



10 Ways to Find Help with Your Case

SELF-REPRESENTED LITIGANTS SERIES

Author: **Amanda Kay, JD**, Program Attorney, National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges

If you are the victim of domestic violence and need legal help, this guide will help you find someone who can help you with your case. A lawyer who knows about domestic violence may be the best person to help. Parts of this guide will give you ideas about how to find one. However, you may not be able to find a lawyer to represent you in court. This guide also gives you ideas of other ways to get help with your case without a lawyer.

This quick guide has links to websites that may help you and some national telephone numbers. You can get more information about local resources by calling our confidential toll-free number, **800-527-3223**.

We can refer you to people and places close to you. We also have information packets that might be helpful, which we can mail to you. You can download many of these informational resources from our website at **www.rcdvpc.org**. Visit the website or call anytime.

A lot of information is available on the Internet, but not all of it is reliable. Please be careful when using information you found on the web. If you have questions, feel free to call us. We cannot provide legal advice, but we can help you understand your options and find reliable help.

Below are our suggestions for getting help with your case.

Work with a domestic violence advocate.

01

A domestic violence advocate is a person who works at your local domestic violence program. Advocates understand what you're going through and know a lot about domestic violence. An advocate can give you information about services near you, like where to find a lawyer or legal assistance, how to find counseling for you or your children, where to find a shelter or help with housing, and places that can supervise visitation.

A domestic violence advocate cannot be your lawyer. But the advocate may be able to go with you to court to provide support. The advocate may also help you get ready for your hearing. A domestic violence advocate may know about lawyers who are willing to take cases at no charge (these lawyers are called pro bono lawyers). Or they may know about lawyers who will take your case if you have low income. (These lawyers work at places called legal aid or legal services organizations).

Even if you have a lawyer, working with a domestic violence advocate can still be helpful. The advocate may know more about domestic violence than your attorney. The advocate can also help plan to keep you

safer during your case.

To find an advocate, call your local domestic violence program or your state domestic violence coalition. Every state has a coalition of domestic violence programs in that state. The National Network to End Domestic Violence has a website with how to contact each state domestic violence coalition at <http://nnedv.org/resources/coalitions.html>.

If you need help finding an advocate in your area, call us at **1-800-527-3223**. You can also call the National Domestic Violence hotline at **1-800-799-7233** or **1-800-787-3224 (TTY)** or visit their website at <http://www.thehotline.org>. The WomensLaw.org website also has a place where you can look up programs by state: http://www.womenslaw.org/gethelp_type.php?type_name=State%20and%20Local%20Programs.

Call the legal aid office(s) for your area.

02

Legal aid (or legal services) provides free lawyers to people who have a low income. Some are for people with a specific legal problem. Be sure to ask about free lawyers for domestic violence victims!

Lawyers are not always available, but many legal aid offices have lawyers specifically for domestic violence victims. If you need help contacting your local legal aid office, call us at **1-800-527-3223**, or check these websites:

This page offers links and help about legal services by state and by topic: <http://apps.americanbar.org/legalservices/findlegalhelp/home.cfm>

This site allows you to search for local legal services providers:

<http://lsc.gov/find-legal-aid>

And this site has information on free legal services in several jurisdictions (not every state): <http://www.probono.net> as well as a page specifically for DV victims: <http://www.probono.net/dv>

WomensLaw.org has a website for domestic violence victims, with information on advocacy, free legal information, and self-help resources in every state. If you select your state from the drop-down list, you can click on links to information in any of these areas. The site also has some general legal information on common topics such as divorce, custody, and protection orders.

<http://www.womenslaw.org/index.php>

Call your state bar and ask about its referral service.

03

Many states have a program that can refer you to a lawyer in your area, with experience in family law. The program often includes a 20- or 30-minute consultation with a lawyer for free or a low fee (\$20-\$50). You can get at least a bit of guidance, even if you can't afford to hire the lawyer to represent you. Many states also have a "reduced fee panel." This is a list of lawyers who agree to take cases for a lower fee if you have a lower income, so ask about that option as well. Many lawyers offer a free consultation as part of their normal policies, so don't be afraid to ask.

