

Hiring and working with a lawyer

CLEO (Community Legal Education Ontario/ Éducation juridique communautaire Ontario)

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How can a lawyer help me?

If you have a legal problem, a lawyer can help you figure out what to do. They can tell you how the law applies to your situation and what your options are. They can tell you what they think will happen based on other cases they have worked on, and help you get the best result possible.

Lawyers do many different things. You might ask a lawyer to:

- review letters or legal documents, such as employment contracts or separation agreements
- draft legal documents for you, such as wills, powers of attorney, contracts, or separation agreements
- speak for you in court or at a tribunal

Legal issues can have serious consequences. Having a lawyer is especially important if:

- you have been charged with a crime and you could go to jail
- you are afraid for your or your family's safety and security
- you have been told that you could get deported from Canada
- you have a hard time reading legal documents or advocating for yourself
- the person on the other side of your problem has a lawyer

How can I find a lawyer?

1. There are a few ways to find the names of lawyers in your area:
2. Referrals from friends and family. Ask them if they've worked with a lawyer on a similar issue, and if they were happy with the lawyer and why.
3. If you have a low income, and are facing some types of criminal, family, immigration, or refugee law problems, you may be able to get a lawyer for free from Legal Aid Ontario. You can call them at 1-800-668-8258. Before you call, get together all documents related to your legal issue, your income, and where you live. If you get an appointment to see someone, make sure to bring your identification, such as your driver's licence, passport, or permanent residence card, with you.
4. If you have a low or middle income, you may be able to find a lawyer with lower fees through JusticeNet (www.justicenet.ca). The lawyers listed there charge fees based on your income.
5. You may be able to find a lawyer through the Law Society Referral Service at lsrs.iso.on.ca/lsrs. After you submit your request online, a lawyer will call you within 3 business days for a free, 30-minute consultation. After that, you can decide if you want to hire them. You can also request a lawyer who speaks a specific language.

How can I find a good lawyer?

Once you have found a few names, you may have to do some research and meet with a couple of them before you decide who to hire. You can search for lawyers by name in the Law Society of Upper Canada's [Lawyer Directory](#) to see if they are licensed or if they have been disciplined, then look at their websites or [read reviews](#) of them. You can then call the lawyers' offices and ask to set up an appointment for a consultation. Ask whether there is a fee for the consultation.

Interview a lawyer

At your first appointment, the lawyer will interview you about your situation. Bring all documents related to your legal problem to your meeting as the lawyer will want to see them.

It's best to tell your lawyer all the facts of your situation, even if they are personal or embarrassing. The lawyer must keep your information **confidential**, which means that they cannot tell anyone about your case without your permission. Look for a lawyer you feel comfortable with and who answers your questions in a way you can understand.

Once the lawyer understands your situation, they will give you their legal opinion and discuss your options. They will also tell you what they think is likely to happen based on their experience. You might not be able to get everything you want, but it's your lawyer's job to tell you what they think is realistic. You must make a choice and give your lawyer **instructions** on what you want them to do.

Take notes during your first meeting and ask the lawyer your own questions. For example, you can ask:

- How long have you been working in this area of law?
- What experience do you have with clients who have been in similar situations?
- Can I talk to one of your previous clients as a reference?
- Will you check with me to get my okay before you...
- How often will I hear from you? Will it be by phone, email, or mail?
- Will anyone else work on my case?
- If I have questions, who should I contact?
- When can you start working on my case?

You should also tell the lawyer about any needs you have like:

- needing an interpreter
- how to communicate with you

Discuss fees

Find out what the lawyer's fees are. Most lawyers bill you by the hour or part of an hour, although some lawyers might charge a flat rate. Usually lawyers also charge you for "disbursements" like court filing fees or courier fees. Often you have to pay a retainer fee at the beginning in order to hire or "retain" the lawyer. The total amount you pay will probably be more than the retainer. If it is less, then the lawyer should give the rest of your money back to you.

Usually, lawyers help you with your case the whole way through. To save some money, you could look for a lawyer who provides "unbundled services," which means that they help you with just some parts of your case, such as drafting a document or representing you in court. This can help you save money, but you have to do more work on your case.

Unbundled services are also called limited scope services. If you plan to handle part of your case by yourself, you could get help from a legal coach. A legal coach can help you understand the process and prepare to represent yourself.

If you need to go to a tribunal or small claims court, you may want to hire a paralegal instead of a lawyer. Paralegals work in many different areas of law and they are usually less expensive than lawyers.

When discussing fees with a lawyer you may hire, ask questions like:

- How much do you charge?
- How is it calculated? Is it daily, hourly, or parts of an hour?
- How much do you think my case will cost overall? What could make it cost more?
- How can I help keep the cost down?
- Will you ask me before you do something that will make it cost more?
- What will you bill me for?
- Will you bill me for phone calls, emails, or your assistant's time?
- How much will your retainer be? What does it cover?
- Do you offer unbundled or limited scope services?