

## **Frequently Asked Questions from Volunteer Attorneys**

An instruction video that answers many basic questions about the program is available at <https://youtu.be/RAmHEnpB-bo>.

### **How does VT Free Legal Answers work?**

VT Free Legal Answers is a web-based version of a walk-in clinic where low income Vermonters can request brief advice about a specific civil legal issue from a volunteer lawyer. Lawyers can provide basic legal advice without any expectation of long-term representation. Users who meet eligibility standards (see next question below) sign the use agreement, create a username and password, post a request for legal advice or information, and provide facts about their case to help the lawyer answer the question. Users select a category (such as "housing" or "debt") that best describes their question. The lawyer may ask for additional information before responding to the user's request. A user's name and county, but no other identifying information, will be shared with the volunteer lawyer. Users are informed that there is no guarantee that a question will be answered. If a question is not answered within 30 days, the user will receive an email from the website administrator instructing them to seek assistance elsewhere. The user will also be provided with a list of resources.

Lawyers who would like to participate are asked to create a username and password, provide contact information and their Vermont attorney license number, sign the lawyer use agreement, and request approval from the website administrator. The website administrator checks that the lawyer is licensed in Vermont and is in good standing with the Vermont Board of Professional Responsibility. Once a lawyer has been approved by the website administrator, his or her account is activated, the lawyer receives an email notification, and he or she can begin answering user questions.

Lawyers may log in at any time to review a list of user questions and select the one(s) they want to answer. A lawyer will have the opportunity to read the full question before deciding whether to take it from the list and answer it. Once a lawyer takes a question from the list, the lawyer has three days to answer it. Lawyers may ask follow up questions if they need additional information in order to answer the user's question. Likewise, a user can pose a follow up question to an answer, unless the lawyer indicates that his or her answer is a "final answer." The lawyer's identity is not revealed to the user unless the lawyer decides to do so. (More detailed information about navigating the website is at the end of the FAQ's.)

Lawyers will be able to view a log of questions they have answered.

### **Who is eligible to use VT Free Legal Answers?**

Eligibility for use of VT Free Legal Answers is limited to the following:

- The user must have household income of less than 250% of the federal poverty level;
- The user may not have liquid assets exceeding \$5,000 in value (this includes checking and savings account balances, as well as the value of any stocks or bonds);
- The user may not be incarcerated;
- The user may not request assistance with criminal law matters.

Users must provide their name, county, and zip code in order to request advice, and agree to post no more than three legal questions per year on three different topics. They can follow-up with an attorney on each question as many times as the attorney and user choose to do so.

### **What kinds of lawyers can participate?**

All Vermont-licensed lawyers in good standing are welcome! We need lawyers with all different areas of expertise to volunteer. We hope that the website will be a convenient way for lawyers to do pro bono work, and that it will appeal to lawyers who have been unable to participate in traditional pro bono work for whatever reason. We also hope to engage lawyers who already provide pro bono services and wish to do more.

### **What happens if a lawyer selects a question to answer, and then decides not to answer it?**

If a lawyer determines that (s)he can't answer a question, the lawyer may place the question back into the open question queue so that another volunteer lawyer may try to assist the user. If a lawyer takes a question and doesn't respond within three days, the question will automatically return to the open questions queue.

### **What type of relationship exists between the client and lawyer?**

When a user submits a question and receives an answer from a lawyer, there will be a lawyer/client relationship formed between that client and the lawyer who responds. That relationship, however, will be limited in scope and duration as described in the use agreements for both users and lawyers. The representation will be limited to providing an answer to the legal question and will not involve any continuing representation of the client beyond the act of providing such an answer. The lawyer will provide short-term, limited legal services to a client (the eligible user of this site) without expectation by either the lawyer or the client that the lawyer will provide continuing representation in the matter. Both the eligible users and lawyers must consent to the limited nature of this relationship both as to scope and duration as indicated when they accept the terms of the use agreement. Eligible users and lawyers who do not accept the terms of the use agreement will not be allowed access to the site.

