Deciding Whether You Need a Lawyer

Lawyers are trained to know what the law says about your legal problem, what your options are, how to help you decide what’s best for your case, and how to present your case. For any type of legal issue, it’s a good idea to talk to a lawyer.

There are a lot of resources out there to help you handle less complicated legal issues on your own. However, that often may not be the best thing for you to do, and when you do it you want to make sure the resources you are using are right for your situation.

Learn about your issue
You should learn about your legal rights and responsibilities. You can find free legal information online at www.IllinoisLegalAid.org and from The Chicago Bar Association and other bar associations.

Can you handle this legal issue on your own? Should you?
Think about whether this is something you should even consider handling on your own, and if so, whether you would be able to do that.

How important is this matter to you? How much will it matter to you if you aren’t successful? The more important it is to you, the more you should think about getting a lawyer’s help.

If you decide to handle a case on your own, be careful about paying for online legal forms, and make sure those forms are right for your case. There are many free forms offered on www.IllinoisLegalAid.org and on court websites.

Finding the Right Lawyer

What kind of lawyer do you need?
Most lawyers specialize in certain kinds of cases, so the first step is to figure out what type of case you have. You want a lawyer who has handled cases like yours. If you have more than one legal issue, you may need different lawyers to handle the different issues.

Where to look for a lawyer
If you have worked with a lawyer before who you liked, start by asking them. If not, start by calling your local bar association to ask about lawyer referral services.

• In the Chicago area, try The Chicago Bar Association Lawyer Referral Service at 312-554-2001.
• Elsewhere in Illinois, try Illinois Lawyer Finder at 888-926-3101 or your local bar association.

Check out the lawyer first
Once you have found a lawyer who may be able to help you, it is important to learn more about them.

• Visit the Illinois Attorney Registration and Disciplinary Commission website www.iardc.org and search for your lawyer. You can find out about the lawyer’s history. You should check if the lawyer has been disciplined and make sure the lawyer has malpractice insurance.
• Check out the lawyer’s website. Run an internet search for the lawyer and look at any reviews about him or her too.
• If the lawyer does not have much information available on the web, ask for client references.

Language skills
If you do not speak English, try to find a lawyer who speaks your language. If a lawyer does not speak your language, find out if the lawyer has an interpreter available.

Payment
There are different ways you can pay for a lawyer’s services. The most common are:

• A Fixed Fee, which means a flat fee is charged for your whole case or for a specific part of your case. In some situations, you may be able to pay a lawyer for part of your case and do other parts yourself
• An Hourly Fee, in which the lawyer is paid a certain amount of money for each hour they work on your case
• A Contingent Fee, where the lawyer receives a percentage of any amount you receive from your case

Remember, you are in charge
Never forget that you are the client and have the final say. You deserve to be treated with respect, and you want to work with someone who you trust.
Meeting with a Lawyer

Your first meeting with a lawyer is often called an initial consultation. If you feel nervous, always remember that it is your decision whether or not to hire this lawyer.

Before the initial consultation

Here are some questions you should ask before your initial consultation:

- Will I be charged for the initial meeting? For some kinds of cases, the initial consultation may be free, while for others there may be a fee.
- How long will the consultation last?
- Where is the office? Can I take public transit? If not, where can I park and how much does it cost?

You should ask the lawyer beforehand exactly what to bring to the initial consultation, but here are some things the lawyer will likely need:

- Any important documents that have to do with your legal issues, especially any court documents you may have received like a notice or a petition
- An outline of the key facts of your case
- A picture ID
- A checkbook or credit card in case you really like the attorney and want to hire him or her right away

At the initial consultation

When you arrive at the meeting, be prepared to discuss your case. The lawyer will want to know more about your situation and may ask you some specific questions. These questions may be helpful for you to ask the lawyer:

- How long have you practiced law?
- If the case involves court, what is your courtroom experience?
- How many cases have you handled like mine?
- Will any other lawyers work on my case? Can I meet them?
- Will any paralegals or assistants work on my case?
- What are my payment options?
- How much will my case cost?
- How long will my case last?
- What are my chances of getting the result that I want?
- What happens if I lose?
- How will I be able to reach you if I need to speak to you?

Hiring Your Lawyer

Once you have decided to hire a lawyer, you will typically be asked to sign a contract, also known as an engagement letter. This document is signed by both the lawyer and client and describes the services between the lawyer and the client. At the end of your initial consultation, if you believe the lawyer is a good match, ask the lawyer to give you an engagement letter to review. Do not feel pressured to sign the letter at that time if you are not sure.

Attorneys are bound by rules of professional conduct. These rules require your lawyer to:

- Keep you informed about your case
- Keep your information confidential
- Keep a secure copy of your legal file.

In return, your lawyer will expect you to:

- Tell the truth about your case
- Respond to their questions and requests for more information as soon as you can
- Be patient with the progress of your case
- Pay a reasonable fee for the work they perform and the other necessary costs (like court fees or getting copies of documents).

Many lawyers require a retainer, which is an amount you pay when the case starts. The money goes towards any future costs of your legal services. If there is money left over from the retainer when your case is over, that money is returned to you.

You may fire your lawyer at any time. All you have to do is tell your lawyer, but it’s a good idea to put it in writing. However, you must still pay for any costs or work the lawyer has already done.

Your lawyer can also end the lawyer-client relationship. They may do this for many reasons, including violations of the engagement letter. If you do not pay your attorney, they can stop representing you.

What If You Can’t Afford a Lawyer?

There are legal aid organizations throughout Illinois that may help you with your case, but they can’t help everyone who contacts them.

Also, if you make over a certain amount of money, you may not qualify for free legal help.

To find out about free legal aid that is available in Illinois, visit www.chicagobarfoundation.org/find-legal-help.