



LEGAL HELP FAQ

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) about legal help in Washington state

Presented by the Practice of Law Board in partnership with
the Washington State Bar Association.



PRACTICE *of* LAW BOARD

WASHINGTON STATE
BAR ASSOCIATION

LEGAL HELP FAQ

These Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) may assist you in finding help for your legal issue. They answer questions many people ask about finding help, whether from a legal professional or from another source. For example, they may answer your questions about finding low-cost help, reporting bad help, or getting ready for legal help.

The Practice of Law Board and the Washington State Bar Association are making these FAQs available to the public for free. They contain general information. They may not cover every possible situation or match your legal needs perfectly, but they should help you get started in finding help.



THE LEGAL CHECKUP SERIES

These FAQs are the first in a series of FAQs and Checklists designed to help the public address any legal issue they may have. Additional FAQs and Checklists will be published in the future.

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These are frequently asked questions (FAQ) about who can help you with a legal problem.



WHO CAN HELP?

I have a legal problem. Who can help?

Three groups of people can provide legal help in Washington state. They are:

- **Lawyers**, who can help with almost any legal problem.
- **Limited Practice Officers or LPOs**, who can help with completing forms when buying or selling property such as a house or a condo.
- **Limited License Legal Technicians or LLLTs**, who can help with family law legal problems like divorce, child support, and which parent the child lives with and how and when the child can visit the other parent.

Check if someone can help with your legal problem here!



How can I find someone to help?

The Washington State Bar Association has a list of people who can provide legal help in Washington state. This list, called The Legal Directory, tells you the person's name, where they work, the type of legal help they offer, and if they are an active member of the bar. The list is at: www.wsba.org/legaldirectory.

How do I know if someone is a lawyer, LPO, or LLLT?

All lawyers, LPOs, or LLLTs who can help with your legal problem can give you their license number. You can use that number to find them in The Legal Directory, the state bar's list of people who can help with legal problems.

Can a former lawyer help me?

A person providing legal services should be on the state bar's list as an active lawyer, LPO, or LLLT to ensure you are getting the best help. You can use this list to ensure the person helping you has not been disbarred or suspended.

Can a paralegal help me?

No. Paralegals learn how to assist lawyers in preparing legal documents, but a paralegal cannot directly help you solve your legal problem.



Not sure what type of legal problem you have? See FAQ 2 on Types of Legal Help. Think someone is offering help who shouldn't be? See FAQ 4 on Reporting Bad Help.

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WHO CAN HELP? *(CONTINUED)*

Can my friend help me?

Maybe. A person can provide general legal help, but they cannot help you with the specific facts of your problem and how the law applies to those facts.

Can someone help me for free?

Many legal professionals sometimes offer free or low-cost services. It does not matter if a person offers free legal advice; they still must be an active lawyer, LPO, or LLLT, in the state bar's list to help you with a legal problem.

Can I use a legal form from the Internet or from a book?

Maybe. A person can go to court on their own. They may tell their own story in court. A person can use forms from the Internet or a book to prepare. But many forms do not properly reflect Washington law because they were prepared for another state. There is as much bad advice online as good advice, so be careful!

Can a Notario help me?

No. Even though Notario Publicos may help with legal problems in other countries, only an active lawyer, LPO, or LLLT can help in Washington state. A Notary Public in Washington state can only say a person properly signed a legal or financial document.

Can a "constitutional" lawyer help me?

There is no such thing as a constitutional lawyer. A lawyer, LPO, or LLLT must be active in the state bar's list of lawyers, LPOs, and LLLTs to give you legal help.

Can a lawyer from another state help me?

Sometimes. But the lawyer must request permission from the court before helping you in that court.



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These are frequently asked questions (FAQ) people often ask about different types of legal help.



TYPES OF LEGAL HELP

What type of legal help do I need?

Lawyers help people with two different problem types: criminal problems or civil problems.

Do I have a criminal legal problem?

You have a criminal problem when a police officer, sheriff, or state trooper arrest you for breaking a law, and if you are guilty, you may be sent to jail or prison.

Do I need a criminal lawyer?

You need a criminal lawyer if:

- **The police arrest you** and take you to jail.
- **The police arrest or ticket you for driving under the influence (DUI)** of either alcohol, marijuana, or other legal or illegal drugs.
- **The police arrest or ticket you for a serious traffic accident.**
- **You want to seal or vacate a criminal record** or have other rights restored.

Do I have a civil legal problem?

You have a civil legal problem when you need to go to court to protect your legal rights or when someone is trying to get you to perform a legal duty. For example, you might need a civil trial or hearing to stop your landlord from evicting you.

Do I need a civil law lawyer?