If you are able to hire an attorney, take the time to interview several lawyers before hiring one. Make sure to ask the lawyer about the fee for representing you and what you can expect. Also, some lawyers do not know a lot about domestic violence. Ask any lawyer you interview about their other cases with domestic violence. If the only lawyer you can find doesn't have much experience with cases involving domestic violence, you can help your lawyer learn more by speaking with a domestic violence advocate. You can also connect the lawyer with a national resource center, like the

Resource Center on Domestic Violence: Child Protection and Custody (<http://www.rcdvcpc.org>). A resource center can give your lawyer information about domestic violence cases.

If you don't know how to contact your state bar, try this website:

<http://shop.americanbar.org/ebus/ABAGroups/DivisionforBarServices/BarAssociationDirectories/StateLocalBarAssociations.aspx>.

Or if you prefer, call us at **1-800-527-3223** and we'll be happy to look up the number for you.

You may have some money for legal assistance, but not enough to hire a lawyer to take your whole case. If so, ask if your state allows "unbundled" services. This means the lawyer helps with only some parts of your case. For example, you can have a session and talk about what your options are in the case or what kinds of arguments to make. You can hire a lawyer just to check your paperwork and make suggestions before it's filed. Or you can ask the lawyer to come to court with you for an important hearing, or for a mandatory mediation session. If your state allows unbundled services and you're interested, ask for referrals to a lawyer who offers them.

The American Bar Association's Pro Se/Unbundling Resource Center (http://www.americanbar.org/groups/delivery_legal_services/resources.html) has some general information. "Pro se" means that you don't have a lawyer and are representing yourself. You may also hear the term "self-represented litigant." The website also has links to state resources (listed in alphabetical order):

http://www.americanbar.org/groups/delivery_legal_services/resources/pro_se_unbundling_resource_center/self_service_centers.html.

Go to "Ask a Lawyer" events.

04

If you can't find an attorney to represent you, many places have "Ask a Lawyer" events.

You can talk to a lawyer about your case for free for 15-30 minutes to get some advice and direction. These events are sometimes called "lawyer in the library" (meaning law library). There are also legal aid fairs. The lawyers at these events can help answer hard questions, give you an idea about whether your case is "strong," and help you choose the right paperwork to file. Remember that lawyers at these events may not be family law attorneys and may not know a lot about domestic violence.

To find an "Ask a Lawyer" event, call the legal aid organization, law library, or self-help center in your area.

Call your local court clerk's office.

05

The clerk's office is a place at or near the courthouse where people file papers for their cases. The people at the clerk's office are not lawyers and cannot give you legal advice. They can help you find local "self-help resources" and answer questions about filing papers, setting a hearing, or general court procedures. (Self-help resources are made to help people who do not have lawyers). The clerk's office also can help you find the name and phone number of any pro bono or legal aid lawyers in your area.

Find a self-help center.

06

Many courts have self-help centers in the courthouse or nearby. Self-help centers generally have workshops or videos about how to prepare your paperwork or tips on appearing in court. Self-help centers often have pre-made forms to fill out and file with the court. They can tell you how your paperwork needs to look (but they can't tell you what to write). Self-help centers also can help you learn

about court procedures and requirements. For example, they can tell you how to get a hearing before the judge. They can also tell you whether you need to take any parenting or other class (and if so, how to get signed up). They'll also know about any required (often called "mandatory") proceedings such as mediation or early neutral evaluation. Self-help centers also know about pro bono and legal services organizations and can give you their phone numbers and information.

If you need help finding a self-help center near you, please call us at **1-800-527-3223**.

Call your local law library.

07

A law library has books and information about the law. The librarians love to be asked for help and are experts in finding legal information. Don't be shy! They'll know about legal services in your area, and some have self-help centers. While they can't give you legal advice, they can help you research the law for your case. Ask your local court clerk about a law library near you, or call us at **1-800-527-3223**.

The American Association of Law Libraries has a useful guide with tips for non-lawyers doing legal research: <http://www.aallnet.org/main-menu/Publications/products/How-To-Research-A-Legal-Problem/howtoresearchlegalproblem.pdf>

Call a national domestic violence resource center.

