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**Court Policy Regarding “Pro Se” Applicants (Applicants Without a Lawyer)
in Probate Cases**

People who represent themselves in court are called “pro se” or “self-represented” litigants. You are not required to have a lawyer to file papers or to participate in a case. You have a right to represent yourself. **However, a pro se may not represent others. Under Texas law, only a licensed attorney may represent the interests of third-party individuals or entities, including guardianship wards and probate estates.** See *In re: Guetersloh*, 326 S.W.3d 737 (Tex. App.—Amarillo, 2010) and *Steele v. McDonald*, 202 S.W.3d 926 (Tex. App.—Waco, 2006), and the authorities cited. Therefore, individuals applying for letters testamentary, letters of administration, determinations of heirship, and guardianships of the person or estate must be represented by a licensed attorney. The only time a pro se applicant may proceed in court is when truly representing **only** himself or herself.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What is a pro se?

A: A pro se is an individual who has not hired a lawyer and appears in court to represent himself and no other person or entity.

Q: Can I still serve as an executor, administrator, or guardian even though I’m not a lawyer?

A: Yes. One need not be a lawyer to serve as an executor, administrator, or guardian. **However, the executor, administrator, or guardian must be represented by a lawyer.**

Q: But I’m the only one that needs letters testamentary. As executor, how would I be representing the interests of others?

A: As executor of a decedent’s estate, you don’t represent only yourself. An executor represents the interests of beneficiaries and creditors. This responsibility to act for the benefit of another is known as a fiduciary

relationship. It gives rise to certain legal obligations and responsibilities that require legal expertise. The lawyer you hire represents you in your capacity as executor and assists you in representing those for whom you are responsible.

Q: If I get the paperwork from a law library or the Internet, can I fill it out and file it? Isn't that what lawyers do?

A: Lawyers don't just fill out forms. Lawyers (1) determine what method of probate or guardianship is appropriate in a particular situation; (2) create or adapt any necessary paperwork, and – importantly – (3) advise the client about the ongoing responsibilities of a fiduciary. If you are not a lawyer, your creating legal pleadings while acting as a fiduciary would constitute the unauthorized practice law.

Q: As a pro se, what proceedings **can** I do on my own in probate cases?

A: The only proceedings you can handle as a pro se are those in which you truly would be representing **only** yourself. For example, a pro se applicant may probate a will as a muniment of title when he or she is the sole beneficiary under the will, and there are no debts against the estate other than those secured by liens against real estate. Note, though, that probating a will as a muniment of title is not always a good option even if there are no debts and the applicant is the sole beneficiary. **Whether a muniment of title is the best probate procedure for a particular situation is a legal decision best made by a lawyer.**

As another example, all of a decedent's heirs may work together without a lawyer to file a small estate affidavit in the limited situations in which a small estate affidavit might be appropriate. For further information, see Texas Estates Code Chapter 205 and www.TexasLawHelp.org. The complexity of the Code poses many pitfalls for non-lawyers attempting to comply with the requirements for a small estate affidavit. An attorney's assistance in drafting a small estate affidavit may prevent the denial of an affidavit where it would have been an appropriate probate procedure if the affidavit had been prepared correctly.

Q: What procedures should I follow if I decide to probate a will as a muniment of title or file a small estate affidavit as a pro se applicant?

A: As stated above, whether something is the best probate procedure for a particular situation is a legal decision best made by a lawyer; **court staff cannot guide you or advise what you should do in your case.**