

Service Providers

How to get legal advice if you can't afford a lawyer.

BY WARD B.B. DAVISON

The old joke goes something like this: “Everyone hates lawyers, until they need one.” As a criminal defense attorney, I have heard the same thing said about police officers. And I’ve often heard the mantra about plumbers, electricians, foundation repair companies, drywall installers, roofers ... can you tell I’m restoring my home? The point is, paying for a service sometimes feels unnecessary because it’s not tangible.

Every now and then we desperately need the services of those same people but can’t afford them. When it comes to a project in my home that I don’t want to pay someone else to do, I try to fix it myself. If I screw up—excuse me, when I screw up—I have to pony up and call someone to fix the original problem and my mistake, or do dishes in the bathtub until I make that call. Unfortunately, when it comes to final consequences with the law, we rarely get a second chance to rectify a mistake. But that doesn’t mean you must push forward without professional help. Luckily, lawyers in Texas band together to provide legal services for our community.

Sometimes when you need a lawyer, you can’t afford one. Before you panic or take out a payday loan or, even worse, ignore the problem hoping it will go away, go online and contact



someone from your local bar association. That’s right, the local attorneys who “everyone hates until you need one” form statewide and local organ-

izations dedicated to helping folks navigate the legal system when they can’t afford to hire an attorney.

Recently I spoke with Michael Coker,

The information included in this column is for educational and informational purposes only. Please consult an attorney regarding specific legal questions.

a private attorney working out of Tyler in Smith County. He's also the current president of the Smith County Bar Foundation. Coker explained to me how Smith County attorneys work with Lone Star Legal Aid.

"Lone Star Legal Aid provides us with names of people who are in need of some free legal help," Coker said. "They might need representation; they might just need some advice. But here in Smith County, all pending cases that have requested for and qualified for our help have been placed with a local lawyer. That's because over 25 percent of our attorneys volunteer to help in our community."

Later that day I got on the phone with Nancy Gallego, the executive director of the El Paso Bar Association. The association takes referrals from Texas Rural Legal Aid and accepts cases from all across West Texas. The majority of these cases deal with criminal defense, family law, or real estate law. But the legal clinics that members of the El Paso bar hold for the community are what really get Gallego excited.

"Twice a year in May and November we hold legal clinics open to the public," Gallego said. "People can come in with their problems, and there are lawyers here the whole day to counsel them. These attorneys don't sign up folks as clients; there are just too many

people to see. But a lot of problems can be solved with a quick consultation and some guidance," she explained. "The attorneys who participate get a good sense of self-worth and often come back time and again," she said. One of the big things a clinic like this can do is help unclog the courts by removing people trying to represent themselves when they don't know how.

The El Paso Bar Association also holds a Veterans Legal Clinic twice a year that provides myriad services all in one convenient location. "It can be a bit overwhelming trying to track down and utilize the services our country offers to veterans," Gallego said. "But by bringing all those groups to one space, it's much easier to use more of the services and understand how they can work together."

[James Gill](#), a criminal defense attorney serving Austin and the surrounding Hill Country, talked to me a little about what private attorneys do for their communities. Gill, who has been practicing law in Travis County for nine years, touched on the Texas Legal Protection Plan and how it can be a cost-efficient option for many people. "This is a prepaid legal protection plan, and it only costs about \$30 a month," Gill said. "You pay into the fund each month, and when you need to go see an attorney, you pay a discounted rate, kind of like a 'co-pay.'

You get to pick which attorneys in your area you want to use," he explained. "It's especially good for family law, but most of the calls I get are for criminal defense. I'm sure there are some plaintiff attorneys in the plan too. This is a great service for folks who want to be sure they have good attorneys at their disposal without having to put up a large retainer. You can make all the promises in life you want about not committing a crime, but you can't ever ensure you won't be accused of one."

Legal emergencies happen. They are often unplanned, and they are usually unpleasant. Sometimes, they can be expensive to fix. But don't despair or panic. Legal professionals in your community want to help you. Some organizations exist for the sole purpose of helping you. Some people are paid by those organizations to help you. It's more time efficient and cost effective for the judicial system to help you rather than leave you twisting in the wind. So take a chance, pick up the phone, and reach out to your local bar association. Chances are someone with the right tools and know-how can help you fix your sink—I mean, your legal issue. **TBJ**

Ward B.B. Davison

practices criminal and civil law in Austin. Visit his website at WardDavisonLaw.com.

Texas Legal Directory "Official Directory of the State Bar of Texas" Your Blue Book of Attorneys since 1935

Federal Section
State Section Exec & Legislative Branches, State Offices, Tax Depts
Court Section State, county and local contact info
Professional Associations
County Map and County/City list
Judicial Pictorial Section
Board of Legal Specialization Section
Areas of Practice Section
Classified Section
Roster Section
Out of State Roster
Biographical Section of participating law firms & individuals

\$68.00 + 4 vol set
+ P&H & Tax

Legal Directories
PO Box 189000
Dallas TX 75218
(800) 447-5375



View your listing at: www.LegalDirectories.com "The Legal Search Engine"