to nonclients. Both Parks and Linth hold that the Trask balancing test weighs in favor of the attorney when the client did not sign the estate planning document before death. Courts in many other jurisdictions hold the same. They commonly justify this position for two major reasons. First, it is possible that an estate planning document does not exist if the testator and attorney have not executed it. Second, without a signature attesting to the document’s contents, the testator’s intent is unclear.

The first rationale is based on the key distinction between negligent drafting cases and prompt execution cases. In the first situation, a tangible document exists and may be in effect, while in the second, the document may not even exist yet. A clear line exists between these

273. Linth, 190 Wash. App. 331, 338, 360 P.3d 844, 848 (addressing the prompt execution of a trust attachment); Parks, 173 Wash. App. at 377, 293 P.3d at 1280 (addressing the prompt execution of a will).
274. See Rydde, 675 S.E.2d at 433–35; Sisson, 809 A.2d at 1270.
claims because “an attorney owes no duty to a prospective beneficiary of a nonexistent will.”

The second rationale reasons that a testator’s intent is unclear until an executed document exists. Without a signature, many individuals, including the client’s attorney, cannot be certain that the document adequately reflects the testator’s intentions. Attorneys must not force a client to execute a document; rather, they must execute the document in the proper legal manner after clients affirmatively decide that they wish to execute it. An attorney may feel pressure to force a client to quickly sign a document if a third party has great stakes in the document and has standing to sue the attorney afterwards.

Considering these rationales, some courts may find a bright-line rule requiring privity appropriate in prompt execution cases. However, the Trask balancing test is still necessary. In a recent Pennsylvania case, Estate of Agnew v. Ross, an attorney had a meeting with a near-death client who was prepared to execute an estate planning document. However, the attorney forgot to bring the document to the meeting, and the client passed away before signing it. The court allowed nonclient intended beneficiaries to bring a cause of action against the attorney under a third party beneficiary contract theory.

Although the issue in Estate of Agnew was failure of prompt execution, it stands in stark contrast to Parks and Linth because the testator’s intent was clear: he was prepared to sign the document and wished to do so. The attorney’s mistake in not bringing the document to the client meeting was the only reason the client did not sign it, and likewise, the only reason the nonclients did not receive their intended

275. Rydale, 675 S.E.2d at 432.
276. See id. at 433–34.
277. Krawczyk, 543 A.2d at 736 (“Imposition of liability would create an incentive for an attorney to exert pressure on a client to complete and execute estate planning documents summarily. Fear of liability to potential third party beneficiaries would contravene the attorney’s primary responsibility to ensure that the proposed estate plan effectuates the client’s wishes and that the client understands the available options and the legal and practical implications of whatever course of action is ultimately chosen.”).
279. Id. at 1022.
280. Id. at 1028 (“[The attorney] also stated that [the testator] ‘would have signed the amendment had I prepared it, but because it was not with me, it was not discussed and until I discussed it with him I can’t say for certain he would have signed it.’ . . . Moreover, [the attorney] conceded that his failure to bring the 2010 Trust Amendment to that meeting was an ‘oversight.’”).
281. Id.
282. Id.
benefit. Under these facts, a bright-line rule would be too harsh, so a court’s analysis under the Trask balancing test remains necessary.

B. If the Document’s Express Provisions Frustrate the Testator’s Intent, the Trask Factors May Favor the Nonclient

When presented with the right case, Washington may hold that nonclients expressly named in the estate planning document may bring a cause of action against the drafting attorney under the Trask balancing test, as other jurisdictions have held. Several states allow “a beneficiary [to] maintain a cause of action against the estate planning attorney only if the client’s intent, as expressed in the will (or other document), is frustrated.” This limitation requires that the frustration of a testator’s intent be apparent on the face of the will in order to avoid parol evidence. For example, Idaho holds that nonclients named as beneficiaries in a testamentary instrument are an exception to the privity rule. Similarly, Iowa creates an exception to the privity requirement when “as a direct result of the lawyer’s professional negligence the testator’s intent as expressed in the testamentary instruments is frustrated in whole or in part and the beneficiary’s interest in the estate is either lost, diminished, or unrealized.”

