



How to Hire the Right Attorney A Guide for Survivors Who Need Real Answers



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Disclaimer

This guide was created to help survivors understand the justice system in clear, human language. It pulls from publicly available information, legal frameworks, and survivor-centered best practices. While every effort was made to ensure accuracy, laws change, procedures vary by state, and every case is unique. This guide is Not legal advice.

It does not replace an attorney, advocate, therapist, or crisis professional.

Reading this guide does not create an attorney–client, advocate–client, or professional relationship of any kind.

If you are considering taking legal action, consult with a licensed attorney in your state. If you are in danger, contact local law enforcement or a crisis hotline.

Any examples of attorney types, fees, or hiring recommendations in this guide are for informational purposes only and should not be interpreted as legal advice or a recommendation of any specific attorney or law firm.

Our Purpose

The Novel Advocate exists to make sure survivors are heard, seen, and never silenced again.

This guide was built to:

- Help you understand the criminal and civil justice systems
- Explain your rights in plain language
- Show you what options may exist after harm
- Help you advocate for yourself with clarity and confidence
- Support the people who support survivors

You deserve answers.

You deserve clarity.

You deserve to move forward without fear.

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PART I

Understanding the Legal Landscape

Includes:

- Why Hiring the Right Attorney Matters
- When You Need a Lawyer
- Understanding Attorney Types

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Why Hiring the Right Attorney Matters

Choosing the ***right*** attorney is not just a legal decision. It is a safety decision, an emotional decision, and a practical decision. The person you hire will be guiding you through some of the most stressful moments of your life. They will see evidence that is personal, painful, and private. They will speak for you in rooms most people never enter.

So you need someone who is the right fit... not just someone with a law degree.

Hiring the right attorney matters because:

1. Not all attorneys are the same or trained for your type of case.

A criminal lawyer cannot handle a divorce.

A divorce lawyer cannot take a medical malpractice case.

A Personal Injury lawyer is not the same as a civil rights lawyer.

Choosing the wrong type of attorney can delay your case, waste money, or even damage your chances of success.

2. The right attorney protects your rights from the very beginning.

Once you are in the legal system, things move fast.

Deadlines appear.

Documents need to be filed.

Evidence has to be preserved immediately.

A good attorney won't just react to problems...they prevent them.



Why Hiring the Right Attorney Matters

3. Your attorney is your voice when you cannot speak for yourself.

Whether you are dealing with a lawsuit, a criminal charge, a divorce, a custody issue, or a wrongful injury...your attorney is the person who stands in the middle of the chaos and says:

“This is my client. These are their rights. This is what we are demanding.”
You deserve someone who represents you with confidence and clarity.

4. The right attorney understands trauma and safety.

Survivors often face:

- fear
- anxiety
- shame
- overwhelm
- retaliation
- confusion
- pressure from the other side

A trauma-aware attorney won't dismiss you, talk over you, or make you feel small. They listen.

They explain things without judgment. And they respect your boundaries.

5. A good attorney keeps you informed, not in the dark.

You should never feel like:

- You don't know what's happening
- You don't understand your case
- You're being pressured to settle
- Your emails go unanswered
- You're being rushed
- You're being talked to like a child

Communication is Everything.



Why Hiring the Right Attorney Matters

6. The wrong attorney can cost you time, money, and peace.

Hiring someone who doesn't understand your case can lead to:

- Delays
- Mistakes
- Missed deadlines
- Wrongful advice
- Unnecessary conflict
- Damaged evidence
- settlements that are far too low

This guide exists so you don't end up there.

7. The right attorney empowers you.

Survivors often face:

The right lawyer doesn't take over your life.

They partner with you.

They give you options.

They explain consequences.

They make sure you understand your choices.

And most *importantly*...

they make sure you stay in control of your own case.

The bottom line:

Hiring the right attorney can change the entire trajectory of your case.

It can protect your future, your finances, your safety, and your voice.

You deserve someone who is not only qualified...but also aligned with your values, your needs, and your healing.

Communication is Everything.



When You Need a Lawyer

Most people wait too long to hire an attorney.

Not because they're careless... but because the legal system feels intimidating, confusing, or expensive.

Survivors especially tend to “wait and see,” hoping things will calm down on their own.

But there are moments in life when having the right attorney is not optional. It is ***essential***.

In the following pages these are the situations where you should strongly consider getting a lawyer involved, even if you aren't sure what type of attorney you need yet.

1. When someone files a lawsuit against you

If you are served with legal papers, you must respond by a deadline.

Missing it can mean losing automatically.

An attorney can help protect your rights and prevent costly mistakes.

2. When you want to sue someone

If you were harmed physically, emotionally, financially, or reputationally, a lawyer can help you understand whether you have a claim and how strong it is.

Civil attorneys handle cases like:

- Assault or violence
- Stalking or harassment
- Defamation
- Personal Injury
- landlord negligence
- professional misconduct
- medical malpractice
- wrongful death
- sexual assault or abuse



When You Need a Lawyer

3. When you're being investigated for a crime

Even innocent people need a criminal defense attorney.

Police investigations can move quickly, and anything you say can be misinterpreted or used against you.

A criminal lawyer protects your rights from day one.

4. When you've been arrested or charged

You should never face the criminal system alone.

A defense attorney helps with:

- Bond
- Court deadlines
- Negotiations
- Plea decisions
- Evidence review
- Trial preparation

Your future, reputation, and freedom are too important to gamble with.

5. When you're dealing with divorce or custody issues

Family law is emotional, complex, and often messy.

You need an attorney if you're facing:

- Divorce
- Domestic violence injunctions
- Safety concerns involving children
- Custody battles
- Parenting plan disputes
- A high-conflict ex
- Child support issues

A family law attorney helps protect your rights and your peace.



When You Need a Lawyer

6. When you've suffered a serious injury

If someone's negligence caused an injury — even if it wasn't a crime — a Personal Injury attorney can help with:

- Medical bills
- Long-term impact
- Lost wages
- Pain and suffering

Insurance companies are trained to minimize payouts.
You need someone trained to maximize them.

7. When you believe a doctor, therapist, or provider harmed you

Medical malpractice and mental health provider misconduct are complicated. These cases require specialized attorneys who understand:

- Medical records
- Expert witnesses
- Standards of care
- State regulations

If the harm involved abuse, exploitation, or boundary violations, a trauma-aware attorney is even more important.

8. When dealing with elder abuse or nursing home neglect

If a loved one is being mistreated in a facility, an elder law or nursing home attorney can help with:

- Injury cases
- Wrongful death
- Safety concerns
- Neglect
- Facility violations

These cases should never be handled alone.



When You Need a Lawyer

9. When someone dies and you must handle their estate

You may need an estate planning or probate attorney if you're dealing with:

- Wills
- Guardianship
- Disputes Among Family Members
- Trusts
- Property Distribution

A lawyer can help you navigate the legal details while you're grieving.

10. When your safety, finances, or future are on the line

If a situation feels too big, too emotional, or too legally complicated — that is your sign.

*Hiring an attorney is not admitting defeat.
It is choosing protection, clarity, and support.*

The bottom line

You shouldn't wait until things fall apart to get legal help.

You get an attorney when you:

- Feel overwhelmed
- Feel pressured
- Feel unsafe
- Feel outmatched
- Feel confused
- Or feel like the situation is bigger than you

Your job is not to navigate the system alone.

Your job is to protect yourself.

Let an attorney help you do that.



How to Find a Lawyer

When life gets complicated and you realize you need legal help, the hardest part is often knowing where to begin.

You're not expected to figure it all out alone.

Here are a few grounded, trustworthy places to start:

- A lawyer you've worked with in the past
- Recommendations from people you genuinely trust
- Verified online directories or bar association lists
- Referrals from churches, advocacy programs, or community support services
- Your state's official Lawyer Referral Service

A Lawyer Referral Service is one of the safest places to start because it only includes licensed attorneys in good standing.

It doesn't choose your lawyer for you, but it gives you a filtered list so you're not left sifting through random ads or risky online listings.



Understanding Attorney Types

The legal world has a lot of titles, specialties, and confusing language. But here's the truth...

Most people don't know which type of attorney they actually need until someone explains it clearly.

This section breaks it down in simple terms so you can pick the right kind of lawyer the first time.

1. Civil Attorneys

Civil attorneys handle cases where someone is harmed and seeks compensation or accountability — not jail time.

Civil lawyers take cases like:

- Assault or battery
- Harassment or Stalking
- Sexual Assault
- Wrongful Death
- Defamation
- Landlord Negligence
- Personal Injury
- Professional Misconduct
- Negligent Security
- Fraud or Financial Harm

If your goal is **justice, accountability, or financial recovery**, this is the kind of attorney you want.

2. Criminal Defense Attorneys

These attorneys defend people who are being investigated, charged, or arrested for a crime.

You need a criminal defense lawyer when:

- Police want to question you
- You are under investigation
- You're facing charges
- You've been arrested
- You've been wrongly accused

Even innocent people need legal protection.
One wrong statement can change everything.



Understanding Attorney Types

3. Family Law Attorneys

Family law attorneys handle emotionally heavy situations involving family relationships and home life.

They help with:

- Divorce
- Custody
- Parenting Plans
- Child Support
- Alimony
- Domestic Violence Injunctions
- High-conflict ex partners
- Relocation with children

If it involves family, children, or safety at home, a family lawyer is the right choice.

4. Personal Injury Attorneys

These attorneys handle injuries caused by another person's carelessness or negligence.

