

A Maryland Judiciary Production
My Laws, My Courts, My Maryland
Should I Represent Myself?

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Introduction

Hello and welcome to this Maryland Court Help video titled "Should I Represent Myself?" In most cases in the Maryland Courts, you may represent yourself. In some instances, however, it may be a better idea to have a lawyer represent you, if possible. This video will help you decide whether you are better off having a lawyer represent you. We will discuss types of cases where hiring a lawyer is strongly advised. We don't have time to discuss every kind of case, but we will share ways to think about your case that will help you decide what to do. Let's get started.

Types of Cases Where a Lawyer is Recommended

First, if your case is a **criminal or child abuse**, case you should engage a lawyer. Your freedom and constitutional rights are at stake. Fortunately, in these cases, you have a right to a lawyer. This means that if you cannot afford one you may receive representation from the Office of the Public Defender. Look for our video titled *Finding Legal Help in a Criminal Case* or visit mdcourts.gov/districtpdinfo for more information. **If you do not qualify the court may also appoint an attorney upon written request.**

Next, seek representation if you're a **victim of domestic violence**. Your safety and life may be at stake. A lawyer can help ensure you obtain the safety and protection available to you under the law. Visit mdcourts.gov/dv for a list of resources.

Representation is strongly recommended for lawsuits involving **physical injury**. Common examples are car accidents and medical malpractice. Often in these cases, you do not need to pay your lawyer up front. Instead you may be offered a contingency fee agreement. This means that the lawyer will take an agreed upon percentage of any money they collect for you.

You should speak to a lawyer before you sign a **contract that will seriously affect your finances**. Contracts can be long and complicated. It's best to make sure you understand everything before you sign. Similarly, you should seek help from a lawyer if your legal issue involves **transfer of real estate**. Examples include routine matters like title searches or deed transfers as well as lengthy matters such as a divorce involving property or foreclosure.

Next, hire a lawyer if you want to **organize a business**. Maryland **formally** recognizes several types of business organizations. A lawyer can explain to you the pros and cons of each type, and help you set up the business. It is also important to note that an incorporated business must be represented by a lawyer in most matters before the court.

If you are being evicted from your home, speak with a lawyer. In some parts of the state such as Baltimore City, free representation may be available to those who cannot afford it. Call a Court Help Center at 410-260-1392 to learn more.

Finally, for many **family law matters** a lawyer is strongly recommended. Often this depends on what is involved in the case. Does your divorce involve property division or alimony? Do you have a child custody or child support case where the parties disagree on what should happen? If so, speak with a lawyer right away. Most courts offer family court help centers where you can speak with a lawyer for free. Visit mdcourts.gov/helpcenter for hours and locations.

Important Questions to Ask Yourself

Now let's discuss some other ways to think about your case and the decision to hire a lawyer. Ask yourself the following questions about your case.

1. Can I afford to lose this case? A court case may be your only chance to be heard, and if this is a "make it or break it" case for you, you might need a lawyer.
2. Is this an emotional case for me? Lawyers can give you unbiased guidance. They can also act as a buffer between you and someone who knows how to upset you, or someone whom you find difficult to confront.
3. Do I fully understand the papers I received from the other side or from the court? Always review your paperwork closely and follow up on anything you don't understand.
4. Does the other side have a lawyer? If so, they may have a big advantage over you even when the case seems like a straightforward matter.
5. Finally, ask, "Is my case a small claim"? Generally, cases before the District Court where the amount involved is \$5,000 or less are considered small claims. Certain rules and procedures are relaxed to make it easier for people to represent themselves. Watch our video titled *Before You File a Small Claim* to learn more.

One last thing before we review. You are best able to represent yourself if you are a person who is organized, pays attention to detail, and keeps good records. You must also be comfortable speaking in public, be able to stick to deadlines, and feel comfortable looking up legal information online or at a law library.

Let's Review

Let's review what you have learned. There are certain types of cases where you should secure the help of a lawyer whenever possible. We didn't have time to discuss every situation, though we discussed some important questions to ask yourself about your case. Whether you decided to represent yourself or you plan to hire a lawyer, the Court has resources to help. Review a complete list at mdcourts.gov/courthelp. Thanks for watching.