

Legal professions - Belgium



Please note that the original language version of this page [fr](#) has been amended recently. The language version you are now viewing is currently being prepared by our translators.

Please note that the following languages: [nl](#) have already been translated.

This section presents an overview of the various legal professions in Belgium.

[Legal professions - introduction](#)

[The state counsel's office](#)

[Judges](#)

[Lawyers](#)

[Notaries](#)

[Other legal professions](#)

[Organisations providing free legal advice](#)

[Legal databases](#)

[Portal of the Federal Public Service for Justice](#)



Legal professions – introduction

This section presents some information relating to legal professions such as:

- the law officers of the state counsel's office,
- judges,
- lawyers,
- notaries, and
- bailiffs.

The state counsel's office

Organisation

The **state counsel's office**, or public prosecutor's office (*ministère public/openbaar ministerie*, also known as the *parquet/parket*), which essentially brings prosecutions (see below), consists of law officers who are qualified judges (*magistrats/magistraten*), and who carry out their duties within the area of jurisdiction of the particular **court** at which they are based.

In any **judicial district** (*arrondissement judiciaire/gerechtelijk arrondissement*) the officers representing the state counsel's office before the court of first instance (*tribunal de première instance/rechtbank van eerste aanleg*), and likewise before the juvenile court (*tribunal de la jeunesse/jeugdrechtbank*), which is a division of the court of first instance, are the **state counsel** (*procureur du Roi /procureur des Konings*), senior deputy state counsel (*premiers substitués/eerste substituten*) and deputy state counsel (*substitués /substituten*). They also act before the police court or police courts (*tribunal de police/politierechtbank*) and the commercial court (*tribunal de commerce/handelsrechtbank*) of their area of jurisdiction.

Before the labour tribunals (*tribunaux de travail/arbeidsrechtbanken*) this function is exercised by an officer known as the **labour auditor** (*auditeur du travail/arbeidsauditeur*), who is likewise assisted by deputies and possibly senior deputies. In criminal cases within their sphere of competence these officers also act before the criminal court (*tribunal correctionnel/correctionele rechtbank*), which is a division of the court of first instance, or the police court or courts.

In each **court of appeal** (*cour d'appel/hof van beroep*) and **labour court** (*cour du travail/arbeidshof*), this role is played by the **principal state counsel** (*procureur-général/procureur-generaal*), who directs and oversees the law officers of the principal state counsel's office at the court of appeal (*parquet général/parket-generaal*) and the corresponding body at the labour court (*auditorat général /arbeidsauditoraat-generaal*). In a court of appeal the principal state counsel is assisted by a senior advocate-general (*premier avocat-général/eerste advocaat-generaal*), advocates-general (*avocats-généraux/advocaten-generaal*), and deputy principal state counsel (*substitués généraux/substituten-generaal*). In a labour court the principal state counsel is likewise assisted by a senior advocate-general, advocates-general, and deputy principal state counsel.

At the Court of Cassation (*Cour de cassation/Hof van cassatie*) the function of the state counsel's office is performed by the **Principal State Counsel at the Court of Cassation**, assisted by a senior advocate-general and advocates-general. Although the same terminology is used, the function of the state counsel's office here is quite different. The Court of Cassation does not rule on the substance of the case, but verifies the legality and regularity of the proceedings.

The state counsel's office is **independent** in the conduct of investigations and prosecutions in individual cases, subject only to the right of the responsible minister to order that a prosecution be brought and to issue binding criminal policy guidelines, including guidelines on investigation and prosecution policy.

Role and duties

The state counsel's office performs a number of tasks and duties. Its work consists of **casework and follow-up** in both **criminal cases** and **civil cases**.

- In **criminal matters** the law officers of the state counsel's office act in the public interest, and seek to ensure the proper conduct and resolution of criminal proceedings. They do this both in the main court proceedings themselves and in the earlier inquiry and investigation proceedings (which are supervised by one of two courts, the pre-trial division (*chambre du conseil /raadkamer*) or the indictment division (*chambre des mises en accusation/kamer van inbeschuldigingstelling*)). At the hearing they ask the court to apply the criminal law; they also seek to ensure that the necessary measures are taken for appropriate enforcement of the sentences handed down. **Before the assize court** (*cour d'assises/hof van assisen*) the role of the state counsel's office is exercised by the principal state counsel at the court of appeal, who may, however, also delegate another officer.
- In **civil matters** the state counsel's office intervenes on its own initiative in circumstances provided for by law and whenever public policy so requires. In such cases it submits an opinion, written or oral. The state counsel's office must be asked for its opinion in cases relating to specific matters listed in the first paragraph of Article 764 of the Judicial Code (*Code judiciaire /Gerechtelijk Wetboek*). It may also ask to be informed of other cases, with a view to giving an opinion, where it judges it appropriate, and a court may bring a case to its attention of its own motion (Article 764 of the Judicial Code, second paragraph).