They help with:

- Car accidents
- Dog Bites
- Negligent landlords
- Slip and Falls
- Unsafe Property Conditions
- Work-Related Injuries (Non-Workers Comp)

Personal Injury attorneys often work on contingency, meaning they only get paid if you win.

5. Medical Malpractice Attorneys

This is a highly *specialized* field.

These attorneys take cases involving harm caused by a medical provider who failed to meet the standard of care.

They handle situations like:

- surgical errors
- medication errors
- mental health provider misconduct
- misdiagnoses
- anesthesia mistakes
- therapist exploitation or boundary violations
- birth injuries

These cases require expert witnesses and detailed evidence, so choosing the right attorney is crucial.



Understanding Attorney Types

6. Nursing Home and Elder Abuse Attorneys

These attorneys focus on protecting older adults in care facilities.

They take cases involving:

- neglect
- physical abuse
- emotional abuse
- unexplained injuries
- bed sores
- medication errors
- wrongful death
- unsafe facility conditions

If your loved one is in danger or harmed in a facility, this is the right kind of lawyer.

7. Estate Planning and Probate Attorneys

These attorneys help with:

- wills
- trusts
- probate court
- powers of attorney
- guardianship
- inheritance disputes
- managing a loved one's estate after death

If someone has passed away or you need to prepare for the future, start here.

8. Other Helpful Attorney Types

Depending on your situation, you may also come across:

- immigration attorneys
- employment law attorneys
- civil rights attorneys
- business or contract attorneys
- real estate attorneys
- insurance attorneys
- appellate attorneys

The bottom line:

Different attorneys handle different problems.

Choosing the right type of lawyer is the first step toward getting the help, protection, and clarity you deserve.



How Consults Work

A consultation is your chance to meet the attorney, share a little about your situation, and decide whether this is someone you trust to handle something important in your life.

Think of it as interviewing **them**, not impressing them. Most people don't know what to expect, so here's exactly how consults usually work.

Many attorneys offer a free consultation

Most civil, Personal Injury, and even criminal defense attorneys will:

- Meet with you for free
- Hear the basics of your situation
- Tell you whether they can help
- Explain what comes next

Family law and estate planning attorneys sometimes charge for consults, but not always.

If there is a fee, they will tell you upfront.

You do not need your whole story prepared

A consult is not the full case review.

You only need to share:

- What happened
- Who was involved
- When it happened
- What outcome you're hoping for

Keep it simple. You're not presenting evidence.

You're just giving enough detail so the attorney understands the situation.



How Consults Work

The attorney will ask questions to learn the basics

You may be asked about:

- safety concerns
- timelines
- injuries
- documents you have
- whether there is a criminal case
- any past or ongoing legal matters
- your goals
- your biggest worries

This helps them understand the legal path ahead.

They will tell you what type of case you may have

A good attorney will explain:

- whether your issue is civil, criminal, or both
- if you are within the statute of limitations
- whether they have handled similar cases
- what challenges your case may have

And they should explain everything in human language — not legal jargon.

They will discuss fees and costs upfront

Depending on the type of attorney, they may tell you:

- contingency (no upfront fee)
- hourly rate
- flat fee
- what costs you're responsible for
- how billing works
- what happens if the case loses

Any attorney who is vague or avoids talking about money... is a red flag.



How Consults Work

The attorney will ask questions to learn the basics

This is your time to evaluate THEM

A consultation is not about whether you're good enough for the lawyer.

It's about whether the lawyer is good enough for you.

Pay attention to how they make you feel:

- Do they listen?
- Do they interrupt?
- Do they explain things clearly?
- Do they make you feel rushed?
- Do they talk down to you?
- Do they seem organized and confident?
- Do they respect your boundaries?

**Your
comfort
matters.**





How Consults Work

The attorney will ask questions to learn the basics

You are not obligated to hire them

You can meet with:

- two attorneys
- five attorneys
- ten attorneys

Until you find the one who fits.

This is normal. Professionals expect it

You don't owe an explanation if you decide not to move forward.

A simple

**“Thank you for your time, but I am pursuing other options”
is enough.**





How Consults Work

The attorney will ask questions to learn the basics

After the consult, the next steps should be clear

You should walk away knowing:

- whether they can take your case
 - what the next steps would be
- what documents or information they need
 - what the timeframe looks like
 - how to contact them
- how to proceed if you want to hire them

If you leave confused... that's a sign.

Bottom line

A consult is where clarity begins.

It's a conversation, not a test.

It's the moment where you decide whether this person is going to walk beside you through something heavy... or whether you need to keep looking.

You deserve an attorney who listens, respects you, explains things clearly, and understands what you're fighting for.



How Fees Work

Hiring an attorney can feel intimidating, especially when you don't know what things cost.

The good news is that every attorney must tell you how they charge before you agree to anything.

There are only a few common ways attorneys bill, and once you understand them, everything becomes much clearer.



Contingency Fees

This is the most common fee structure in cases involving:

- Personal Injury
- Medical Malpractice
- Civil Cases Involving Harm or Negligence
- Wrongful Death
- Nursing Home Abuse

Contingency means:

You do not pay upfront.

The attorney only gets paid if they win or settle your case.

Their fee comes from a percentage of the recovery — often 30 to 40 percent depending on the case and the stage of litigation.

What you still might pay for (depending on the firm):

- Filing Fees
- Depositions
- Travel
- Expert Witnesses
- Records Retrieval
- Medical Record Costs

Some firms cover these costs upfront and subtract them later. Others require payment along the way.

Always ask: “Do costs come out before or after your percentage?”

This one detail can change your final payout significantly.

How Fees Work



Hourly Billing

Attorneys who handle criminal defense, family law, estate, and business matters often charge by the hour.

Hourly fees can range from:

- \$150–\$300 for less experienced attorneys
- \$300–\$600 for experienced attorneys
- \$600+ for specialists or metropolitan areas

You'll likely be asked to pay a retainer, which acts as a prepaid deposit.

The attorney bills their time against this amount.

When the retainer runs low, they ask you to refill it.

Hourly billing is common for:

- Criminal Defense
- Divorce
- Custody Disputes
- Estate Planning
- Probate
- Guardianship
- Civil Defense
- Complex or Ongoing Legal Matters

Flat Fees

Some attorneys charge one set price for predictable tasks.

Examples:

- Drafting a Will
- Creating a Trust
- Writing a Contract
- Uncontested Divorces
- Simple Guardianship Petitions

Hybrid Fees

Some cases use a mix, such as:

- A Small Upfront Fee Plus Contingency
- Reduced Hourly Plus Percentage of Recovery
- Hybrid Models For Civil Rights or Complex Litigation

Not common, but important to be aware of.



How Fees Work

Questions You Should Always Ask

These are essential and should be on your checklist page:

- ✓ What type of fee structure do you use for my case?
- ✓ What is your contingency percentage?
- ✓ What costs am I responsible for?
- ✓ Do costs come out before or after your percentage?
- ✓ Do you offer payment plans?
- ✓ Is there a retainer? How much?
- ✓ How do you bill your time?
- ✓ How often will I receive billing statements?
- ✓ Will I be charged for emails, phone calls, or texts?
- ✓ What happens if I can't afford the next stage of litigation?

A good attorney will explain all of this clearly.

A bad one will try to skip or rush this part.

Bottom line

You have the right to understand every dollar you may be responsible for. Fees should never feel like a mystery or a trap.

A trustworthy attorney will make their billing structure simple, transparent, and easy to understand — before you ever sign anything.

