



HARRIS LAW & CO.

Protecting Families & Businesses Through All of Life's Journeys

Where Does Your Money Go? How to Control Costs in a Divorce or Custody Case

Few of us go through a divorce or custody battle without being concerned about the financial strain it will put on our budget. Planning for these costs can be difficult enough given the uncertainty in the process itself, but it is made even harder by the unfamiliarity of how legal fees work.

How do fees work?

In family law cases, most attorneys charge hourly for their services. The rate they charge varies based on a number of factors: complexity of the case, urgency, experience, timeframe, skill, etc. It is often hard to understand the value behind the fees you incur as you are paying for an attorney's time, knowledge, skills, and advocacy. Not as simple as going to the store and buying a gallon of milk. Further, some costs are beyond the attorney's control such as actions taken by the opposing party or mandatory court costs for filing your action. While the attorney may be able to give you an estimate of total fees, this estimate can change dramatically as your case and needs change.

Under most legal service agreements, you are billed for every tenth of an hour that the attorney or paralegal works on your file. This is why you may see a .1 or .4 on your bill. Check out the chart below to see how your ".1s" translate into real dollars and cents.

You will receive a copy of all of your bills so you can see the breakdown of what you are being billed for and who is completing the work. We send our bills out to our clients on a monthly basis through email. That way you can easily click to pay your bill online if you have an outstanding amount due and you do not need to get a check or worry about finding a stamp. Other law firms may send out quarterly bills or send them through snail mail.



So, what is a retainer?

Your retainer is the fee you pay to your attorney up front to work on your matter. The funds placed in the retainer account are only transferred to the attorney or law firm as payment on a bill. Think of it like an "escrow account". The retainer allows your attorney to work on your matter and bill against your account. Once your account is depleted, then your attorney may ask you to "refill" your retainer account to continue working on your case. If your case ends and you have an amount remaining in your retainer account, then that remaining amount is returned to you.

How can I help control the costs?

In order to keep costs low, it's important to understand what you are charged for and the costs you are responsible for. These terms are generally laid out in your legal services agreement. General rule of thumb: everything is billable. Phone calls, emails, and messages sent to your attorney or their assistant are billable.

Minutes	Time	@\$225/hr Attorney	@\$125/hr Paralegal
0-6	.1	\$22.50	\$12.50
6-12	.2	\$45	\$25
12-18	.3	\$67.50	\$37.50
18-24	.4	\$90	\$50
24-30	.5	\$112.50	\$62.50
30-36	.6	\$135	\$75
36-42	.7	\$157.50	\$87.50
42-48	.8	\$180	\$100
48-54	.9	\$202.50	\$112.50
54-60	1.0	\$225	\$125



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**Rebekkah J. Mouw
is a skilled advocate
on our Family Law
Team.**

Our Passion Shows!

Reviews



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Thank you for
helping us better
serve our
community by
referring us to your
friends & family.

Check out our
website for other
helpful articles,
videos, & seminar
opportunities.

Communications with opposing parties and their attorneys, witnesses, and experts are billable. Time spent drafting legal documents, letters, and preparing for trial is billable. Costs for filing fees, printing, and mailing are billable.

What are some tips to keep costs low?

While it is important that you stay in contact with your attorney, here are some general tips that may help you be more efficient with your dollars:

- Don't email your attorney with every little question. Keep a list. Then, when you have a few questions send them to your attorney to address at once or bring them to your next meeting. Of course, if something is time sensitive, you will need to address it immediately with your attorney.
- Ask yourself if something is really an emergency. While your attorney may be available outside of regular business hours, they generally charge higher rates for services during non-business hours. Sometimes emergencies do come up and your attorney will need to be contacted.
- Keep notes. You will discuss a lot of different things with your attorney and it can be hard to remember it all. We do not expect you to! But it is helpful if you jot down a few notes to help you jog your memory. This way you are not billed for asking your attorney the same questions twice.
- Keep a copy of your file. If you are providing documents or notes to your attorney, keep a copy for yourself and bring it to your meetings. This way if your attorney needs something or if you want to review something later it is readily available.
- Start a checklist. If your attorney asks you to think about a course of action or provide documents to them, put it on a checklist so you do not forget to get back to them. This prevents you from being billed again for a remainder call or email.
- Work with an attorney with a skilled and experienced paralegal to help you control costs even further as their time is charged at a substantially lower rate than the attorney. Paralegals may assist with initial drafting, administrative work, and help with communications and questions.
- Work with an attorney who focuses on family law. If you are working with an attorney who does a little bit of everything or who does not focus on family law, then you will end up paying more for their inexperience or unfamiliarity. Yes, they may charge a lower rate, but it is not low enough to account for the differences in preparation time, drafting time, and the quality of advice you will receive (which translates into saved time, money, and headaches down the road).

If you have questions about what you are being billed for, review your legal services agreement and ask your attorney. It is important that you understand at the outset of your case what you will be charged for and how you can help curb those costs without affecting the outcome of your case or your attorney's ability to represent you. If you are facing a divorce or custody dispute, give our family law team a call at 605-777-1772. We understand your case and your money matters.

**This article is only intended to give general information and not specific legal advice. Consult with an attorney on your situation before taking any legal action.*