



YOU AND YOUR LAWYER



The information provided in this document is meant for the sole use of Active Duty service members, retirees, their families, and those individuals eligible for legal assistance. The information is general in nature and meant only to provide a brief overview of various legal matters. Rights and responsibilities vary widely according to the particular set of circumstances in each case. Laws can vary across states, services, and civilian jurisdictions and laws are changed from time to time. Do not rely upon the general restatements of background information presented here without discussing your specific situation with a legal professional.

1. HOW DO I CHOOSE A PRIVATE ATTORNEY?

A. There are many ways to select a private attorney if you do not have one in mind already. In some cases, you may have been represented previously by an attorney who could help you in your present situation. Then again, there may be a friend or relative who has been represented by a good lawyer in a case similar to yours.

2. ARE THERE OTHER WAYS OF PICKING A CIVILIAN ATTORNEY?

A. Yes -- the North Carolina Bar Foundation maintains a Lawyer Referral Service in Raleigh. By calling the toll-free number (800-662-7660), you can obtain the names of lawyers in your area that may be able to help you. The important thing is that you choose a lawyer able to handle your case and able to work with you. Any way of selecting a lawyer is satisfactory if it achieves these goals, for it is very important for the client to have confidence in his or her attorney.

3. WHEN WOULD I NEED A CIVILIAN ATTORNEY INSTEAD OF A LEGAL ASSISTANCE ATTORNEY?

A. A legal assistance attorney may not be able to help you in every situation, due to state laws, military regulations and available manpower. For example, you will probably need to hire a lawyer to represent you if you have been sued or if you wish to file a lawsuit. You will also need to retain an attorney if you need a complex will to be drafted. Sometimes a regulation will prohibit advice or representation, such as in cases involving a conflict of interest or income-producing property of a client. In any of these cases, you will need to retain a private attorney to advise and represent you. Your legal assistance attorney will let you know if your case requires referral to a civilian attorney.

4. WHAT ARE MY LAWYER'S DUTIES?

A. The best summary is contained in a "Declaration of Commitment" published by the American Bar Association, which asks that all lawyers live by these principles and provide copies of them to their clients.

MY DECLARATION OF COMMITMENT TO CLIENTS

- **To treat you with respect and courtesy**
- **To handle your legal matter competently and diligently in accordance with the highest standards of the profession**
- **To exercise independent professional judgment on your behalf**
- **To charge a reasonable fee and to explain in advance how that fee will be computed and billed**
- **To return telephone calls promptly**
- **To keep you informed and provide you with copies of important papers**



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- **To respect your decisions on the objectives to be pursued in your case, as permitted by law and the rules of professional conduct, including whether or not to settle your case**
- **To work with other participants in the legal system to make our legal system more accessible and responsive**
- **To preserve the client confidences learned during our lawyer-client relationship**
- **To exhibit the highest degree of ethical conduct in accordance with the Code of Professional Responsibility/Model Rules of Professional Conduct**

5. WILL MY CIVILIAN LAWYER TREAT EVERYTHING I SAY CONFIDENTIALLY?

A. Your civilian lawyer is bound by the same ethical obligations as a legal assistance attorney. This means that what you say to your lawyer is "privileged information" that must be held in confidence unless you give permission otherwise. In addition, your civilian attorney has the duty to:

- a. Let you make the major decisions in your case, such as pleading guilty in a criminal case or accepting a compromise or settlement in a civil case; and
- b. Remain open and honest with you in all aspects of your case, including the chances of success, the good and bad sides of your position, the time needed and the fee required. The North Carolina State Bar is responsible for maintaining and enforcing these standards of conduct for attorneys licensed in this State.

6. HOW DO CIVILIAN LAWYERS CHARGE FOR THEIR SERVICES?

A. Lawyers set fees in a number of ways. The major types of fees are flat rates, contingency fees and hourly billing.

7. WHEN IS A FLAT FEE USED?

A. Lawyers may use a flat fee in handling certain civil and criminal cases where the work involved is usually straight-forward, predictable and routine. Thus many lawyers use a flat rate or set fee in uncontested divorces, simple wills, traffic tickets and misdemeanors, adoptions and name changes. Court costs (filing fees, witness fees and sheriff's costs) are usually not included in the flat fee. A flat fee is one which is paid in advance (ordinarily) and does not vary depending on the amount of time or work involved. No refund is due if the work takes less time than expected and no additional charge is made if the case is longer or more complex than usual.

8. WHAT IS A CONTINGENCY FEE?

A. A contingency fee is one which is paid by the client only if the lawyer is successful. It is paid out of the sum of money that is collected by the lawyer and thus is available only in civil lawsuits which involve suing for a sum of money, such as auto accident cases and malpractice claims. A typical fee charged by a lawyer might be one figure (25-33%) if the case is settled without trial and another (33-40%) if it is necessary to go to court. On the other hand, some lawyers charge a single percentage regardless of whether trial is necessary or not. Since the lawyer collects no fee if the case is lost, you will usually need to have a case with clear liability and damages before a lawyer will agree to a contingency fee in handling the case.

