

New service promises lawyer in 15 minutes

by admin

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I can get a pizza in 15 minutes," LawyerUp CEO Chris Miles says. "Why can't I get a lawyer?"

That's the premise behind a new service that aims to become the AAA of the criminal defense world.

LawyerUp, which is now doing business in Rhode Island, Massachusetts and Connecticut, promises customers that if they have a "legal emergency," they can have a lawyer dispatched within minutes.

Miles says he stumbled on the idea after talking to a friend whose college-age son was traveling with friends in a vehicle that was stopped and searched by police. No one was arrested, but the anecdote made Miles realize that legal advice is often unavailable when people need it most.

When a request for help comes in, LawyerUp's dispatch service starts calling the attorneys on its roster until one responds and agrees to do an hour of initial legal work for "up to \$250."

Unlike personal injury referral machines like The Law Offices of James G. Sokolove, LawyerUp doesn't take a cut of the lawyers' fees. Instead, it processes a direct payment from the client to the attorney, and then charges the client an additional \$100 dispatch fee.

Miles says the outfit drew on the knowledge of its general counsel, Roger Williams University School of Law Professor Alex Ruskell, in coming up with a system that wouldn't run afoul of professional ethics regulations.

The nascent service has about 1,000 users, none of whom have made an emergency call yet. But one lawyer on its roster says that having an attorney involved at the outset of the arrest process can make a big difference in how a case is resolved.

"When I get a call from a family member saying that their son or daughter was just arrested, normally the police have already talked them into giving a statement without an attorney present," says Providence lawyer Katherine Godin. "At that point, it's about getting the best deal possible. I had one case where, after being arrested, the client admitted to nearly 100 counts of child molestation."

"It's certainly innovative," says Joseph Waldbaum, a Beverly, Mass., attorney who specializes in OUI defense work and who is not affiliated with LawyerUp.

Charging no up-front fee is a great move, Waldbaum says, though he wonders how the company will cover the marketing and administrative costs.

Since many criminal defense lawyers offer free initial consultations, LawyerUp's big selling point is its 15-minute guarantee, Waldbaum adds. "That's got to work every single time," he says. But even if a lawyer is dispatched right away, there may be only so much he can do late at night, Waldbaum cautions. "It's my experience that when you try calling a police station, especially late at night, you are not necessarily put through to your client."

Miles is the first to admit that telling users to reach for their cell phone when an officer approaches their car would "get people hurt." Instead, customers who download LawyerUp's mobile app are

reminded of their right not to make an initial statement without an attorney present, and to contact the service when given the opportunity to make a post-booking phone call.

Although the service is initially being marketed toward young adults who might find themselves in legal hot water, Miles says LawyerUp may be used by anyone seeking criminal legal advice. "We're like an ambulance," he says. "We'll respond no matter what it is."

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