

ABOUT THE STATE BAR OF CALIFORNIA

Created by the California State Legislature in 1927, the State Bar is an administrative arm of the California Supreme Court. Its mission is to serve the people of California through careful oversight of the legal profession. The State Bar's primary functions are:

- › Licensing the 250,000 attorneys in California
- › Regulating the profession and practice of law
- › Enforcing the Rules of Professional conduct for attorneys
- › Disciplining attorneys who violate rules and laws
- › Administering the California Bar Exam
- › Advancing access to justice
- › Promoting diversity and inclusion in the legal system

The State Bar cannot represent clients or refer them to a particular attorney. If you need an attorney, the State Bar can connect you with a lawyer referral service in your community.

Follow the State Bar:



www.calbar.ca.gov

866-44-CA-LAW



CONTACT THE STATE BAR OF CALIFORNIA

Find Certified Lawyer Referral Services

www.calbar.ca.gov/lrs
800-843-9053
(Outside California: 415-538-2250)

Complaints: Attorney Misconduct or Unauthorized Practice of Law

www.calbar.ca.gov/Filecomplaint
800-843-9053 (Outside California: 213-765-1200)

Complaints: Lawyer Referral Services

www.calbar.ca.gov/lrs-complaint

Client Security Fund

www.calbar.ca.gov/Client-Security-Fund
213-765-1140
Email: clientsecurityfund@calbar.ca.gov

What Consumers Should Know Before Hiring an Attorney



The State Bar
of California

Information in this pamphlet is valid as of February 2020.

DO YOU NEED AN ATTORNEY?

If you think you have a legal problem, you may be wondering how best to find legal help.

The mission of the State Bar of California is to protect the public through careful oversight of the legal profession. The mission also includes furthering access to legal services.

The State Bar cannot represent clients or refer you to a particular attorney, but the agency can help you understand what you should know before hiring an attorney. The State Bar can also connect you with certified lawyer referral services in your community to help you find a licensed attorney, including those who may provide free or low-cost assistance. Many offer services in multiple languages.

This pamphlet provides guidelines to give you confidence when you explore options for legal representation.



Looking for information about legal services in your native language?
Call the State Bar at 866-44-CA-LAW.

This pamphlet is also available in:

Spanish Español • Vietnamese Tiếng Việt
Korean 한국어 • Chinese 中文
• Russian Русский • Tagalog

WHAT CONSUMERS SHOULD KNOW BEFORE HIRING AN ATTORNEY

How to decide if you need an attorney

A certified lawyer referral service may be able to help you decide whether you need an attorney (See back panel for contact information). You may have a problem that can be handled without an attorney or by organizations such as a rent control board, small claims court, or community mediation program. Lawyer referral services may also be able to direct you to government agencies or other organizations that are best suited to assist you. If you need an attorney, the referral service can help you find one who specializes in the area of law you need.

How to find an attorney

- ▶ Ask people you know and trust if they can refer you to an attorney.
- ▶ Be wary of attorneys who approach you in person, by phone, or through social media to offer legal services.

What to do before you hire an attorney

- ▶ Look up a potential attorney on the State Bar website (www.calbar.ca.gov) to check for license status, eligibility to practice law, and history of public discipline.
- ▶ Ask a prospective attorney whether they carry liability or malpractice insurance.
- ▶ Ask a prospective attorney how they will respond to your needs and how quickly they return calls or emails. You and your attorney should agree on how you will communicate.
- ▶ Ask about costs, such as whether the attorney charges an hourly rate or flat fee, or uses other billing arrangements. Also ask what payment schedule is expected.
- ▶ If the cost of legal services is an obstacle, consider inquiring whether an attorney is willing to offer services that are limited in scope.

After you hire an attorney

- ▶ Obtain a contract in writing, but note that not all services require a written contract. For example, services unlikely to cost more than \$1,000 in legal fees do not require a written contract. However, if the attorney will be working for you on a contingency fee basis, a written contract is always required.
- ▶ Retain copies of all documents and correspondence with attorneys, including emails and text messages.
- ▶ Avoid paying in cash. If you do, get receipts for all payments.
- ▶ Although you may need to pay certain fees in advance, up-front fees for some services, such as payment for mortgage loan modification services, are strictly prohibited. Your attorney should be able to confirm this for you.

Finding free or low-cost legal services (legal aid)

Your local lawyer referral service can provide information about options for free or low-cost legal services (often referred to as "legal aid"). Legal aid organizations may not provide services in all areas of the law, and you may have to meet certain standards to be eligible for their services.

You may also go online to LawHelpCA (<https://lawhelpca.org>) for a legal aid directory.

Can I Fire My Attorney?

Yes, you can fire your attorney at any time, but in certain circumstances you may need the permission of a judge. When ending an attorney-client relationship, be sure to obtain copies of your files. You have a right to your client file. Attorneys also have a duty to account for all money received from a client, as well as any money from others received on behalf of a client. You can ask for such an accounting at any time, including when an attorney no longer represents you.