

My Laws, My Courts, My Maryland:
FINDING LEGAL HELP

(Intro music)

Many people are unsure about how to hire a lawyer. You may be worried about paying a lawyer. Perhaps you know you really cannot afford legal help, or you may be unsure about whether or not you have a legal problem. Today, you will learn how to find a lawyer. We will talk about some of the questions you may have when you begin looking for a lawyer. We will also go over where you may be able to get free or low-cost legal help in Maryland.

Today, you will learn how to get legal help in a civil case, that is, a non-criminal matter. If you have been charged with a crime, you may want to hire a private lawyer who is experienced in handling criminal cases. And if you cannot afford a lawyer in a criminal case, one will be appointed for you. You should contact the Office of the Public Defender as soon as possible to determine if you are eligible for their services. You can contact the Office of the Public Defender at 1-877-430-5187.

You may find it harder to get legal help if you cannot afford it in a civil matter. Because in most instances, you do not have a constitutional right to a lawyer in civil matters. Generally, the right to a free lawyer applies only to criminal matters. So you need to know where and how you can get free or low-cost legal help.

First, we will talk about how to hire a private lawyer. Even if you think you can't afford to hire a private lawyer, you may be surprised. If you are a smart legal consumer, you may be able to afford more legal help than you think.

Where should you begin if you want to hire a private lawyer? Many local bar associations provide lawyer referral services. A bar association is a trade association or organization of lawyers. When you have a legal problem in Maryland and you have a lawyer, your lawyer must be licensed to practice in the State. Local legal practices can vary so it is often a good idea to hire a lawyer in the county where your case will be heard.

Many local bar associations operate lawyer referral programs that can help you find a local lawyer with expertise in the area in which you need help. Many lawyer referral programs also provide for a low-cost initial meeting. That means you can meet with the lawyer for a half-hour or so, often for a nominal fee. During that meeting, you can explain your problem, and get some basic information or advice. You then decide whether or not you want to hire that lawyer. Remember, it's up to you whether to hire a certain lawyer.

During the initial meeting, the lawyer should provide you with information about what the services cost, and how you will be billed. You should decide whether you feel comfortable with the attorney, and whether you can afford to hire him or her. You are not required to hire any particular lawyer. And remember, all lawyers should have you complete a retainer agreement, a contract that details what they will do for you and how much the services will cost. They should give you a copy of that agreement if you decide to hire them. To find a lawyer referral service, go to www.peoples-law.org/referrals. You can also find a directory of lawyers who are members of the Maryland State Bar Association by going to www.msba.org.

Some lawyers will try to estimate how many hours it will take for them to assist you, but remember, it's only an estimate. It may depend on whether the parties agree on the facts of the case. Most lawyers will bill you per hour at a preset hourly rate. They will usually require you to pay a retainer, or deposit, up front. They will draw from that retainer as they perform work for you. As the money is used up, they may ask you to replenish the retainer by paying additional money. Any money that they have not yet earned, however, remains yours and should be returned to you upon completion of the work. They may also simply bill you per hour as they do the work.

In some cases, a lawyer may agree to a "contingency fee." That's where he or she is only paid if you win the case. The lawyer will take a percentage of the money you collect as his or her fee. You will agree upon the percentage in writing when you hire him or her.

You can also ask if they can perform work for a flat rate. Sometimes lawyers can estimate the work and charge you a flat rate for their work.

Or you may want to hire the lawyer to perform some tasks for you, while you do the rest of the work yourself. Ask your lawyer about "limited scope" representation. If you think you can handle representing yourself, your lawyer may be willing to do discrete tasks or individual pieces of the work for you, for a fixed rate. Some lawyers may be willing to coach you to represent yourself, doing only those tasks that you hire them to do.

But what if you really cannot afford to pay for legal help? Quite a few organizations provide free or low-cost legal help in Maryland. Some operate in a single county or jurisdiction; while others serve a larger region or the entire state. Some of these

organizations provide help in a specific type of case; others provide help in a range of case types. Almost all of the organizations that provide free or low-cost legal help will provide that help only to individuals who are eligible based on their income. Be sure to ask whether you qualify for their help. In some cases, you may need to bring proof of income when you meet with them for the first time. Remember, these organizations are generally not required to help you, and many have limited resources. If you want their help, contact them as soon as possible. There may be a waiting list.

Pro bono organizations provide you with a private lawyer, who volunteers to provide legal help and representation to people in need. Pro bono lawyers donate their time to help others. Many are running their own small law firm. It may be difficult for them to devote an unlimited amount of time to their pro bono clients. If you are able to get a lawyer through a pro bono organization, be prepared when you meet with the lawyer so you use the time effectively. For a complete list of pro bono programs, go to www.peoples-law.org.

There are other types of legal organizations that provide free or low-cost help to income eligible Marylanders. These organizations have attorneys on staff that provide legal advice and representation. Some provide legal help in a broad range of case types including family cases, consumer law matters and cases involving public benefits. Others focus on only one area like domestic violence or housing. For a list of all Maryland legal service providers, visit www.peoples-law.org.

In some instances, you may find you need to represent yourself in a court matter. There are a number of programs that can help you represent yourself. Most Circuit Courts operate Family Law Self-Help Centers, designed to provide forms and legal assistance to

people representing themselves in a family case. There is a District Court Self-Help Resource Center at the District Court in Glen Burnie where you can get help representing yourself in other types of cases including landlord-tenant, small claims, consumer, and domestic violence matters. The District Court Self-Help Resource Center also offers free assistance from attorneys via phone or by live chat online. You can reach the Center at 410.260.1392. For a list of self-help centers in Maryland courts, go to www.peoples-law.org.

In some instances, you may just want some basic legal information. Maryland has an excellent online legal resource – the Maryland People’s Law Library – also at www.peoples-law.org. You can get basic information about all types of Maryland law. The site includes links to forms and referral information, including complete lists of legal services providers across the State. Court forms are also available from the Maryland courts website – www.mdcourts.gov. You may find advertisements or websites that offer Maryland court forms for a price. Most of the court forms you will need, however, are available free of charge from the Maryland Courts.

Finally, the two law schools in Maryland and many courts have law libraries open to the public where you can visit in person, and some of them have online resources. Many of these libraries are staffed with law librarians who can help you find the information you need. For information on the State Law Library and other public law libraries, see the Maryland Courts website, at www.mdcourts.gov/lawlib.

So while you might be unsure right now, Maryland courts and legal services providers offer many resources to assist you in finding legal help.

This has been a production of the Access to Justice Department of the
Administrative Office of the Courts. For more information, please visit
www.mdcourts.gov.

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