



INFORMATION FOR CLIENTS OF TEXAS ATTORNEYS

The information included in this column is for educational and informational purposes only. Please consult an attorney regarding specific legal questions.



Reduced-Fee Legal Services In Texas

Navigating the legal world can seem daunting without the assistance of a lawyer. From drafting wills to arranging child custody, lawyers help Texans with legal matters every day. For those who do not qualify for free legal services, but are still on very limited budgets, there are programs that offer reduced-fee legal services. This article provides a basic overview of reduced-fee legal programs around the state.

WHAT IS A FREE LEGAL AID PROGRAM?

There are three federally funded legal aid organizations in Texas (Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas, Lone Star Legal Aid, and Texas RioGrande Legal Aid) that provide free legal services to indigent Texans. The programs focus on family law issues, but also address legal matters involving housing, employment, public benefits, the elderly, estate planning, and consumer complaints. Legal aid organizations do not provide legal support for criminal cases or immigration cases, except to certain victims of domestic violence. These services are typically available only to families that fall below 125 percent of the federal poverty guidelines (\$23,163 annually for a family of three, based on 2011 guidelines), but can apply to families that fall below 200 percent of the federal poverty guidelines (about \$37,060 annually for a family of three). There are many local programs that provide resources and assistance. For more information, contact the State Bar Legal Services Support Division at (800) 204-2222, Ext. 1855.

WHAT IS A REDUCED-FEE LEGAL SERVICES PROGRAM?

Low-cost legal services come in different forms with different names (e.g., Modest Means Panel, Match Program, Reduced-fee Legal Services Program, and Limited Scope Assistance). Their goals are similar: to provide affordable legal services to those who fall at or below 225 percent to 250 percent of the federal poverty guidelines (\$41,693.10–\$46,325.10 annually for a family of three). Programs accomplish this in a variety of ways. Some trim initial consultation and hourly fees. Others encourage lawyers to walk clients through the difficult steps of a case so that clients can handle the simpler tasks on their own. Participating attorneys are lawyers with regular caseloads who agree to perform services at a reduced fee for a limited number of clients.

HOW CAN I FIND A LAWYER IN MY AREA?

The State Bar of Texas Lawyer Referral Information Service (LRIS) connects individuals with lawyers in their area

who practice specific areas of law. LRIS reaches the 240 counties not served by local referral services. For more information, call (877) 9-TEXBAR (983-9227) or visit www.texasbar.com/lris. LRIS guarantees potential clients up to three 30-minute meetings with an attorney for \$20 each to create a mutually agreeable attorney-client arrangement. Clients can negotiate all other fees.

Many metropolitan areas, including Bexar, Collin, Dallas, El Paso, Harris, Jefferson, Nueces, Tarrant, and Travis counties, are not covered by the statewide LRIS because they provide their own referral programs that can be reached through county or city bar associations.

WHERE ARE REDUCED-FEE LEGAL SERVICES?

Some metropolitan areas have reduced-fee legal services programs that arrange predetermined discounts from attorneys for referrals. In Travis County, for example, the Match Program limits the 30-minute consultation fee to \$20 and caps the billable rate at \$75 per hour.



In Harris County, the Modest Means Program reduces participating attorneys' billable rates by 25 percent. Reduced-fee legal programs are being developed in new regions. Contact your local bar association for up-to-date information.

Travis County also has a lawyer referral service with attorneys trained to provide "limited scope assistance" on family law cases so attorneys and clients can share the responsibility and keep costs low. These services are sometimes called "unbundled" services because they allow an attorney and client to choose which services will be provided to the client. Unbundled services are an alternative to the full-service assistance traditionally offered to clients. For more information, visit austinbar.org/pages/limited_scope.

WHAT RESTRICTIONS EXIST ON MODEST MEANS PROGRAMS?

Modest means programs are limited in their geographic and legal reach. The programs in Travis County and Harris County, for example, limit coverage to family law issues, simple wills, and guardianship matters. The State Bar LRIS program, the Limited Scope Assistance Program, legal aid programs, and resources available online can help provide supplemental assistance to low-income individuals.

HOW DO REDUCED-FEE LEGAL PROGRAMS WORK?

You should contact the appropriate lawyer referral service, which will first screen you for general eligibility (subject

matter, income, and location of dispute). Then you will have an initial consultation or meeting with an attorney. It is up to you and the attorney to decide whether to extend the attorney-client relationship beyond the consultation. If you hire the attorney to represent you, a retainer fee or deposit and a written agreement will likely be required. ✪

This article was prepared by members of the access to justice group of the 2010–2011 class of LeadershipSBOT, the State Bar's leadership academy. Group members included Mayra Castro of San Antonio, Aaron Dorfner of Midland, Kayla Dreyer of Edinburg, Nereida Lopez of McAllen, Abbas Mahvash of Dallas, Kellie Pai of Houston, and Gail Schroeter of Del Rio.

NO GECKOS
NO CAVEMEN
NO TALKING BABIES

Scott Wolfe
Wolfe Law Group
GilsbarPRO Client Since 2005

... because real clients
speak for GilsbarPRO

Get a **PRONTO QUOTE** for
LAWYERS' PROFESSIONAL LIABILITY INSURANCE

Get a premium estimate during your first phone call.

Get a customized quote within 6 hours.

Get your CNA policy at your desk within 1 business day.

CNA is the largest underwriter of legal malpractice coverage in the U.S. GilsbarPRO is the exclusive administrator for the CNA Lawyers Professional Liability Program in the State of Texas.

Call the PROs.
thousands of attorneys already have.

800.906.9654 • gilsbarpro.com

GILSBARPRO CNA

Title Professionals E&O Insurance is also available through CNA and GilsbarPRO!

One or more of the CNA insurance companies provide the products and/or services described. The information is intended to present a general overview for illustrative purposes only. CNA is a registered trademark of CNA Financial Corporation. Copyright (c) 2011 CNA. All rights reserved.