If the testator named the plaintiffs in the estate planning document, then the Trask factors largely favor the nonclient-plaintiffs and support a legal malpractice cause of action. On its face, the document would benefit the nonclient-plaintiff. An estate planning attorney could probably foresee harm to the nonclient-plaintiff because the testator expressly named the nonclient. Also, the nonclient-plaintiff’s injury would likely be connected to the estate planning attorney’s conduct. Additionally, the profession would not be greatly burdened. Rather, allowing named nonclients to bring malpractice causes of action would

283. Id.
284. See supra section III.B.
286. Fogel, supra note 285.
288. Schreiner, 410 N.W.2d at 683.
put privity in the past 1883

encourage better drafting, strengthen client relations, and limit the
number of plaintiffs who could bring legal malpractice actions to those
expressly named.

Conversely, if the estate planning document does not name nonclient-
plaintiffs, the Trask factors favor the attorney. In that circumstance, the
face of the document does not clearly show that the testator intended to
benefit the plaintiff through the testator’s transaction, that the attorney
could foresee the harm, or that the attorney’s conduct certainly caused
injury to the nonclient-plaintiff. From a policy perspective, preventing
future harm may be difficult because of the challenge of determining
whether an attorney named the correct individuals in estate planning
documents. Additionally, legal malpractice actions would burden the
estate planning profession if all frustrated nonclients unnamed in wills
and trusts could bring malpractice lawsuits.

When presented with the right facts, Washington may hold that the
Trask balancing test does not allow nonclients to bring a cause of action
unless the testator expressly named them in the documents. However,
such a result may be too harsh because the approach fails to account for
situations where nonclient-plaintiffs lose their cause of action as a direct
result of the attorney’s negligence. For example, when a document does
not expressly mention the nonclient-plaintiffs because of an attorney’s
negligent drafting error, the nonclient-plaintiffs would lose their cause of
action.

Consider the fact pattern presented in an Oregon case, Hale v.
Groce: 

‘[d]efendant, who is an attorney, was directed by a client to
prepare testamentary instruments and to include a bequest of a specified
sum to plaintiff. After the client’s death, it was discovered that the gift
was not included either in the will or in a related trust instrument.’

The plaintiff’s complaint alleged that the testator identified the intended
beneficiary and told the attorney that he intended a $300,000 gift for that
individual at his death, yet none of the estate planning documents
provided for that gift. In Hale, the will and related trust document did
not name the intended beneficiary because the drafting attorney
negligently omitted the testator’s intended gift for the nonclient. The
Court held that an attorney’s negligence might give rise to a nonclient’s
cause of action against the attorney because a contract to include the

289. 744 P.2d 1289 (Or. 1987).
290. Id. at 1290.
291. Id. at 1293.
292. Id.
nonclient beneficiary in an estate planning document creates a duty to both the client and the nonclient beneficiary.293

These facts demonstrate circumstances in which the exception to the privity rule for intended beneficiaries expressly named in estate planning documents might be too narrow. The exception for expressly named plaintiffs appeals to courts because of its simplicity and bright line nature and appeals to attorneys because of its apparent outcome in favor of attorney-defendants under Trask.294 Yet, it could significantly curtail some deserving plaintiffs. For example, it does not provide the nonclient with recourse for situations when an attorney’s negligence results in the omission of the nonclient’s name.295

C. If the Residuary Clause Is Negligently Omitted from an Estate Planning Document, the Trask Factors May Favor the Nonclient

Under certain circumstances, the Trask balancing test may not only favor nonclients that the testator expressly named in estate planning documents, but also those nonclients who the attorney negligently excluded despite the testator’s intentions. Intended beneficiaries of an estate may wish to bring a malpractice action against an attorney who fails to include a residuary clause in an estate planning document. If Washington determines that the Trask balancing test favors the nonclients in this setting, then it will likely fall into the camp of states that recognize a cause of action when an estate planning document clearly frustrates the testator’s intent, even when the document does not expressly name the nonclients.

In Arnold v. Carmichael,296 Florida held that a nonclient had a cause of action against the estate planning attorney because the omission of the residuary clause frustrated the testator-client’s intent.297 The court

293. Id. at 1292 (“Because under third-party analysis the contract creates a ‘duty’ not only to the promisee, the client, but also to the intended beneficiary, negligent nonperformance may give rise to a negligence action as well. Not every such contract will support either claim.”).

294. Chang v. Lederman, 90 Cal. Rptr. 3d 758, 773 (Cal. Dist. Ct. App. 2009) (“Expanding the attorney’s duty of care to include actual beneficiaries who could have been, but were not, named in a revised estate plan, just like including third parties who could have been, but were not, named in a bequest, would expose attorneys to impossible duties and limitless liability because the interests of such potential beneficiaries are always in conflict . . . . Moreover, the results in such lawsuits, if allowed, would inevitably be speculative because the claim necessarily will not arise until the testator or settlor, the only person who can say what he or she intended or explain why a previously announced intention was subsequently modified, has died.”).

295. Hale, 744 P.2d at 1293; see infra section IV.C.


297. Id. at 466.
explained “[u]nder this exception, liability may be found on the part of an attorney if, due to the attorney’s professional negligence, testamentary intent as expressed in a will is frustrated, and the beneficiary’s legacy is lost or diminished as a direct result of that negligence.”

Likewise, the District of Columbia found that an attorney breached a duty of care to a nonclient upon omitting a residuary clause in *Hamilton v. Needham*. The court explained, “[a] lawyer who admits that he omitted from a will a residuary clause requested by the testator and thereby causes the residual estate to pass by intestate succession has facially demonstrated an obvious lack of care and skill.” The court affirmed the trial court’s malpractice finding because the attorney-defendant did not offer any “meaningful facts to justify or excuse his failure and no real issue was presented as to causation.”

Under similar circumstances in Washington, the *Trask* factors would likely weigh in favor of a nonclient. The first factor, the extent to which the testator intended the transaction to benefit the plaintiff, favors the residuary beneficiary because the omitted provision intended to benefit her would cause significant harm. The second *Trask* factor, foreseeability of harm to the plaintiff, likely favors the nonclient if she can establish that the drafting attorney knew of the testator’s intention to leave a residuary benefit for her. The third and fourth *Trask* factors, the degree of certainty that the plaintiff suffered injury and the closeness of the connection between the attorney-defendant’s conduct and the injury, weigh in the nonclient’s favor because the omission would prevent the nonclient from receiving a benefit and cause injury to the nonclient from the attorney’s failure to adhere to the testator’s intentions. The fifth *Trask* factor, the policy of preventing future harm, favors the nonclient because omitting a residuary clause constitutes negligence. The sixth *Trask* factor, the extent to which the profession would be unduly burdened by a finding of liability, favors the nonclient-plaintiff. A finding of liability in the context of residuary clause omissions does not

---

298. *Id.*

299. 519 A.2d 172, 175 (D.C. App. 1986) (holding that extrinsic evidence may be admitted to establish the testator’s intent and the attorney’s liability to intended beneficiaries after omitting a will’s residuary clause).

300. *Id.*

301. *Id.*

302. *Id.* (“A lawyer who admits that he omitted from a will a residuary clause requested by the testator and thereby causes the residual estate to pass by intestate succession has facially demonstrated an obvious lack of care and skill.”).
unduly burden the profession because the mistake does not occur often, and when it does, the profession supports attorney accountability for the mistake.\footnote{303}{Mieras v. DeBona, 550 N.W.2d 202, 209 (Mich. 1996) ("Testators do not ordinarily ask that a will be drafted solely to bequeath specific property with the intent that the residue of the estate will be distributed as if they died intestate . . . it is not unusual, in contrast with the omission of a residuary clause, for a will to fail to exercise a power of appointment."); see also Arnold, 524 So. 2d 464, 467 ("[Attorney] clearly had a duty to read the will before allowing it to be turned over to his client"); Hamilton, 519 A.2d 172, 175 ("A lawyer who admits that he omitted from a will a residuary clause requested by the testator and thereby causes the residual estate to pass by intestate succession has facially demonstrated an obvious lack of care and skill. No expert need guide the factfinder here.").}

Under the \textit{Trask} balancing test, negligently omitting a residuary clause would likely open the door to a nonclient suit. In upholding this outcome, Washington would align itself with other states recognizing nonclients' standing, even if the nonclient did not appear in the estate planning document.\footnote{304}{See supra section III.B.} While this seems to create broad liability for an estate planning attorney, the nonclients still have a significant evidentiary challenge of establishing that the testator clearly intended for their benefit even though the document does not mention their name.\footnote{305}{Joan Teshima, \textit{Attorney's Liability, to One Other Than Immediate Client, for Negligence in Connection with Legal Duties}, in \textit{61 A.L.R. 4th} 615, § 2 (1988) ("In most cases, the courts have recognized a will-drafting attorney's liability to an intended beneficiary whom the attorney negligently omitted when preparing the will, although proving such a cause of action when the attorney does not admit negligence may be complicated by the court's exclusion of evidence showing that the testator's intention was different from that disclosed in the will.").} Attorney liability will not become sweeping because of this challenge.

V. NONCLIENTS SHOULD EXHAUST THE REMEDIES PROVIDED UNDER WASHINGTON'S REFORMATION STATUTE BEFORE BRINGING A MALPRACTICE CLAIM

To balance attorney liability and attorney accountability, this Comment proposes using Washington's will and trust reformation statute as an exhaustion requirement before nonclients bring a malpractice action against an attorney. This solution may avoid unjust enrichment when individuals other than the intended beneficiaries receive a gift that the testator did not intend for them. It may also make the nonclient intended beneficiaries whole without the need for a malpractice action against the estate planning attorney. On occasions where the statute does not serve to make the intended beneficiaries whole, then further action through a malpractice claim might provide a remedy.
A. *Washington’s Reformation Statute Provides a Progressive Solution for Frustrated Intended Beneficiaries When the Estate Planning Document Has a Clear Mistake*

Beyond the *Trask* balancing test, Washington’s reformation statute, RCW 11.96A.125,306 allows courts and intended beneficiaries to remedy the problem presented by a nonclient intended beneficiary’s cause of action.307 The statute provides:

> The terms of a will or trust, even if ambiguous, may be reformed by judicial proceedings . . . to conform the terms to the intention of the testator or trustor if it is proved by clear, cogent, and convincing evidence that both the intent of the testator or trustor and the terms of the will or trust were affected by a mistake of fact or law, whether in expression or inducement.308

Under common law, courts could not modify wills or trusts.309 Washington’s adoption of this statute defies common law and allows for the modification of both wills and trusts either by court order or the parties’ binding nonjudicial agreement.310 The departure from common law and implementation of this statute coincides with the Restatement (Third) of Property, the Uniform Probate Code (UPC), and the Uniform Trust Code (UTC).311 Like Washington, the Restatement, the UPC, and

