

# A Guide to Virtual Hearings at the Boston Municipal Court and District Courts for Practitioners

## *Virtual Hearings – What Types of Hearings and how to Obtain Information*

1. If you have a scheduled hearing, you will be notified by the clerk via telephone, e-mail, or first-class mail that the hearing will proceed virtually, with details about time and call-in information. Some courts are assigning specific times for hearings, and others are requiring that parties call in at 9:00 a.m. for a “first call” to assign approximate times when the hearing will be conducted.
2. If you have any questions about whether your hearing is proceeding virtually, contact the civil clerk for your courthouse. For a complete list of contact information, please see the following links:

Boston Municipal Court - [https://www.mass.gov/orgs/boston-municipal-court/locations?\\_page=1](https://www.mass.gov/orgs/boston-municipal-court/locations?_page=1)

District Courts - [https://www.mass.gov/orgs/district-court/locations?\\_page=1](https://www.mass.gov/orgs/district-court/locations?_page=1)

3. As soon as possible, request an interpreter for the virtual hearing if there are participants who do not speak English comfortably. You should also make any other accommodation requests necessary for full participation in the hearing. Check with the clerk on the appropriate steps to make the formal request.

## *Virtual Hearing Platforms*

1. The BMC and District Courts will be using both telephonic hearings and Zoom conferencing for virtual hearings. There will be a “call in” line for telephone communication if camera access is not available. For basic information of how to use Zoom, please see this link.

<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/categories/200101697>

2. Zoom uses data for cellphones. If Wi-Fi or cell phone data is unavailable, court libraries and community libraries have wi-fi available to use from the parking lots.

## *Use of Documents at Hearings*

1. Documents you intend to reference at the hearing, including exhibits, must be with the court ahead of time. You should check with the Court Clerk to see how they prefer to receive documents.
2. In order to send the documents to the Court ahead of the hearing, you should call and verify that your clerk is accepting email filing. If you do not have e-mail, contact the Clerk’s Office to arrange the most efficient method of delivery of said documents. Please note that Boston Municipal Court is accepted eFiling.

District Court numbers and emails can be found here: [https://www.mass.gov/orgs/district-court/locations?\\_page=1](https://www.mass.gov/orgs/district-court/locations?_page=1)

Boston Municipal Court number, emails and FAQ’s about eFiling can be found here: <https://www.mass.gov/guides/boston-municipal-court-faqs-related-to-covid-19>



3. Send the documents to the clerk with plenty of time before the hearing to allow for processing.
4. Prior to the hearing, confirm that the court has received the documents and that they will be brought to the judge's attention prior to the hearing.
5. All documents that you send to the court for the hearing should be produced to the opposing party with the same pagination for ease of reference.

### *Virtual Hearing Etiquette*

1. Ensure that everyone who will participate in the hearing (you, witnesses, co-counsel) are familiar with how to use the technology ahead of time, and know what time they will be required to join the hearing. Zoom can be tested ahead of time using the following link:

<https://zoom.us/test>

2. For your Zoom hearing, position your camera so that it captures a complete view of your face and upper torso. Ensure that your lighting is not back-lit or dark. The above-referenced link will allow you to see how you will appear when the real hearing begins.
3. Dress as if you are going to court.
4. The courts will record the hearing. You should not make any unauthorized recordings of your own as this may be in violation of Massachusetts law and Court rules.

### *The Hearing*

1. Call into the hearing a few minutes prior to the designated time to ensure you will have time to resolve technical issues.
2. Once in the virtual meeting, you can be seen and heard. Act the same was as if you were in court. Do not speak unless you want to be heard.
3. The courtroom clerk will join the call/meeting first to confirm that everyone is there and to ensure that documents, etc. are in order for the judge.
4. When everyone is present or after having waited a sufficient amount of time for parties to appear, the clerk will then request that the judge join the call/meeting and start the hearing.
5. If the judge does not give an overview of how the hearing will be conducted and you have questions about procedure or logistics, you should ask them at the outset so that you are clear regarding the judge's expectations.
6. To the extent that it can, the hearing will proceed as it typically would in person.

*These guides were created in collaboration with the Massachusetts Access to Justice Commission.*



# A Guide to Virtual Hearings for Self Represented Litigants in Boston Municipal Court and District Court

## *How to Prepare for and Represent Yourself in Virtual Hearings in Boston Municipal Court and District Court:*

Massachusetts courts have started doing virtual hearings in many cases because of COVID-19.

- There will be a judge to listen to you and the other side.
- The big difference between virtual hearings and hearings in court is that virtual hearings take place over the phone or computer (using a video chat software called Zoom).
- Below is information about how to get ready for and attend your virtual hearing.
- Please **call or email the court** before your virtual hearing if you have questions.
  - ◇ You may call the court at the **Trial Court Help Line** at 1-833-9ICOURT.
  - ◇ The courts' email addresses are here: <https://www.mass.gov/guides/court-department-emails>.
- If you want a lawyer, you can search for free or low-cost lawyers in your area at <https://www.masslegalservices.org/findlegalaid>.

## **I. BEFORE YOUR HEARING**

### **A. Respond to Court Letter**

- You should get a letter from the court that says when your virtual hearing will be and how to attend. Make sure you carefully read this letter.
- After you get the letter, contact the court and tell them:
  - ◇ The best phone number and email address where they can contact you, if any;
  - ◇ If you need an interpreter for the hearing and what language you need;
  - ◇ If you need an accommodation for the hearing (for example, if you are deaf or hard of hearing, blind or have trouble seeing, or will need a break during the hearing);
  - ◇ If there is a good reason why you cannot attend the hearing on the scheduled date (for example, if you have a doctor's appointment);
  - ◇ If you do not have many minutes on your cell phone; and
  - ◇ If you have any questions about the instructions for joining the virtual hearing.
- **Note:** If you have a case, but didn't get a letter, please call or email the court and ask about your case.



### ***B. Two Options for Joining Your Hearing***

- You will probably have two options for joining the hearing—one using video chat with Zoom and one calling in by phone.
- You get to choose which option is best for you.
- Video chat with Zoom may be the best option for you if:
  - ◇ You have a smart phone or a computer with a webcam;
  - ◇ You will be somewhere with a strong Wifi connection, including a library parking lot or somewhere else with a hot-spot;
  - ◇ You feel comfortable being on camera; and
  - ◇ You feel comfortable using technology.
- If you choose to use video chat with Zoom, you should do the following before your hearing date:
  - ◇ Download the free Zoom software here: [https://zoom.us/download](https://zoom.us/download;);
  - ◇ Test it out by starting a new meeting by yourself;
  - ◇ Practice muting and un-muting yourself;
  - ◇ Practice adjusting the volume;
  - ◇ Practice turning your camera on and off;
  - ◇ Prepare what you want to say at the hearing and write down notes; and
  - ◇ Pick a spot to do the hearing where you can charge your phone or computer. If you can, pick a spot with a plain background (for example, a blank wall) and lighting that makes it possible to see your face on camera.
- If you choose to call in by phone, you should do the following before your hearing date:
  - ◇ Make sure that you have enough minutes for the hearing, if possible;
  - ◇ Practice muting and un-muting yourself;
  - ◇ Prepare what you want to say at the hearing and write down notes; and
  - ◇ Pick a spot to do the hearing where you can charge your phone.

### ***C. Sending Evidence to Court***

- If you have documents or other evidence that you want the judge to see, it is best if you send the evidence to the court before the hearing.
- Before the hearing, call or email the court to ask the best way to send evidence.
- Remember: anything you give to the Court, you also have to give a copy to the other side.



***D. If you do not currently have internet service at home and you are a low-income household, you may qualify for free or discounted internet:***

- Comcast may be contacted at 1-800-COMCAST or visit [https://www.internetessentials.com/covid19#thingstoknow&all\\_AmIeligibleforIE](https://www.internetessentials.com/covid19#thingstoknow&all_AmIeligibleforIE).
- Verizon may be contacted at 1-800-VERIZON or visit <https://www.verizon.com/info/low-income-internet/>.
- RCN may be contacted at 1-800-746-4726 or visit <https://www.internetfirst.com/>.
- Charter-Spectrum may be contacted at 1-844-488-8395.
- Starry may be contacted at 1-888-231-9403 or visit <https://starry.com/starryconnect>.
- You may also contact your mobile phone provider regarding high-speed data packages including hot-spot connectivity.”

## **II. GETTING READY ON DAY OF YOUR HEARING**

- Charge your phone or computer.
- Make sure you have all these things with you:
  - ◇ Your notes about what you want to say;
  - ◇ The documents you want to talk about;
  - ◇ Paper and a pen or pencil; and
  - ◇ Your phone or computer charger.
- Try to make sure there will not be a lot of background noise during the hearing.
- Turn off the TV and any music. Ask other people around you to go into a different room or be as quiet as possible.
- If you are using video chat with Zoom, dress as if you are going to court. Turn on lights if it is difficult for people to see your face.
- Be on time –the court can start without you, so you don’t want to be late.
- **Call the court if you cannot attend the virtual hearing.** This is very important. If you don’t call the court and don’t show up to your virtual hearing, you could automatically lose your case.

## **III. DURING THE HEARING**

- Remember that:
  - ◇ The virtual hearing is being recorded.
  - ◇ It is helpful to identify yourself each time you speak.
  - ◇ It is best for one person to speak at a time so it is not hard to hear.
  - ◇ Speak respectfully to everyone and call the judge “Your Honor.”



- Tell the judge if you need an interpreter for the hearing and what language you need. Tell the judge if you need an accommodation for the hearing (for example, if you are deaf or hard of hearing, blind or have trouble seeing, or will need a break during the hearing).
- Listen carefully to instructions by the judge or clerk and ask questions if you don't understand something.
- The judge or clerk will tell you when it is your turn to speak.
- Keep yourself on mute when you are not speaking.
- Ask the judge if you can respond to something the other side said.
- At the end of the hearing, the judge will tell you what will happen next in your case.
- **If you get disconnected, call back or log in again and tell the judge that you got disconnected.**

#### **IV. ADDITIONAL HELP**

- You can also get additional help with your case at the Court Service Center, the locations and contact information can be found at <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/learn-about-court-service-centers>
- You can also call a law librarian for help with research on your case at (800) 445-8989
- You may be able to get some of your legal questions answered at Mass Legal Answers Online: <https://mass.freelegalanswers.org>
- If you would like to see if you qualify for a free or reduced cost lawyer to help you check this website: <https://www.masslegalservices.org/findlegalaid>

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# A Guide to Virtual Hearings for Family Law Practitioners

## *Purpose of these Guidelines*

- In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the significant restrictions on in-person hearings in the Probate and Family Court, more and more hearings are being conducted via virtual means, including telephone hearings and Zoom hearings.
- Each division of the Probate and Family Court will likely set their own procedures for noticing and scheduling a virtual hearing. These guidelines are meant to set forth best practices for practitioners and litigants during a virtual hearing.

## *Practitioner's Preparation for a Virtual Hearing*

- Familiarize yourself with the filing and contact information for the Court in which you are appearing:
  - ◇ Court Department Emails can be found here: <https://www.mass.gov/guides/court-department-emails#-probate-and-family-court->
  - ◇ Court addresses and phone numbers can be found here: [https://www.mass.gov/orgs/probate-and-family-court/locations?\\_page=1](https://www.mass.gov/orgs/probate-and-family-court/locations?_page=1)
- Make sure the Court has the necessary and correct contact information for you and your client (e.g. cell phone number if you are not using your office line, email addresses, etc.).
- Well in advance of the hearing, file with the Court and serve on the other party all pleadings, affidavits, financial statements, exhibits and all documents you wish the Court to review during the hearing. Keep in mind the timing and service requirements set forth in Rule 6 of the Massachusetts Rules of Domestic Relations Procedure, as well as the requirements for email service of documents as set forth in Standing Order 4-20.
- Keep a record of all documents you have filed with the Court (e.g. documents you want the Court to review in relation to the hearing). Prior to the hearing taking place, confirm with the Clerk that the Court has received these documents and the documents are easily accessible to the presiding judge.
- To the extent the Court supports electronic filings, electronic filings have been the Court's preferred way to ensure that documents are timely received and filed. Be prepared to send to the Court clerk any filings that may be missing from the Court file by electronic mail at the start of the hearing.
- Mark documents with identifying characteristics on each page so that the Court can readily identify and review those documents during the hearing (e.g. Headers/footers on each page indicating document title and page number or Bates stamps).
- Coordinate a plan with your client for how you will interact and communicate with each other during the virtual hearing.
- The best practice for you and your client is to be in the same room for the virtual hearing, following safety guidelines. However, if you and your client are appearing in separate locations, consider setting up a "back channel" for in-hearing communications such as e-mail, text message, Slack, Google Chat.





- Remain flexible with timing. Clear out your schedule and your client's schedule at least a half hour prior to the hearing start time and an hour after the anticipated hearing end time.
- Well in advance of the virtual hearing, set expectations for your client's conduct and contributions during the hearing.
- Make sure your necessary technology is ready to go without incident (e.g. internet is fully functioning, Zoom app is updated, cell phone charged).
- Have all documents filed with the Court in relation to the virtual hearing easily available for your use during the hearing.
- Check your email regularly leading up to the virtual hearing in the event of a change relating to the hearing.
- When preparing your argument, assume that not every piece of information you wish to convey will be heard perfectly or will register. To that end, create a list of major points you think the Court will need to hear to rule in your favor and emphasize those points during the virtual hearing.

### ***Guidelines for Practitioners and Litigants During a Virtual Hearing***

#### ***All hearings:***

- This is still a hearing in a court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Serious issues are heard and determined during these hearings. No matter what format a hearing takes, treat the hearing with the same respect as if you and your client were appearing in person.
- Be aware of your surroundings and find a quiet location without distractions where you and your client can take part in the hearing. Turn off all TV's, radios, and limit noise and "guests" in the hearing.
- When not talking, place yourself on mute.
- Remember that hearings are recorded. You and your client should not speak to any third parties during a hearing.
- Non-parties to a case (e.g. children, friends, other family members) should not be present on any virtual hearings. This is especially true with regard to children who are the subject, or may become the subject, of any virtual hearings.
- When announcing yourself for the record, defer to the Court with respect to the order of introductions. In the absence of guidance, Plaintiff's counsel should introduce him or herself first, followed by Plaintiff, then Defendant's counsel and Defendant.
- At the start of any virtual hearing, make sure all attorneys and parties state on the record that they are alone and that no third parties are within earshot of the hearing proceedings. If a third party must be present for the hearing, identify that individual and the reasons why that individual must be present for the hearing.
- At the start of a hearing be sure to list out all the matters scheduled for hearing and confirm on the record that the Court has all the documents and materials necessary for you to move forward with the hearing.
- If there is no way to avoid a child being present for a hearing (e.g. no child care available or the child is very young and cannot be left alone) then the client should make sure that the call is not on speaker phone and should otherwise place the hearing on mute.





### *Telephonic hearings:*

- Given the nature of telephonic hearings, practitioners should not speak over one another. If at all possible, limit the individuals speaking at a telephonic hearing to the Court and the lawyers involved in the action.
- Whenever an individual speaks during a telephonic hearing, that person should introduce themselves each time they speak (e.g. “Your Honor, this is Attorney Jones. In response to Attorney Smith’s statement, my client’s position is as follows...”).
- Do not call in to the Court’s phone line early. You might join the call of a hearing already in progress. Joining a call creates a notification sound that can be distracting
- Do not go on too long without taking a pause. Because of the nature of the phone system in use, if you are speaking, you might not be able to hear the Court attempting to get your attention.
- Sometimes the phone line will be unclear or the call may drop. Be prepared to restart the call and pick up where the hearing stopped.

### *Zoom hearings:*

- Take online tutorials about Zoom so you become comfortable with all the technological capabilities Zoom has to offer.
- You and your client should dress as though you are appearing before the Court in person.
- Be aware of your background. If your background is distracting, consider using a neutral digital background on Zoom.
- Be careful with your use of Zoom chat and make sure if you do use Zoom chat that you are directing your messages to the correct recipients.

### *Where can I go for more helpful information?*

- The court has some helpful information here: <https://www.mass.gov/guides/court-system-response-to-covid-19>

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# A Guide to Virtual Hearings for Self Represented Litigants in Family Law Matters

## *What is a virtual hearing?*

- Because of COVID-19, the courts must limit the number of people appearing in person in the courthouses. The court can help more people resolve their issues by offering some people the opportunity to have a virtual hearing.
- A virtual hearing is a court hearing where the judge will listen to the parties either on the phone or by video (Zoom).
- The judge will hear the evidence from each side and make a decision on the case, just as they would in the courthouse.
- Para obtener información sobre el testamento y el tribunal de familia en español, acceda a la siguiente dirección web: <https://www.mass.gov/guides/preguntas-frecuentes-del-tribunal-de-asuntos-de-familia-testamentos-y-sucesiones>

## *How do I know if I have a virtual hearing?*

- The Courts are conducting remote hearings for emergency matters and all non-emergency matters that can be heard remotely.
- The Court will notify you if a hearing is scheduled in your matter. This notice typical comes in the mail. It is important the Court has your correct mailing address.
- Please note that the Court may call you from a blocked number or setup a Zoom video conference.

## *How do I prepare for a virtual hearing?*

- Make sure the court knows how to communicate with you and whether or not you can participate in a video hearing. The Court will notify you if your hearing will be held remotely. Give the best phone number for the Court to reach you and your email address before the hearing. You can find the email address and phone number for the court here: [https://www.mass.gov/orgs/probate-and-family-court/locations?\\_page=1](https://www.mass.gov/orgs/probate-and-family-court/locations?_page=1)
- Make sure the court knows right away if you have limited minutes on your phone, you need an interpreter, you are hard of hearing, or you have trouble seeing.
- Submit any documents you need to file with the court ahead of time.

- ◇ You may need to communicate with the Clerk's office to find out how.
- ◇ Many courts will accept emails with scanned copies, but if you have to mail it in, allow plenty of time for it to reach the court – at least 10 days.

Email is the best way to send something to the Court. If you cannot email your documents, you can mail a copy to the Court. But mail is not as good as email:

US mail is slower during the pandemic. Send your mail early so the post office has time to deliver it to the Court. If you wait too long, the Court might not get your mail until it's too late.



- ◇ Sometimes the courthouse has to shut down with no warning because of the virus. The court cannot receive mail when the courthouse is closed.
- ◇ Think about all of the documents that you might need the judge to see.
- ◇ In an in-person hearing, you have a chance to hand documents to the judge. In a phone or Zoom hearing, you need to think about all the documents you may need so you can send them to the court **before** your hearing and then refer to them **during** the hearing.
- ◇ Remember: anything you give to the Court, you also have to give a copy to the other side.

You can do this over email as well.

- If you have a smart phone or computer with video/mic you should download the Zoom app well ahead of the court hearing date.
- Check your emails regularly because the court is likely to send you important information via email.
- Starting checking the <https://www.mass.gov/orgs/probate-and-family-court> website a few days before your hearing in case there's information that might affect your hearing.
- Make notes about the most important things you want the judge to know.
  - ◇ You may not get to say everything on your mind, so you want to make sure you talk about the most important things first.
- Have all your documents together and ready with you at the time of your hearing.
- Be ready on time! Your hearing may start promptly on time, so be logged on/calling in just before the start time so you're ready to go.
- Be flexible – your hearing may not take place exactly at the time it was scheduled.
- Be aware that sometimes the Court has to close unexpectedly and without warning because of COVID exposure. You can see which courts are open here: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/courthouse-closures-due-to-covid-19>
- If you are unsure how to file a document or picture or are having problems filing a document or a picture call the court right away. You can also call the Court Service Centers, Court Libraries, or Court helpline for assistance if they have documents they need to file and cannot. All of those numbers or websites are listed at the end of this guide.

### *What do I need to know for my virtual hearing?*

- Virtual hearings pick up a lot of background noise and this can be distracting for the judge.
  - ◇ Try to go to someplace quiet for your hearing.
  - ◇ Keep children and pets in another room, if possible.
  - ◇ Turn off TVs, radios, and any other background noise, if possible.
  - ◇ Do not have any other people around who may want to talk to you.
  - ◇ Keep your line on mute when you are not talking. Remember to unmute yourself just before you talk.
- Look around at what will be behind you on the video.
  - ◇ Remember everyone else can see what's around and behind you.
  - ◇ If possible, have a plain wall behind you.



- Make sure your phone is charged.
  - ◇ Keep a charger cord handy and be near a plug if your battery goes down quickly.
- If you have a limited number of minutes, make sure you have at least one hour (60 minutes) available.
- Remember this is still a court hearing, not just a meeting
  - ◇ Be respectful of the judge and the other party
  - ◇ Dress appropriately, as if you were going into the courthouse
- It is very hard for the judge to hear when more than one person is speaking at a time.
  - ◇ Wait until others have stopped speaking before speaking yourself.
  - ◇ If the judge invites someone else to speak, let them finish before you ask to respond.
- You may have to wait a while to speak, keep a notebook handy to write down things you want to say so you don't forget them when it's your turn to speak.
- Do not record the virtual hearing yourself. The court will keep a recording of the hearing in case there needs to be an appeal.
- At the end of the hearing the judge will say what will happen next. Do not hang up until the judge says the hearing is over. Most people will get the judge's decision by regular mail.

### *Where can I go for more helpful information?*

- The court has some helpful information here: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/frequently-asked-questions-about-court-procedures-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>
- If you have questions about your case, you can contact the Clerk's office or the Register's for the Probate and Family Court where your case was filed. Contact information can be found at <https://www.mass.gov/guides/court-department-emails>. If you cannot reach a Clerk's Office or a Registers Office, contact the Trial Court Help Line at 833-9ICOURT (9126878).
- You can also get additional help with your case at the Court Service Center, the locations and contact information can be found at <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/learn-about-court-service-centers>
- You can also call a law librarian for help with research on your case at (800) 445-8989
- You may be able to get some of your legal questions answered at Mass Legal Answers Online: <https://mass.freelegalanswers.org>
- If you would like to see if you qualify for a free or reduced cost lawyer to help you check this website: <https://www.masslegalservices.org/findlegalaid>

### *What do I do if I don't have internet?*

If you do not currently have internet service at home and you are a low-income household, you may qualify for free or discounted internet:

- Comcast may be contacted at 1-800-COMCAST or visit [https://www.internetessentials.com/covid19#thingstoknow&all\\_AmIeligibleforIE](https://www.internetessentials.com/covid19#thingstoknow&all_AmIeligibleforIE)



- Verizon may be contacted at 1-800-VERIZON or visit <https://www.verizon.com/info/low-income-internet/>.
- RCN may be contacted at 1-800-746-4726 or visit <https://www.internetfirst.com/>.
- Charter-Spectrum may be contacted at 1-844-488-8395.
- Starry may be contacted at 1-888-231-9403 or visit <https://starry.com/starryconnect>.
- You may also contact your mobile phone provider regarding high-speed data packages including hot-spot connectivity.

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# A Guide to Virtual Hearings For Practitioners in the Housing Court

## *Pre-Hearing Preparation*

### **1. Documents and Exhibits**

- As there is no way to hand documents to a clerk as you would during a typical in-person hearing, you must be certain that all of the documents you intend to show the judge and/or introduce as exhibits are in to the court ahead of time.
- Such documents would include any returns of service (if there was a Short Order of Notice, etc.) as well as any potential exhibits you would like to introduce into evidence.
- Some exhibits can be attached to the complaint or motion at the time of filing. The court has asked litigants to send any other documents to [easternhousingcourt@jud.state.ma.us](mailto:easternhousingcourt@jud.state.ma.us). If you do not have access to email, you can call the Housing Court to arrange for other means of delivery; U.S. mail is not recommended due to the intermittent staffing of the Clerk's Office and the possibility that the documents may not reach the judge in time.
- After sending these documents, you should confirm that the court has received them and that they will be brought to the judge's attention prior to the hearing.
- You should also make sure that all witnesses have a copy of what was submitted with the same pagination so that you can refer judge and witness to the same page of a pre-submitted document during your examination.

### **2. Logistics**

- Be sure that all witnesses have details as to how to call in (or connect to) the hearing and that they are familiar ahead of time with what they need to do to join and participate in the hearing. Any new technology should be tested ahead of time to ensure the microphone/speaker/camera work.
- If you are participating in a Zoom hearing, carefully set your camera so that it captures a good view of your face and upper torso. You don't want the camera to cut off part of your face, for instance. Make sure that you are not in front of a window, which will make you backlit and hard to see. To practice, you can start a new meeting in the Zoom application and it will show, without other participants, how you will look in an actual meeting.
- An interpreter can and should be requested for any virtual hearings at which a participant doesn't comfortably speak English. You should also make any other accommodation requests that are necessary for you to fully participate in the hearing.
- The court will use its recording system to record a virtual hearing in the same way it records in-person hearings. You should not make any unauthorized recordings of your own as this may be a violation of Massachusetts law as well as the Court's rules.

### **3. What to Expect at the Hearing**

- While some judges may allow an attorney to summarize the expected testimony, most Housing Court judges will conduct virtual hearings in a manner similar to an in-person hearing. You should therefore prepare to formally examine all witnesses.



- The judge will expect compliance with all applicable court rules and the Rules of Civil Procedure and evidence. For example, potential exhibits need the appropriate foundation and you should move that each such document be formally admitted, even if you sent it to the judge ahead of time.
- Make sure that you and your witnesses are aware that most judges will expect participants to behave in a virtual hearing as they would in court – there should not be any interrupting or speaking out of turn. Sometimes a phone hearing (or even a Zoom hearing) can seem less formal. That does not mean that anyone can chime in with a comment at any given moment.

### *During the Hearing*

- You should plan to call in or connect to the hearing a few minutes prior to the noticed time to ensure there are no technical issues.
- Be sure to warn all witnesses that once they are on the call/meeting, anything they say can be heard by the clerk and anyone else present and it may even be recorded on the record. This is true even if the judge has not joined the hearing. You and your witnesses should be aware that the line you will be calling in to is not a private line – the same number and passcode are used for all hearings and it is the Court's position that others can listen in as they would in a courtroom during an in-person hearing.
- All participants should also be aware that if they are participating in a Zoom hearing, they can be seen even if they aren't speaking so they should be careful to behave in the same way they would if they were in court.
- The courtroom clerk will join the call/meeting first to confirm that everyone is there and to ensure that documents, etc. are in order for the judge.
- In the event one party is not present, the Clerk may wait and sometimes will attempt to reach the missing party, however the hearing will eventually proceed one-sided if a participant cannot be located (and assuming there was appropriate notice to the missing party). In such cases, you should still expect to introduce any necessary evidence to allow the judge to make a decision.
- When everyone is present or after having waited a sufficient amount of time for parties to appear, the clerk will then request that the judge join the call/meeting and start the hearing. If the judge does not give an overview of how the hearing will be conducted and you have questions about procedure or logistics, you should ask them at the outset so that you are clear regarding the judge's expectations.
- When the judge is ready for the parties to proceed with testimony, the clerk will swear in the witnesses using the same oath that is used in the courtroom.
- While it is in everyone's interest to conduct any hearings as efficiently as possible, there are no time limits on virtual hearings and you should not worry about having enough time to present your case. Only one case is scheduled for any particular date and time and you should expect your case to proceed as soon as all the parties and witnesses are present.

### *After the Hearing*

- Any orders issued as a result of the hearing will be posted on [masscourts.org](https://masscourts.org) for download. The Clerk's Office will also email a copy to those participants who have provided email addresses.
- The court is also mailing decisions as they would after a typical in-person hearing.

*These guides were created in collaboration with the Massachusetts Access to Justice Commission.*





# A Guide to Virtual Hearings for Self Represented Litigants in the Housing Court

## A Guide to Going to 'Court' on the phone or video by yourself.

June 15, 2020

### Before the Hearing

Plan ahead. Make sure you know:

- When your hearing is,
- How the Court will hold the hearing, and
- You know how to "go to" the hearing!

The Housing Court uses Zoom for video hearings, and a conference call line for telephone hearings.

Most hearings are on the telephone. If both sides have a lawyer, the court is more likely to do the hearing by Zoom – video meeting.

The Court will send you instructions for your hearing.

Read everything the Court sends you and make sure you understand how to do the hearing.

Give the court the best phone number and email address to reach you.

Sometimes the court has to close unexpectedly, with no warning because of the virus.

To check on the court where your hearing will be held, see <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/courthouse-closures-due-to-covid-19>

### Call or email the court as soon as you can if:

- You do not get a letter from the court.
- You do not understand the instructions for Zoom or the telephone conference call line
- You need an accommodation from the court like:

- ◇ You are hard of hearing.
- ◇ You need a break during the hearing.
- ◇ Your eyesight is not good.
- ◇ You need an interpreter.

- You cannot do the hearing on the date the court gave you, because you have to work or you have another scheduling conflict. You must have a very good reason to change the date.
- You do not have enough minutes on your cell phone plan to do the entire hearing. Most hearings are about one hour.
- To find the number or an email for the court go to: [https://www.mass.gov/orgs/housing-court/locations?\\_page=1](https://www.mass.gov/orgs/housing-court/locations?_page=1)

If you do not currently have internet service at home and you are a low-income household, you may qualify for free or discounted internet:

- Comcast may be contacted at 1-800-COMCAST or visit [https://www.internetessentials.com/covid19#thingstoknow&all\\_AmIeligibleforIE](https://www.internetessentials.com/covid19#thingstoknow&all_AmIeligibleforIE).
- Verizon may be contacted at 1-800-VERIZON or visit <https://www.verizon.com/info/low-income-internet/>.
- RCN may be contacted at 1-800-746-4726 or visit <https://www.internetfirst.com/>.
- Charter-Spectrum may be contacted at 1-844-488-8395.
- Starry may be contacted at 1-888-231-9403 or



visit <https://starry.com/starryconnect>.

- You may also contact your mobile phone provider regarding high-speed data packages including hot-spot connectivity.

## For the Hearing

1. Find a quiet, private place where you can call or Zoom from.

Think of noisy things that could distract you or interrupt the hearing and plan to stop the interruptions. Your plan could be to put a movie on in another room and have snacks out for the children. Or put your noisy dog in another room.

2. Have pen and paper ready to take notes.
3. Make sure you have good cell or WIFI signal and if possible, an electric outlet.
4. Make sure the battery is fully charged on your device.
5. Have your charger with you.

## Telephone hearings

If possible, use a landline.

If you are using a cell phone, make sure ahead of time that you call from a place that has good signal for your phone.

Make sure the battery is charged.

Maybe you can find a place that has good signal and is near an electric outlet so if your phone battery tends to run out quickly, you can plug in.

Learn how to mute and un-mute yourself.

If your phone plan has minutes, check the number of minutes you have. Make sure it will be enough for the hearing. Most hearings last about an hour.

## Zoom Hearings

If you are using WIFI, make sure ahead of time that you call from a place that has a good WIFI signal.

Download Zoom. It is free. Make sure it works on your device. Note: Sometimes software downloads and updates can take some time.

Learn how to use Zoom. Practice:

- Turn your webcam on and off;
- Adjust the audio and video;
- Mute and un-mute yourself.

If possible, use headphones with a microphone.

Set your camera so that it captures a good view of your face and upper body. You do not want the camera to cut off part of your face. Make sure you are not in front of a window. The light behind you will make it hard to see you.

To practice, you can start a new meeting in Zoom. You do not have to invite anyone else. You can see how you will look in an actual meeting.

Remember this is still a court proceeding and the court can see you if you turn on your video. Dress appropriately. Solid colors are better for Zoom than clothes with patterns. Make sure your background is not distracting or inappropriate. Adjust the lighting in your room if necessary.

## Documents or Photos you Want the Judge to Consider

The court's letter will include instructions on how to give the Court documents or photos.

Think about all of the documents that you might need the judge to see.

In an in-person hearing, you have a chance to hand documents to the judge.

In a phone or Zoom hearing, you need to think about all the documents you may need so you can send them to the court **before** your hearing and then refer to them **during** the hearing.

Email your documents to the court **before** the



hearing to: [EasternHousingCourt@jud.state.ma.us](mailto:EasternHousingCourt@jud.state.ma.us)

Label each document or photo clearly.

For example: “Tenant’s Exhibit A.”

In your email, include your name, the best phone number to reach you, your docket number, and the date of your hearing. Explain that you need to give these documents to the court so the judge can see them at the hearing.

Email is the best way to send something to the Court. If you cannot email your documents, you can mail a copy to the Court. But mail is not as good as email:

- US mail is slower during the pandemic. Send your mail early so the post office has time to deliver it to the Court. If you wait too long, the Court might not get your mail until it’s too late.
- Sometimes the courthouse has to shut down with no warning because of the virus. The court cannot receive mail when the courthouse is closed.

Remember: anything you give to the Court, you also have to give a copy to the other side.

### **Prepare what you need to say**

Write down everything you need to tell the court at this hearing: Dates, names, addresses, and dollar amounts are all helpful details.

Include the specific things you need the court to order. For example:

- I need the court to give me more time to move.
- I need the court to order my landlord to fix the heat.
- I need the court to order my tenant to stop disturbing the other tenants.
- I need the court to dismiss the case.

## **The Day of the Hearing**

The clerk will ask everyone on the phone or in the Zoom meeting to say their names. Once everyone is present, the judge will join in.

Be aware: the court can do the hearing even if not everyone in the case is at the hearing.  
**If you miss the hearing and you did not tell the court ahead of time, the court can hold it without you.**

The judge or the clerk might give instructions to everyone at the beginning of the hearing. Listen carefully.

If the judge or the clerk does **not** give instructions at the beginning, you can ask the court to explain how the hearing will be done.

Speak slowly and clearly. Pauses are helpful.

Speak loudly and clearly enough so everyone can hear you.

Remember: **This is still a court proceeding.** Even though you are not physically in the courtroom, this is a serious matter.

The hearing is recorded.

Everyone can hear you. This is not a private phone call or Zoom meeting.

If there is a lot of noise where you are, the judge might ask you to mute yourself when you are not talking. Remember to un-mute yourself when you want to talk.

Be polite and respectful to everyone.

Address the judge as “Your Honor.”

**Do not interrupt** the judge, the other side, or anyone else during the hearing. Wait your turn. The judge will give everyone a chance to talk.

If someone says something and you want to respond to it, write it down. You can come back to it when it is your turn.

Be patient. The judge and the clerk are doing the



best they can.

If you need something to be repeated, ask politely.

If you have trouble with the phone or the technology, tell the judge as soon as possible.

- