

ACCESS TO JUSTICE

Information for New Jersey Residents
Who Need to Get Legal Help



ACCESS TO JUSTICE INFORMATION FOR NEW JERSEY RESIDENTS WHO NEED TO GET LEGAL HELP

This is an informational guide to help New Jersey residents find resources to help them resolve legal issues. The New Jersey State Bar Association makes no representations about the information or services provided by any of the organizations listed here.

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Hon. Evelyn Padin, Chair
Hon. Supti Bhattacharya
Lori O Borgen
Ehsan F. Chowdhry
Jhanice V. Domingo
Norberto A. Garcia
Debra E. Guston
Christopher J. Keating
James Lewis V
Michael Noriega
Mary Frances Palisano
Diane K. Smith

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FINDING AN ATTORNEY

GETTING STARTED

In resolving a legal issue, it may be helpful to seek the advice of an attorney.

The law is filled with terms and language that are not always familiar. Here are a few terms to know before you start:

Consultation: A lawyer may provide a consultation, which is a brief conversation about your case and possible ways to address your legal issues.

Full representation: This is when a person and an attorney agree that the attorney will handle your case. You have the right to end that arrangement at any time.

Civil: This is a broad category of legal matters that includes disputes between people or businesses.

Criminal: This is a broad category of legal matters that center on someone being accused of a crime.

Family: This is a very large category of the law that includes a range of issues involving families and children, including domestic violence, divorce, child custody, adoption, parentage/paternity and juvenile matters.

Municipal: This is a category of legal issues that involve a particular town that could include issues like motor vehicle violations or disorderly persons offenses.

The American Bar Association offers these guidelines in choosing a lawyer that is right for you: [How Do I Find a Lawyer? \(americanbar.org\)](http://americanbar.org).

Here are some tips the ABA suggests:

What should I look for when choosing a lawyer?

The lawyer will be helping you solve your problems, so the first qualification is that you must feel comfortable enough to tell them, honestly and completely, all the facts necessary to resolve your problem. No one you listen to and nothing you read will be able to guarantee that a particular lawyer will be the best for you; you must judge that for yourself.

Are there any practical considerations to keep in mind when choosing a lawyer?

Yes, the lawyer's area of expertise and prior experience are important. Many states have specialization programs that certify lawyers as specialists in certain types of law. Some legal specialties also have created their own certification programs, such as the [National Association of Estate Planners and Councils](http://www.naepc.org), and the [National Elder Law Foundation](http://www.nelf.org). You may also wish to ask about the type of cases your lawyer generally handles. What is the breakdown of that lawyer's practice (e.g. 50% personal injury cases, 25% divorce cases and 25% "other.") Keep in

mind that most lawyers are not certified in a specialty, but that does not necessarily mean that a specific lawyer is not an expert in a specific field, particularly where a lawyer handles a high volume of cases in a particular practice area.

Other considerations are the convenience of the lawyer's office location, fees charged, and the length of time a case may take.

Where should I start to look for a lawyer?

There are many ways to find a reliable lawyer. One of the best is a recommendation from a trusted friend, relative, or business associate. Be aware, however, that each legal case is different and that a lawyer who is right for someone else may not suit you or your legal problem.

I want to hire a lawyer, but I cannot afford one. Where can I find legal help at no or low-cost?

Several legal assistance programs offer inexpensive or no-cost legal services to those in need. You can search online under topics such as "legal clinics," "legal aid," or "legal advice." You may also contact NJ211.org or call 211 to find legal services and other resources. Most legal services programs have special guidelines for eligibility, often based on where you live, the size of your family, and your income. Some legal services providers have their own staff lawyers, and others operate with volunteer lawyers. Note that people do not have a right to a free lawyer in most civil legal matters.

I have been accused of a crime, and I cannot afford a lawyer. What can I do?

If you are accused of a crime, the U.S. Constitution guarantees you the right to be represented by a lawyer in any case in which you could be incarcerated for six months or more. State constitutions may guarantee your right to a lawyer for lesser crimes. If you cannot afford a lawyer, either the judge hearing the case will appoint a private lawyer to represent you free of charge or the government's public defender will handle your case, also at no charge.