306. *WASH. REV. CODE § 11.96A.125 (2016).*
307. *Id.*
308. *Id.*
309. RESTATEMENT (THIRD) OF PROP.: WILLS AND OTHER DONATIVE TRANSFERS § 12.1, cmt. c (AM. LAW INST. 2003) (“Until recently, courts have not allowed reformation of wills. The denial of a reformation remedy for wills was predicated on observance of the Statute of Wills, which requires that wills be executed in accordance with certain formalities. . . . modern authority is moving away from insistence on strict compliance with the statutory formalities . . . . Recent cases [and statutes] have begun to recognize that wills can be reformed.”).
311. RESTATEMENT (THIRD) OF PROP.: WILLS AND OTHER DONATIVE TRANSFERS § 12.1 (AM. LAW INST. 2003) (“A donative document, though unambiguous, may be reformed to conform the text to the donor’s intention if it is established by clear and convincing evidence (1) that a mistake of fact or law, whether in expression or inducement, affected specific terms of the document; and (2) what the donor’s intention was. In determining whether these elements have been established by clear and convincing evidence, direct evidence of intention contradicting the plain meaning of the text as well as other evidence of intention may be considered.”); UNIF. TRUST CODE § 415 (UNIF. LAW COMM’N 2010) (“The court may reform the terms of a trust, even if unambiguous, to conform the terms to the settlor’s intention if it is proved by clear and convincing evidence that both the settlor’s intention was and that the terms [of the trust] were affected by a mistake of fact or law, whether in expression or inducement.”); UNIF. PROB. CODE § 2-805 (UNIF. LAW COMM’N amended 2010) (“The court may reform the terms of a governing instrument, even if unambiguous, to
the UTC, other states also allow for the reformation of wills and trusts.  

The Washington State Legislature first enacted the will and trust reformation statute in 2011. Then, in 2013, it amended the provision while amending several other provisions to reform the state’s trust laws. Support for the bill came largely from the state’s desire to keep trusts in Washington by making the governing laws attractive. The bill also “makes a lot of other housekeeping changes to streamline the process and make trust administration and resolution of disputes more efficient and less costly.” The trust and will reformation provision is one such housekeeping element.

When utilized, the provision allows for the efficient and cheap resolution of trust and will disputes without malpractice litigation. Petitioners commence “judicial proceedings” under RCW 11.96A as “new action[s].” The actions are “special proceeding[s] under the civil rules of court” governed by the procedural provisions of the chapter. Filing a petition in the superior court with jurisdiction commences a judicial proceeding. The clear, cogent, and convincing evidence standard limits courts’ reformation power to those cases where a mistake of fact or law exists and inhibits the intent of a testator or trustor. The statute continues to allow will or trust reformation without a finding of

---

312. See In re Estate of Duke, 352 P.3d 863, 879 (Cal. 2015) (California was “persuaded that authorizing the reformation of wills . . . serves the paramount purpose of the law governing wills without compromising the policies underlying the statutory scheme and the common law rules. If a mistake in expression and the testator’s actual and specific intent at the time the will was drafted are established by clear and convincing evidence, no policy underlying the statute of wills supports a rule that would ignore the testator’s intent and unjustly enrich those who would inherit as a result of a mistake.”); Erickson v. Erickson, 716 A.2d 92, 98 (Conn. 1998) (holding that extrinsic evidence may be admitted to prove the testator’s intent and an error may be corrected if clear and convincing evidence shows the testator’s intent was frustrated by the error); Engle v. Siegel, 377 A.2d 892, 893–85 (N.J. 1977); In re Herecog, 747 N.Y.S.2d 901, 903–05 (N.Y. Surr. Ct. 2002).