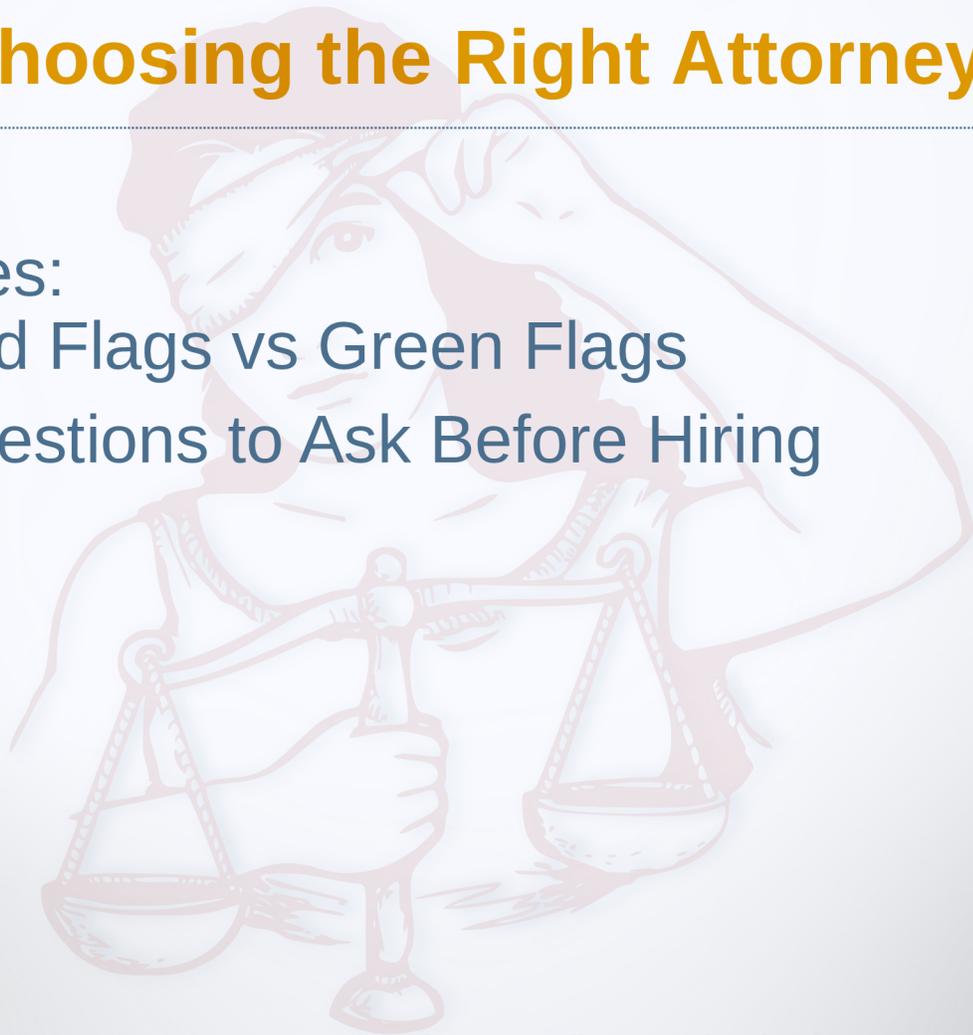


PART II

Choosing the Right Attorney

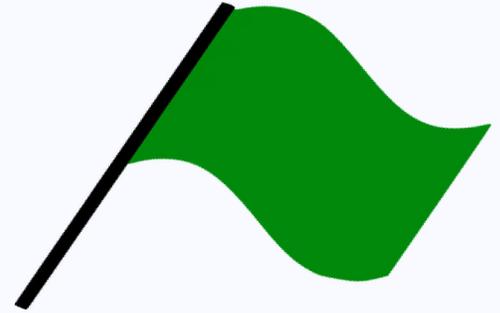
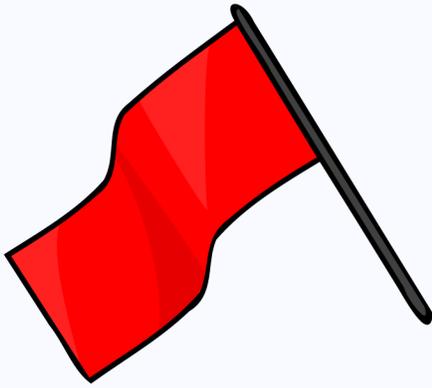
Includes:

- Red Flags vs Green Flags
- Questions to Ask Before Hiring



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Red Flags and Green Flags When Hiring an Attorney

Choosing an attorney is not just about credentials.
It's about safety, trust, communication, and alignment.

A lawyer can either protect you... or make everything harder than it needs to be.

Here's how to recognize the difference

If you see these behaviors, pause... or walk away completely.

1. They make promises or “guarantee” an outcome.

No attorney can promise a win, a settlement amount, or a dismissal. Anyone who does is selling you fantasy, not professionalism.

2. They rush you to sign a contract

Pressure tactics are not normal.
You should never feel like you're being cornered.

3. They avoid talking about fees

If they're vague about money, percentages, or costs...that's intentional. And dangerous.

4. They interrupt you or talk over you

If they can't listen during the consult, they won't listen later when it matters.

5. They dismiss your trauma or act annoyed by emotion.

If they roll their eyes, minimize your experience, or tell you to “calm down”...leave immediately.

6. They don't explain things clearly

If you feel more confused after talking to them, that is a sign of poor communication — or poor integrity.

7. They barely let you speak

An attorney who dominates the conversation isn't building a partnership. They're building control.

8. They have no experience with your type of case

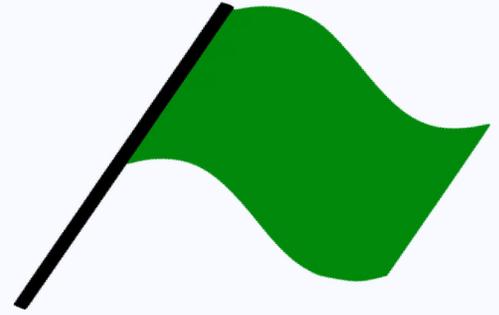
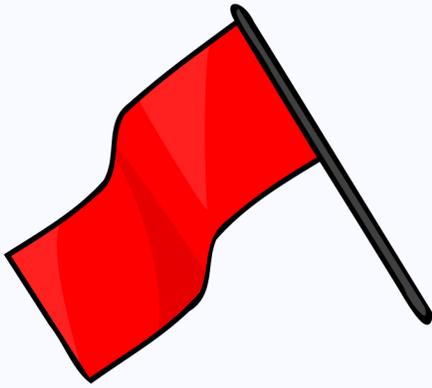
If they hesitate, deflect, or claim they “can figure it out”... that's a hard no.

9. They seem disorganized or scattered

Missed emails, vague answers, or sloppy office systems are major red flags.

10. Something feels “off”

Your instincts matter. You don't need proof to walk away.



Red Flags and Green Flags When Hiring an Attorney

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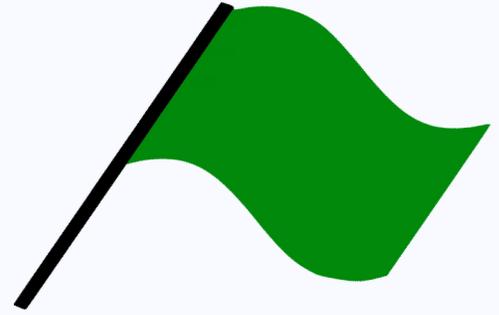
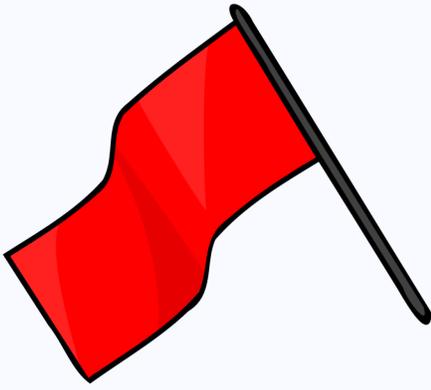
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Red Flags and Green Flags When Hiring an Attorney

A lawyer can either protect you... or make everything harder than it needs to be.

Here's how to recognize the difference

These signs show you're talking to an attorney who respects you and knows what they're doing.

1. They listen fully before giving advice

They make space for you to explain without rushing, interrupting, or judging.

2. They explain the law in plain language

If they can make complex things easy to understand, they're confident in their knowledge.

3. They talk openly about fees, costs, and contracts

No surprises. No hiding. Transparency is a must.

4. They have real experience with cases like yours

They can point to examples, outcomes, and past work... without bragging or exaggerating.

5. They respect your boundaries

They ask what communication style works best for you.

They don't push, pressure, or demand.

6. They answer your questions patiently

No eye rolls. No irritation.

No "you don't need to worry about that." Just clarity.

7. They make you feel safe and respected

You feel heard, believed, and supported — not judged or dismissed.

8. They tell you the strengths AND weaknesses of your case

Honesty is a green flag.

Attorneys who sugarcoat things cannot be trusted.

9. They define next steps clearly

A good attorney leaves you thinking, "OK, I understand what happens next."

10. You feel comfortable with them

Not intimidated. Not pressured. Not small.

Just... safe.

Bottom line

You are not choosing a mechanic.

You are choosing someone who may shape your future, protect your rights, and walk beside you through some of your hardest moments.

 **Red flags matter.**  **Green flags matter.**
And your comfort matters most of all.

You deserve an attorney who respects your story and fights for it clearly, compassionately, and without ego.



Questions to Ask Before Hiring an Attorney

Here's how to recognize the difference

These signs show you're talking to an attorney who respects you and knows what they're doing.

You are not auditioning.

You are interviewing them.

The right attorney will welcome your questions.

The wrong one will get irritated by them — which tells you everything you need to know.

1. Experience & Case Fit

- **How many cases like mine have you handled?**

If the number is vague or they dodge... that's a clue.

- **What were the outcomes of those cases?**

You're looking for honesty, not bragging.

- **Do you specialize in this type of law?**

Experience matters. Comfort does too.

- **Have you worked with survivors or trauma-related cases before?**

This one is huge. **Watch how they react.**



2. Communication

- **How will we communicate? Email, phone, text?**

You deserve a communication style that fits your needs.

- **How often will I receive updates?**

Weekly, monthly, only when something changes... you need clarity.

- **Who will I be speaking with most — you or your staff?**

Some firms pass everything to paralegals. You should know that upfront.

- **How quickly do you usually respond to messages?**

A respectful attorney has boundaries and reliability.



Questions to Ask Before Hiring an Attorney

Here's how to recognize the difference

These signs show you're talking to an attorney who respects you and knows what they're doing.

3. Fees, Costs & Billing

• **What is your fee structure for my type of case?**

Hourly, flat fee, contingency, hybrid...No surprises.

• **What costs might I be responsible for?**

Filing fees? Experts? Records? Depositions? Travel?

• **Do you specialize in this type of law?**

Experience matters. Comfort does too.

• **Do costs come out before or after your percentage?**

In contingency cases this detail is everything.

• **Will I receive itemized billing statements?**

Transparency is respect.



4. Strategy & Expectations

• **What is your honest opinion about my case — strengths AND weaknesses?**

A good attorney tells the truth gently.

A bad one tells you what you want to hear.

• **What are the possible outcomes?**

They should give a range, not a guarantee.

• **How long do cases like mine typically take?**

Timelines vary — but they should be able to explain the process.