9. WHEN DO LAWYERS CHARGE ON AN HOURLY BASIS?



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A. An hourly rate is most common when the client's work will be substantial, but it is difficult to estimate how much time it will take. Thus, for example, a lawyer might charge on an hourly rate for a contested custody or contract case, or for the preparation of a family trust document. It is fairly common for the lawyer to require a retainer to be paid before starting on the case. This amounts to a deposit or down payment to make sure that the client is serious about the case and is financially prepared to cover the costs that may be incurred. The size of the retainer and whether any part of it is refundable will vary from case to case and lawyer to lawyer.

10. DOES THE COURT EVER AWARD ATTORNEY'S FEES?

A. Yes -- North Carolina courts are authorized to award attorney's fees in several situations. The major ones are as follows:

a. When the attorney acts as a trustee or agent for the court to manage money, property or other assets, the court can usually grant the lawyer a fee to be paid out of the assets managed. Thus, a lawyer who acts as the Executor or Administrator of a deceased person's estate, or who is the Trustee for the bank in a foreclosure sale, can ask the court to award him or her a fee based on the price obtained in the foreclosure sale or the value of the debts paid and the personal property in the estate.

b. In certain family law cases, the court may order one party to pay some or all of the other's legal expenses. The court can make such an award in cases involving alimony, child support, custody and paternity, by way of example. It is important to remember, however, that the award of attorney's fees in such cases is not mandatory or automatic. It depends on a variety of factors, such as good faith, need, lack of adequate support, and so on. The courts see these awards of attorney's fees as a way to pay back or reimburse people for attorney's fees already paid or presently due. It is very difficult to retain an attorney from the outset based on the promise or hope of court-awarded attorney's fees at a later date. This is especially true because many times a person will not obey the court's order to pay the other party's attorney and so further court work may be necessary.

c. In some cases, a contract provides for payment of attorney's fees by one who breaks the contract. In such a case, the court will enforce the contract (if it is valid) and can award attorney's fees to the winning party from the breaching party if such a clause is inserted in the contract.

d. A final example of court-awarded attorney's fees is the "nuisance lawsuit" -- one that has no basis or justification. If the judge finds that a lawsuit is frivolous, groundless and without justification, an award of attorney's fees may be made by the court against the person bringing the suit. The same is true if it is a defense, counterclaim or answer that is frivolous.

11. WHAT IF I CAN'T AFFORD AN ATTORNEY?

A. First of all, talk to a legal assistance attorney. There may be a legal aid society or public defender office that can help you. You may be able to handle the case yourself, as with small claims court (currently involving claims of \$10,000 or less in North Carolina—see website below). The North Carolina Child Support Enforcement Agency (located in each North Carolina County) can help obtain an initial order for child support with a nominal charge. Once child support is ordered, you can obtain help in enforcing payment from the Agency, or from the Clerk of Superior Court through whom the payments are made, or you can ask the court to appoint a lawyer to enforce payment. It may be that you don't need a lawyer but need to be referred to another office, such as the installation housing office, the inspector general, the county health department or the district attorney. Just remember -- don't



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give up! See a legal assistance attorney as early as possible so he or she can listen to the facts and help you avoid or solve the problem.

12. WHAT SHOULD I WATCH OUT FOR WHEN DEALING WITH MY CIVILIAN LAWYER?

A. Here are some tips on the important matters that involve your lawyer and some areas where complaints are common:

- a. Be sure to insist that your lawyer explain specifically 1) what will be done in your case, and 2) how much it will cost. If you wish, you can ask the lawyer to put this in writing. This includes the contract that binds you and the attorney -- make sure you get a written contract and then read it!
- b. Clients should receive frequent case updates and regular communications from their attorneys; the rules of most state bars require this. Be sure to ask about this if you want to ensure that your lawyer knows you want to be kept current regarding your case.
- c. You should also get copies of the “pleadings” -- motions, complaints, counterclaims, petitions -- that have been filed in your case, as well as any order or judgment that the judge signs.
- d. The lawyer should release your file to you upon request and with reasonable notice.
- e. Consider hiring a lawyer who specializes in your particular kind of case. Many states allow lawyers to become specialists and list themselves as such if they meet certain qualifications. A specialist is usually more likely to know the “ins and outs” of your case than an attorney who is a “general practitioner.”

13. WHAT IF I HAVE OTHER QUESTIONS ABOUT ATTORNEYS AND THEIR FEES?

A. Don't be afraid to ask questions at your very first meeting with a civilian lawyer. Always insist on signing a contract with the lawyer you want to hire, and be sure to read the contract before signing to make sure it sets out accurately your entire agreement. Feel free to "shop around" and compare various attorneys, but don't just shop for the lowest fee. The cheapest lawyer is not necessarily the worst or best, and the most expensive one may not be the right one for you. Be sure to consider such factors as location, accessibility, personality, time available and experience in your problem area. There are lots of lawyers in most communities. It is your job to find the right lawyer for your case.

HELPFUL WEBSITES:

North Carolina Legal Aid: <http://www.legalaidnc.org/>

Armed Forces Legal Assistance Website: <http://legalassistance.law.af.mil/>

Guide to NC Small Claims Court:

http://www.legalaidnc.org/public/learn/publications/small_claims_court/default.aspx