

Helping Your Lawyer Help You



Sometime during your life, you will probably need a lawyer. A study by the American Bar Association discovered that more than 70 percent of U.S. households encounter a situation in a year that might have led them to hire a lawyer.¹ For many people, a visit to a lawyer's office is a little intimidating, but this does not have to be the case. Your lawyer should be your ally, a skilled professional who will help you enforce your rights under our laws. As the term "ally" implies, your lawyer does not work alone. Any actions you take on your own can either help or hinder your lawyer. Here are some of the ways you can help your lawyer help you.

- **Keep Good Records.** Keep records, contracts and all other important documents in a safe place. You should save all your warranties, deeds, insurance policies, tax returns, bank statements and loan papers. Pay all your bills by check or money order and save the cancelled checks or receipts as proof of payment in case there is a dispute. If you must pay by cash, be certain to obtain a receipt.
- **Make No Admissions.** Most likely, you won't be sitting in your lawyer's office when you realize that you need legal help. You may be watching a tow truck move your wrecked car or facing a police sergeant across a desk. In these situations, make no admissions. Statements that you make to police or others can later be used against you in court. If the police are questioning you as a suspect in a crime, ask to speak to a lawyer. The police must then stop their questions and allow you to contact an attorney. Do not accept responsibility for an accident or a crime even if you feel you are responsible. The decision to pay for damages or plead guilty to a crime should be made only after discussing it thoroughly with an attorney.
- **Act Promptly.** If you receive notice that you are being sued or charged with a crime, contact a lawyer immediately. Prompt action is crucial to your case because there are important deadlines that must be met. If you miss these deadlines, you may forfeit important legal rights. If you receive a summons to appear in court, do not wait until the day before your appearance to contact a lawyer. Your attorney will not have enough time to prepare your case, and there is no guarantee that the judge will postpone the case at your request. It is equally important to act promptly if you believe you have grounds for a lawsuit. Most lawsuits have time limits, called Statutes of Limitations. If you miss the Statute of Limitations for your legal action, you lose your right to sue. As soon as you have been harmed in a way that you think may be grounds for a suit, contact a lawyer.
- **Be Open and Honest with Your Attorney.** When you consult a lawyer, he or she will rely on you for a full, unbiased, truthful statement of the facts of your case. Do not omit details because you feel they may put you in a bad light. Your lawyer can help you only if you disclose all the facts. Complete disclosure is essential to your case and includes providing all the documents or physical evidence relevant to your case.
- **Cooperate in Preparing Your Case.** The best way to help your lawyer while waiting for your day in court is by keeping your appointments and following his or her instructions. Do not discuss your case with anyone, even friends and neighbors, without your lawyer's approval. Instruct your family to refrain from discussing the case as well. Do not sign any forms, statements or releases without consulting your lawyer. Promptly forward copies of all correspondence, bills or legal documents you receive regarding your case to your lawyer. Above all, do not attempt to negotiate a settlement without your lawyer. This could lead to an undesirable result.
- **Respect the Court.** Although many legal problems do not require a court appearance for resolution, you may find yourself before a judge or jury. The impression you make will affect your credibility. You should dress appropriately. Jeans, t-shirts, revealing clothing and flashy jewelry are likely to leave a poor impression and should be avoided. Show respect for the court by dressing as if you were going to an important business meeting.

While you are in front of the judge or jury, do not argue with or interrupt your lawyer. Instead, keep notes of things you wish to bring to your lawyer's attention. Your lawyer will confer with you during the course of the trial and you can use your notes at those times. Act politely and with dignity during the proceedings. Exaggerated expressions of disbelief or loud wisecracks will serve only to identify you as a person with poor manners who does not understand the serious nature of court proceedings. A calm, credible and sincere appearance on your behalf will be a great help to your lawyer. Be sure to address the judge as "Your Honor." The keys to acting as your lawyer's ally are preparation, discretion and communication. Although there are no guarantees, you can increase the odds of obtaining a favorable outcome when you work together with your lawyer.

Consider Enrolling in the Legal Plan

While all of this information is helpful, it assumes you have an attorney and know how to access the legal system. If you do not have an attorney, consider enrolling in the Legal Plan. It covers the most common personal legal matters at an affordable rate.

Your participation allows you, and in most cases your family, to receive help through a national network of over 12,000 pre-qualified attorneys. Please consider this benefit during your next open enrollment period. Simply ask your human resource representative for more information on how to enroll.

If you have questions concerning coverage or use of the legal plan, call the Hyatt Legal Plans Client Service Center at (800) 821 - 6400 between 8 am – 7 pm Eastern Time Monday through Friday, or visit www.legalplans.com.

Group Legal Plans are provided by Hyatt Legal Plans, Inc., a MetLife company, Cleveland, Ohio. In certain states, group legal plans are provided through insurance coverage underwritten by Metropolitan Property and Casualty Company and Affiliates, Warwick, Rhode Island.

¹ "Public Perceptions of Lawyers: Consumer Research Findings," Prepared on Behalf of Section of Litigation, American Bar Association, April 2002.
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