• **What do you need from me as a client?**

Communication? Documents? Evidence?

Honesty? This question builds partnership.

• **How do you handle cases where the other side is aggressive or hostile?**

Their confidence matters. Their temperament matters more.





Questions to Ask Before Hiring an Attorney

Here's how to recognize the difference

These signs show you're talking to an attorney who respects you and knows what they're doing.

5. Boundaries & Fit

- How do you support clients who are dealing with trauma or anxiety?

This tells you everything about their emotional intelligence.

- How do you prefer clients reach you in emergencies?

You need to know their version of "urgent."

- If we disagree on strategy, how do you handle that?

You're not hiring a dictator.

You're hiring a professional.

6. Before You End the Consult... Ask This:

- What are the next steps if I choose to hire you?

A good attorney will list everything clearly:

- paperwork
- deadlines
- documents
- strategy
- expectations

If they can't explain the next steps, they're not ready for your case.

Bottom line

Your questions are not annoying. They are necessary.



An attorney who respects you will answer clearly, patiently, and without defensiveness.

An attorney who gets irritated, vague, dismissive, or controlling is not your person — keep looking.

You deserve representation that protects your rights and respects your voice.



PART III

Trauma-Informed & Client Protections

Includes:

- Trauma-Informed Considerations
- How to Fire an Attorney / When to Switch
- How to Request Your Client File
- Protecting Your Case
- When to Get a Second Opinion
- Your Rights as a Client

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Trauma-Informed Considerations

Because the legal system is already overwhelming. Your nervous system deserves support, not pressure.

When you are walking through trauma, your brain is doing two jobs at once. It is trying to survive what happened and also trying to make decisions about what happens next. That split focus can make legal situations feel harder than they already are.

A trauma informed approach reminds you of a few things:



You are allowed to slow down

You do not need to make decisions on the spot.

You can ask for time.

You can say, "I need to think about that."

You get to bring someone with you

If talking to an attorney triggers anxiety or dissociation, you can bring a support person. That does not make you weak. That makes you smart.



You can ask for things to be repeated

Attorneys talk fast. They use legal terms you may not know. Trauma fog can make it hard to process information.

You can ask them to explain it again.

Or write it down.

Or email you a summary.





Trauma-Informed Considerations

Your body's reactions are not "overreactions"

Shaking, sweating, forgetting details, or zoning out are normal trauma responses. You are not being dramatic. You are not being irrational. Your nervous system is trying to protect you.

You deserve an attorney who is patient, respectful, and steady

If someone makes you feel rushed, judged, dismissed, or intimidated... that is not trauma informed care. You deserve someone who understands that trauma changes the way memories, decisions, and communication work.

You can set boundaries with your attorney

You can tell them:

- I prefer email over phone calls
- I need advance notice before meetings

- I do not want surprise decisions made without me
- I need things explained clearly



**Your boundaries are a strength.
Not an inconvenience.**



How to Fire an Attorney (or When to Switch)

**Leaving an attorney is not a betrayal.
It is protecting your case and your peace.**

Switching attorneys does not make you difficult.

It does not ruin your case.

It does not make you a “problem client.”

It simply means your needs are not being met.

Here are the clearest signs that it is time to change attorneys:

How to Fire an Attorney: Step by Step

1. Put it in writing Keep it short: “I am ending our attorney client relationship effective today. Please provide my file and billing summary.”
2. Request your full case file
You always have the right to it.
They cannot hold it hostage.
3. Check your retainer agreement
There may be instructions for ending representation.
Follow them and keep a copy.
4. Hire a new attorney before important deadlines
If you have a court date coming up, do not wait until the last minute.
5. Do not explain more than you need to
You do not owe a long story.
You are allowed to protect your peace.

Consistent lack of communication

If you cannot reach them for weeks. If they ignore emails. If you are always chasing them down.

That is a red flag.

You feel unheard or dismissed

If your concerns are brushed off or minimized...
If they make you feel stupid for asking questions...

That is not acceptable.

You do not feel safe or supported

The way an attorney talks to you matters.

Tone matters.

Respect matters.

If your body tightens every time you think about calling them, listen to that.

They make decisions without your permission

Attorneys cannot sign agreements for you or accept offers without your consent. If they do, that is a serious breach.

You feel pressured to settle or drop things

A good attorney gives you options, not ultimatums.



How to Safely Switch Attorneys (Protecting yourself, your case, and your peace)

Sometimes the bravest thing you'll do in your legal process is deciding you deserve better representation.

Switching attorneys is not dramatic. It's not wrong. It's not disloyal. It's simply choosing someone who is aligned with your safety, your goals, and your values.

Here's how to switch without disrupting your case.

1. Pause before making the decision

Before you move forward, check in with yourself:

- Has communication consistently been poor?
- Has your attorney dismissed or minimized your concerns?
- Do you feel unsafe, pressured, or confused?
- Are deadlines being missed?
- Is your gut telling you something is off?

If yes... it's time to consider transitioning.

You're not "overreacting."

Your instincts matter.

2. Secure new representation before you fire your current attorney

This protects you from:

- Gaps in deadlines
- Missing important hearings
- Losing momentum in your case
- Being left unrepresented during a critical moment

Ask your potential new attorney:



"If I terminate my attorney, can you take over immediately?"

A good attorney will guide you step-by-step.

Do not tell your current attorney you are considering leaving.

Just like you don't tell a landlord you're moving out before you secure a new place... you don't tell an attorney until everything is safely lined up.

This avoids:

- Sudden withdrawal
- Delays or lost documents
- Sabotage of your case
- Tension during active work



How to Safely Switch Attorneys (Protecting yourself, your case, and your peace)

4. Request your client file (your legal right)

You don't need to give reasons. You don't need to justify anything.

Use simple wording:

“_____”

“I am requesting a complete copy of my client file. Please provide this electronically. Thank you.”

- Make this request in writing.
- Date it.
- Save a copy.

5. Send a short, clear termination letter

It doesn't need emotion or explanation.

Something like:

“_____”

“Thank you for your work on my case. I am ending representation effective immediately. Please forward my complete client file to me and to my new attorney upon request.”

- That's it.
- No details.
- No blame.
- No argument.

6. Protect your evidence and communication



How to Safely Switch Attorneys (Protecting yourself, your case, and your peace)

7. Expect professionalism – even if they’re surprised

A good attorney will:

- Acknowledge your message
- Provide your file
- Withdraw appropriately
- Respect your boundaries

8. You are allowed to leave any time

You do not owe:

- Loyalty
- Apologies
- Justifications
- Emotional processing
- A meeting
- “One last conversation”

You deserve representation that supports your voice.

If you feel unsafe, unheard, or minimized... you have the right to walk away.

“

Switching attorneys is not failure.

It is self-protection.

It is clarity.

It is strength.

Sincerely,

The Novel Advocate



How to Request Your Client File

(What to ask for, how to ask, and what you are entitled to)

Your “client file” is everything your attorney has created, gathered, or received while representing you.

It belongs to you — not them.

Requesting your file is straightforward... but survivors are often never told how.

Let's fix that.

1. You do not need a reason

You can request your file at any time.

You don't need to explain:

- Why
- What you're planning
- Whether you're switching attorneys
- Whether you're unhappy

You ask... they provide.

2. What should be included in your file

A complete client file typically includes:

- All documents you provided
- All pleadings, motions, and filings
- Notes from meetings
- Emails and correspondence
- Discovery items
- Evidence or exhibits
- Medical records or reports they obtained
- Contracts, agreements, retainer documents
- Billing records
- Calendars or deadlines
- Research or memos relevant to your case
- Anything they prepared on your behalf

Your file is everything needed for another attorney to step in smoothly.



How to Request Your Client File

(What to ask for, how to ask, and what you are entitled to)

Your “client file” is everything your attorney has created, gathered, or received while representing you.

It belongs to you — not them.

Requesting your file is straightforward... but survivors are often never told how.

Let's fix that.

3. What attorneys can't withhold

They cannot withhold your file because:

- You owe money
- They are upset you're leaving
- They disagree with your decision
- You didn't give them a “reason”
- They don't approve of your new attorney

They may charge **reasonable copy fees**, but most provide digital files for free.

4. How to request your file (script you can copy/paste)

EMAIL TEMPLATE

“

Hello,

I am requesting a complete copy of my client file for my personal records.

Please provide the full file in electronic format.

Thank you.

That's it.

Short.

Clear.

Unemotional.

Professional.



How to Request Your Client File

(What to ask for, how to ask, and what you are entitled to)

5. Ask for your file before ending representation

This protects you from:

- Delays
- Lost documents
- Retaliation
- Requests being ignored

Once you have your file in hand, you can safely transition.

6. What to do if they refuse or delay

This is rare, but if it happens:

- Follow up in writing
- Contact the state bar complaint department
- Ask your new attorney to request the file
- Document every interaction

Attorneys know withholding a client file is a serious ethical violation.

7. Organizing your file

Create a folder system:

- “Evidence”
- “Emails”
- “Court filings”
- “Medical records”
- “Attorney documents”
- “Notes”

Your new attorney will appreciate you more than you know.

SUMMARY

Your client file belongs to you.
Request it confidently.

You do not need permission to
access your own case.



Protecting Your Case

(Staying safe, smart, and grounded during your legal journey)

Whether you're hiring an attorney, switching attorneys, or navigating an active case...

There are simple steps you can take to protect yourself, your credibility, and the outcome of your case.

These are the tools survivors are rarely taught — and absolutely deserve to know.

1. Be careful what you post online

Screenshots live forever.