For civil legal problems, a lawyer generally focuses on one legal area, so no single lawyer can help with every civil legal problem. Look for a lawyer who handles the type of problem you have. Some legal issues, such as bankruptcy and immigration, are matters for federal rather than state courts, so authorized legal professionals from other states may be allowed to provide legal services and assist clients in these courts. The list on the next page will help you find the type of legal help you need.



Not sure who can give you legal help? See FAQ 1 on Who Can Help?

Think someone is offering help who shouldn't be? See FAQ 4 on Reporting Bad Help.

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These are frequently asked questions (FAQ) people often ask about different types of legal help.

TYPES OF LEGAL HELP *(CONTINUED)*

- **Civil and individual rights lawyers** can help you if you are discriminated against based on age, disability, gender, race, religion, sex, or other reasons.
- **Bankruptcy lawyers** can help you if you have more bills or owe more money than you could ever pay.
- **Consumer rights lawyers** can help you with loans, debt collection, an unfair contract, or a bad or unsafe product.
- **Education lawyers** can help you get your child special education or with discipline or suspensions.
- **Employment lawyers** can help you get your pay or wages, with your worker's rights, with job safety, and with job-related discrimination or harassment.
- **Family lawyers or limited license legal technicians (LLTs)** can help you with divorce, child custody and visitation, domestic abuse, and nonparental custody.
- **Health or medical lawyers** can help you with health insurance (Medicaid-Medicare or private) problems, with getting proper care, and if a medical professional causes harm.
- **Housing or tenant lawyers** can help with landlord-tenant disputes, evictions, and bad conditions in a rental property.
- **Immigration lawyers** can help you become a citizen, avoid deportation, or get a green card or visa.
- **Income maintenance or benefits lawyers** can help you get food and housing assistance or the Social Security, unemployment, or veterans' benefits you deserve.
- **Indian or tribal lawyers** can help you in a tribal court.
- **Personal injury lawyers** can help you if you are hurt because someone didn't take proper care to prevent the harm.
- **Wills and estate lawyers** can help you decide what happens when you die, such as drafting documents for the care of any children.
- **Workers' compensation lawyers** can help you if you are hurt or injured at work.



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These are frequently asked questions (FAQ) people ask about getting free or low-cost help with a legal problem.



FINDING LOW-COST HELP

I can't afford legal help. What can I do?

Depending on how much money you make, several agencies may provide free (pro bono) or low-cost (low bono) legal help. Check out these programs:

- **Moderate Means Program.** The Washington State Bar Association's Moderate Means Program, available at www.wsba.org/mmpclients, may provide legal help with family, housing, or consumer law issues.
- **Legal Aid Programs.** Many counties have a bar association or other groups of lawyers or limited license legal technicians (LLTs) that may provide free or low-cost legal services. You can find these groups at www.wsba.org/qualified-legal-service-providers.

What about reliable online legal resources?

There is a lot of online information available. These organizations offer free services:

- **Washington Law Help** has significant information for people about Washington law and representing yourself in court. They are at www.washingtonlawhelp.org/.
- **The Northwest Justice Project** may help, and you can also access a toll-free legal hotline for people with low incomes. You can reach them at nwjustice.org/get-legal-help.
- The **Washington Attorney General's Office** has consumer law information. You can reach them at www.atg.wa.gov/consumer-protection.
- The **Unemployment Law Project** helps people when they have been denied unemployment claims. You can reach them at unemploymentlawproject.org.
- The **Northwest Consumer Law Center** can help with consumer matters including managing debt. You can reach them at nwclc.org/.
- **211 Washington** helps connect people with community resources. You can reach them by dialing 211 on your phone, or at wa211.org/.



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Not sure what type of legal problem you have? See FAQ 2 on Types of Legal Help.

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These are frequently asked questions (FAQ) people ask about getting free or low-cost help with a legal problem.

FINDING LOW-COST HELP *(CONTINUED)*

Can I find information about my problem on the Internet and use that information to do it myself?

Yes, you can represent yourself in any legal matter. This is called pro se representation. If you will represent yourself, check with the courthouse in your city or county to see if they have information which may help. A directory of courts is available at www.courts.wa.gov/court_dir/.

And if you are using information from the Internet, ensure the information is up-to-date and is correct law for Washington state, your county, and the city you live in.

Does Washington have a “Small Claims Court”?

Small claims courts in Washington are a user-friendly, low-cost way of settling legal disputes up to \$10,000 (when brought by a person). Discover everything you need to know about small-claims suits at Washington Law Help, www.washingtonlawhelp.org/resource/small-claims-court, and the Washington Courts, www.courts.wa.gov/newsinfo/resources/?fa=newsinfo_jury.scc&altMenu=smal.