Alongside the main tasks just described, the state counsel's office also ensures that **decisions and guidelines relating to criminal policy are monitored and properly applied in its area of jurisdiction**.

Criminal policy guidelines are issued by the Minister for Justice, after consulting a board consisting of the principal state counsel at the five courts of appeal (*collège des procureurs généraux/college van procureurs-generaal*).

This board is under the authority of the Minister for Justice and takes decisions with a view to maximum consistency in the drafting and coordination of policy and the proper functioning of the state counsel's office generally.

The board's jurisdiction extends throughout the country and its decisions are binding on the principal state counsel at the courts of appeal and on all members of the state counsel's office under their authority and direction.

More information is available on the website of the [Federal Public Service for Justice](#) (Ministry of Justice, headings (French) 'Ordre judiciaire' - 'Ministère publique' or (Dutch) 'Rechterlijke Orde' - 'Openbaar Ministerie').

Judges

Organisation

A distinction is made between '**sitting judges**' (*la magistrature assise/de zittende magistratuur*), who adjudicate the cases that come before them, and 'standing judges' (*la magistrature debout/de staande magistratuur*), the law officers who serve in the state counsel's office (see above).

In general, adjudicating judges are called **juges/rechters** in the lower courts and **conseillers/raadsheren** in the appeal courts.

The **role** of the adjudicating judges is to apply the law to a situation or dispute put before them in a civil matter, or to persons who have committed an offence.

In some lower courts professional judges sit alongside non-professional or lay judges. There are **non-professional judges** in the following courts:

- Commercial court: professional judges and non-professional judges (called *juges consulaires/consulaire rechters*).
- Labour tribunal: professional judges and non-professional judges (called *juges sociaux/sociale rechters*).
- Court for the enforcement of sentences (*tribunal de l'application des peines/strafuitvoeringsrechtbank*): professional judges and non-professional judges (called *assesseurs en application des peines/assessoren in strafuitvoeringszaken*).

Responsible authority

The [High Council of Justice](#) (*Conseil supérieur de la justice/Hoge Raad voor de Justitie*) has a **threefold role**:

- to play a decisive part in policy for the **appointment** of judges (including the law officers of the state counsel's office), on an objective and non-political basis;
- to exercise **outside supervision** over the functioning of the judiciary (including the state counsel's office), and in particular the handling of complaints;
- to **submit opinions** to policy-makers in order to improve the functioning of the judiciary.

More information is available on the website of the [High Council of Justice](#)

Lawyers

Role and duties

Lawyers (*avocats/advocaten*) are law and justice professionals. They are subject to rules of conduct which guarantee their **total independence**. They are also bound by professional secrecy.

Lawyers are trained to act in the different fields of law, which often overlap (company law, administrative law, town planning law, tax law, family law, etc.). Over the course of their career, lawyers may specialise in one or more fields where they have acquired specific expertise.

Lawyers can assist you not only before the courts but in any situation where you may need legal assistance, a representative, a drafter or even moral support.

Their mission is therefore threefold:

- Lawyers **advise**
- Lawyers **conciliate**
- Lawyers **defend**.

Any lawyer can plead and represent his or her client in any court in the country - the police court, the civil magistrate's court (*justice de paix/vrederecht*), the court of first instance, the commercial court, the labour tribunal, the court of appeal, the labour court, the assize court, or the Council of State (*Conseil d'État/Raad van State*) - and even in other European Union countries.

Lawyers also provide assistance in arbitration or mediation proceedings, for any alternative method of resolving conflicts, or for any meeting.

They do not act only in the event of a dispute. Through the advice they provide, or the contracts they draft or adapt, they often avoid the need to go to court.

They can also help if you need to rent or buy real estate, if you want to set up a company, if you are crippled by debt, if you want to conclude a contract with a new employer, if you have been the victim of an accident or an assault, if you are summoned to court, if you are separating from your partner, etc.

Lawyers for everyone

For people with low incomes, the law provides a legal aid service (*aide juridique/juridische bijstand*, formerly known as 'pro deo') and court costs assistance (*assistance judiciaire/rechtsbijstand*).