Avoid posting:

- Details about your case
- Rants about the opposing party
- Emotional reactions that can be misinterpreted
- Evidence
- Private conversations

Your attorney should be your first point of contact... not social media.

2. Save every communication

Keep records of:

- Emails
- Texts
- Call logs
- Voicemails
- Any threatening or manipulative message
- Any communication with your attorney that feels off

Documentation protects you, even when you don't realize it yet.

3. Don't contact the opposing party

Even if you're tempted to:

- Defend yourself
- Correct a lie
- Seek closure
- Ask for information
- Smooth things over

Do not do it.

Opposing counsel can twist anything you say.

Let your attorney handle all communication.

4. Follow your attorney's instructions

When they say:

- "Don't post about this"
- "Don't reach out to them"
- "Let me handle that"
- "Please stop responding to this person"

...they're protecting you, not controlling you.



Protecting Your Case

(Staying safe, smart, and grounded during your legal journey)

5. Keep your evidence safe

Store backups in:

- A password-protected folder
- A secure email
- A flash drive
- A physical binder

Do not store your evidence only on your phone.

Phones break... cases cannot.

7. Maintain your boundaries

Protect your mental health:

- Set email boundaries
- Limit legal conversations at night
- Build recovery time after meetings
- Step away when overwhelmed

You can care about your case and care about yourself at the same time.

6. Talk honestly with your attorney

Tell them:

- What scares you
- What confuses you
- What you're unsure about
- What feels overwhelming

Honesty helps them protect you better.

You don't need to act "fine."

You need to be supported.

8. Remember: you don't have to be perfect

Survivors often think:

- "If I say the wrong thing, I'll ruin everything."
- "If I react emotionally, I'll look unstable."
- "If I don't have every document, I'll lose."

None of this is true.

Human reactions do not sabotage cases.

Dishonesty does.

Silence does.

Lack of support does.

You are allowed to be human and still pursue justice.

Protecting your case is really about protecting you.

Your clarity, your evidence, your boundaries, and your peace all matter.



When to Get a Second Opinion

(Because choosing the right attorney should never be a guess or a gamble)

***You are allowed to get more than one opinion.**

You are allowed to compare.

You are allowed to take your time.**

A second opinion doesn't mean something is wrong.

It means you're being thoughtful, responsible, and intentional about protecting your case and your peace.

Here's when you should absolutely consider getting one.

1. When something feels "off" but you can't explain why

Sometimes your intuition knows what your brain hasn't sorted out yet.

Red flags often start as:

- A weird feeling
- A moment of discomfort
- Confusion you can't shake
- A sense of being rushed or minimized

You don't need "proof."
Your instincts count.

3. When you don't understand the plan

IIIIf the strategy feels unclear... or the attorney can't explain things in a way that makes sense to you... you deserve another perspective.

You are the client.

Understanding is part of your rights.

2. When the attorney dismisses your concerns

If you hear things like:

- "That's not important."
- "You're worrying too much."
- "Let's not focus on that right now."
- "Just trust me."

...then it's time to check with someone else.

Expertise should never sound like dismissal.

4. When communication is slow, inconsistent, or confusing

Your case is important.
Your time is valuable.

If:

- messages go unanswered
- updates never come
- deadlines sneak up on you
- you feel ignored

...you should get another opinion.

This isn't being "difficult."

This is protecting your future.



When to Get a Second Opinion

(Because choosing the right attorney should never be a guess or a gamble)

***You are allowed to get more than one opinion.**

5. When the attorney pressures you to sign quickly

If they say things like:

- “You need to sign today.”
- “Don’t talk to anyone else.”
- “Trust me, I know what I’m doing.”

...slow down.

Pressure is not professionalism.

A good attorney will encourage you to take your time and compare options

7. When your trauma is not respected

This is a major reason many survivors look elsewhere

If the attorney:

- talks over you
- gets irritated with your emotions
- doesn’t understand trauma responses
- doesn’t respect your boundaries
- makes you feel small

...you deserve someone who treats you with dignity.

6. When the fees aren’t clear

If the attorney cannot explain:

- your retainer
- hourly rates
- costs
- billing structure
- what is and isn’t included

...then you absolutely need a second opinion.

Money conversations should not feel scary or confusing.

8. When you want confirmation that you’re on the right path

Even if you like your attorney...

Even if you feel safe...

Even if everything seems fine...

You can still get a second opinion just to feel more confident and informed.

Good attorneys do not get offended by comparison.

Great attorneys encourage it.



When to Get a Second Opinion

(Because choosing the right attorney should never be a guess or a gamble)

***You are allowed to get more than one opinion.**

9. When the case is complex, sensitive, or high-stakes

Any situation involving:

- medical malpractice
- wrongful death
- large damages
- trauma
- institutional misconduct
- complicated evidence

...often benefits from multiple perspectives.

A second opinion ensures you're not missing options you didn't know existed.

Bottom Line

Getting a second opinion is not disloyal, rude, or unnecessary.

It is smart, empowering, and completely normal.

You get to explore your options.

You get to clarify your concerns.

You get to choose the attorney who aligns with your needs, your boundaries, and your healing.

And you deserve nothing less.



Your Rights as a Client

Most people never hear this part.
But these are your boundaries and your protections.

Here are the most important rights you should know:

You have the right to clear communication

You deserve updates.

You deserve explanations.

You deserve to know what is happening in your case.

You have the right to ask questions

Any question.

As many times as you need.

There is no “stupid” question when you are navigating trauma and legal decisions.

You have the right to honesty about fees

You should know:

- What you are being charged for
- How billing works
- What the retainer covers
- What extra costs might come up

There should never be financial surprises.



Your Rights as a Client

You have the right to a copy of everything

Court filings.

Evidence.

Letters.

Your entire file is yours.

Emails.

You have the right to confidentiality

Your attorney cannot talk about your case to anyone without your permission.

You have the right to competent representation

Your attorney should know what they are doing.

They should not take cases they are not qualified for.

You have the right to be respected

No yelling.

No dismissiveness

No shaming.

No intimidation.

Ever.

You have the right to feel safe

If an attorney makes you feel uncomfortable, uneasy, pressured, or scared, you can leave and choose someone else.



PART IV

Survivor-Centered Advocacy & Legal Resources

Includes:

- National Hotlines and Support Resources
- Understanding Reporting Requirements
- Self-Care During Legal Processes

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National Hotlines and Support Resources

National Domestic Violence Hotline

1.800.799.7233
Thehotline.org

Free, confidential support 24/7 for anyone experiencing abuse.

RAINN – National Sexual Assault Hotline

1.800.656.4673
rainn.org

Crisis counseling, advocacy, and local referrals.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

Call or text 988
988lifeline.org

Immediate emotional support for distress, mental health crises, or suicidal thoughts.

National Center for Victims of Crime

victimsofcrime.org

Legal information, victim compensation info, and state resources.



Legal Assistance and Referral Options

State Bar Association Referral Services

Most state bars offer free or low-cost referrals to licensed attorneys in your area.

Local Legal Aid Organizations

Provide free or reduced price assistance based on need.

Victim Compensation Programs

Every state has a crime victim compensation program that may help with medical bills, counseling, lost wages, and more.

National Crime Victim Bar Association

Helps connect crime victims with civil attorneys who understand trauma and victimization.



State Bar Association Referral Services

1. State Bar Association Referral Services

Every state has a Bar Association that licenses attorneys. Many of them also run a Lawyer Referral Service.

What they do

- Ask you a few basic questions about your situation
- Match you with an attorney who handles that area of law
- Sometimes guarantee a reduced cost first consultation
- Make sure the lawyer is in good standing with the bar

How to use them

- Search online for “Your State + Bar Lawyer Referral Service”
- Call or submit an online form
- Be ready to give a short summary of what happened, where it happened, and whether there are any upcoming court dates

What to ask when you call

- “Is there a fee for the referral or first consult”
- “How long is the consultation”
- “Will I speak with the attorney or just staff”
- “What type of law does this attorney focus on”

Pros

- You know the attorney is licensed and active
- You are not just picking from random ads
- Often a simple way to find someone in your county who actually handles your type of case

Limitations

- They do not screen for trauma informed care
- They may not have deep lists for very specialized cases
- You still need to interview the attorney yourself



Local And Regional Bar Associations

In many areas there are also county or city bar associations. Some of them run their own referral panels for:

- family law
- criminal defense
- **Personal Injury**
- landlord tenant
- elder law

These can be especially helpful if you live in a larger city or a county with an active legal community.

You search for them the same way... "County Name Bar Association" or "City Name Bar Association."



Legal Aid And Nonprofit Law Organizations

If you cannot afford a private attorney, legal aid may be an option.

What they do

- Provide free or low cost help based on income and case type
- Often focus on civil issues like housing, family law, public benefits, safety, and protection orders
- Sometimes provide full representation, sometimes advice clinics only

How to find them

- Search “legal aid + your county or state”
- Ask local domestic violence shelters or victim advocate offices who they refer to
- Check your state bar website for “pro bono and legal aid” pages

What to ask

- “Do I meet your income guidelines”
- “What kinds of cases can you take”
- “Do you help with protection orders, crime victim issues, or malpractice”
- “If you cannot represent me, can you refer me to someone who might”

Reality check

Legal aid is a lifeline for many people, but they are often over capacity. If they say no, it is about resources, not your worth or how serious your situation is.



Victim Legal Services And Advocacy Based Programs

Some states and national organizations offer lawyers specifically for crime victims.