### **Must lawyers check for conflicts of interest before answering a question?**

In general, the only conflicts of interest that would preclude a lawyer from answering a question for an eligible user of VT Free Legal Answers are conflicts of interest that the lawyer actually knows of at the time that the lawyer answers the question. Lawyers need not do a conflict of interest check upon viewing a name or reading about a particular situation, unless they actually recognize a conflict of interest with the person or the situation. This means that the possibility exists, and the clients agree that they understand, that a lawyer who answers a question (or another lawyer with whom they practice) may be representing other parties with an interest in the question.

### **What about professional liability insurance coverage?**

Volunteer lawyers who provide brief advice and counsel via the website will be covered by professional liability insurance maintained by the American Bar Association and by Legal Services Law Line of Vermont, Inc. If a user and an attorney agree to meet off-line or continue services beyond the on-line service, there is no longer coverage under the ABA or the Legal Services Law Line professional liability insurance. If an issue of

malpractice arises, the ABA Free Legal Answers administrator has the ability to trace each answered question back to the attorney who answered it.

### **Is there a confidentiality issue with client information/lawyer advice being housed on the internet?**

The website is designed to insure client privacy. Information available to the website administrator and the lawyer responding to a question is confidential, subject to the limitations of the "Privacy/Confidentiality Policy. Client requests for information and the lawyer responses are maintained in a database for review to measure the effectiveness of the program. Information may be disclosed when legally required by government authorities conducting an investigation, to verify or enforce compliance with website policies and applicable laws, or to protect against mis-uses or unauthorized use of the website. An absolute guarantee of security is not possible when using the internet and internet based systems.

### **Can I subscribe to a specific category of cases?**

If your area of practice is specialized and you only want to answer certain types of questions, you can subscribe to a category and receive an email notification each time a question in that particular category is posted. To subscribe to a category (for example, evictions), click on the "Manage Subscriptions" tab at the top of the screen. Scroll down to the category you are interested in and click on the red circle. When the red circle changes to a check mark, you have successfully subscribed to that category. You may also choose where you want to get subscription emails. To change it from your user name email, click on your email address next to the green check and enter your different email address. Click the save icon to save your email address. You can unsubscribe at any time.

### **Can I earn CLE credit?**

The Vermont Board of Bar Examiners will be examining the question of CLE credits at its October meeting. We will update this FAQ after getting an answer after that meeting.

### **How do I contact the administrator with a question?**

If you have a question or run into a technical problem with the site, you may contact the administrator by emailing [sabel-palmer@lawlinevt.org](mailto:sabel-palmer@lawlinevt.org).

### **How do I navigate the Website and select questions to answer?**

Go to [vt.freelegalanswers.org](http://vt.freelegalanswers.org) and select "Sign In" at the top right side of your screen. After you enter your user name (which is your email address) and password, you will automatically be directed to a page that lists all the questions that have been posted for lawyers to answer.

There are three ways in which to view questions in the queue:

1. The default view is a list of all the questions in the queue.
2. Questions with red-outline flags are those that have been posted for more than 10 days and questions with filled-in red flags are questions that have been in the queue for at least 25 days and will be closed if no lawyer is able to answer them. Questions that are not answered within 30 days will be closed and the client will be notified.
3. Click "Filter" to view questions sorted by category.

4. Click "Home" to see questions in your personal queue.

You can also click the "Preview" button to read the first few lines of a question. If you decide you want to see more details, click "Subject" to be taken to the question detail page. When you have found a question you'd like to answer, click "I want to answer this question" on the bottom of the question detail page. If you then decide that you don't want to take a question, click "I want to return this question" to send it back to the full queue. Click "Answer Now" or "Answer Later", depending on your preference. If you fail to respond to a question that you have selected within 3 days, the question will be moved back into the queue. Once you have taken the question, you will be able to reply to the client and provide an answer or ask follow up questions. The client will not know your identity unless you choose to provide it. If you ask the client a question, you will receive an email when the client responds and a prompt to log back into the website to respond.

