



PHILADELPHIA LEGAL ASSISTANCE

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FAMILY LAW SERVICES

ACCESSING PLA – INTAKE HOURS

Telephone intake is available from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. (noon) Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Clients should call our intake line at 215-981-3838 to access services for child custody, protection from abuse, divorce, and support if the client is the plaintiff, or person seeking child or spousal support. Unfortunately, due to lack of resources, we are currently unable to assist defendants in child and spousal support matters. **IF YOU DO NOT SPEAK ENGLISH, PLEASE TELL US WHAT LANGUAGE YOU SPEAK AND WE WILL CALL YOU WITH AN INTERPRETER.**

If you are unable to call please email us at accesspla@philalegal.org and let us know how we can reach you.

AVAILABILITY OF ATTORNEYS

Please be advised that even if you cannot afford to hire an attorney, there is no legal right to a court-appointed lawyer in civil, private cases of child custody, child or spousal support, protection from abuse and divorce. Non-profit groups like PLA strive to provide attorney representation in such cases. **However, because we have a limited number of Family Law attorneys for all of the eligible clients in the City, we are only able to provide advice and information in most cases and cannot send a lawyer to court with you.** A PLA paralegal or CASAC law student will interview you about your case, give you basic legal information, and present your case to the PLA attorneys to see if one of them is available to take your case. If we cannot provide you with an attorney, the paralegal or law student under the supervision of an attorney will continue to advise you and complete legal documents as necessary. Fortunately, the Family Court is able to handle cases where a person does not have a lawyer. With our advice and information we hope that you will be better able to handle your own case, please read inside for more information about our services. Thank you.

The Staff of the Philadelphia Legal Assistance Family Law Unit
& the Custody and Support Assistance Clinic



Philadelphia Legal Assistance (PLA) is an independent, non-profit law firm which opened in January, 1996 with federal funds to provide high quality legal representation to low income residents of Philadelphia in non-criminal matters. We use the federal guidelines established by the Legal Services Corporation to determine if your income is low enough for you to qualify for free advice or representation. PLA provides advice and assistance in the areas of bankruptcy, consumer protection, domestic relations, unemployment, welfare, food stamps, social security, and home mortgages. This brochure is designed to guide you through PLA's family law services.

Attorneys, paralegals and law students are available to provide various levels of assistance in family law matters. The PLA Family Law Unit attorneys and paralegals serve clients with the help of the Custody and Support Assistance Clinic (CASAC), a group of University of Pennsylvania law students. Both PLA and CASAC staff follow the same guidelines outlined below regarding conflicts of interest, income eligibility and domestic violence. If you have any questions about these policies, please ask us during your interview.

Policy Regarding Conflicts of Interest

The Lawyer's Rules Professional Rules of Conduct prohibit us from assisting a client who presents a "conflict of interest". This rule can be very complex, but basically it means that if one party in a case is or has been a client of PLA or CASAC, we cannot advise or represent the other side. We have a duty to the first person we saw to keep the information they gave us about their case private and to not assist anyone whose interests are against him or her. Therefore, each person who comes to PLA regarding a domestic relations or related cases will be asked a number of questions regarding his or her family relationships to determine if a "conflict" exists.

PLA's Policy Regarding Domestic Violence

PLA generally does not interview as a potential new client anyone who currently has a Final Protection Order *against* him/her. PLA does this in an attempt to keep our doors open to victims of domestic violence and to not create a conflict of interest problem. Although PLA recognizes that not everyone who has a protection order against them is an abusive person, this is the only objective criteria we can establish in order to help the most victims possible. PLA does make an exception to this general rule if someone currently is both a plaintiff and defendant in a cross-petition situation.

Information Required by PLA

PLA must first determine if you are financially eligible for our services. You will need to give us information about all of your sources of income, (including employment, welfare, social security, unemployment compensation, child or spousal support, etc.) and your assets. The federal guidelines also require us to consider the income of your spouse if you are living with him or her.

To assist you with your legal matter, PLA will need to review the documents relating to your case. This includes all court papers that have been filed and orders that have been issued in the case or other related domestic relations matters. If you do not have all of the paperwork, you should go to Family Court (34 S. 11th Street) and ask for a "Docket History" of your case, or a "PACSES Printout" in support matters. Social security numbers and birth dates of the parties, the children involved, if any, and of the parents of those children are also helpful.

PLA's Domestic Relations Services

Divorce: PLA offers advice regarding general legal rights for divorce, equitable distribution and alimony. For many years we also provided representation to help people obtain simple divorces. Due to limited resources, we are currently unable to provide that services. However, depending on the facts of your case, we may be able to refer you to the a program of the Philadelphia Bar Association which refers low income people to attorneys who are willing to handle simple divorces for a reduced fee. Because both the law and paperwork involved in divorces can be very complex, it is very difficult for a person to handle a divorce on his or her own. Therefore, we do not provide divorce forms or assist in completing divorce papers.

In Pennsylvania, custody, support and protection from abuse problems can be handled separately in court without filing a divorce. Even if we cannot handle your divorce, PLA and CASAC can provide you with assistance in these other areas.