These programs may help with:

- asserting your rights in criminal cases
- privacy and safety concerns
- enforcing protective orders
- victim compensation appeals
- some civil options tied to the crime

Examples of where to look:

- “Victim legal services + your state”
- Your local State Attorney or District Attorney victim advocacy unit
- Statewide coalitions for domestic violence or sexual assault

These programs can often work alongside a civil attorney or criminal defense attorney, not replace them.



Civil Attorney Networks And Specialty Groups

For certain types of harm, it can help to find attorneys who focus on those cases every day.

Examples:

- **Personal Injury** and wrongful death
- medical malpractice
- Nursing Home Abuse
- civil rights or police misconduct

You can search for:

- “Your state + medical malpractice attorney”
- “Your state + Nursing Home Abuse lawyer”
- “Your state + civil rights attorney”

Then use the tools in your guide to interview them properly.

If you are dealing with harm connected to a crime, you can also look for crime victim civil attorneys through national networks and then filter by state.



Law School Clinics

If you live near a law school, check whether they have legal clinics.

These clinics sometimes offer free help in areas like:

- Housing
- Immigration
- Family law
- Civil rights
- Record Sealing or Expungement

Law students work under the supervision of licensed professors and attorneys.

The work can be very high quality, but clinics usually have limited space and very specific case types.



Checking An Attorney's Background

Wherever you find a name, always:

1. Look them up on your state bar website
 - Verify they are active
 - See if there is any public discipline

2. Read their website carefully
 - Do they actually handle your type of case
 - How long have they been practicing
 - Do they talk about trauma, survivors, or victims in a respectful way

3. Be careful with rating sites
 - Stars and reviews can be helpful, but they can also be manipulated
 - Use them as one small data point, not the final word



If You Still Cannot Find Someone

You can:

- Ask a trusted therapist, advocate, or doctor if they know any attorneys who are kind to survivors
- Call a local domestic violence center or rape crisis center and ask who they see survivors work well with
- Reach out to more than one bar referral or legal aid program
- Use your worksheets to stay organized while you keep looking



Bar Association Referral Links

Where to start when you need a lawyer and don't know who to call.

Nearly every state has a State Bar Lawyer Referral Service (LRS).

This is one of the safest and most reliable ways to find a licensed attorney who actually practices in the area of law you need.

Below is the full guide to how bar referrals work, what they offer, what to expect, and how to use them well.

What a Bar Referral Service Does

A Bar Association Referral Service will:

- Match you with a licensed attorney based on your legal issue
- Often guarantee a reduced fee consultation
- Confirm the attorney is active and in good standing
- Provide attorneys who practice in the correct legal category
- Offer options if the first attorney is not a good match

It's NOT a random list or paid ad placement.

It's a vetted, regulated resource.



What They Do NOT Do

This is important so survivors know what to expect:

- They do not give legal advice
- They do not evaluate the strength of your case
- They do not promise specific outcomes
- They do not screen for trauma-informed communication
- They cannot force an attorney to take your case

How to Use a Bar Referral Service

This is important so survivors know what to expect:

Search online:

1. “Your State Bar Lawyer Referral Service”
2. Example: Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Maryland, etc.
3. Fill out their short online form OR call directly.
4. Answer a few basic questions:
 - Type of legal issue
 - County where it occurred
 - Urgency
 - Any upcoming deadlines
5. They give you the name and contact info of an attorney.
6. You call and schedule the consult.
7. Use your worksheets to evaluate the attorney.

What to Ask When You Call the Bar

This helps survivors feel prepared:

- “Is there a fee for the referral?”
- “How long is the discounted consultation?”
- “Will I be meeting with the attorney or only staff?”
- “Does this attorney handle cases like mine?”
- “If this attorney is not a fit, can I get a second referral?”

These questions prevent surprises.



Advantages of Bar Referrals

- The attorney is licensed and verified
- No random Google results
- Helps you avoid predatory firms
- Keeps everything local to your county or region
- Gives you a safer first step when you're overwhelmed

Limitations of Bar Referrals

- They may not match you with trauma-informed attorneys
- Very specialized cases sometimes require searching beyond the referral list
- You still need to interview the attorney and decide if they fit

This is why your Worksheets and Red Flags pages matter so much.

State-By-State Referral Directories

- | | | | |
|---------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------|
| • Alabama | • Indiana | • Nebraska | • South Carolina |
| • Alaska | • Iowa | • Nevada | • South Dakota |
| • Arizona | • Kansas | • New Hampshire | • Tennessee |
| • Arkansas | • Kentucky | • New Jersey | • Texas |
| • California | • Louisiana | • New Mexico | • Utah |
| • Colorado | • Maine | • New York | • Vermont |
| • Connecticut | • Maryland | • North Carolina | • Virginia |
| • Delaware | • Massachusetts | • North Dakota | • Washington |
| • Florida | • Michigan | • Ohio | • West Virginia |
| • Georgia | • Minnesota | • Oklahoma | • Wisconsin |
| • Hawaii | • Mississippi | • Oregon | • Wyoming |
| • Idaho | • Missouri | • Pennsylvania | |
| • Illinois | • Montana | • Rhode Island | |



Understanding Reporting Requirements

(Therapists vs. Attorneys — what survivors need to know)

Why this matters

Many survivors hold back crucial information because they're scared someone will report them, judge them, or misuse what they say.

You deserve clarity so you can speak freely, safely, and with confidence.

Therapists and Counselors: What They MUST Report

Mental health providers are mandated reporters.

This means they are legally required to report situations involving:

- Current child abuse or neglect
- Current elder or vulnerable adult abuse
- Immediate danger to yourself or someone else
- Active plans to harm someone
- Sometimes domestic violence involving minors

But...

Most trauma disclosures **do NOT trigger a report.**

Talking about:

- Past abuse
- Past trauma
- Past self-harm
- Past suicidal thoughts
- Past assault
- Past violence
- does not require them to report anything.

Still, survivors often censor themselves.

That's why this next part is important...



Understanding Reporting Requirements

(Therapists vs. Attorneys — what survivors need to know)

Attorneys: What They CAN'T Report

Attorneys are not mandated reporters.

They operate under **strict confidentiality and attorney–client privilege.**

This means:

- You can tell your attorney everything
- They cannot disclose your information without your permission
- They cannot call police, DCF, or anyone else
- They cannot testify against you
- They cannot repeat what you told them
- They are legally obligated to protect your privacy

Even if you tell an attorney something uncomfortable or difficult, they still cannot report it unless YOU decide to.

This is why survivors often speak more openly to attorneys than therapists when preparing for a case.

What This Means for You

- You get to choose:
- Who you confide in
- What details feel safe to share
- When you're ready to disclose
- How much of your trauma story you want involved in your legal process

Your safety comes first.
Your comfort comes first.
Your consent comes first.

If You're Unsure What to Share

- Try asking your attorney:
- “Can you tell me what is protected by attorney–client privilege?”
- “Is anything I say here reportable?”
- “How do you protect my privacy?”

A good attorney will explain this clearly and respectfully.



Self-Care During Legal Processes

(Because your nervous system deserves support, not pressure)

**Filing a case. Interviewing attorneys. Collecting records.
It's a lot... especially when you're carrying trauma.**

This page teaches you how to protect your peace while protecting your case.

Your Trauma Reactions Are Not "In the Way"

Legal steps can trigger:

- Exhaustion
- Foggy memory
- Shaking or sweating
- Trouble making decisions
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Wanting to shut down

Nothing is wrong with you. Your body is responding to pressure, uncertainty, and reminders of what happened.

You are doing better than you think.

Build Your Support System

You don't have to walk through this alone.

- Consider:
- A trusted friend who helps you organize papers
- Someone who drives you to appointments
- A support person who sits in the waiting room
- A weekly check-in with someone grounding
- A therapist who understands legal trauma

Your strength does not come from walking alone. It comes from allowing yourself support when you need it.

Before Any Legal Meeting: Prepare Your Nervous System

Try this:

- Breathe in for 4... out for 6
- Hold something comforting in your hand
- Write down your questions ahead of time
- Set the intention: "I will go at my pace."

Grounding yourself helps your clarity return.



Self-Care During Legal Processes

(Because your nervous system deserves support, not pressure)

**Filing a case. Interviewing attorneys. Collecting records.
It's a lot... especially when you're carrying trauma.**

This page teaches you how to protect your peace while protecting your case.

After Any Legal Meeting: Give Yourself Recovery Time

Survivors often forget this part... but it's vital:

- Block an hour after the meeting
- Drink water
- Eat something comforting
- Take a walk or sit outside
- Text someone safe
- Do not jump straight back into productivity

Legal meetings can feel like reliving pieces of the trauma.

Your body needs space to come back down.

Create a "Legal Process Boundaries List"

Examples:

- "No legal phone calls after 6 PM."
- "I check emails only once a day."
- "I need updates in writing."
- "I will not discuss my case when I'm exhausted."
- "I pause before making major decisions."

You're allowed to protect your energy.

Use the Tools You Already Have

Self-care in a legal process isn't spa days and bubble baths.

It's:

- Structure
- Boundaries
- Rest
- Safety
- Predictability
- Support
- Being gentle with yourself when the process feels heavy

You're not being difficult.
You're being human.

Bottom Line

Your mental health matters as much as your legal case.
You deserve a path that supports your voice and your nervous system.
And you're doing this.
Even when it feels heavy... you're doing it.



PART V

Worksheets & Practical Tools

Practical pages you can print, fill out, and bring to your attorney.

