

Legal Services of New Jersey
100 Metroplex Drive at Plainfield Avenue
P.O. Box 1357
Edison, New Jersey 08818-1357

Contact: Harvey Fisher
Office Phone: 732-529-8430
Cell Phone: 908-616-9941
E-mail: hfisher@lsnj.org

FOR RELEASE AT WILL

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**NEW DO-IT-YOURSELF GUIDE TO DIVORCE
NOW AVAILABLE FROM LEGAL SERVICES OF NEW JERSEY**

EDISON — Every year there are some 55,000 divorces in New Jersey, a heart-wrenching process that also can be costly, especially for poor people. The irony is that while the numbers may seem high, New Jersey actually has one of the lowest rates of divorces in the nation — possibly because of the process’s comparatively daunting high legal costs.

There’s general agreement that in most divorces it’s best to have a lawyer. But what if that route is not affordable and the regional Legal Services program in your area has a long waiting period because of limited funding? Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ) has completed an updated and expanded version of one of its most popular publications, “Divorce in New Jersey: A Self-Help Guide,” that instructs people in relatively simple terms how to do their own divorce, especially if the issues are not complicated.

The easy-to-read primer essentially is designed as an inexpensive way out for many estranged couples whose failed marriages or civil unions are trapped in limbo because of the cost of divorce.

Tricia Simpson-Curtin, chief content officer for LSNJ, says “the manual is consistently in high demand as it offers clear step-by-step instructions and easy-to-use forms, allowing people to complete the forms at their own pace on their own computers with minimal expense.”

“Even under the best of circumstances, the dissolution of marriage or civil union is a difficult, draining process,” says LSNJ President Melville D. Miller, Jr. “For low- and middle-income New Jerseyans unable to afford and retain a lawyer, the process is so overwhelming that many may opt instead to remain in unhappy, unhealthy, or unsafe relationships. It is our hope that this guide we are making available will help many married and civil union couples escape the dangers in such failed relationships and even if they do have legal representation, the guide will help them better understand the process and work with the lawyer they have.”

Instructions for filing for a divorce are available at no cost on the Legal Services website at <https://www.lsnjlaw.org/Publications/Pages/Manuals/DivorceGuide.pdf>. The full publication with all the forms required to file for divorce is free for qualified low-income people eligible for Legal Services assistance. All others can secure the digital edition for personal use at a cost of \$25. Detailed information for ordering online, including pricing for law firms, libraries, and other organizations, is available at <https://checkout.lsnj.org>. Low-income individuals who believe they qualify for a free copy should apply online at www.lsnjlawhotline.org or call Legal Services’ toll-free, statewide legal hotline at 1-888-576-5529.

In the past few decades, the number of people bringing or defending divorce matters without a lawyer – in legal jargon its called going “pro se” – has increased as people try to avoid the expense of getting a divorce with a private attorney. Generally, attorney retainers for divorce run about \$5,000 or so, and the hourly charges can range from hundreds of dollars on up,

sometimes way up. That's especially true of places like New Jersey and other high cost-of-living states in the northeast.

Still, Miller, the LSNJ president and others caution that having a lawyer on board, if possible, is the best and safest way to go. The self-help manual lists many of the circumstances often involved in divorces – such as alimony, child support, custody and other potentially thorny and complicated issues – that are best handled by an attorney.

One woman, who used the manual to eventually gain an end to her two-year marriage, recalled how she realized she could not afford the fees and other related costs of lawyers, so she turned to the manual and its step-by-step instructions. As she put it, “I just kept going to the manual all the time. It had all kinds of information, pretty self-explanatory.”

The manual has numerous pages of various forms that people may need to file, and also includes a glossary of terms designed to help individuals not familiar with legal terminology better understand what's going on. Further, the introduction even provides precise instructions on how to use the manual.

In addition to those forms, the divorce guide includes six chapters, covering the divorce process: Preparing and Filing the Divorce Complaint; Serving the Divorce Complaint; After Serving the Divorce Complaint; Getting a Default Judgment; Going to Court When the Defendant is Not in Default; and Issues After Final Judgment.

Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ), located in Edison, heads the state's Legal Services system, a network of five independent non-profit corporations and has been providing free essential legal aid in civil matters to low-income people through offices in all 21 counties for

more than 50 years. Since its inception, LSNJ has provided representation in more than 2.4 million cases.

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