

Securing The Right Lawyer for Me

You may have a legal problem and not know how to resolve it. Lawyers have been specially trained in the law and our legal system. And the right lawyer can advise and assist you with your particular problem. If you are facing criminal charges or a lawsuit, for example, a lawyer can help you understand your rights, and the strengths and weaknesses of your case. A lawyer knows the rules and procedures for arguing the case in court. And a lawyer can make a big difference in whether or not your side of the story is successfully presented to a judge or jury. A lawyer can help you get a divorce, file for bankruptcy or draw up a will. Or, if you have been seriously injured or mistreated, a lawyer can help you file a lawsuit. Some lawyers handle a variety of legal problems; others specialize in certain areas of the law. In some instances, failing to call a lawyer immediately can make the situation worse. If you are arrested or involved in a serious auto accident, for example, someone should interview the witnesses and gather evidence as soon as possible. In other situations, preventive legal advice could save you time, trouble and money by preventing legal problems before they arise. Take, for example, the purchase of your family home or car. You might have a problem in the future if you sign the purchase agreement without completely understanding it. Or maybe you are launching a business with a partner. A lawyer could point out the advantages and drawbacks of various partnership arrangements. These are just a few of the many situations in which lawyers can provide advice and assistance.

2. How do I find a lawyer?

California has more than 150,000 practicing lawyers. You should be able to find the right one - if you know where to look. Recommendations. Maybe you know a lawyer in a town where you used to live. Perhaps a lawyer who works for a corporation lives across the street. These lawyers may be able to refer you to other lawyers who have experience with your type of problem. You also could ask your friends, co-workers and employers if they know any lawyers. Business owners or professionals such as bankers, ministers, doctors, social workers and teachers might be able to give you the name of a lawyer. Certified lawyer referral services. You could call a local State Bar-certified lawyer referral service. This type of service refers potential clients to attorneys. After interviewing you, the referral service staff will match you with a lawyer who is experienced in the appropriate area of the law. (There is usually a small charge for the initial consultation with a lawyer.) For an online list of certified lawyer referral services, visit the State Bar's Web site at www.calbar.ca.gov/lrs. For a recorded message that can provide you with the phone numbers of certified services in your county, call 1-866-44-ca-law (1-866-442-2529). If you are out of state, you can call 415-538-2250 to hear the same recorded message. Or check the Yellow Pages of your telephone directory for a listing under the heading "Attorney Referral Service." (Keep in mind that the service's State Bar certification number must appear in all advertising.) State Bar-certified lawyer referral services must meet minimum standards established by the California Supreme Court. And because the State Bar enforces those standards, you could turn to the State Bar if you have a problem with the service. And if you were to file a complaint, the State Bar would look into it. There are other advantages as well. For example, a certified referral service:

- * Can refer you to a lawyer who specializes in the field of law that relates to your case.
- * Will refer you to attorneys who are insured. All lawyers who participate in certified lawyer referral services must carry malpractice insurance to protect their clients. This means that if your lawyer does something wrong, and you successfully sue for malpractice, the lawyer will have the ability to pay.
- * Will screen your call to determine whether you have a legal problem - or need some other type of assistance. And if you do need another type of assistance, the referral service can refer you to government agencies or other organizations that may be better suited to assist you. For example, you might have a problem that could be handled, without charge, by a rent control board or community mediation program.
- * Will only refer you to an attorney who has met certain standards of experience and is a State Bar member in good standing.
- * Will only refer you to an attorney who has agreed to do fee arbitration in the event of a fee dispute.
- * May be able to provide an attorney at a reduced rate. Lawyer referral services are required to make arrangements to serve people with limited means.
- * May be able to provide you with a bilingual attorney.

For more information on State Bar-certified lawyer referral services, see the State Bar's consumer education pamphlet *What Can a Lawyer Referral Service Do for Me?* To find out how to order a complimentary copy of this or any other State Bar consumer education pamphlet, see the contact information at the end of #16 (page 17). Advertisements. You also could check the Yellow Pages, newspaper advertisements or the Internet in your search for an attorney. Most lawyers choose not to advertise, other than to list their names, addresses and telephone numbers in the Yellow Pages. But lawyers are allowed to advertise in the Yellow Pages, in newspapers and magazines, on the radio and television, on billboards, on the Internet or any place else - as long as the ad does not contain false or misleading information. Lawyers may use ads to list their fields of law. They also may post their fees. If you decide to call a lawyer featured in an advertisement, keep the ad for reference. If the ad was aired on the radio or television, make notes for your records. Joint advertising groups. Sometimes lawyers join together and advertise their services as a group. Often a group of lawyers will share an 800 telephone number and/or a Web site. State law requires that joint advertising groups identify by name the participating lawyers. Public interest groups. Non-profit public interest organizations, such as groups concerned with civil liberties and housing discrimination, may be able to help you. Such groups sometimes have staff lawyers who might be able to handle your case. Others provide legal help solely to groups of people rather than to individuals. For example, they might help you and your neighbors convince your city council to install a traffic light at a busy intersection. There is no one best way to find public interest organizations. A local bar association, State Bar-certified lawyer referral service or government agency might be able to assist you. Suppose you believe a landlord is discriminating against you. You could call your city or county housing office for the names of groups that are concerned with your problem. Or, the organization you need may be accessible on the Internet or listed in the Yellow Pages under "Associations," "Consumer Protection Organizations," "Social Service and Welfare Organizations" or a similar listing. Free legal aid agencies. What if you can't afford a lawyer? Depending on your income and the nature of your legal problem, you may be able to get free or low-cost legal help in non-criminal cases from a legal services program. Check the white pages of your telephone book to see if such an organization is located in your area. A State Bar-certified lawyer referral service or local bar association may be able to refer you to a legal services program. California's statewide legal services Web site - www.LawHelpCalifornia.org - also could help you locate a

local program and provide you with other resources as well. Or, maybe a law school clinic could assist you. Suppose you are accused of committing a crime. If you cannot afford a lawyer, you might qualify for free help from the public defender's office. Look in the white pages of the telephone book under your county's listings. What if there isn't a public defender in your area? In such an instance, a judge would typically appoint a private attorney to represent you free of charge. Dispute resolution programs. In addition, many communities have "dispute resolution" programs. These programs can help you and another person "mediate" or work out problems instead of going to trial. For more information, see the State Bar pamphlet *How Can I Resolve My Dispute Without a Trial?* For instructions on ordering, see the contact information at the end of #16 (page 17). Prepaid legal services plans. Perhaps you belong to a "legal insurance" plan through your employer, labor union, credit union, credit card company - or as an individual. Your plan may cover the kind of legal work you need - just as medical insurance plans pay certain medical costs. Generally, the premiums you pay entitle you to a certain amount of a lawyer's time or to a lawyer's services at a reduced rate. 3. Do lawyers specialize? Some do. And the State Bar has a program designed to help you find skilled specialists. Lawyers can become State Bar-certified specialists (and advertise themselves as such) by showing that they have extensive experience and tested ability in their field of law. Currently, the State Bar certifies lawyers in eight specialties: appellate law; criminal law; estate planning, trust and probate law; family law (divorce, custody, support and related issues); immigration and nationality law; bankruptcy law; taxation law; and workers' compensation law.

About the Author

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