08

National domestic violence resource centers, like ours, exist to help victims. The National Resource Center on

Domestic Violence has information on many topics related to domestic violence. Their website is <http://www.nrcdv.org> and they have a toll-free number, **1-800-537-2238**. The National Domestic Violence Hotline is available 24 hours a day, every day, at **1-800-799-SAFE (7233)**.

Some resource centers have information on certain issues or for certain groups of people. Check this list and see if one of these centers might help you with your specific issue. Just call or go the website listed:

National Indigenous Women's Resource Center

855-NIWRC-99/406-477-3896
<http://www.niwrc.org>

Asian & Pacific Islander Institute on Gender-Based Violence

415-568-3315
<http://www.api-gbv.org>

National Latin@ Network for Healthy Families and Communities

651-646-5553
<http://www.nationallatinonetwork.org>

Battered Women's Justice Project (help for survivors with the civil and criminal justice systems), including **National Center on Protection Orders and Full Faith and Credit** (help with enforcement of protection orders)

1-800-903-0111
<http://www.bwjp.org>

Battered Women's Justice Project: National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women (help for survivors charged with a crime)

1-800-903-0111 ext. 3
<http://www.ncdbw.org>

The Northwest Network of Bi, Trans, Lesbian and Gay Survivors of Abuse

206-568-7777
<http://www.nwnetwork.org>

Resource Center on Domestic Violence: Child Protection and Custody (help with child protection and child custody issues)
1-800-52PEACE (527-3423)
<http://www.rcdvcpc.org>

National Health Resource Center on Domestic Violence: Futures Without Violence (help with the health care system's response to domestic violence)
888-792-2873
<http://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/health>

National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health (help for survivors and their children with the effects of abuse and trauma)
312-726-7020 ext. 2011
<http://www.nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org>

A complete list of the resource centers can be found at this website, with descriptions of each center, links, and telephone numbers: <http://www.nrcdv.org/dvrn>

Be persistent—but be polite.

09 Remember: Persistence is key! Everyone who can help you is likely overworked, and you may need to remind them you're still waiting. Keep track of who you talk to. If they can't answer your questions right

away, ask when you can expect to hear back. Then don't be afraid to follow up. Also, if any one of these resources can't help you, keep trying the others. Someone will be able to help.

Also remember: Courtesy is appreciated. You're under an incredible amount of stress. It's hard not to get emotional when you're talking about your safety and your children's future. The court system is not easy to follow, and it's almost never quick. This can be frustrating. But you'll find people more willing to help you, even going out of their way sometimes, if you treat them with respect. Try to think about how you'd like to be treated when you feel like you are losing your patience.

Take care of yourself.

10 You're going through a difficult time. The pressure on you never seems to end, whether it's work (or looking for work), caring for your children, or even just figuring out what's for dinner. A family law case is a marathon, not a sprint. You need to conserve your energy and think long-term. And while a lot of people can help in one way or another, ultimately, it's up to you to make decisions and keep your life moving forward. Under these circumstances, caring

for yourself is not a luxury, even though it's probably something you're not used to doing. Reach out for the help you need, and accept it when it's offered.

Another important reason to take care of yourself is that how you behave in court has a lot to do with how much you will be believed. You need to be able to tell your story in a way that someone who knows nothing about you or your family will understand what happened. You also need to explain why your requests are reasonable and will benefit the children. Abuse, especially if it was for a long time, can affect you in ways that might surprise you. Getting the help you need to deal with the trauma and emotional effects will help you win your case. (For more information about how to be your own best witness, see our Victim's Evidence Guide on our website, <http://www.rcdvcpc.org>.)

Family, friends, and faith communities can all be sources of amazing support. (But sometimes they add their own pressures, so do what's right for you). Many domestic violence programs have support groups. You can talk to others who know what you're going through—you're not alone. A therapist or counselor might also help, so check your health insurance (if you have it) or ask your advocate about services in your area.

For help with any services in this guide or to ask questions not covered here, please don't hesitate to call us at **1-800-527-3223**. We're here to put you in touch with resources that can help you.

**We wish the best for you
and your children.**

This document was supported by Grant Number 90EV0415 from the Administration of Children, Family and Youth Services, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Its contents are the responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official view of DHHS.