WAYS TO GET HELP

DO YOU NEED NO-COST LEGAL HELP?

Legal Assistance at No-Cost to the Client:

Many programs offer legal services at no cost to individuals who qualify because of their income levels. You will find information about those programs, what services they provide and how to access them throughout this resource guide.

Criminal:

For certain municipal court, criminal and other matters, defendants may qualify for a government-funded public defender.

Applications for those eligible to apply for a public defender will be provided by the Court in each individual matter. An overview of the application process and the services available is provided here:

nj.gov/defender/apply/index.shtml

The eligibility guidelines to qualify for a public defender in municipal court can be found here:

<https://www.njcourts.gov/courts/municipal>

Civil:

For civil matters, there are private organizations that provide assistance in certain civil matters to individuals who meet eligibility criteria, which often includes certain income limitations. Many programs provide assistance with/for specific issues or in specific areas of the state, and they are listed elsewhere in this guide. Two programs that offer statewide assistance on a number of civil legal issues are:

Legal Services of New Jersey and Regional Legal Service Programs: Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ) heads the state's Legal Services system, which also includes six regional legal service programs. The programs provide free essential legal aid in civil matters to individuals who meet certain income eligibility requirements.

LSNJ can be reached through its toll-free LSNJLAW Hotline, 888-576-5529 (888-LSNJ-LAW), which is open Monday through Friday 8:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Individuals can also apply for assistance online at lsnjlawhotline.org. Information and updates about government benefits is available at Government Aid and Services at lsnjlaw.org. LSNJ also provides extensive self-help materials and other important information and updates on its public information page: lsnjlaw.org.

Contact information for the regional programs can be found here: lsnj.org/LegalServicesOffices.aspx.

Volunteer Lawyers for Justice: Volunteer Lawyers for Justice (VLJ) provides free civil legal services to individuals who meet certain income and other program-specific requirements. VLJ can be reached Monday - Friday, at 973-645-1955. Individuals can also obtain information and apply for services online at vljnj.org/get-help.

CAN YOU PAY AN ATTORNEY SOME FEES, BUT NOT THE FULL COST?

Reduced-Fee Programs

Reduced fee programs are available for the resolution of certain civil matters to individuals who qualify based on their income. Through such programs, qualified individuals are referred to an attorney who has agreed to charge a reduced rate for agreed-upon legal representation.

Bankruptcy

mercercbar.com/find-a-lawyer/reduced-fee-bankruptcy/, 609-585-6200

County Programs

Reduced-fee programs are available in the following counties:

Burlington County: Reduced Fee Referral Program/Burlington County Bar Association at burlcobar.org , 609-261-4542

Camden County: camdencountybar.org/reduced-fee-lawyer-referral-program/, 856-482-0620

Middlesex County: mcba.community.lawyer/pages/reduced-fee/ , 732-828-0053 ext. 100

Monmouth County: Monmouth Bar Association Reduced Fee Program | Monmouth Bar Association / 732-431-5544

Morris County: morriscountybar.com/referrals/reduced-fee-referral-program/, 973-267-6089

Rutgers Law School:

Rutgers Law School administers a law firm aimed at serving the needs of moderate-income New Jersey residents who often cannot otherwise afford quality legal services. Assistance is provided at a reduced fee by recently admitted lawyers, under the supervision of a more experienced attorney.

Disputes focusing on the following issues are accepted: divorce, custody, child support and related family law matters; consumer fraud; bankruptcy filings; employment discrimination; homeowner contract disputes; immigration / visa issues; mental health related legal matters; municipal court / minor criminal matters; special education litigation; and landlord/tenant disputes.

You can find out more about the program here:

law.rutgers.edu/legal-services-rutgers-law-associates

You can contact the program using these phone numbers:

Contact Rutgers Law Associates in Camden at 856-225-6088

Contact Rutgers Law Associates in Newark at 973-353-2564

You can also contact by email at RutgersLawAssociates.info@rutgers.edu.

CAN YOU AFFORD AN ATTORNEY, BUT NEED HELP FINDING ONE NEAR WHERE YOU LIVE?

Referral Services

New Jersey's county bar associations administer lawyer referral services. They can refer you to a local attorney who can help you resolve your legal issue at agreed-upon fees.