316. Id.


clear, cogent, and convincing evidence through TEDRA agreements under RCW 11.96A.220.319

By applying this statute, courts can lessen the exposure of an attorney’s estate planning malpractice liability while still remediying the harm to intended beneficiaries. A court may award a nonclient attorneys’ fees under RCW 11.96A.150 to hold attorneys accountable for their mistake or negligence in estate planning. The statute provides:

(1) Either the superior court or any court on an appeal may, in its discretion, order costs, including reasonable attorneys’ fees, to be awarded to any party:

(a) From any party to the proceedings;

(b) from the assets of the estate or trust involved in the proceedings; or

(c) from any nonprobate asset that is the subject of the proceedings. The court may order the costs, including reasonable attorneys’ fees, to be paid in such amount and in such manner as the court determines to be equitable. In exercising its discretion under this section, the court may consider any and all factors that it deems to be relevant and appropriate, which factors may but need not include whether the litigation benefits the estate or trust involved.320

This Comment urges Washington courts to require nonclient intended beneficiaries to exhaust RCW 11.96A.125 before bringing a malpractice cause of action. While the Trask balancing test has a clear result in cases where the prompt execution of a will or trust is at issue, the Trask balancing test does not have a clear result in other fact patterns. In order to reduce the harm of litigation and limit malpractice liability while still holding estate planning attorneys accountable, courts should impose RCW 11.96A.125 whenever possible and may impose attorneys’ fees under RCW 11.96A.150 as punishment if necessary.

319. WASH. STATE BAR ASS’N, Comments to 2012 Title 11 Revisions, http://www.wsba.org/Legal-Community/LegislativeAffairs/~media/Legal%20Community/Legislative%20Affairs/2013/Trust%20Act.ashx [https://perma.cc/8BC8-MBCK] (“This section is modified to clarify that the evidentiary standard contained in this section only applies to reformations by judicial procedure. It is long standing law in Washington that reformations may be made by agreement under RCW 11.96A.220 without application of the evidentiary standard.”).

B. Washington Plaintiffs Should Exhaust the Reformation Statute Before Bringing Legal Malpractice Actions Like Plaintiffs Exhaust Probate Proceedings Before Bringing Tortious Interference with Inheritance Claims in Other States

Several other jurisdictions hold that tortious interference with an expected inheritance claims must be exhausted in probate proceedings before plaintiffs may bring such causes of action. 321 This Comment proposes that a similar exhaustion requirement should apply in Washington before a nonclient brings a legal malpractice cause of action.

While the state legislature could enact an exhaustion requirement, courts in other states have adopted a similar requirement through common law. Florida holds that “if adequate relief is available in a probate proceeding, then that remedy must be exhausted before a tortious interference claim may be pursued.” 322 In that case, the plaintiff could have brought an undue influence claim before a probate court and had the will declared invalid, thereby inheriting intestate because she was the only heir. The Court did not allow a subsequent tort action to bring the undue influence claim again. 323 Similarly, a New Jersey appellate court noted that it was “in accord with a multitude of courts” when it held “that a claim for tortious interference with an anticipated inheritance is unavailable when an adequate probate remedy exists.” 324 Likewise, Nebraska, which does not recognize claims of tortious interference with an expected inheritance, held that adopting that cause of action was unnecessary because it “would duplicate theories of recovery available to [the plaintiff].” 325 The Court found that the remedies available in probate proceedings were adequate where “the action in the probate court would be to impose a constructive trust over the proceeds of the sale of real estate, as compared to an action for damages based upon the tort.” 326

322. DeWitt, 408 So. 2d at 218 (citing Benedict v. Smith, 376 A.2d 774 (Conn. 1977)).
323. Id.
324. Garruto, 936 A.2d at 1022 (citing cases from New Mexico, Arkansas, Maryland, Montana, Indiana, Illinois, Florida, Connecticut, North Carolina, Kentucky, Massachusetts, and Kansas).
326. Id.
As noted above, Washington has not faced an appropriate fact pattern to clarify the Trask balancing test, let alone establish an exhaustion requirement. However, the facts of a recent California case demonstrate the practicality of such an exhaustion requirement. In Paul v. Patton,327 a testator intended to give “Other Assets—Personal Property” to his children from his first marriage in a trust.328 However, the attorney drafted the trust agreement to give the residue to the broad category: the client’s “beneficiaries.”329 The “beneficiaries” group included both the testator’s adult children and his second spouse, thereby giving the second spouse a larger portion of the estate than the testator intended and decreasing the amount intended for his children.330 The children first filed a petition to modify the trust agreement and obtained a letter from the drafting attorney who admitted that the trust did not reflect the testator’s intentions.331 The modification action resulted in a settlement, in which the second wife still received more than the testator intended to give her.332

