

THE FULL SERVICE LAWYER: WHAT TO EXPECT FOR WHAT YOU PAY By Nancy M. Perry

You have decided to retain the services of an attorney for your divorce. That's an excellent idea, especially if you have children. The following are a few tips on what to expect from your attorney.

The Contract and Billing

Make sure you discuss fees and sign a contract. Read the contract and ask questions. Does he charge for long distance? How are phone calls and emails billed? How much does he charge for copies? You should receive a monthly invoice and/or statement from your attorney telling you exactly what work he's done and how much retainer money you have left.

Speaking of Retainers

Lawyers work and earn their pay just like anyone else. We have overhead, payroll, rent and bills due each month just like anyone else. Why do lawyers require a retainer up front? Far, far too many times, lawyers work for their client, bill for their time and don't get paid. The reality of it is, lawyers are the last ones on the list to be paid by the client and if there is no money left, we don't get paid. Retainers merely insure that we will be paid for our services.

What can I Expect for my Retainer?

You can expect that your lawyer will keep you apprised of your case and will respond to your questions in a timely manner. Lawyers are very busy with court dates, mediation, collaborative law sessions, new client meetings, and the like. The lawyer or someone in his office should respond to your email or phone call within a day or two. Make use of the lawyer's paralegal. For one thing, they bill at a cheaper rate. Paralegals are the backbone of any law firm. A good relationship with the paralegal can help you greatly.

When you do talk to your attorney, have a list of your questions handy. It's best to save your questions for one phone call as you will be billed for each phone call. If you call your attorney's office several times a day, you will be billed for each call. That goes for emails as well.

You should receive a copy of all letters, pleadings, and any other document related to your case. You should also be apprised of any upcoming deadlines such as discovery or hearing dates. The best way you can help your attorney and save money is for you to do as much of the legwork as you can. You can put together the marital assets in a spreadsheet with copies of supporting documents or gather up the children's medical and school records. Any legwork you can do and hand to the attorney neatly organized will save you hundreds of dollars in legal fees.

And finally, follow your attorney's advice. If you hired a family attorney, trust that he knows what he's doing. Nothing can jeopardize your case more than not following your attorney's advice and in many cases, your attorney can't fix the mess you've created when you contradict his advice. Going through a divorce is an emotional, crazy time. For now, let your lawyer do your thinking for you. That's why you're paying him.