A list of those services can be accessed through the New Jersey State Bar Association here: <https://njsba.com/county-bar-associations-for-the-public/>

DO YOU WANT OR NEED TO REPRESENT YOURSELF IN COURT?

Representing Yourself

People may choose to or need to represent themselves in legal matters. This is called being pro se. There are a number of resources available to help, but the first step is to consider all of the issues involved.

Here is a link to some issues to consider before deciding to represent yourself:

https://www.njcourts.gov/sites/default/files/forms/11218_things_to_think_about_eng.pdf

If you are representing yourself, there are many websites that offer assistance:

New Jersey Judiciary – njcourts.gov

This is the website for the New Jersey Judiciary, which offers general guidance on legal-related proceedings and forms and instructions for various court filings.

Self-help center: <https://www.njcourts.gov/self-help>

Educational programs, seminars and workshops on legal topics:

<https://www.njcourts.gov/public/upcoming-events>

Ombudsman program, helping to guide people through the court system. Note: they do not provide legal advice: <https://www.njcourts.gov/public/get-help/judiciary-ombudsman-program>

Statewide ombudsman directory:

<https://www.njcourts.gov/public/directories/court-services/ombudsman>

Online Legal Resource Center: <https://www.njcourts.gov/self-help/legal-reference-materials>

Legal Services of New Jersey: lsnjlaw.org

A statewide legal resource that offers legal forms, manuals, and articles to help you answer your legal questions, get help with your legal problem, or just learn more about the law

Volunteer Lawyers for Justice: vljnj.org

VLJ offers resources and self-help material.

New Jersey State Bar Foundation: njsbf.org

The New Jersey State Bar Foundation serves as the statewide resource for law-related education for the public.

DO YOU WANT TO TRY TO RESOLVE YOUR MATTER ONLINE?

Resolve Disputes Online

Some disputes can be resolved online without the need for a court appearance. Even if your matter can be resolved online, you may still consider consulting with an attorney utilizing the resources noted above to ensure your rights are fully protected.

Here is information about online resolution tools:

Motor Vehicle Violations -- Municipal Court Online Dispute Resolution System:

Minor motor vehicle violations that do not carry penalties such as jail or driver's license suspension may be able to paid or resolved through an online dispute resolution system.

Individuals can pay a ticket directly or have a ticket reviewed for possible amendment through NJMCdirect. For ticket review, select Case Dispute after entering your ticket information.

For questions about your specific case, you can contact the municipal court where the matter is pending. A list of municipal courts and contact information can be found here:

<https://www.njcourts.gov/self-help/municipal-court>

Expungements

Individuals seeking to remove, seal, impound or isolate arrest, conviction and other records can apply to have them expunged. Find out more here: njcourts.gov/selfhelp/expungement.html

GOING TO COURT

Participating in a Virtual Legal Hearing.

For those issues that require a court appearance, some appearances will be virtual. If you are scheduled to participate in a virtual hearing and you do not have access to a phone, computer or other device, or access to the internet, you should let the court know immediately.

The court may be able to help you find a way to participate or may postpone the hearing. County ombudsmen can arrange for a place for you to participate in a hearing if you do not have a quiet place elsewhere.

A list of ombudsmen can be found here: <https://www.njcourts.gov/public/directories/court-services/ombudsman>

If you are able to participate in a virtual hearing, here is some advice to consider:

Before the hearing: Prepare for your virtual hearing. If you plan to participate in your hearing by video, download the video application before your scheduled hearing. Be sure to test your speaker, microphone, and camera before the hearing. Video call software websites often provide a test link to try your equipment before the actual event (Zoom test example [here](#)).

The day of the hearing: Make sure others using your Wi-Fi network minimize their usage during your hearing so you have the best possible connection. Find a quiet place to participate in the hearing. Put all pets and other things that may be a distraction in a different room

During the hearing: Remember that even if conducted virtually, a court proceeding is still a formal, official proceeding. Individuals should conduct themselves as they would if they were appearing in a courtroom or other proceeding in person. This means:

- dress appropriately
- pay attention
- limit distractions

Important: Keep your phone, computer or other device on mute when not speaking. This will reduce feedback and limit background noise.

