

WHAT IS A WITNESS?

In almost all civil or criminal litigation, persons other than parties to the lawsuit are called on to testify by one of the parties in the case. These persons are called witnesses. Of course, parties in the case also may testify on their own behalf, and, in that respect, they are witnesses, too. After swearing or affirming they will tell the truth, witnesses testify to what they know about facts relating to lawsuits between parties. Those with specific expertise also may be called as witnesses to give expert opinions about issues involved in a lawsuit. Whether a witness testifies in open court or before the trial (for example, in a deposition), every party to the lawsuit must be allowed to question all witnesses to bring for the very thing that might be favorable to the party's position.

CAN I BE FORCED TO BE A WITNESS?

A person called as a witness generally must give testimony when it is needed, whether it is convenient or not. In criminal cases, and sometimes in civil cases, witnesses can refuse to testify under the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution when doing so would implicate them in any type of criminal activity (not limited to the case being tried). Witnesses who refuse to answer questions they believe may incriminate them do not waive their rights, as defendants do, if they begin answering other questions. The court can, however, order a witness to testify through a "subpoena." In such a case, the witness must honor a properly issued and served subpoena, or risk being held in contempt of court, an offense punishable by a fine, imprisonment or both. Since a party to a lawsuit usually must rely on other individuals to testify to what they know, it is very important for witnesses to testify when called.

WHAT IS DEPOSITION?

In some cases, a party to a lawsuit may want to obtain a witness's testimony before trial. A "deposition" is the taking and recording of testimony before the actual trial. A deposition may be taken by the party calling the witness, or by the opposing party, to

discover what the witness knows about the subject of the lawsuit. The deposition may be recorded by a court reporter or with an audio or video recording device.

WHAT ARE RULES OF EVIDENCE?

The rules of evidence have been developed over many years to control all courtroom proceedings. They ensure that credible evidence is presented and that unnecessary or unreliable evidence is kept out of the courtroom. For example, the "hearsay rule" prevents a witness from relating second-hand information. Second-hand ("hearsay") evidence is not accepted because it is not thought to be reliable and because it would be unfair if an opposing attorney could not directly question the person alleged to have made the statement.

An attorney in a case may object to a particular question asked of a witness. If the judge overrules the objection, the witness must answer the question. If the judge sustains the objection, the witness will not be permitted to answer. When an attorney objects to a question, the witness should wait for the judge's ruling before answering. During a deposition, the witness will usually be required to answer the question even after an attorney objects, because no judge is present at a deposition to rule on a possible objection. Eventually, if a party plans to use the deposition question and answer, the judge will rule on the objection before trial. The judge's ruling will determine whether or not the jury will hear the question and answer.

HOW ARE WITNESSES QUESTIONED?

Since the trial's main purpose is to bring out the truth, both sides in a lawsuit must have a chance to question witnesses. This is done through "direct examination" and "cross-examination."

The lawyer who calls a witness to testify asks questions to bring out the facts (direct examination). Then, the opposing lawyer asks questions about that testimony (cross-examination). Both lawyers' questions should serve one purpose: to reveal the facts known by the witness.

Witnesses are sometimes concerned about being cross-examined, but they need not fear this process. The opposing lawyer must test a witness's memory and determine how it compares with the memories of others. It is natural for several persons to see and remember an event some what differently. A witness may remember some facts and forget others. A witness is expected to testify from memory as accurately as possible—no more and no less.

WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS AS A WITNESS?

If you are serving as a witness, your own attorney probably will not be present when you testify. Whenever you are testifying, whether during a pretrial deposition or a trial, if you feel particular questions may tend to involve you in the lawsuit, you should exercise your right to speak with your own attorney before testifying. You have the right to have an attorney present during most legal proceedings. If the answer to a particular question would tend to incriminate you (implicate you in the commission of a crime), you have a constitution alright to refuse to answer and should consult with your attorney before responding. Otherwise, you must respond to all questions truthfully, even if you must answer, "I don't know" or "I don't remember."