Through **legal aid**, the services of a lawyer are made available completely or partially free of charge. It is a two-tier system:

- **Front-line legal aid** (*aide juridique de première ligne/eerstelijnsbijstand*) is available to all, and is not linked to income. Lawyers are available on standby (*permanence/permanentie*) for brief consultations: initial advice, a request for information, etc.
The bodies responsible for the provision of front-line legal aid are known as 'legal aid commissions' (*Commissions d'Aide Juridique/Commissies voor Juridische Bijstand*).
- **Second-line legal aid** (*aide juridique de deuxième ligne/tweedelijnsbijstand*) is available to persons who meet certain financial conditions or who are in certain situations. This aid - completely or partially free of charge depending on the situation - means that a lawyer will be appointed to assist you in a legal or administrative proceeding, to provide you with more detailed advice, or even as part of a mediation.
The bodies responsible for providing second-line legal aid are known as 'legal aid bureaux' (*Bureaux d'Aide Juridique /Bureaus voor Juridische Bijstand*).

Court costs assistance means that fees incurred during the proceeding will not be charged, or will be charged only in part (registry costs (*droit de greffe/griffierechten* or *droits d'enregistrement/registratierechten*) or the fees payable to bailiffs (*huissiers de justice /rechtsdeurwaarders*) or to notaries (*notaires/notarissen*) or for expert reports). To obtain court costs assistance clients must contact the legal aid bureau themselves or through their lawyer.

Responsible authorities

All lawyers are members of a bar (*barreau/balie*). At present there are 28 bars in Belgium.

An Association of the French-speaking and German-speaking Bars (*Ordre des barreaux francophones et germanophone/Kammer der französischsprachigen und deutschsprachigen Rechtsanwaltschaften* (AVOCATS.BE)) groups together the bars of the French-speaking and German-speaking communities in the country (13 French-speaking bars and one German-speaking).

A Flemish Bar Association (*Orde van Vlaamse Balies* (OVB)) groups together the bars of the country's Dutch-speaking community (14 bars).

Information concerning the profession of lawyer may be obtained by consulting the following internet pages:

- [Association of French-speaking and German-speaking Bars of Belgium](#)
- [Flemish Bar Association](#)

Access to these databases is **free of charge**.

Notaries

Notaries are **public officers**, appointed by the King, whose particular role is to authenticate legal instruments executed before them. By law some instruments require the involvement of a notary to record an agreement reached between the parties ('**authentic instruments**', *actes authentiques/authentieke akten*). Thus, for example, the involvement of a notary is required when selling a property. As well as acting to draw up authentic instruments, a notary may also be asked to liquidate an estate, to draft a private agreement, to give an opinion, etc.

The sphere of responsibility of notaries covers three major areas:

- **Property law** (sale of a property, borrowing, etc.),

- **Family law** (marriage contracts, inheritance, divorce, etc.) and
- **Business law** (setting up of companies, etc.).

There is a **National Chamber of Notaries** (*Chambre nationale des notaires/Nationale Kamer van Notarissen*). Its main **objectives** are:

- to represent the notaries of Belgium in dealings with the authorities within the scope of its competence,
- to lay down rules of professional conduct,
- to make recommendations to chambers of notaries to help in maintaining professional discipline.

Provincial chambers are the profession's disciplinary bodies: their main tasks are to ensure that the rules of professional conduct are observed and to settle professional disputes (among other things they handle complaints).

There is also the Royal Federation of Belgian Notaries (*Fédération Royale du Notariat Belge (FRNB)/Koninklijke Federatie van het Belgisch Notariaat (KFBN)*), a professional association which assists notaries in their daily work by providing tailored services, and which represents the profession in a variety of cases.

More information is available on the [website of the Royal Federation of Belgian Notaries](#).

Other legal professions

Bailiffs

Bailiffs are **public legal officials** who operate as practitioners of a **self-employed profession**. In other words, they have a dual professional identity: on the one hand, they are public officials; on the other hand, they practise their profession **independently**.

They are **public legal officials** because the State has delegated a share of official authority to them. For that reason, they cannot refuse to respond to a request to act, unless their code of professional conduct or the law does not allow it, for example where there is a conflict of interests or the request is unlawful. They never act on their own initiative, but always at the request of someone who has given them formal instructions. In each of the tasks they have to perform they must adhere to various legal requirements. They may charge fees for the acts they perform, to cover part or all of their costs.

As **self-employed professionals**, bailiffs act independently and impartially. Their professional experience is available to everyone. They do not receive any salary, compensation or other emolument from the authorities. They have to pay for everything themselves.

