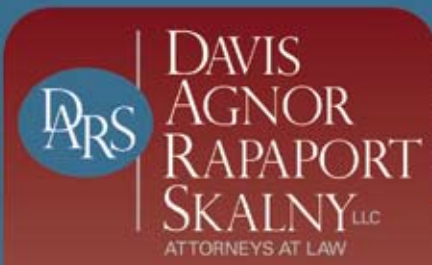


We help you find your way.



LEGAL BRIEFS

Getting Started: How to Find an Attorney

Our New Year's celebration has come and gone, and most of our resolutions have been deferred if not forgotten. One resolution that should not be forgotten, however, is the one to do your estate planning.

For most people, estate planning is a daunting task that can easily be put on the back-burner. It shouldn't be. There is much you can do now to protect your family's security should something happen to you, and most of the issues involve estate and tax planning, asset protection, and disability and long-term care planning.

The first step is to retain competent legal counsel. Your attorney should be able to properly identify those issues that are important to you, and then set out the various options you should consider in addressing them. You could probably develop such a plan without an attorney after countless hours reading books on these matters, or after searching the internet, but those resources, no matter how well written, will not apply directly to your individual situation. An experienced estate planning or elder law attorney will be able to design a comprehensive plan for you and your family while giving you the confidence that you have identified every issue that needs to be addressed.

How do you find an estate planning attorney? One very good resource is to get referrals from friends or family who worked successfully with their attorneys on such issues. Another resource would be your own attorney who may have worked with you on other matters, such as buying a house. If you were satisfied with your attorney's performance then that attorney may be able to help you again or, at least, refer you to another attorney who can help you. Personal referrals such as these can provide to you the assurance that you will be working with someone you can trust.

On the internet, there are countless resources, most of them advertisements by attorneys with professional referral sources that appear to be independent in nature. Stay away from these since all it takes to be listed on one of these sites is a fee paid by the attorney.

There are some exceptions. One is Martindale-Hubbell. This is an organization that has been rating lawyers, using peer evaluations from other attorneys, for decades. On the internet, Martindale-Hubbell can be found at www.martindale.com or www.lawyers.com. At the first website, attorney ratings can also be found using the following ratings: AV (Very High to Preeminent), BV (High to Very High), and CV (Good to High).

Other sites include the Howard County Bar Association's website at <http://www.howardcountybar.org/>, click on "Looking for a Lawyer," and at the website for the National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys, www.naela.com, click on "Locate an Elder Law Attorney."

Display advertisements in newspapers and the yellow pages are of limited usefulness, except, perhaps for identifying potential attorneys to check out at the Martindale-Hubbell website or the other websites noted above.

Whomever you pick, be prepared to invest some real time and effort into the estate planning process. The more effort you invest, the better the results will be. Never be afraid to ask questions about your estate plan, or about the attorney's fees associated with preparing your estate plan. Always keep in mind that what you are doing is providing you and your family with the security of knowing that your affairs are in order, no matter what the future may have in store for you.