Includes:

- Case Summary Worksheet
- Decision-Making Worksheet
- Document & Evidence Tracker
- Document & Timeline Worksheet / Evidence Tracker
- Billing & Fee Tracker
- Case Costs You May Be Responsible For
- Retainer Balance Log
- Hourly Billing Log
- Payments Made
- Questions to Ask About Billing & Conversation Log
- End-of-Case Summary



CASE SUMMARY WORKSHEET

People Involved _____

Who is on the other side of this issue? _____

(Individuals, companies, agencies) _____

- _____
- _____

Witnesses or People Who Have Important Information:

Have you worked with any attorneys before for this issue? _____ Yes _____ No

If yes, who?

Do you have any of the following?

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Text messages | <input type="checkbox"/> Police reports |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Emails | <input type="checkbox"/> Contracts or agreements |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Screenshots | <input type="checkbox"/> Court documents |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Photos or videos | <input type="checkbox"/> Financial records |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Medical records | <input type="checkbox"/> Other evidence (list): |

Where are these stored?



CASE SUMMARY WORKSHEET - Your Goals

What outcome are you hoping for?

(Examples: protection, compensation, clarity, accountability, stopping harassment, custody, etc.)

What is most important to you right now?

(Your safety... your peace... your children... your financial stability...)

Safety & Urgency

Do you feel unsafe or threatened? Yes No

If yes, explain:

Are there upcoming deadlines, court dates, or urgent matters? Yes No

If yes, list dates: _____

Questions for the Attorney



DECISION-MAKING WORKSHEET

A tool to help you choose the attorney or legal path that fits your needs.

1. What Decision Are You Making?

Briefly describe the choice you are trying to make.

Example: "Should I hire Attorney A, Attorney B, or keep looking?"

My decision:

2. What Are Your Goals?

List the outcomes you want. Place a check by the ones that matter most.

- Accountability
- Protection / Safety
- Justice
- Closure
- Financial recovery
- Clear communication
- Trauma-informed approach
- Experience with my type of case
- Something else: _____

3. What Are Your Non-Negotiables?

These are things you absolutely must have from an attorney.

Examples: transparency, respect, timely communication, honesty.

1)

2)

3)



DECISION-MAKING WORKSHEET

A tool to help you choose the attorney or legal path that fits your needs.

4. What Are Your Red Flags So Far?

List any concerns you've noticed in your consults or interactions.

- They talked over me
- They rushed the consult
- They dismissed my concerns
- They were unclear about fees
- They made guarantees
- Something felt "off"
- Other: _____

Write in any specifics:

5. What Are Your Green Flags?

List the strengths or positives you noticed.

- They listened
- They explained things clearly
- They respected my boundaries
- They understood trauma
- They had experience with my type of case
- Their staff was kind
- They did not pressure me
- Other: _____

Specifics:



DECISION-MAKING WORKSHEET

A tool to help you choose the attorney or legal path that fits your needs.

Criteria	Option 1:	Option 2:	Option 3:
Experience with cases like mine			
Communication style			
Comfort level with them			
Fee structure I understand			
Trust / intuition			
Green flags			
Red flags			



DECISION-MAKING WORKSHEET

A tool to help you choose the attorney or legal path that fits your needs.

7. What Does Your Gut Say?

Sometimes the body knows before the brain does.

My intuition tells me:

8. Next Steps

- Schedule a follow-up call
- Request a written fee agreement
- Gather documents for them
- Continue interviewing attorneys
- Make a decision by: _____
- Something else: _____



Document & Evidence Tracker

A simple way to organize what you have... and what you still need.

This worksheet helps you keep every important piece of evidence in one place.

Bring it to consults, updates, or whenever you need to check what still needs to be gathered.

Category	Description	Where It's Stored	Status	Notes
Police Reports			<input type="checkbox"/> Have <input type="checkbox"/> Need	
Medical Records			<input type="checkbox"/> Have <input type="checkbox"/> Need	
Photos / Screenshots			<input type="checkbox"/> Have <input type="checkbox"/> Need	
Text Messages / Emails			<input type="checkbox"/> Have <input type="checkbox"/> Need	
Witness Statements			<input type="checkbox"/> Have <input type="checkbox"/> Need	
Financial Records			<input type="checkbox"/> Have <input type="checkbox"/> Need	
Social Media Evidence			<input type="checkbox"/> Have <input type="checkbox"/> Need	
Employment Records			<input type="checkbox"/> Have <input type="checkbox"/> Need	
Contracts / Leases			<input type="checkbox"/> Have <input type="checkbox"/> Need	
Other Documents			<input type="checkbox"/> Have <input type="checkbox"/> Need	



Digital Evidence Checklist

Make sure you save copies in a secure folder. Check off what you've already backed up.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Screenshots saved with dates | <input type="checkbox"/> Phone logs downloaded |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Messages exported to PDF | <input type="checkbox"/> Cloud backup created |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Voicemails or recordings saved | <input type="checkbox"/> Duplicate copies saved on an external drive |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Emails labeled and archived | <input type="checkbox"/> Sensitive items stored in a password-protected folder |

Evidence Quality Notes

These prompts help you think like an investigator.

- Is the evidence clear and readable
- (ex: timestamps visible, photos not blurry)?
- Does the evidence show sequence and context?
- Does anything need corroboration?
- Are there gaps in the story that need documents?
- Are there items you worry might be lost or deleted?

Notes:

What Still Needs to Be Gathered

List anything missing so you can request it later.

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Chain of Custody / Handling Notes

(Not required for most cases, but helpful if needed.)

- Who collected the evidence?
- When was it collected?
- Has it been shared with anyone else?
- Have digital items been altered, screenshotted, or forwarded?

Notes:

Secure Storage Plan Where will copies live?

- Cloud backup
- Encrypted folder
- External hard drive
- Printed copy for attorney
- Secure binder for personal use



Timeline Worksheet

Quick Prompts if You Don't Know Where to Start
Sometimes it's easier to answer prompts than to force a perfect timeline.

What is the first thing you remember happening?

What happened just before things got worse?

Was there a moment when you realized, "something is wrong"?

Were there key conversations, texts, or messages you still remember?

Did anything happen at work, at home, or online that matters?

Were there medical, legal, or financial turning points?

Did anyone witness part of what happened?

Write freely here:



Timeline Worksheet

Pattern or Escalation Notes

This helps attorneys see the bigger picture.

- Did things escalate over time?
- Were there repeated behaviors?
- Did the harm increase after certain events?
- Did the person become more controlling, threatening, or manipulative?

Notes:

Timeline Gaps

It is normal to have memory gaps, especially after trauma. Write what you do know.

- Dates I'm unsure about: _____

- Things I remember but cannot place in order:

- Places where evidence might help fill gaps:

What You Need to Request

As you build your timeline, you may realize you are missing documents or records.

Use this to keep track:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Phone logs | <input type="checkbox"/> Therapy notes or appointment logs |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Text message exports | <input type="checkbox"/> Employment records |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Screenshots | <input type="checkbox"/> Bank statements |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Emails | <input type="checkbox"/> Photos / videos |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Police reports | <input type="checkbox"/> Social media downloads |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Medical records | <input type="checkbox"/> Witness information |

Other items: _____



Timeline Worksheet

Summary of Key Events

At the bottom, survivors can summarize the three or four events that matter most.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.



Attorney Notes (Optional)

Leave space for attorneys to write their thoughts during consults.



Timeline Worksheet

Billing & Fee Tracker

A simple way to understand costs, stay organized, and avoid surprises.

Legal billing can feel confusing or overwhelming.

This worksheet helps you track fees, payments, expenses, and communication so you always know where things stand.

Attorney Billing Overview

Item	Rate / Amount	Notes
Consultation Fee	\$_____	<input type="checkbox"/> Free consult <input type="checkbox"/> Paid
Hourly Rate	\$_____ per hour	
Retainer Amount	\$_____	Date paid: _____
Contingency Fee %	_____% of recovery	<input type="checkbox"/> Only if you win
Flat Fee	\$_____	What it covers:
Payment Plan	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	Terms:

Item	Rate / Amount	Notes
Consultation Fee	\$_____	<input type="checkbox"/> Free consult <input type="checkbox"/> Paid
Hourly Rate	\$_____ per hour	
Retainer Amount	\$_____	Date paid: _____
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Timeline Worksheet

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Hourly Rate	\$_____ per hour	
Retainer Amount	\$_____	Date paid: _____
Contingency Fee %	_____% of recovery	<input type="checkbox"/> Only if you win
Flat Fee	\$_____	What it covers:
Payment Plan	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	Terms:



Case Costs You May Be Responsible For

Case Costs You May Be Responsible For

Use this to track expenses that are separate from attorney fees.

Cost Type	Estimated Amount	Paid?	Notes
Filing Fees	\$_____	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Process Server	\$_____	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Expert Witness Fees	\$_____	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Medical Record Fees	\$_____	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Deposition Costs	\$_____	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Court Reporter	\$_____	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Investigation Fees	\$_____	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Travel Expenses	\$_____	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Other Costs	\$_____	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	



Timeline Worksheet

Payments Made

A simple way to track what you've paid and when.

Date Paid	Amount	Method	For What?	Receipt Received?
				<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
				<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
				<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
				<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
				<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
				<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
				<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
				<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
				<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
				<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
				<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
				<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
				<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
				<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No



Timeline Worksheet

Questions to Ask About Billing

Use this checklist whenever billing feels unclear.