## **Frequently Asked Questions from Site Users:**

### **How does VT Free Legal Answers work?**

VT Free Legal Answers lets you request brief advice and counsel about a specific civil legal issue from a volunteer lawyer. Once you register and set up your account, you may ask up to three legal questions each year. Each question must be in a different legal area. When you post your questions, volunteer lawyers in Vermont will be able to see your question. Once a volunteer lawyer chooses to answer your question, you will get an e-mail with an answer, or an e-mail asking you for more information.

The volunteer lawyers only provide information and basic legal advice. There is no expectation of long-term representation. If you meet eligibility criteria, you must sign the use agreement, and create a username and password. You can then post a request for legal advice or information and provide facts about your case that will help the lawyer answer the question. You will be asked to select a category (such as "housing" or "debt") that best describes your question. The lawyer may ask you for additional information before responding to your request; you can choose to respond to that request or not. Only your name and county, but no other identifying information, will be shared with the volunteer lawyer.

There is no guarantee that a question will be answered. If a question is not answered within 30 days, you will receive an email from the website administrator directing you to other legal resources. If a lawyer answers your question, you may be able to ask follow-up questions, though the volunteer lawyer is not required to answer them. You will not see the name of the volunteer lawyer unless the lawyer chooses to give it to you.

### **Who is eligible to use VT Free Legal Answers?**

Eligibility for use of VT Free Legal Answers is limited to the following:

- You must have household income less than 250% of the federal poverty level;
- You may not have liquid assets exceeding \$5,000 in value (this includes checking and savings account balances, as well as the value of any stocks or bonds);
- You may not be incarcerated;
- You may not request assistance with criminal law matters.

You must provide your name, county, and zip code in order to request advice. You must agree to post no more than 3 legal questions per year on 3 different topics. You can follow-up with an attorney on each question as many times as the attorney and you choose to do so; the follow-up questions do not count toward your total of three questions.

### **What happens if a lawyer can't answer my question?**

A lawyer might be unable to answer your question for a number of reasons. Some examples might be a conflict of interest, your failure to respond to the lawyer's request for additional information, or the question may fall outside the lawyer's area of expertise. If a lawyer determines that she cannot answer a question, the lawyer may place the question back into the queue so that another volunteer lawyer may try to

assist you. If a lawyer takes a question and doesn't respond within 3 days, the question will automatically return to the open questions queue.

### **Is the volunteer lawyer who answers my question representing me?**

When you submit a question and receive an answer from a volunteer lawyer, there is a lawyer/client relationship formed between you and the lawyer who responds. That relationship, however, is limited in scope and duration as described in the use agreement that you sign when you register. The representation is limited to answering your question and does not involve any continuing representation beyond providing the answer. There is no expectation that the lawyer will provide continuing representation to you. Both you and the lawyer must consent to the limited nature of this relationship both as to scope and duration as indicated when you accept the terms of the use agreement. If you do not accept the terms of the use agreement you will not be allowed access to the site.

### **Are my questions confidential?**

This site is designed to insure client privacy. The web program is administered via email through a platform that limits access based on a screening. Confidentiality will be maintained since only the website administrator has access to content between a client and a lawyer. Information available to the website administrator and the lawyer responding to a client request shall remain confidential, subject to the limitations of the Privacy/Confidentiality Policy. Requests for information and the response of the lawyers participating in VT Free Legal Answers may be maintained in a database for review in order to measure the effectiveness of the project. Steps will be taken to maintain the security of this database and it will only be utilized by the administrator, but an absolute guarantee of security is not possible when using the internet and internet based systems. Information may be disclosed when legally required at the request of government authorities conducting an investigation, to verify or enforce compliance with the policies governing our website and applicable laws or to protect against misuses or unauthorized use of our website.

### **My question says it is marked as closed. Why?**

Questions can be marked as closed for multiple reasons:

1. The attorney who responded marked the question as closed after responding;
2. The site administrator had to close the question and listed why it was closed;
3. You never answered the attorney's response, so the question automatically closed.

Please remember, you cannot ask a more than 1 question per legal area, so if a question is closed, please do not re-post it to the general queue or it will be closed by the site administrator.

### **I have asked all 3 questions. What do I do now?**

As you agreed in the use agreement, each user may only ask three (3) total questions per year and each one must be on a different legal issue. You can look at our page for other places to find help to see if there are other resources that might be able to help you.