Following the settlement, the children proceeded with a professional negligence claim against the drafting attorney, which the trial court dismissed.333 The court of appeals reversed the dismissal, holding that the attorney may have owed a duty of care to the children because the testator clearly intended them to benefit from his estate.334

Although the court did not require the testator’s children to reform the will before bringing a cause of action against the attorney, they attempted to do so.335 The reformation action did not make the plaintiffs whole because it resulted in a settlement that unjustly enriched the second spouse.336 If the children had refused to settle, the reformation action may have made them whole because the attorney’s letter clearly evidenced the testator’s intentions and admitted a drafting error.337 Similarly, the Hale v. Groce plaintiffs brought an action to reform the

327. 185 Cal. Rptr. 3d 830 (2015).
328. Id. at 833.
329. Id.
330. Id.
331. Id. at 833–34.
332. Id. at 834.
333. Id.
334. Id. at 839.
335. Id. at 833–34.
336. Id.
337. Id.
will before bringing an action against the estate planning attorney. Like the Paul plaintiffs, the reformation action failed to make the Hale plaintiffs whole.

If a Washington court faced facts similar to Paul v. Putton and required the intended beneficiaries to first exhaust their remedies through the reformation statute, then fair results would likely follow. The nonclient-plaintiffs could potentially receive the portion of their father’s estate due to them, prevent the second spouse’s unjust enrichment, avoid litigation against the drafting attorney, yet still hold the attorney accountable by imposing an attorneys’ fees obligation. Although the reformation exhaustion requirement adds an extra hurdle for beneficiaries, it would still provide a cause of action when the beneficiaries have a strong claim and cannot reach a reformation remedy. Like the Hale v. Groce plaintiff, if the reformation statute proved ineffective because the will or trust does not expressly provide a gift to the beneficiaries, then a Washington nonclient-plaintiff could still bring a cause of action against an attorney for a court to analyze under the Trask balancing test.

CONCLUSION

The Washington State Supreme Court should give clear guidance to lower courts regarding the administration of the Trask balancing test. Thus far, the Trask balancing test has not weighed in favor of nonclient intended beneficiaries, but only a limited number of fact patterns have come before Washington courts. Under the right circumstances, the Trask balancing test may come out in favor of the nonclient rather than the attorney. Washington may allow a nonclient a cause of action against the drafting attorney if presented with facts concerning the negligent omission of a residuary clause or an estate planning document that frustrates the testator’s intentions on its face.

Nonclient intended beneficiaries should use Washington’s will and trust reformation statute, RCW 11.96A.125, to alleviate their harm before bringing a legal malpractice action against the attorney. Like states that require exhaustion in probate proceedings before plaintiffs

338. Hale v. Groce, 744 P.2d 1289, 1293 (Or. 1987) (Hale plaintiff brought a reformation action to reform the will and related trust document that failed to name him because the drafting attorney negligently omitted the testator’s intended gift for the plaintiff); see supra section IV.B.
339. Id. at 1293.
may bring tortious interference with inheritance claims, Washington courts should require exhaustion by reformation before nonclient-plaintiffs may bring malpractice claims. Using this statute as an exhaustion requirement and requiring the attorney at fault to pay the intended beneficiaries’ attorneys’ fees holds attorneys accountable for estate planning work and deters negligent drafting and execution of estate planning documents. It also limits frivolous litigation by frustrated intended beneficiaries, and allows courts to make harmed intended beneficiaries whole outside of a malpractice lawsuit.