

LEGAL ASSISTANCE AND PRO SE HELP IN FAMILY LAW CASES

When most people think of going to court, they think of having an attorney with them. However, attorney fees in domestic relations cases (i.e. custody, support, divorce and protection from abuse) can be very high and must usually be paid before the representation begins. For that reason, many people in Philadelphia handle their own domestic relations case. If you would like to hire an attorney, but are not familiar with anyone who handles family matters, you may contact the Philadelphia Bar Association's Lawyer Referral and Information Service at 215-238-6333 or www.PhilaBar.org. If you are one of those people who cannot afford an attorney, there are still options for you.

FAMILY COURT

The Family Court can provide you with some assistance in your domestic relations case, including helping you to file basic petitions, to check on the status of your case and to provide other general information. However, Family Court cannot give you legal advice about your case. In many cases, after a thorough interview and legal analysis of your situation, it may be that you need to file different papers, file papers that are not available at Family Court, or file no papers at all. For that reason, it is always advisable to at least speak with an attorney before you take action.

FREE LEGAL ASSISTANCE

Unlike criminal cases, you do not have a right to have an attorney appointed for you in domestic relations cases. However, if you cannot afford to hire your own attorney you may be eligible for free legal advice or representation. Many unions have legal service plans for their members. Also, there are some private non-profit agencies and law school clinics in Philadelphia which provide free assistance. Most of these agencies require that you be low-income and must determine if you meet their eligibility requirements before assisting you. Most also provide legal services in areas of law other than Family Law. Please remember that all of the agencies have limited staff and cannot represent everyone who seeks their services.

Private Non-profit Organizations Assisting Low-Income Individuals

Philadelphia Legal Assistance (PLA) provides advice, pro se assistance and representation in all areas of domestic relations, (child custody, child support, spousal support, divorce and protection from abuse) to low-income people who live in Philadelphia or have a case here. 215-981-3800 or www.PhilaLegal.org.

Custody and Support Assistance Clinic (CASAC), is an independent project operated by law students attending the University of Pennsylvania and housed at PLA. CASAC assists people to prepare basic and complex motions and pleadings. Clients contacting PLA are referred to CASAC when students are available.

Community Legal Services (CLS) assists low income parents involved with the Department of Human Services at Dependency Court, (1801 Vine Street). They do not handle domestic relations cases. 215-981-3700 or www.CLSPhila.org.

Private Non-profit Organizations Assisting Special Populations

AIDS Law Project of Pennsylvania (ALP) provides free legal services including advice, referrals, and representation to HIV positive individuals in a variety of matters. In domestic relations matters ALP primarily assists parents in the area of Standby Guardianship. 215-587-9377 or www.AIDSLawPA.org.

Center for Lesbian and Gay Civil Rights provides free legal services including advice, referrals, and representation to gay and lesbian people in a variety of matters, including protection from abuse and custody in the area of domestic relations. 215-731-1447 or www.Center4CivilRights.org.

Homeless Advocacy Project (HAP) provides free legal services to homeless individuals and families in Philadelphia. In Family Court cases, HAP provides representation primarily in custody cases but provides advice, pro se assistance, and referrals in all types of Family Court cases. 215-523-9595 or www.homelessadvocacyproject.org.

Legal Clinic for the Disabled (LCD) provides free legal services to low-income physically disabled clients in Philadelphia and the surrounding counties. Located at Magee Rehabilitation Center, LCD has a small staff and uses volunteers to provide representation in domestic relations and other cases. 215-587-3350 or www.MageeRehab.org.

Senior Law Center (SLC) provides free legal services in a variety of matters to residents of Philadelphia age 60 and over. Representation is usually prioritized for people who are low-income. SLC handles protection from abuse, grandparent custody and standby guardianship matters for seniors. 215-988-1242 or www.SeniorLawCenter.org.

Women Against Abuse Legal Center (WAALC) advises and represents low income victims of domestic violence in protection from abuse and custody matters. WAA also advises victims regarding criminal proceedings and has counseling and shelter services. 215-686-7082 or www.WomenAgainstAbuse.org.

Women's Law Project (WLP) has a telephone counseling service that answers questions about domestic relations matters. WLP does not provide representation in court or legal advice. 215-928-9801 or www.WomensLawProject.org.

Law School Clinical Programs

Temple Legal Aid (Temple) is a law school clinical program providing limited representation to low income clients in domestic relations cases. Call 215-204-1800 for information.

Penn Legal Assistance Office (PLAO) is the in-house teaching law office of the University of Pennsylvania Law School which accepts a very limited number of custody and support cases during the academic year only. They do not accept divorce cases or walk-ins. Call 215-898-8427 for information.

Other Programs

Volunteer for the Indigent Program, (VIP) is a referral program which attempts to locate private attorneys to volunteer their services in civil cases for low income clients. VIP accepts referrals only and cannot be contacted directly. PLA or CLS as well as other agencies on this list can screen and refer you to VIP. Because VIP must find a volunteer to take your case, the referral to them must be made several weeks before a hearing and VIP cannot guarantee to find an attorney for every case.

Low Fee Plan of the Philadelphia Bar Association makes referrals to private attorneys who handle cases for a reduced fee. The client is responsible for the reduced fee plus all costs and reasonable expenses resulting from the case. To qualify one must be low income, although the income guidelines are slightly higher than those of the other agencies. The Plan only accepts referrals and cannot be contacted directly. PLA or CLS can screen and refer you to the Plan. The Plan does not handle custody or complex divorce matters.

SELF-REPRESENTATION

If you do not qualify for free legal assistance, or if they do not have the resources to represent you, but you also cannot or do not wish to hire a private attorney, you may represent yourself. This is called "pro se" representation. If you will be representing yourself, you should become familiar with the laws and rules for family court cases. The legal process is often more complex than it might seem from just reading the laws. Therefore, you might want to have at least an initial consultation with a domestic relations attorney about your case. Pennsylvania laws and rules can be found at the local law library. Jenkins Law Library in Philadelphia (833 Chestnut Street, Suite 1220, (215) 592-5692) is open to the public for a \$5.00 daily fee. Some internet sites can also give you access to Pennsylvania laws and rules. The Family Court website which has very helpful information is located at <http://courts.phila.gov> in the Court of Common Pleas section. There is also a link to the Pennsylvania Child Support Program website there. Pennsylvania Laws are at <http://members.aol.com/StatutesPA/23.html>. Pennsylvania Rules, which help apply those laws, can be found at www.PACode.com. The websites for the agencies listed above also have helpful brochures.