### **I need site technical help. Who do I ask?**

You may e-mail the site administrator with questions about using the site. The site administrator will not respond to requests for legal help.

## **Other places to find legal help and information:**

### **Vermont free legal information resources**

You can find free civil legal information at **Vermont Law Help**.

You can also find helpful information at the **Vermont Judiciary** and **Vermont Bar Association** web sites.

### **Free legal services programs in Vermont**

**Vermont Legal Aid** and **Legal Services Law Line of Vermont** provide free civil legal services to eligible clients. To see if you qualify for help, you can contact the Vermont Law Help hotline at **800-889-2047**, or submit a web inquiry at the **Vermont Law Help** web site.

The **Vermont Volunteer Lawyers Project (VVLP)** can connect qualified clients with a free attorney in certain cases. The **Vermont Bar Association** coordinates many county-based programs funded by the **Vermont Bar Foundation** that offer lawyer representation at no cost to qualified clients. If you do not qualify for free legal assistance, you may qualify for the "Modest Means" program, where you pay a reduced fee for legal representation. To see if you qualify for these programs, you can contact the Vermont Law Help hotline at **800-889-2047**, or submit a web inquiry at the **Vermont Law Help** web site, and indicate that you are inquiring about VVLP, the VBA county programs, or the VBA "Modest Means" program.

The **South Royalton Legal Clinic**, housed at Vermont Law School, provides representation to eligible clients in immigration cases statewide, and in other civil legal areas in counties near the Law School. You can contact the clinic at **802-831-1500**.

**Have Justice Will Travel** provides legal and support services to low-income victims of domestic violence. Their phone number is **877-496-8100**.

### **If you want to hire an attorney**

The **Vermont Bar Association** offers the **VBA Lawyer Referral Service**. This service provides the name of a local lawyer experienced in the area of law you need, who will provide a 30-minute consultation for no more than \$25 for the 30 minutes. Arrangements for further representation are between the client and the lawyer. You can contact this service at **800-639-7036**, or contact the service on-line at the **VBA Lawyer Referral Service** web site.

### **Telephone Hotlines**

**Vermont Law Help** is the intake and quick advice hotline for Law Line and Vermont Legal Aid. You can call the hotline at **800-889-2047**. Hotline hours are MWF 8:30-1:30 and TuTh 11:30-4:00. If all staff are busy, or you are calling during non-hotline hours, please leave a voice mail and we will call you back.

**Vermont 211** is a general assistance hotline for many types of assistance. Just dial **211**.



**Vermont Domestic Violence Hotline** is at **800-228-7395**.

**Vermont Sexual Violence Hotline** is at **800-489-7273**.

**Vermont Workers' Rights Hotline** is at **866-229-0009**.

### **Other helpful agencies**

**Disability Rights Vermont** provides advocacy and legal assistance on certain disability-related issues. Some issues may be referred to the Disability Law Project of Vermont Legal Aid. The phone number is **800-834-7890**.

**Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence**, provides information and resources for people dealing with domestic and sexual violence, including contact and referral to local support agencies. Phone **800-228-7395**.

The Vermont chapter of the **American Civil Liberties Union** provides information and, for select cases, representation defending individual rights guaranteed by the Constitution and Bill of Rights. The phone number is **802-223-6304**.

The **Vermont Center for Crime Victim Services** provides support, referral, and information for victims of crime in Vermont. Their phone number is **800-750-1213**.

The **Vermont Human Rights Commission** investigates allegations of unlawful discrimination in housing, public services and state employment. Their phone number is **800-416-2010**.

The Vermont Attorney General's Office **Civil Rights Unit** investigates allegations of unlawful discrimination in private employment, as well as hate crimes. Their phone number is **888-745-9195**.

The Vermont Attorney General's **Consumer Assistance Program** takes complaints and assists Vermonters in consumer fraud, scams, and other disputes with businesses. The phone number is **800-649-2424**, or e-mail [consumer@uvm.edu](mailto:consumer@uvm.edu).

The **Vermont Workers' Center** provides information around worker's rights. The Worker's Rights Hotline is at **866-229-0009**.