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Make your elder law practice user-friendly

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We elder law practitioners certainly want to make our law practices user-friendly for our clients. Advances in medicine make it likely that most people will end up growing old and facing the challenges that come with old age. Such challenges may include reduced mobility, hearing loss, vision problems, driving difficulties, reduced or impaired cognitive functions, and myriad other physical, mental, and emotional problems. Younger people, too, may be affected by blindness, deafness, illness, or injury. Legal issues can be daunting enough without these challenges. This is why it is so important for us to take steps to minimize the distractions and obstacles elders and people with disabilities might face while seeking our assistance. Many of these steps are simply common sense, but taken together they provide a checklist to gauge how well we are accommodating our clients.

Location, location, location

In selecting a location for your office, it is best to choose a place that is relatively easy to find and can be easily accessed by a route other than one of the freeways. Many elderly clients would rather spend an extra ten or twenty minutes taking the back roads than fight through congested freeways to get to you. Ideally, your office would be accessible by public transportation as well. Directions to your office should include information about parking (especially handicapped parking) and about available public transit lines. In selecting an office building, make sure there is handicapped-parking access near an entrance to the building. Ideally, the parking lot would be level, well-lit, and free of tripping hazards. Steps and curbs should be painted or otherwise obvious, and ramps allow the elderly to choose whether they feel like conquering the stairs that day. Adequate elevators are a must if the building is more than one story tall. Hallways should be wide enough to accommodate walkers and wheelchairs, and the building needs to be well-lit throughout. Handicapped bathrooms should be available and easily accessible. The doors to the building should either be easy to open or have automatic openers so that the client does not have to fight to get into the building—and the same should be true of your office door. The tension on the inside office doors can often be adjusted by maintenance personnel, to make it easier for your clients to open the door. Signage within and outside the building should be as large as is reasonable with contrast between the lettering and the background.

Train your staff

In many cases, your client's first contact with your office will be with your staff. Important subsequent contacts may be with your staff as well. For these reasons, it is vital that your employees are trained to recognize the challenges your elderly clients may be facing and to deal appropriately with those challenges. For example, your assistant might fill out the intake sheet for a client who has significant vision or

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Make your practice user-friendly

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For additional suggestions, see "Tips for Working with Elder Clients" on page 6 of the March 2007 *In Brief* publication from the Professional Liability Fund.

writing problems rather than just handing the intake sheet to her. You and your staff need to speak clearly and boldly without yelling, keep direct eye contact and slow down your speech if necessary (especially since some clients with hearing difficulties are reading your lips), and use plain English instead of legal catch phrases. Staff should never use patronizing names, and should always refer to your clients as Mr., Mrs., or Ms. Staff members need to be ready to assist clients by offering to open doors for those using a walker or wheelchair, or to otherwise help move obstacles out of their way.

Consider your office configuration

When you meet with your clients in your office, you will want to minimize distractions. The room you meet in should be as quiet as possible. You do not want noise from the copy room or reception area competing for your client's hearing, so you may need to locate your meeting room away from these areas. Sound-proofing insulation in the walls is ideal. Anti-glare lighting should be used as much as possible. If the room you are meeting in has windows, you will usually want to seat your clients with their backs to them, so the glare is not overwhelming, and you will also want to have blinds just in case. The room needs to be bright, since older eyes need more light to see clearly. Given the reduced mobility of some of your elderly clients, you should limit the distance they have to go to get to your meeting room, and also reduce their need to maneuver around your conference table or desk. Chairs should be fairly easy to move, yet sturdy and designed with strong arms so that your clients can get into and out of them easily.

Some simple accommodations

Have a pair or two of reading glasses available in case your clients have forgotten theirs. A magnifier might also be useful. Credit-card-sized lighted magnifiers are available at Office Depot and at **www.magnifying-card.com**. A metal signature guide is helpful for clients who have lost most of their vision. You can find one at **www.braillebookstore.com.** Ergonomic pens with enlarged rubber grips can make signing easier. You should use a clear, easy-to-read typeface, and should increase the font size to at least 14 points for clients with poor vision. Avoid colored papers that lessen the contrast between the text and the paper. Your Web site can be designed to give clients the option of increasing the font size and viewing the text only.

Consider the fatigue factor

Closely monitor the length of the appointments and the details and complexity of the issues discussed so that you do not overwhelm your client. Asking questions throughout the meeting will help ensure that your client is tracking the conversation. When a colleague of mine stopped to ask a question of her client, the client honestly responded that he had not been paying attention for the last ten minutes. You may have to opt for two or three short meetings instead of one long one. Alternatively, you may want to give your clients one or more breaks during the meeting so they may move around, use the bathroom, or get a drink. You might also have to schedule the meeting at a time of day when the client functions best. If the client is having a bad day, you may need to be flexible and reschedule the appointment.

Make house calls

Physical challenges may make it difficult for some clients to come to your office. If friends or family cannot bring the client to you, you may need to go to the client. And if mental capacity is an issue, the client might be less disoriented if you meet with him or her in the home or residential facility. If you decide to meet with clients in their home or at their facility, you may need to take some steps to make sure you have their full attention. Ask if you can turn off the television or radio, and move chairs as necessary so you are reasonably close and can maintain eye contact and keep their full attention. You may need to ask others who are present to leave the room so that you can have a confidential discussion with your client. You should adopt a general policy on whether you will charge for all of your travel time at your normal rate or at a reduced rate, whether you will charge only for travel one-way, or not charge for travel at all. This policy should be clearly communicated to your client when you or your staff set the appointment for the home visit. If your client will be reviewing or signing documents during the home visit, you may want to take a clipboard with you in case your client is not able to sit at a table. I prefer the sturdy plastic clipboards that have storage built in for documents and pens.

The number of elders is growing quickly, and attention to the needs of your elderly clients makes good business sense. Such attention also provides us all with the opportunity to render true professional service. ■