



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.

The Dangers of Representing Yourself in Legal Matters

BY LISA ZVONEK AND STEPHANIE DODGE SMITH

After a year of legal wrangling, Jim Bullock's client's complaint against his homeowners association (HOA) had yet to be resolved. Bullock's client attempted to represent himself when he sued his HOA for a \$500 sheetrock repair to his condo. A year after his initial complaint, the repairs had not been made and he faced trial and a possible \$68,000 judgment. It was at that time that the client decided it was time to contact an attorney for legal help.

"All of his claims had been dismissed," said Bullock, a civil practice attorney in Dallas. "He faced trial over the HOA's request for an award of its attorney's fees — \$68,000. That's when the client contacted us. ... While we were able to protect him at trial against the judgment, it was too late for us to help him with the real problem: the needed repairs to his condo."

As people find their financial standing challenged in these tough economic times, many, such as Bullock's client, are turning to self-representation in legal matters. One reason people decide to represent themselves is the perceived expense. They either want to save money or don't believe they make enough money to afford an attorney. But as lawyers and many pro se litigants have found out, self-representation can lead to a larger expense in the long run, not to mention more stress, frustration, and disappointment, than had they hired an attorney in the first place.

An additional perceived barrier that may cause some people to try self-representation is that they are unsure how to go about finding an attorney. They may

be suspicious of finding an attorney online or through an ad or may worry about inept representation. Profiled here are two programs — the State Bar of Texas Lawyer Referral Information Service and the Texas Legal Protection Plan — designed specifically to help Texans gain access to a lawyer and the legal assistance they need.

LAWYER REFERRAL INFORMATION SERVICE

The State Bar of Texas Lawyer Referral Information Service (LRIS) is a statewide program that matches potential clients with the proper attorney to suit their legal needs. The client is provided with a 30-minute consultation for no more than \$20; it is during this consultation that the referred attorney can determine whether the person is a candidate for pro se repre-

sentation or is truly in need of the knowledge and experience a licensed attorney offers. Referrals are made on a rotation.

Attorneys who participate in the service are referred to as LRIS panelists, or members. (Jim Bullock is a LRIS panelist.) In order to participate in the service, attorneys must be in good standing with the State Bar and must apply for membership.

Finding an attorney through the service is cost-effective and can help those thinking about self-representation find a rational and unbiased answer to their legal problems. Austin attorney and LRIS panelist Kimberly Gruber says she often sees pro se litigants who are "clouded in their own case by emotion and bias." Such emotions can lead to those clients losing not only their cases, but also their property, family, ideas, or money.

San Antonio attorney and LRIS member Rafael Baca has seen this first-hand. He was hired by an inventor of successful gym equipment. The inventor chose "homemade intellectual property protection" and currently faces challenges by several copycat manufacturers in the United States, Asia, and in the European Union.

"The inventor is currently in danger of quickly losing his business to these copycats, as well as from the expenses in playing legal catch-up," Baca said.

For more information about LRIS, call (800) 252-9690 or visit texasbar.com/lris.

TEXAS LAWYER PROTECTION PLAN

The Texas Lawyer Protection Plan (TLPP) has spent four decades helping Texans with adoptions, civil and criminal

CONTACT INFORMATION

LAWYER REFERRAL INFORMATION SERVICE
texasbar.com/lris
 Toll free (800) 252-9690
 30-minute consultation for \$20

TEXAS LAWYER PROTECTION PLAN
tlpp.com
 Toll free (800) 252-9346
 Enroll through employer or as individual



matters, family and juvenile matters, financial issues such as consumer protection and debt collection, and estate planning. TLPP was officially formed in 1972 by the State Bar of Texas and the Texas Legislature to provide Texans with an option for affordable and effective accessibility to the legal system.

Imagine the costs associated with a surgery or a car accident if you were without medical or car insurance? A legal benefits program like TLPP operates in the same way as a medical or vehicle insurance policy. Policy holders keep their coverage or policies active and seek services from within a network of providers when needed.

Any Texan may join TLPP. Members can enroll through their employer, if the service is offered, or as individuals. The

cost is about \$20 per month. Upon enrollment, more than 15 legal benefits become available to members and their families. For example, members can receive up to four hours annually of preventive legal services, such as legal advice, negotiations, correspondence, and document preparation.

TLPP members are in every corner of Texas and are connected to a network of nearly 1,000 attorneys throughout the state. Panel attorneys assist TLPP members just as they assist their other clients — from advice and consultation to representation and even up through major trial — but bill TLPP rather than billing the TLPP client.

Ignoring legal problems or attempting to solve them without the aid of a lawyer

often has negative and compounding consequences. TLPP offers its members the opportunity to resolve their legal issues or help prevent them in the first place.

For more information about the Texas Legal Protection Plan, visit tlpp.org or call (800) 252-9346. ✦

LISA ZVONEK is director of the State Bar's Lawyer Information Referral Service (LRIS).

STEPHANIE DODGE SMITH is the educational outreach director of the Texas Legal Protection Plan.



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