Protection From Abuse: PLA offers both advice and court representation for victims of domestic violence in protection from abuse matters. This includes victims who are seeking protection orders against their abuser and victims who are defending against cases filed against them by their abuser. In most cases we do not help clients file protection from abuse petitions as the Court has a unit which helps people to file at no charge. Our services focus on providing representation at hearings where possible and, when not possible, preparing clients to represent themselves at hearings.

Child and Spousal Support: We offer advice about one's general legal rights including who is entitled to receive or must pay child or spousal support, how much the payments should be, how to file legal papers to get support or to increase or decrease the current amount ordered, what the Department of Public Welfare's role is in the proceedings, and how to represent one's self in court. In some cases we provide attorney representation, prioritizing the more complex cases and cases where the other side is represented by an attorney.

Child Custody: We offer advice about one's general legal rights including who is entitled to seek custody, emergency custody, what to do after a DHS case is closed, how to file legal papers, what to do when the other side is violating an order, and how to represent one's self in court. In some cases we provide court representation. We try to prioritize cases for attorney representation where family violence is involved (including domestic violence against a parent and/or child abuse) and where the other side is represented by an attorney. **NOTE:** *If your custody case involves DHS and is scheduled to be heard at 1801 Vine Street in Philadelphia, that indicates that you have a Dependency matter. In those cases, please contact the Family Advocacy Unit at Community Legal Services which handles Dependency matters. For information about their hours call 215-981-3700*

Special Expertise for Language Minority and Deaf Victims of Family Violence & Teen Mothers: Through past and current special grants we have developed expertise in providing family law assistance to language minorities and immigrants. PLA has bilingual staff who are sensitive to the special cultural needs of these victims of family violence. PLA also has experience in providing assistance to deaf clients and has a staff member who signs. If a staff member is not fluent in the client's language, PLA will make every effort to find an appropriate interpreter. PLA also has an attorney who specializes in providing domestic relations services to young mothers, ages 14 - 21.

Referrals Available Through PLA

Volunteer for the Indigent Program, (VIP) attempts to locate private attorneys to volunteer their services for low income clients. VIP accepts referrals only and cannot be contacted directly. PLA can screen and refer you to VIP to see if they have a volunteer attorney to handle your case. Referrals are generally accepted only if the other side is represented by a lawyer and if the referral is made a few weeks before the hearing. VIP cannot find an attorney for every case.

Low Fee Plan of the Philadelphia Bar Association makes referrals to private attorneys who handle cases for a reduced fee. The client must pay the reduced fee (listed below) plus all costs and reasonable expenses for the case, including court fees. Clients must be low income, but the income guidelines are higher than those of PLA. The Plan only accepts referrals and cannot be contacted directly. PLA can refer you for the following cases handled by the Low Fee Plan:

Child and/or Spousal Support Conference - \$200

Domestic Abuse (1 hearing) - \$250

Uncontested Divorce (no property) - \$250

Child and/or Spousal Support Hearing - \$250

Name Change - \$250.

Uncontested Divorce with Custody/Support Agreement - \$300

Other Agencies Which Provide Some Domestic Relations Assistance or Representation

AIDS Law Project of Pennsylvania (ALP) provides free legal services including advice, referrals, and representation to HIV positive individuals in a variety of matters. In domestic relations matters ALP primarily assists parents in the area of Standby Guardianship. 215-587-9377 or www.AIDSLawPA.org.

Center for Lesbian and Gay Civil Rights provides free legal services including advice, referrals, and representation to gay and lesbian people in a variety of matters, including protection from abuse and custody in the area of domestic relations. 215-731-1447 or www.Center4CivilRights.org.

Homeless Advocacy Project (HAP) provides free legal services to homeless individuals and families in Philadelphia. In Family Court cases, HAP provides representation primarily in custody cases but provides advice, pro se assistance, and referrals in all types of Family Court cases. 215-523-9595 or www.homelessadvocacyproject.org.

Legal Clinic for the Disabled (LCD) provides free legal services to low-income physically disabled clients in Philadelphia and the surrounding counties. Located at Magee Rehabilitation Center, LCD has a small staff and uses volunteers to provide representation in domestic relations and other cases. 215-587-3350 or www.MageeRehab.org.

Penn Legal Assistance Office (PLAO) is the in-house teaching law office of the University of Pennsylvania Law School which accepts a very limited number of custody and support cases during the academic year only. They do not accept divorce cases or walk-ins. Call 215-898-8427 for information.

Senior Law Center (SLC) provides free legal services in a variety of matters to residents of Philadelphia age 60 and over. Representation is usually prioritized for people who are low-income. SLC handles protection from abuse, grandparent custody and standby guardianship matters for seniors. 215-988-1242 or www.SeniorLawCenter.org.

Temple Legal Aid (Temple) is a law school clinical program providing limited representation to low income clients in domestic relations cases. Call 215-204-1800 for information.

Women Against Abuse Legal Center (WAALC) advises and represents low income victims of domestic violence in protection from abuse and custody matters. WAA also advises victims regarding criminal proceedings and has counseling and shelter services. 215-686-7082 or www.WomenAgainstAbuse.org.

Women's Law Project (WLP) has a telephone counseling service that answers questions about domestic relations matters. WLP does not provide representation in court or legal advice. 215-928-9801 or www.WomensLawProject.org.