

## Resource Sheet: Finding a Civilian Attorney

This resource sheet provides general information intended to assist you in finding a civilian attorney who meets your needs.

1. **Determine what type of attorney you need.** Attorneys oftentimes specialize in various areas of the law. Accordingly, it is recommended that you search for an attorney with experience and/or expertise in the relevant specific area of law. Some examples of practice areas include:

- ❖ **Bankruptcy law.** Are you struggling with debt and avoiding debt collection agencies? Are you wondering whether filing bankruptcy is the right choice for you?
- ❖ **Criminal law.** Have you been arrested? Have you been indicted? Have you been contacted by a federal criminal investigative agency?
- ❖ **Disability law.** Do you have questions regarding Social Security disability claims or veteran's disability claims?
- ❖ **Family law.** Are you looking to obtain a divorce? Seeking a pre-nuptial agreement? Wanting to adopt or seek guardianship of a child?
- ❖ **Immigration law.** Do you have questions about how a non-U.S. citizen may lawfully enter the U.S.? Would you like to know how to become a U.S. citizen? Are you seeking to apply for a green card or visa?
- ❖ **Personal injury law.** Have you been injured in an accident? Have you been bitten by a dog? Have you been harmed by a health care professional?
- ❖ **Small business or corporate law.** Are you seeking to establish a business?
- ❖ **Trusts and estates.** Do you have over \$5 million in assets? Would you like an inter vivos trust? Do you need complex estate planning guidance?

2. **Narrow the geographic scope of your search.** Generally, it is recommended that you find an attorney near to where you are located. A local attorney may be more familiar with local laws and the local court system. If you are overseas, you may want to narrow your search to the location where the legal matter has arisen (e.g., location of a foreclosure) or will be resolved (e.g., place of divorce).

3. **Use available resources to find names of attorneys or law firms.**

- ❖ **Recommendations.** A word-of-mouth recommendation from a friend, colleague, professional, or neighbor is oftentimes a good starting point. Likewise, if you are friendly with an attorney, ask him or her for a referral to an attorney with relevant experience. Business owners, bankers, ministers, doctors, social workers, and teachers also might be able to give you the name of a trusted lawyer. If they do, ask if you can use the referring person's name when you make initial contact with the lawyer.
- ❖ **Contact your state or local bar association for qualified attorneys in your area.** State bar associations keep public records about complaints and disciplinary actions taken against attorneys licensed to practice in the state. Most local bar associations also have free referral services that can help you find an attorney. You can find your bar association's website by selecting your state from the American Bar Association's Lawyer Referral Directory (link follows).  
<http://apps.americanbar.org/legalservices/lris/directory/home.html>
- ❖ **Use an Online Service.** Several websites, such as Lawyers.com and Avvo.com, offer to pair potential clients with attorneys, allowing users to select the type of attorney they are seeking and the desired location of services. Oftentimes, this is a free service.

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- ❖ **Review online listings of attorneys.** Several websites, such as LegalZoom, Rocketlawyer, LawTrades, and Avvo.com, offer free reviews of law firms and/or lawyers. Some websites, such as LawHelp.org, focus on helping low-income individuals find attorneys.
- ❖ **Attorney Advertisements.** Attorney advertisements may be found online, on television, on the radio, or in print (such as phonebooks and newspapers). If you decide to call a lawyer featured in an advertisement, keep the ad for reference or take notes for your records.
- ❖ **Public interest groups.** Not-for-profit public interest organizations, such as groups concerned with civil liberties and housing discrimination, may be able to assist you. To find such an organization, try contacting a local bar association or related government agency.
- ❖ **Client-attorney matching services.** Such services permit you to post a brief description of your case on the service's website. Attorney members of the service may then bid on the case by offering you a consultation. The selection of an attorney, if any, would be up to you.
- ❖ **Free legal aid agencies.** Depending upon your income and the nature of your legal issue, you may be able to obtain free or low-cost legal help in non-criminal cases from a legal services program. A state bar lawyer referral service, local bar association, or law school clinic may be able to refer you to a legal services program.

4. **Interview the attorney.** Prior to hiring an attorney, you should interview him or her. The attorney should be willing—and able—to answer any questions you may have. Recommended areas of inquiry include:

- ❖ **Pricing.** You should ask how the attorney bills his or her time, whether by the hour, flat-fee, or contingency fee. Flat fee pricing may be used in specialty areas such as family law and immigration law.
- ❖ **Timeframe for Legal Work.** You should ask how quickly you can expect the attorney to complete your legal work. Although the attorney will be unable to give you an exact date, he or she should be able to give you an expected timeframe and tell you how long previous similar cases have taken.
- ❖ **Likelihood of Success.** Although attorneys are prohibited from guaranteeing the successful outcome of a case, your attorney should be able to give you an assessment as to what you can reasonably expect. You may also ask for references from prior clients, but the attorney is required to obtain permission from prior clients before he or she can give you their information.
- ❖ **Availability.** You should ask how quickly the attorney can start and who will be your primary contact throughout the case.
- ❖ **Misconduct.** Past attorney misconduct or reprimands may be located on the state bar association website. If your attorney has such a record, ask about it. In some cases, the infraction may be minor, such as failure to pay bar fees on time. You must decide whether you want to work with an attorney who has engaged in conduct that has resulted in disciplinary action.

*Except in limited circumstances, the Legal Assistance Office (LAO) is unable to provide recommendations for, and/or referrals to, civilian attorneys. Likewise, the LAO does not endorse any specific website, organization or business to assist you in locating an attorney.*