The steps that a bailiff may have to take fall into two broad categories: '**out-of-court**' measures (*interventions extrajudiciaires/buitengerechtelijke tussenkomsten*, such as out-of court recovery of debts or official findings of fact) and '**court**' measures (*interventions judiciaires/gerechtelijke tussenkomsten*, meaning the serving or enforcement of a decision). When the bailiff is taking a step of one of these kinds he or she will often have a duty to provide you with information on how you can exercise your rights, and to answer your questions about the bailiff's role, regardless of whether it is you who have asked the bailiff to act, or whether the step taken by the bailiff is addressed to you.

In each **judicial district** there is an **association** (*chambre/kamer*) of all the bailiffs in the district. Its main objectives are to ensure that bailiffs in the district observe the rules of professional discipline and the laws and regulations that concern them, and to settle disputes that may arise between them.

There is also a Belgian National Association of Bailiffs (*Chambre nationale des huissiers de justice de Belgique/Nationale Kamer van Gerechtsdeurwaarders van België*), whose main **objects** are:

- to ensure uniformity of discipline and rules of professional conduct among bailiffs,
- to defend the interests of its members, and
- to represent them.

More information is available on the website of the [Belgian National Association of Bailiffs](#).

Other

Judges and the law officers of the state counsel's office are assisted by a range of administrative and legal professionals, such as courts clerks or legal secretaries.

At every hearing the judge is assisted by a **court clerk** (*greffier/griffier*). The clerk clears the way for the work of the judge, for example by preparing the files needed for the hearing. At the hearing the clerk records the proceedings and ensures that all the necessary documents are properly drawn up. The clerk performs and coordinates the tasks of the court registry (*greffe/griffie*). Every court has a registry, headed by a chief clerk or registrar (*greffier en chef/hoofdgriffier*). There are one or more court clerks in a registry, depending on the size of the court. In their turn court clerks may be assisted by administrative staff.

Legal secretaries (*référéndaires/referendarissen*) are lawyers who assist the judges in the drawing up of their judgments. They help in the handling of cases, on the instructions and under the responsibility of one or more judges. They study the file, look into the legal questions raised, and draft judgments.

The officers of the state counsel's office may also engage lawyers to prepare the legal aspects of their cases. These lawyers are known as *juristes du parquet/parketjuristen*. They carry out legal research, manage investigations, or prepare the legal aspects of summonses and submissions, on the instructions and under the responsibility of one or more of the law officers of the state counsel's office.

Every state counsel's office has a secretariat headed by a chief secretary. These secretaries assist the law officers in research and documentation work and in compiling files. They keep the office's documents and registers up to date, maintain records, etc. The number of secretaries depends on the size of the office. The secretaries may also be assisted by administrative staff.

Court registries and state counsel's offices employ large numbers of administrative staff. The administrative staff manage the files on the cases being dealt with and the data entered in databases. Other administrative staff handle post and filing, and direct visitors calling at the office.

More information on these professions can be found in [this document](#).

Organisations providing free legal advice

All citizens can obtain **free initial legal advice**, given by law professionals. This is known as **front-line legal aid** (see above):

- practical information,
- legal information,
- an initial legal opinion, or
- referral to a specialised organisation.

Here the matter will not be resolved immediately, but **initial guidance** is given. Pools of lawyers are available on standby in law courts, community law centres (*maisons de justice/justitiehuisen*), some municipal offices (*administrations communales/gemeentelijke diensten*), most public social welfare centres (*centres publiques d'action sociale/openbare centra voor maatschappelijk welzijn*), and various associations that provide a legal service.

More information is available in the online brochure: [Legal Aid: Better Access to Justice \(Un meilleur accès à la justice/Een betere toegang tot justitie\)](#).

Legal databases

Information is available on the [website of the Federal Public Service for Justice](#) (Ministry of Justice).

Portal of the Federal Public Service for Justice

Headings

Information

- Justice A to Z;
- Information officer (*fonctionnaire d'information/informatieambtenaar*);
- Publications;
- Complaints;
- Court addresses;
- Press releases;
- Statistics.

Judiciary

- Law courts;
- State counsel's office;
- Territorial jurisdiction;
- Advisory Council of the Judiciary (*Conseil consultatif de la magistrature/Adviesraad van de magistratuur*);
- Commission on the Modernisation of the Judiciary (*Commission de modernisation de l'ordre judiciaire/Commissie voor de Modernisering van de Rechterlijke Orde*);

Reshaping the judicial landscape.

Related links

 [Federal Public Service for Justice](#)

The national language version of this page is maintained by the respective Member State. The translations have been done by the European Commission service. Possible changes introduced in the original by the competent national authority may not be yet reflected in the translations. The European Commission accepts no responsibility or liability whatsoever with regard to any information or data contained or referred to in this document. Please refer to the legal notice to see copyright rules for the Member State responsible for this page.

Last update: 15/11/2016