



Legal Aid and other Low-Cost Legal Help

If you cannot afford a lawyer, legal aid may be able to help you:

There are legal aid offices (also called *legal services*) throughout the United States. Legal aid offices are not-for-profit agencies that provide free legal help to people who cannot afford to hire a lawyer.

While many legal aid offices only help people with very low incomes, some offices have more flexible income rules.

Legal aid usually handles cases involving:

- **Domestic violence** – if your partner is abusing you, legal aid can help you obtain a protective order, a child custody order and divorce.
- **Family law** – if you have a child custody or divorce case, legal aid may be able to help. Call your local legal aid office or ask the Judge in your case to appoint a legal aid lawyer to represent you in court.
- **Housing** – if you are being evicted from your home or if your house is in foreclosure, legal aid may be able to help.
- **Public Benefits** – if you have a problem with welfare, Food Stamps, Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), or Social Security, legal aid may be able to help.

Many legal aid offices may be able to handle other problems including immigration, consumer, and disability issues. Some legal aid offices focus on one area of law, such as disability law, or housing law.

About this Guide

This guide was created by the Legal Aid Society of Northeastern New York in partnership with the New York LawHelp Consortium and Pro Bono Net, with support from the Legal Services Corporation Technology Initiative Grant program.

To read all of the guides in this series, visit NYLawHelp.org or LawHelp.org.

Some legal aid offices get funding from the government and that may limit the kind of cases they can take.

To find a legal aid office near you: Go to www.LawHelp.org and select the state where you live to find out who in your state may be able to help with your legal problem.

I do not have legal immigration status. Can legal aid help me?

Each legal aid office has its own rules about who qualifies for its services. However, if you are a victim of a violent crime or domestic violence, legal aid can help you in any case that helps protect you from the domestic violence or abuse *even if you do not have legal immigration status*. If you are a victim of domestic violence, legal aid may also file an immigration application on your behalf. Some legal aid offices specialize in a wide range of immigration law issues. Go to www.LawHelp.org for information about the rules for the legal aid offices in your area.

Are there cases that legal aid does *not* handle?

Civil legal aid does not handle cases for money damages such as medical malpractice, or car accident cases or traffic violation cases or criminal cases. (For the difference between civil and criminal issues, see *The Differences between Criminal Court and Civil Court*).

What can I expect from a legal aid lawyer?

Legal aid lawyers have the same qualifications as other lawyers. Everything you say to your lawyer is *confidential*, which means that it is not shared with anyone outside of the legal aid office. Since everything you say to your lawyer is confidential, tell your lawyer the truth. Your lawyer can help you best when you tell your lawyer the truth.

I do not qualify for legal aid, where else can I go for help?

- **Your local bar association**, which is an organization for lawyers.

You can call your local bar association's *lawyer referral service* to find a licensed, private lawyer who has experience with your type of legal problem and will meet with you for a reduced fee. The lawyer will meet with you for 30 minutes about your case for a fee of less than \$50. It is very important to carefully review the fee agreement before you hire the lawyer to start working on your case. Sometimes there is no fee for medical malpractice, car accident or worker's compensation cases because the lawyer will only get paid if you win your case.

You can also ask your local bar association if they have any of the following *free* services for people needing legal help:

- *a volunteer lawyer project*
- *a pro bono project* (another word for volunteer lawyer project)
- *a free legal workshop*
- *a self-help clinic*

To contact the bar association in your area, go to

www.americanbar.org/groups/bar_services/resources/state_local_bar_associations.html

- **Your local law school** may have free *legal clinics* where law students provide free legal help and are supervised by law professors.
- **Your local Area Agency on Aging** helps seniors, 60 years old or over, with many types of problems. Your local *Area Agency on Aging* may also provide free or low-cost legal help.

To find your local *Area Agency on Aging*, go to:

http://www.aoa.gov/AoARoot/AoA_Programs/OAA/How_To_Find/Agencies/find_agencies.aspx

For More Information

Looking for more information on this topic? Visit LawHelp.org and select your state to find other self-help resources and information about free and low-cost legal aid providers in your area.

Disclaimer

This guide was prepared for general information purposes only. The information it contains is not legal advice. Legal advice is dependent upon the specific circumstances of each situation. Also, the law may vary from state to state. Some information in this guide may not be correct for your state. To find local resources, visit LawHelp.org and select your state.