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Helpline offers free legal advice to seniors in PA

Access to free legal help for older citizens in Pennsylvania comes in two forms. The SeniorLAW Center in Philadelphia has been pursuing justice for low income seniors in the Philadelphia area for 30 years. Additionally, the SeniorLAW Helpline provides free and confidential legal advice, information and referrals to anyone over the age of 60 years anywhere in Pennsylvania.

The SeniorLAW Center on South Broad Street in Philadelphia provides free legal services to our most at-risk seniors who are at, or below, the federal poverty level. For more information on their services, go to www.seniorlawcenter.org. The Helpline is most likely to be of interest to readers. A project of the SeniorLAW Center, the Helpline is available to any Pennsylvanian, 60 years or older, regardless of economic status. Seniors in Pennsylvania can call the toll free number, 1-877-PA SR LAW, or 1-877-727-7529, any time from 10 am until 4 pm, Monday through Friday.

Initially, the senior speaks to a legal advocate, who is not a lawyer, to request basic demographic data and ask for a summary of the legal issues of concern. The advocate schedules a time for an attorney to call the senior to provide advice, legal information, and if necessary, a referral to such entities as Legal Aid or to the Office of the Attorney General. In this way, seniors who are unable to easily access a lawyer due to their geographic location, disabilities, or financial situation can obtain some legal advice at no cost. Sometimes, it is a mostly a matter of determining whether legal assistance is even necessary in their particular situation.

According to the Helpline, seniors call with a wide range of legal concerns. More than 25 percent of the questions are related to legal issues in consumer matters. Some are seeking help with credit card debt, others with contractor issues and home repairs. A common question seems to be related to the senior's responsibility for car payments when the senior co-signed a grandchild's car loan. Another common area for questions is in the traditional elder law category. These include such questions as should I sign my house over to my children, do I need a Will, or who will pay for nursing home care if I need it?

There are many other legal issues which may concern those calling the Helpline. These include landlord-tenant disputes, boundary line disputes, family law matters, tax questions, and public benefits questions. Help lines can not only educate seniors about legal rights, but can provide access to critical services. Some seniors are isolated geographically, or by disabilities that limit their mobility or understanding. Many are struggling to maintain their independence, and may be unaware of resources available to them in their communities. Seniors are often targeted for theft, economic crimes, and abuse. Too many live in extreme poverty, or have cultural obstacles. SeniorLaw Helpline is also able to assist those who may not speak English sufficiently well to make their needs and concerns known.

By confidential legal counseling by telephone, and education on legal subjects through a quarterly electronic newsletter as well as by telephone in response to direct questions, the SeniorLaw Helpline continues "to provide seniors access to justice, regardless of their circumstances."