

Legal Bearings

Find your bearings in the U.S. legal system.

QUICK GUIDE

Know Your Rights One-Pager

This one-page guide gives a simple summary of basic rights many people have in the United States. It is general education, not legal advice, and it may help you ask better questions if you talk with a lawyer.



What this one-pager is for

If you feel scared, rushed, or confused, a short list of rights can help. This page is a plain-language summary you can save, print, or share with family.

It covers core rights that many people in the U.S. have when dealing with police, immigration officers, landlords, employers, schools, hospitals, and courts. Your exact rights can depend on the facts, your state, and your immigration status. For advice about your own situation, talk with a licensed attorney.

If you want help finding one, you can use our free [\[lawyer matching service\]](#)(/get-matched/). Legal Bearings is not a law firm. It is a free matching service for readers and is paid a flat fee by participating attorneys.

Core rights to remember

- You often have the right to stay silent. This means you do not have to answer questions about where you were born, your immigration status, or other facts that may be used against you. In some situations, giving your name may still be required by local law.
- You often have the right to ask, "Am I free to leave?" If the answer is yes, you may leave calmly.
- You often have the right to refuse a search. A search means police or another officer looks through your body, clothes, car, home, phone, or belongings. Say clearly, "I do not consent to a search." Do not physically resist.
- You often have the right to ask for a lawyer. A lawyer is a licensed attorney who can give legal advice. Say, "I want to speak to a lawyer." Then stop answering questions.
- You often have the right to an interpreter. An interpreter is a person who translates spoken words. If you do not understand English well, say, "I need an interpreter."
- You often have the right not to sign papers you do not understand. Ask for a translation or more time to read.
- You often have the right to be paid for work you already did. In many cases, wage laws protect workers no matter their immigration status.
- You often have the right to emergency medical care. A hospital emergency room often must check and stabilize a person in an emergency.
- Your child often has the right to attend public school from kindergarten through 12th grade, no matter immigration status.

- You often have the right to be free from discrimination. Discrimination means unfair treatment because of race, national origin, religion, sex, disability, or other protected traits under certain laws.

What to do if an officer or official stops you

- 1 Stay calm. Keep your hands where they can be seen. Do not run, argue, or give false documents.
- 2 Ask, "Am I free to leave?" If yes, walk away calmly.
- 3 If they ask questions, you may say, "I choose to remain silent." This means you are using your right not to answer.
- 4 If they ask to search you, your car, or your home, say, "I do not consent to a search." Do not block them physically.
- 5 If they show a warrant, ask to see it. A warrant is a paper signed by a judge that may allow a search or arrest. If it is for your home, it should usually have your correct name or address and a judge's signature.
- 6 If you are arrested or detained, say, "I want to speak to a lawyer." Detained means you are being held and are not free to leave.
- 7 Do not sign anything you do not understand. Ask for an interpreter or a translated copy.
- 8 As soon as you can, write down names, badge numbers, what was said, where it happened, and the time and date.

Rights at work, at home, and at school

At work, many people have basic protections about pay, safety, and harassment. Harassment means repeated behavior that is threatening, abusive, or sexual. Your boss often cannot keep wages you already earned just because of your accent, national origin, or immigration questions. Rules vary, and some workers have extra protections.

At home, a landlord often cannot lock you out, shut off utilities, or take your things without using the legal process. The legal process means the formal court steps required by state law. Eviction rules are different in each state. If a landlord gives you papers, keep them.

At school, children usually have a right to attend public K-12 school. Schools often must provide language help for students and sometimes for parents. If you are asked for papers you do not

understand, ask what they are for and request language support.

In many places, you may also have rights in family court, traffic court, and criminal court to understand what is happening. If you do not speak English well, ask for an interpreter as early as possible.

Be careful with notarios and unlicensed help

In the U.S., a notary public is usually not a lawyer. A person who promises legal help without a law license may cause serious harm. Before you pay anyone, ask if they are a licensed attorney in your state and what services are included.

How to use this one-pager in real life

- 1 Save a copy on your phone and keep a printed copy at home.
- 2 Teach the short phrases to family members, especially children and older relatives.
- 3 Add emergency phone numbers for a trusted person, your child's school, and a lawyer if you have one.
- 4 Keep important papers together, such as IDs, rent records, pay stubs, court papers, and medical insurance cards.
- 5 If something happens, take notes right away. Save texts, photos, voicemails, and letters.
- 6 If you need legal advice, talk with a licensed attorney. If you are not sure how to choose one, read our [\[guide to choosing a lawyer\]](#)(/guides/choosing-a-lawyer/).
- 7 If you want help finding a lawyer, you can use our free [\[matching service\]](#)(/get-matched/). It is free for you, and participating attorneys pay Legal Bearings a flat fee to be included.

In plain English: Keep this page close, know a few key phrases, and if your problem is serious, get advice from a licensed attorney as soon as you can.





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