

WHAT  
CAN A  
LAWYER  
REFERRAL  
SERVICE  
DO FOR  
ME?

GET THE  
LEGAL  
FACTS  
OF LIFE

# What can a lawyer referral service do for me?

- 1 *What is a lawyer referral service?*
- 2 *How can a lawyer referral service help me?*
- 3 *How does a lawyer referral service work?*
- 4 *Where should I look for a lawyer referral service?*
- 5 *What should I look for in a lawyer referral service?*
- 6 *How important is certification?*
- 7 *Who operates lawyer referral services?*
- 8 *How much will I have to pay?*
- 9 *What should I do if I believe my lawyer has done something wrong?*

## **1** *What is a lawyer referral service?*

A lawyer referral service refers potential clients to attorneys. This means that if you want to talk to a lawyer, a lawyer referral service is a good place to call. The lawyer referral service staff will interview you and, if you have a legal problem, will match you with a lawyer who is experienced in the appropriate area of law. You will then see the lawyer for an initial consultation or speak to the lawyer on the phone.

In California, lawyer referral services must be certified by the State Bar and must conform to certain standards adopted by the California Supreme Court.

## **2** *How can a lawyer referral service help me?*

If you need legal help, a certified lawyer referral service can put you in touch with a lawyer who can help you with your problem. And if your problem can be resolved without a lawyer, the service will try to provide information or the names of other organizations or agencies that may be able to help you.

## **3** *How does a lawyer referral service work?*

When you call a lawyer referral service, you will be asked about your situation. If you have a legal problem, the lawyer referral service will arrange an initial consultation for you, or give you the name and number of a lawyer whom you can contact directly to arrange a consultation. There is usually a small charge for this consultation, but it may, in some cases, be free. After the initial consultation, it is up to you whether or not you want to hire the lawyer.

## **4** *Where should I look for a lawyer referral service?*

For a complete list of State Bar-certified lawyer referral services, visit the State Bar's website at [calbar.ca.gov/lrs](http://calbar.ca.gov/lrs). Or, for a recorded message that can provide you with phone numbers of such 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.

Be sure to look for the lawyer referral service's State Bar certification number, which must appear in all advertising. And if you are not sure whether the lawyer referral service is certified, call the service directly and ask for its certification number.

## **5** *What should I look for in a lawyer referral service?*

Be sure that you use a lawyer referral service that is certified by the State Bar of California. By law, lawyer referral services must be certified by the State Bar of California to operate in California, and must list their certification number in all advertising. State Bar-certified lawyer referral services also must follow certain rules to protect clients.

## **6** *How important is certification?*

Certification means that a lawyer referral service meets certain standards approved by the California Supreme Court. Because the State Bar enforces those standards, the State Bar can provide you with a complaint form and look into your complaint if you have a problem with a lawyer referral service.

Certification also means that if you use any one of the certified services, you can be assured of the following:

- **Attorneys 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, you can be certain that the lawyer has the ability to pay.

- **The lawyer referral service will screen your call.** Every certified lawyer referral service has trained staff to help you determine whether you have a legal problem and, if so, what kind of lawyer you need—or if you need some other type of assistance.

- **The lawyer referral service can refer you to a lawyer in your area of legal need.** Certified lawyer referral services have lawyers with experience in many legal areas, such as family law, personal injury, probate and landlord-tenant law. Certified lawyer referral services screen their lawyers so they can refer you to a lawyer who practices in the particular area of law you need. Many lawyer referral services have subject matter panels, on which attorneys can serve only if they have demonstrated experience and/or meet certain other requirements.

- **The lawyer referral service can give you information about other service programs.** Some problems may at first seem to require a lawyer's help, but actually may not. For example, you may have a problem that can be handled without charge, by a rent control board, small claims court or community mediation program. Certified lawyer referral services can direct you to government agencies or other organizations that may be better suited to assist you.

- **The lawyer referral service may be able to provide an attorney at a reduced rate.** Certification rules require lawyer referral services to make arrangements to serve people of limited means. Some lawyer referral services do this by operating low-fee or no-fee panels, while others cooperate with independent local *pro bono publico* ("for the public good"), or free, programs. If you are financially eligible, the lawyer referral service may be able to refer you to one of its own attorneys who charges a reduced rate, or to another provider who can provide you with free assistance.

- **The lawyer referral service may be able to provide bilingual lawyers.** Many certified lawyer referral services have lawyers who speak Spanish and other languages to help you.

- **The lawyer referral service may provide lawyers who handle "limited scope representation" (also called "unbundling").** Such lawyers can – with your permission, understanding and participation – provide legal assistance for a limited part of your case while you represent yourself in

other parts of it. Such assistance can be more affordable than full-scope representation. Some lawyer referral services, for example, provide attorneys who can simply review marital settlement agreements when little is in dispute. Not all referral services have limited scope or unbundling panels, however. Ask if such representation is available.

## **7** *Who operates lawyer referral services?*

Most lawyer referral services are operated on a non-profit basis by local bar associations or legal services programs. Some lawyer referral services are operated on a for-profit basis by businesses or lawyers. A certified lawyer referral service cannot be owned by a lawyer who receives more than 20 percent of all referrals or by a group of lawyers who together receive more than 20 percent of all referrals. Both non-profit and for-profit lawyer referral services are held to the same standards under the certification rules of the State Bar of California.

## **8** *How much will I have to pay?*

Most lawyer referral services charge only a nominal fee – such as \$30 – for an initial consultation with a lawyer. Some offer a free first-time consultation. During the initial consultation, you can explain your situation and ask questions that will help you decide whether you want to hire the lawyer.

If the lawyer referral service cannot provide the legal help you need at the price you can afford to pay, the service may be able to recommend a free legal services program in your area.

For more information on finding a lawyer, see the State Bar pamphlet *How Can I Find and Hire the Right Lawyer?* You can order this consumer pamphlet and others free of charge by sending an e-mail to [pamphlets@calbar.ca.gov](mailto:pamphlets@calbar.ca.gov). For information on ordering the bar's consumer publications by mail, call 1-888-875-LAWS (5297). Or, visit the bar's website – [calbar.ca.gov](http://calbar.ca.gov) – where you'll find the pamphlets, as well as information on ordering them.

## **9** *What should I do if I believe my lawyer has done something wrong?*

Bring your concerns to the lawyer referral service. If your complaint is not easily resolved, you can file a complaint against the attorney by calling the State Bar's Attorney Complaint Hotline at 1-800-843-9053. For more information on reporting a lawyer to the State Bar and handling other problems, see the State Bar pamphlet *What Can I Do If I Have a Problem With My Lawyer?*

For more information on certified lawyer referral services, you can contact the State Bar at:

Lawyer Referral Services Certification Program  
Office of Legal Services  
The State Bar of California  
180 Howard Street  
San Francisco, CA 94105-1639  
Recorded message: 415-538-2250  
Website: [calbar.ca.gov/lrs](http://calbar.ca.gov/lrs)

**The purpose of this pamphlet is to provide general information on the law, which is subject to change. It is not legal advice. Consult a lawyer if you have a specific legal problem.**

**The State Bar of California**  
**Office of Media & Information Services**

180 Howard Street  
San Francisco, CA 94105-1639  
415-538-2000  
Publications: 1-888-875-LAWS (5297)  
[pamphlets@calbar.ca.gov](mailto:pamphlets@calbar.ca.gov)  
[calbar.ca.gov](http://calbar.ca.gov)



THE STATE BAR OF CALIFORNIA

Office of Media & Information Services

180 Howard Street

San Francisco, CA 94105-1639

Place  
Stamp  
Here