



The Practice of Law: Legal Representation Costs

Every day brings with it a variety of stress which people are generally able to successfully manage. However, occasions arise when they suddenly find themselves in a predicament with legal consequences. Such events will naturally create a significant increase in stress that becomes difficult to manage only to be exacerbated by the uncertainty of outcomes coupled with financial costs associated with legal representation.

Although an individual's physical, mental, and financial health at the time will be determinative factors to effectively absorb the additional anxiety, another influential factor is knowledge. Knowing what the spectrum of outcomes could be as well as extent of legal expenses will not eliminate the weight of stress, but will lighten the burden. Reducing the fog of uncertainty provides visibility as to what lies ahead. When selecting an attorney, keep in mind the attorney cannot guarantee the outcome, but should be able to provide a realistic assessment of an individual's legal risk from best to worst case scenario coupled with an estimate of the cost involved with legal representation.

An individual's case can involve anywhere from dozens of hours to hundreds of hours of legal work depending upon the complexity involved. When the client is a legal entity such as a business, non-profit, government entity, etc., the time dedicated to legal services only increases dramatically. If legal expenses are based on an hourly rate, then the longer a case takes naturally means the greater the ultimate cost to an individual for legal representation. As a result, an individual will naturally wonder and worry whether legal services will flow like an open spigot or be responsibly managed.

This article is not intended to debate the merits of how legal services are charged, but rather to provide some basic insight as to what can be expected. Specifically, what can an individual anticipate in terms of legal representation costs in Washington, D.C.? Although it naturally depends, an examination of hourly rates for legal representation in Washington, D.C. involving worker's compensation, criminal defense matters, complex civil

Maurice A. Brungardt
Attorney at Law



litigation, and administrative actions regarding foreign service personnel is informative for an individual faced with the daunting prospect of employing legal counsel for the first time.

In Washington, D.C., workers' compensation is a benefit provided by the employer at no cost to the employee providing medical care for an individual's work-related injury or illness and replacement of lost wages. Workers' compensation coverage is required for all private employers in the District of Columbia. The maximum hourly rate for an attorney's fee award in worker's compensation cases in the District of Columbia varies from \$240 for those with less than two years of experience to \$350 for those with twenty years or more of experience.

For criminal defense matters, costs can obviously vary according to the offenses alleged to have been committed and experience of the attorney involved. A useful barometer is the hourly rate established per the Criminal Justice Act (CJA) for court appointed attorneys to represent indigent individuals defending themselves against criminal charges. CJA panel attorneys are paid an hourly rate of \$175 in non-capital cases, and, in capital cases, a maximum hourly rate of \$223. These rates are effective for work performed on or after January 1, 2025. The rates include both attorney compensation and office overhead. Compensation beyond statutory thresholds of \$13,600 for felonies, \$3,900 for misdemeanors, and \$9,700 for appeals, requires approval from the chief judge of the circuit or their delegate, depending on the category of representation. Although the CJA hourly rates are specific to compensation for legal representation of the indigent, they can serve as a baseline regarding the fees of a privately employed criminal defense attorney.

Just as in criminal matters, fees arising from civil litigation are contingent upon case complexity and the lawyer's experience level. However, there exists a useful and available resource which be an initial guide to estimating legal costs. The Department of Justice's Fitzpatrick Matrix for complex litigation in the District of Columbia establishes hourly rates anywhere from between \$467 for an unexperienced attorney to \$807 for counsel with 35 plus years of experience. The Fitzpatrick Matrix is an updated version of the Laffey Matrix, a chart that successful federal

Maurice A. Brungardt
Attorney at Law



litigants had used to calculate and claim reimbursement for their legal fees in the District of Columbia since 1983.

A review of case decisions from 1983 to 2019 published by the Foreign Service Grievance Board (FSGB) reflects that they can entail anywhere from 15 to 375 hours worth of legal work, hourly rates varying from \$160 to \$325, and total legal fees of as little as \$3,075 to as much as \$86,383. In terms of averages, a case pursued through the Foreign Service Grievance Process involves 121 hours of legal work, an hourly rate of \$182.13, and total legal costs of \$22,112.26. As far back as 2002, the FSGB has held that “an hourly rate of \$225.00 is consistent with the hourly rates customarily approved by this Board for attorney fee reimbursement.” (See FSGB Case No. 2000-075.)

In addition to the traditional hourly rate method of charging for legal services, attorneys may also charge according to a flat fee method or a contingency fee depending upon the type of case and what is permitted within the rules of the relevant bar association. Regardless, the intent of this article is not to discuss all the various methods by which an attorney charges for legal services rendered, rather it is to educate the reader as to what the potential legal representation costs are based upon hourly rates in Washington, D.C. relevant to four different practice areas. Like snowflakes, each legal matter is unique. However, knowing what the potential costs are in some practice areas enables an individual seeking legal counsel to make a much more informed decision regarding in whom to make the financial investment to advocate on their behalf.