Here are instructions from the Court for participants in remote events: <https://www.njcourts.gov/attorneys/remote-instructions>

You can also watch a video here: youtube.com/watch?v=mUFdhqISvbk&feature=youtu.be

Submitting Documents for a Virtual Hearing

Submitting documents to the Court can be done using the Judiciary Electronic Document Submission system (JEDS), a website that helps people and attorneys submit documents electronically to the New Jersey Courts.

You can access JEDS here: njcourts.gov/selfhelp/jeds.html

Watch a video about how to use JEDS here: [youtube.com/watch?v=W_gm7pyEulg&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_gm7pyEulg&feature=youtu.be)

Or contact your county court Ombudsman here: <https://www.njcourts.gov/public/directories/court-services/ombudsman>

Participating in an In-Person Hearing

Some matters will require an in-person court appearance. If you are asked to participate in-person here is some additional information to guide you.

Before you arrive:

Arrive early but expect to wait. There are serious consequences to being late or missing a court appearance. Give yourself plenty of time to find the courthouse, locate appropriate parking, get into the building and through a metal detector and security screening (NOTE: leave all sharp objects or weapons at home), and arrive in the courtroom before your matter is scheduled to begin.

Prior to entering the courtroom, turn off or silence phones. Do not chew gum, eat; watch anything on your phone and do not bring reading material.

You can find information about the state Superior Courts here: <https://www.njcourts.gov/courts/vicinages>

If you need the services of a courtroom interpreter, here is how to request one: <https://www.njcourts.gov/public/get-help/request-interpreter>

When you get to the courtroom:

- Check in with court staff immediately.
- Listen carefully to attorneys, court staff and the judge. Please note that all matters in court are recorded.
- Courts schedule many events at the same time, expect to wait, possibly several hours before your matter is addressed. Court matters are also sometimes postponed.

General tips:

- Please dress neatly;
- Be respectful;
- Exercise self-control at all times;
- Speak clearly; and
- Answer questions directly.

OTHER LEGAL ASSISTANCE ORGANIZATIONS

Note: These organizations are listed in alphabetical order. This does not constitute a complete list of legal assistance organizations in New Jersey.

Chosen Family Law Center: Assistance with name change petitions in New York and New Jersey courts for TGNCNB youth and adults; gender marker changes on birth certificate when legally allowed (NY and NJ). Must meet certain income limits to be eligible.

ChosenFamilyLawCenter.org / 732-639-1657.

Community Health Law Project: Assistance for individuals with disabilities and the frail elderly. See chlp.org for office locations.

Education Law Center: Provides assistance with education law issues, edlawcenter.org
973-624-1815, ex. 300

Essex County Legal Aid Association: Assistance to residents of Essex County. Income max 250% of federal poverty level. Intake M-F, 9 am - 1 pm, via phone (973-622-0063) or email (HELP@eclanjanj.org). Civil matters only, largely landlord/tenant, including evictions, ejections, and housing conditions. For more information, go to: eclanjanj.org.

Make the Road New Jersey: Primarily serving individuals in Elizabeth, Newark, Passaic, and Perth Amboy. Call 908-368-1196.

New Jersey State Bar Association: Offering free legal help in civil cases to New Jersey residents who have served overseas since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks through the Military Legal Assistance Program.

<https://tcms.njsba.com/personifyebusiness/Resources/ProBono/MilitaryLegalAssistanceProgram.aspx>

888-541-1900

NJ Reentry Corporation: Providing employment, food, clothing, shelter and addiction assistance to individuals recently released from jail. Help can be found at njreentry.org/help; call 551.255.5500 for immediate assistance.

