The Legal Issues you should know now that you are 18

Provided by
The Allegheny County Bar Association
Raising the Bar on Legal and Community Service
When you turn 18 years old you are now a “legal” adult. You can now vote, make contracts, and be registered for the draft. But you will also be treated as an adult in court. So you need to understand, respect and obey the law.

Here are just some of the many laws/legal issues that you need to know. For more information, visit the Allegheny County Bar Association’s website at www.acba.org or talk with an attorney.

“As Is” can mean “Oh No”

When you buy a used car that the dealer advertises “as is,” be careful. The dealer is telling you that he is not warranting anything. If anything happens to the car, the dealer is not responsible for it. When you are buying a used or new car, always have someone with you who knows something about cars and get a mechanic to check out the car before you purchase it. This applies to anything you purchase “as is.”

Contracts—know what you are signing

Now that you are 18, Pennsylvania courts will hold you responsible for your promise to pay if you enter into a contract. Whether you buy a car or rent an apartment, READ and UNDERSTAND the contract. If you don’t understand something, ask an attorney, parent, etc. When you enter into a contract, it is an agreement that creates legally enforceable obligations.
Don’t rent a bunch of trouble

When you leave home or finish college, your first stop is often a rental property, whether it’s an apartment, condominium or house. You will be asked by the landlord to enter into a lease. A lease is an agreement between you, as tenant, and your landlord that describes both parties’ rights and responsibilities concerning the property you are renting.

All of the terms of the lease are important, and you should read and understand them. Look closely at the provisions concerning rent, the security deposit, repairs and maintenance of the property, the duration of the lease and renewal and termination of the lease (whether there is a late fee if the rent is paid late).

Plain and simple—don’t drink

You cannot legally drink or purchase alcoholic beverages in Pennsylvania until you are 21 years of age. But because you are 18 and will be treated as an adult in court, you need to know the laws.

If you are caught buying, drinking, possessing or transporting beer, wine or liquor, you can be arrested. If convicted, you can be fined up to $300, jailed up to 90 days, or both. In addition, you will have a criminal record and lose your driver’s license for 90 days.

If you are caught driving under the influence of alcohol, it is a misdemeanor of the second degree, with a maximum penalty of up to $5,000 and up to two years in jail. If you are tried and convicted, you must pay a minimum of $300 and spend at least 48 hours in jail and pay other legal fees. In addition, you will lose your license for at least 3 months, possibly up to a year.
Under Pennsylvania’s Zero Tolerance Law, persons under 21 can be arrested and charged with a DUI even if their blood alcohol is .020—that means any measurable amount of alcohol in your system.

**Controlled substances can cause things to go out of control**

Knowingly or intentionally possessing a controlled substance, unless it was obtained with a valid prescription, is a crime. For violations of the Controlled Substance, Drug, Device and Cosmetic Act, a court must suspend your driver’s license for a period of 6 months for the first offense, a period of one year for a second offense and a period of two years for the third offense. This is true even if the controlled substance was not found in your car.

**There is no draft but you must be registered**

All males turning 18 must register with the Selective Service Administration. Then you must let the Selective Service Administration know of any change in address or name up until you are 26 years old. If you don’t register, you may be imprisoned for up to five years and fined up to $10,000. You also may be denied federal financial aid for college.
Sexual harassment is no joke

Sexual harassment is unwanted sexual behavior. It may take different forms, including: physical contact, like grabbing, pinching, touching or kissing against a person's will; sexual comments, like name-calling, starting rumors, making sexual jokes at a person's expense, or making sexual gestures at or about a person; sexual propositions; and unwanted communication, like phone calls, letters, or e-mails. Unwanted communications can be mean, nasty, or threatening, or they can seem flattering or nice but still make a person uncomfortable. The harasser and the victim can be either male or female, and they do not have to be the opposite sex.

Under Title IX, schools, colleges and universities that receive any amount of federal funding are required to guarantee all students an education in an environment free from sexual harassment and sex discrimination. People who violate the institution's sexual harassment policy may face suspension, expulsion or possible civil liability for their actions.

Internet use can lead to abuse

Let's be as clear as possible. Be very careful what you write/communicate or download on e-mails, on your website, your blog, your personal page, etc. Those words and downloads could haunt you the rest of your life. Not only can people print out copies of what you have written, the information, even if deleted, can become permanent record on your hard drive. People have lost jobs and relationships and can be sued, arrested, and jailed for information they have written on e-mails or websites.
Credit cards—make sure you can afford them

When you are 18, you can get your own credit cards, but they can really cause you trouble if you spend more than you can afford.

Once you borrow money, you must pay it back. If you do not or you pay late, you may be in default by failing to live up to your promise to pay back the money in a certain way. Your creditor will probably give you notice that you are in default. Treat it seriously! Call your creditor to explain the delay and make arrangements to repay the creditor somehow. If not, the creditor can sue you for the money, or he can take back the collateral that backs up the debt. You will have a bad credit rating and it can follow you for years, preventing you from purchasing a car or a home, or preventing you from obtaining a job.

Sometimes no matter how carefully you are borrowing money or using credit cards, your debts pile up. If you absolutely cannot work things out with your creditors, you might have to consult an attorney about the possibility of filing bankruptcy.

The Allegheny County Bar Association’s Young Lawyers Division offers a program for high school students that addresses these legal issues and many more. For more information, contact the Young Lawyers Division at 412-261-6161.

The Allegheny County Bar Association

Raising the Bar on Legal and Community Service

www.acba.org