

FINDING THE LEGAL HELP YOU NEED

Legal Help Checklist

Yes No

- Are you planning to buy or sell real estate?
- Do you plan to rent property?
- Are you having a dispute over rent, a mortgage or housing conditions?
- Do you have children but have never had a will prepared?
- Do you own land but have never had a will prepared?
- Do you have a dispute with your employer or your union?
- Have you recently been injured on the job?
- Have you been garnished or had your property attached?
- Have you been unable to collect a debt?
- Are you unhappy with something you have purchased?
- Have you signed a contract that you do not understand, or feel is unfair?
- Have you supplied materials or performed services for which you have not been paid?
- Are you in a dispute over your credit rating?
- Are you thinking about separation or dissolution of marriage?
- Are you in a dispute over child support or visitation rights?
- Do you feel your child support payments are unfair?
- Have you recently been given a drunken driving ticket?
- Is your child in trouble with the authorities?
- Have you been in an accident recently?
- Are you in a dispute over settlement of an insurance claim?
- Have you been given papers telling you to be in court?
- Are you being abused by the person with whom you are living?
- Are you arguing with the government over benefits?

If you answered “yes” to any of the above questions, you have a legal issue and probably need legal advice. Here are answers to questions you may be asking about where to get such advice.

Where Do I Begin?

First, consider the many private or government agencies that serve the public. One of them may have exactly the kind of help you need.

I Believe I Need a Lawyer, But I Have Little Income

The public defender handles criminal cases for no fee for those who meet certain income guidelines. To find the public defender's phone number, call your county courthouse or directory assistance. In non-criminal cases, legal aid offices provide services to qualifying individuals who cannot afford to pay. Contact The Missouri Bar if a telephone listing is not available.

I Believe I Need a Lawyer, But I Don't Qualify for Free Legal Assistance. How Can I Find a Lawyer Who Is Right for Me?

Selecting a lawyer who will meet your legal needs is not – and should not be – an easy decision. Legal problems can have an impact on your life for years to come if not handled properly. Thus, you want to carefully select an attorney who will represent you effectively and efficiently.

Perhaps the best way to find a qualified lawyer is to ask questions of people you trust: family, friends, doctors, or others whose advice you consider worthy. Have they had experience with a particular lawyer or law firm? Were they satisfied with the way the lawyer handled their case? Did the lawyer – win or lose – work hard on their behalf? Was the lawyer always available and responsive to requests for information? A lawyer's reputation for effectiveness and trust often speaks volumes about his or her character – something of vital concern to you as you work with him or her in addressing your legal problem.

Word of mouth, while an important factor in selecting an attorney, is not the only resource available to you. Other source of information include:

Martindale-Hubbell

The Martindale-Hubbell Law Directory is a multi-volume publication that provides brief, yet detailed, information on lawyers and the law firms where they work. The information within this directory can provide you with a profile of the attorney, his or her background and education, expertise in particular areas of the law, how other lawyers assess his or her skills and character, and much more. *The Martindale-Hubbell Law Directory* can be found in most courthouses and law libraries, and may

also be available in some public libraries. In addition, Martindale-Hubbell has a lawyer locator at its web site, www.martindale.com/locator/home.html. The lawyer locator allows a potential client to search for a lawyer by name, firm, location or even law school attended.

Lawyer Referral Services

The Missouri Bar and some local bar associations in the state's major metropolitan areas have established lawyer referral services to assist in finding a lawyer. If you are interested in finding a lawyer in your locale who practices in a particular area of the law, call either your local lawyer referral service listed in the Yellow Pages (in St. Louis and Springfield), or call The Missouri Bar Lawyer Referral Service at 573/636-3635. Likewise, you may use the LawyerSearch feature on The Missouri Bar's website (www.mobar.org) to find a lawyer in your area who is now accepting cases in the area of law that concerns you.

Lawyer Advertising

Advertisements by lawyers can offer additional information to be used in making a decision as to a lawyer's qualifications. However, these advertisements should be viewed only as a starting point for collecting information and should lead you to ask follow-up questions to that lawyer. Advertisements should be just one component of your search for a qualified, trusted advocate for you and your interests.

Ask Questions

Finally, once you have settled on an attorney to interview, make an appointment. Don't hesitate to ask about his or her qualifications, background, and experience with the types of matters affecting you. As the client, it is your right to expect top-notch service from the lawyer you hire.

It is also important to note that neither the Supreme Court of Missouri nor The Missouri Bar grant certification of specialty areas of the law for lawyers. Thus, if a lawyer claims he or she is a "specialist" in a particular area of the law, be aware that this claim is not authorized by either the Supreme Court or The Missouri Bar.

Should I Make an Appointment?

Most attorneys prefer that you do. However, some public agencies will not make appointments and ask you to come in during their office hours. Because each differs, it is always best to call first.

How Should I Prepare for My First Visit?

To get the best help as quickly as possible and with a minimum of expense, you should bring all papers relating to your problem with you on your first visit. You may also find it helpful to write out your problem and just how it came about so you can better remember the details.

If you haven't seen a lawyer before, you may not know what to expect. Feel free to ask about anything you do not understand. Your lawyer is there to help you and will try to answer your questions. You should also feel free to discuss all aspects of your problem with your attorney. For instance, you may have a problem with your working conditions and be afraid you'll lose your job if you bring it to your employer's attention. This is something you should discuss with your attorney so he or she can give you the best advice.

Finally, you must be prepared to tell your attorney everything about your problem . . . both the good and the bad. Do this even if you think it might not be favorable to your case. Your attorney must work with the truth — all of it. Otherwise, he or she may learn about it too late and not be prepared to handle it.

What About Fees?

As mentioned before, some services, like the public defender or Legal Aid, are free. If you see a private attorney, though, you should always ask about fees at your first meeting. Attorneys may or may not charge for the first conference. Be sure you ask when you phone for an appointment. Fees vary, so you should find out at the start how the fee will work. If the fee quoted by an attorney seems unusually high, you may wish to call another lawyer.

You also should ask how often you will receive a bill and what information will be contained in it. If a lawyer agrees to handle your case on a contingent fee basis, that agreement must be in writing. You may decide you would like any fee agreement in writing; if so, you should ask for this.

Will My Lawyer Keep What I Tell Him Confidential?

Once you hire a lawyer, he or she must treat everything you tell him or her as confidential and may not reveal it to anyone. Unless you decide otherwise, your communications will be treated as absolutely confidential.