- How often will I receive invoices?
- Will I see itemized billing?
- Will you notify me before large expenses?
- Who on your team will bill at a lower rate?
- How do you calculate time? (six-minute increments, etc.)
- How do refunds for unused retainer funds work?
- Will I receive receipts for every payment?

Notes & Conversations Log

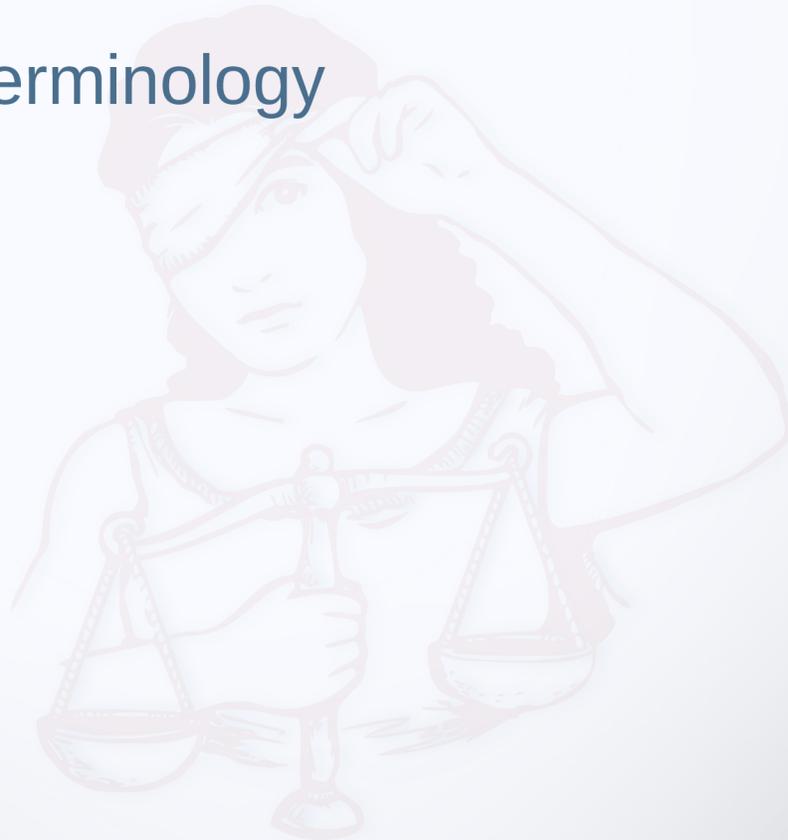
Date	Who You Spoke With	Summary of Conversation	Next Steps



PART VI

Legal Terminology & Reference Guide

Legal Terminology



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LEGAL TERMINOLOGY Plain-Language Reference

Legal systems use formal language that can feel overwhelming, especially when you are under stress.

This section explains common words, roles, and phrases you may hear so you can stay oriented and informed.

You are not expected to already know these terms.
You are allowed to ask what anything means.

KEY PLAYERS IN A LEGAL CASE

Attorney / Lawyer

A licensed professional who provides legal advice and represents clients.

Client

That's you.
The person whose legal issue is being addressed.

Judge

A neutral official who oversees court proceedings and makes legal rulings.

Jury

Community members who decide facts in a trial. Not all cases involve a jury.

Clerk of Court

Court staff who manage filings and records.

Prosecutor

An attorney who represents the government in criminal cases. They do not represent victims directly.

Defense Attorney

An attorney who represents the person accused of a crime.

Plaintiff

The person or party who brings a civil lawsuit.

Defendant

The person or party being sued or accused.

Public Defender

A court-appointed attorney for criminal defendants who cannot afford private counsel.

Expert Witness

A professional who provides specialized opinions (medical, financial, technical).

Mediator

A neutral third party who helps resolve disputes outside of trial.

Victim Advocate

A support professional who helps victims understand rights and access resources.

Paralegal / Legal Assistant

Support professionals who assist attorneys with documents, scheduling, and communication.

They do not give legal advice



LEGAL TERMINOLOGY Plain-Language Reference

Legal systems use formal language that can feel overwhelming, especially when you are under stress.

This section explains common words, roles, and phrases you may hear so you can stay oriented and informed.

You are not expected to already know these terms.
You are allowed to ask what anything means.

TYPES OF PLEAS (CRIMINAL CASES)

Not Guilty

The person denies the charges and asks the state to prove the case.

Guilty

The person admits to the charge and the case moves to sentencing.

No Contest (Nolo Contendere)

The person does not admit guilt but accepts the conviction.

Alford Plea

The person maintains innocence while acknowledging the prosecution likely has enough evidence to convict.

Open Plea

A guilty plea without a sentencing agreement. The judge decides the outcome.

Plea Deal / Plea Agreement

An agreement resolving the case without trial, often involving reduced charges or sentencing.

Conditional Plea

A plea that preserves the right to appeal a specific legal issue.

MISDEMEANOR CASES (Criminal, but Often Simpler)

Misdemeanors do use pleas, but they often move faster and feel less formal.

Not Guilty

You are contesting the charge.

Guilty

You admit to the charge and move to sentencing.

No Contest (Nolo Contendere)

You accept the conviction without admitting guilt. Often used to limit civil liability.

Plea Deal / Plea Agreement

A negotiated resolution. This might include reduced charges, fines, diversion programs, or probation.

Withheld Adjudication (state-specific, common in Florida)

The judge does not formally convict you, even if you plead guilty or no contest. This can matter a lot for records and employment.

Even misdemeanor pleas can carry long-term consequences.
“Minor” does not mean harmless.



LEGAL TERMINOLOGY Plain-Language Reference

TYPES OF COURT DOCUMENTS YOU MAY SEE

Complaint / Petition

The document that starts a case.

Summons

Official notice that a case has been filed and a response is required.

Notice

An update about a filing, hearing, or event in the case.

Motion

A request asking the court to make a decision.

Order

A written ruling issued by the judge.

Judgment

The court's final decision.

Answer / Response

The reply to a complaint or petition.

Transcript

The written record of court proceedings.

Affidavit / Declaration

A written statement sworn to be true.

Subpoena

A legal order requiring documents or testimony.

Discovery Requests

Formal requests for information and evidence.

Docket

The official list of everything filed in a case.

Exhibits

Documents or items used as evidence.

Legal language is often formal and dramatic by design.

If a word makes you pause, it matters.

You are allowed to ask what anything means before responding or agreeing.



LEGAL TERMINOLOGY Plain-Language Reference

SCARY OR ALARMING THINGS YOU MIGHT HEAR (AND WHAT THEY USUALLY MEAN)

“You’re being investigated.”

Information is being gathered. No decision has been made yet.

“The case was dismissed.”

The court ended the case for legal or procedural reasons. This does not determine truth.

“The statute of limitations may apply.”

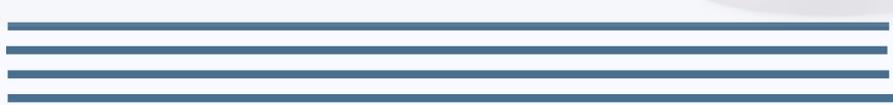
There may be a filing deadline that needs evaluation. Exceptions sometimes exist.

“We’re filing a motion to dismiss.”

One side is asking the court to rule on a legal issue. This is routine.

“The judge denied the motion.”

That specific request was denied. The case often continues.



THINGS THAT MIGHT SOUND GOOD (BUT ARE NOT GUARANTEES)

“This should be an easy case.”

No case is guaranteed.

“I’ve handled cases like this before.”

Experience matters, but fit and communication still matter.

“We can probably settle.”

Settlement is a possibility, not a promise.

“We’ll take care of everything.”

Attorneys handle legal work, but you still have rights and responsibilities.





PART VII

Coming soon

Attorney-Specific Hiring Guides

- Civil Attorneys
- Criminal Defense Attorneys
- Family Law Attorneys
- Personal Injury Attorneys
- Medical Malpractice Attorneys
- Nursing Home & Elder Abuse Attorneys
- Estate Planning Attorneys

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Your Attorney Hiring Guides

Because every legal need deserves the right advocate by your side.

These signs show you're talking to an attorney who respects you and knows what they're doing.

Not every situation calls for the same type of attorney... and most people don't realize that until they're already overwhelmed.

So we made it simple.

This section of the guide breaks down the most common attorney types survivors and everyday people may need, and what to look for when hiring each one. Each specialty requires different experience, different questions to ask, and different red flags to watch for.

You don't have to guess.

We built these guides so you can walk into any consult with clarity, confidence, and the right expectations.



What These Mini-Guides Will Cover

Each attorney-specific guide will help you understand:

- What that type of attorney actually does
- The cases they handle
- When you might need one
- What questions to ask before hiring
- What red flags to watch for
- What green flags signal a trustworthy fit
- What documents to bring to your consult
- How their fees usually work
- What realistic timelines look like



Your Attorney Hiring Guides

Why We Created These

Most people only search for an attorney when they're stressed, scared, or facing something unfamiliar. That's the worst time to be learning how the system works.

These guides give you your footing back.

They give you the questions, the language, and the confidence to choose someone who will show up for you the way you deserve.

Your story matters.

Your safety matters.

And who represents you matters.

Coming Soon

- How to Hire a Civil Attorney
- How to Hire a Criminal Defense Attorney
- How to Hire a Family Law Attorney (divorce, custody, support)
- How to Hire a Personal Injury Attorney
- How to Hire a Medical Malpractice Attorney
- How to Hire a Nursing Home or Elder Abuse Attorney
- How to Hire an Estate Planning Attorney (wills, trusts, POAs)