Pro Bono Partnership: Provides assistance to non-profits, probonopartner.org/nonprofits-clients/request-legal-assistance/

Rutgers Mortgage Foreclosure Clinic: law.rutgers.edu/mortgage-foreclosure-clinic (856) 225-6568

Seton Hall Law School Foreclosure Defense Project: Visit law.shu.edu/clinics/civil-litigation-foreclosure-defense-project.cfm to request assistance online. 973-642-8700

The **Special Parent Advocacy Network** (SPAN) has a number of education-related resources here: spanadvocacy.org/covid-19-resource-page/

Domestic violence

In addition to Legal Services of New Jersey and Volunteer Lawyers for Justice, here are organizations to contact:

County phone numbers to access local courthouses to apply for a temporary restraining order can be accessed here: <https://www.njcourts.gov/sites/default/files/public/domestic-violence-countyphonenumberstro.pdf>

Other places that can offer immediate help are:

National Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-799-SAFE(7233)

New Jersey Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-572-SAFE(7233)

Partners for Women and Justice, 650 Bloomfield Avenue, Bloomfield, 973-233-0111 <https://partnersnj.org/get-help/>

Rutgers Law Domestic Violence Clinic (Camden Location): Please call 856-225-6425 or 856-225-2915 and leave a message. Someone will return the call during the hours of 9 a.m. and 4 p.m., usually within two business days of the message. Please include in the message whether it is permissible to leave a message at the phone number. Visit law.rutgers.edu/domestic-violence-clinic

Immigration

In addition to Legal Services of New Jersey and Volunteer Lawyers for Justice, here are organizations to contact:

A full listing of organizations offering immigration assistance is available through the Immigration Advocates Network here:

immigrationadvocates.org/nonprofit/legaldirectory/search?state=NJ

Seton Hall Law School Immigrants' Rights Clinic: Call 973-642-8700

Rutgers Law School Immigration Clinic: Call 973-353-5292

American Friends Service Committee: Call 973-643-1924 or visit afsc.org/program/immigrant-rights-program-newark-nj

ACLU-NJ. Please submit immigration detention concerns related to COVID-19 to COVID19@aclu-nj.org

Catholic Charities:

Newark: ccannj.org/immigration-and-refugee/; 973-733-3516

Middlesex: <https://ccdom.org/immigration-services>; 732-324-8200

Camden: catholiccharitiescamden.org/refugee-immigration/; 856-342-4166

New Jersey State Bar Foundation and IOLTA-supported Organizations

Camden Center for Law and Social Justice: Provides legal services to victims of domestic violence in South Jersey, camdenlawandjustice.org/services/

Comitè En Unión para Salvadoreños (CEUS): Legal Services for Immigrants program provides affordable, quality legal representation for immigrants, ceusnj.org/

Covenant House Youth Advocacy Center: Provides legal help to youth facing homelessness and human trafficking survivors, covenanthousenj.org/find-support/supportive_services/

G.I. Go Fund: Provides assistance to all military veterans, with a focus on veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Assistance provided includes legal help to assist with employment, housing, education and health issues, gigo.org/pages/how-we-help

Kids in Need of Defense (KIND): Provides attorneys to represent children in immigration court, supportkind.org/what-we-do/legal-services/

Legal Aid Society of Monmouth County: Provides free civil legal services to residents of Monmouth County who meet income and eligibility guidelines and have disabilities, monmouthlegalaid.com/canwehelp/

Lutheran Social Ministries of New Jersey: Provides low-cost immigration legal services to those unable to afford a private attorney; staffed with an immigration attorney and a federal Department of Justice Accredited Representative, lsmnj.org/community-services/were-making-a-difference-throughout-new-jersey/immigration-legal-services/

Morris County Organization for Hispanic Affairs (MCOHA): The organization's Center for Citizenship and Legal Immigration provides low-cost immigration consultations and services to assist immigrants in obtaining lawful status, applying for citizenship, and defending against deportation, mcoha.org/center-for-citizenship-and-legal-im

New Jersey Consortium for Immigrant Children: The program assists unaccompanied children who have recently arrived in the U.S. without their parents and youth otherwise at high risk of deportation because they are in active removal proceedings, njcic.org/our-work

New Jersey Crime Victims Law Center: Pro bono legal assistance to crime victims, including direct representation in the criminal justice system, njcvlc.org/

Partners for Women and Justice: A non-profit public interest law firm that is dedicated to making a difference in the lives of domestic violence and sexual assault victims through legal representation, advice and counseling sessions, partnersnj.org/about-us/

Project Self Sufficiency of Sussex County: offers a variety of free legal advice, education and assistance programs for northern New Jersey residents, projectselfsufficiency.org/legal-assistance-education