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These are frequently asked questions (FAQ) people ask about reporting bad legal help.



REPORTING BAD HELP

Can I complain about someone who should not give legal help?

Yes. You can report anyone other than a lawyer, limited license legal technician (LLLT), or a limited practice officer giving people legal help. You can report them to the Practice of Law Board. They collect such reports of the unlawful practice of law and may refer them to the appropriate authority.

How do I complain about someone who may not give legal help?

To report someone who may not give legal help, complete and submit an Unauthorized Practice of Law Complaint Form available at <https://bit.ly/39QZRgh>.

Please use the form to explain the legal help given and attach any documents which will help determine which legal enforcement agency to send the complaint to for review and action.

You can submit the complaint form via e-mail to UPL@wsba.org or mail it to the Practice of Law Board, 1325 4th Avenue, Suite 600, Seattle, WA 98101.

What happens after I complain?

The Practice of Law Board will provide a copy of the complaint to the person and give them the chance to explain their side of the story. The Board will review the complaint and any response. The Board will decide which enforcement agency to send it to for further action.

If the Practice of Law Board decides not to refer your complaint to an enforcement agency, it will close your complaint without further action, and notify you of its decision in writing.

You can report someone not authorized to practice law here!



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REPORTING BAD HELP *(CONTINUED)*

What if I am in danger from or threatened by the person who may not practice law?

If someone is threatening or harassing you, call your local police or sheriff immediately.

Is my complaint about a person who may not practice law confidential?

No. The Practice of Law Board provides the person you are complaining about a chance to tell their side of the story. They will be provided with a copy of the complaint form, including any attached documents you provide. Sometimes, where there is a court rule or law that prohibits disclosure of personal information, the Practice of Law Board will keep that information private.

What if the legal professional that I hired is not helping me?

In exchange for the right to provide legal help, lawyers, limited license legal technicians (LLLTs), and limited practice officers (LPOs) must obey strict rules of professional conduct. For example, they must tell you what they are doing for you. They must inform you of the status of your case.

They should give you an engagement letter or other documentation about the help they are providing and what they will charge for such help.

If you have hired an authorized legal professional to assist you and they are not communicating with you or if you think they are not properly providing you with good legal help, you can report them to the Washington State Bar Association at www.wsba.org/discipline.

You can report a legal professional who is not helping here!



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These are frequently asked questions (FAQ) people ask about getting ready for legal help.



GETTING READY FOR LEGAL HELP

You've found a lawyer or a limited license legal technician to help you, and you are going to an initial meeting. You should prepare so you will get the most out of your meeting.

What should I bring to the meeting?

Bring copies of all documents and other records about your legal problem for the legal professional to review. This includes any court records or documents you have or that have been given to you. For example, if you are looking for legal help about the place you rent, bring your lease and receipts of any rent payments you have made.

How do I best tell my story and present the facts about my legal problem?

It's important that you tell your whole story so you will get the best help possible. A good way to do this is to prepare a timeline of everything that has happened with the date it happened. Be sure to include all the steps you have taken to solve your legal problem. Be honest and thorough because a legal professional must have all the facts to best help you.

Will I be charged for the first visit even if I am not sure the person can help me?

It depends. Some legal professionals charge for a first meeting; others may have an initial meeting for free. Make sure to ask upfront before the meeting.

Can I ask the legal professional about their background and experience?

Yes. You should ask questions about the person's experience, how they work, and their professional history to make sure their experience matches your needs. For example, you might ask whether, and how often, they've helped others with your specific legal problem.



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GETTING READY FOR LEGAL HELP *(CONTINUED)*

Can I ask about the process?

Yes. You should know how the legal professional will help. Ask about what will happen and when. Ask what the legal professional will do. Ask how long it will take to solve your legal problem. Asking these questions will give you a realistic idea about the situation and help you decide what to do next.

Can I ask about my options?

Yes. Often there are different solutions to a legal problem. Be sure you understand your legal options and the possible outcomes. You should understand how the legal help fits with your goals. For example, do you want to resolve the matter without going to court? Or do you want to tell your story in court?

Can I negotiate how much the legal help will cost?

Possibly. You need to understand how much you will pay for the legal help. To avoid surprises, be sure you understand how the legal professional will charge or bill you for the legal help. Understand what other fees you may be charged. For example, will you pay for copying documents or court filing fees? Ask if there is any work you can do that may lower these fees.

Ask for a written fee agreement that details all fees and costs before you decide to hire the legal professional, and remember you are under no obligation to hire the legal professional.

How often should I talk with my legal professional?

Talk to the legal professional giving you legal help about how they will keep you up to date on the work they are doing to help with your legal problem. If you have not heard from them, or if you have new information about your problem, call them and tell them about your concern.



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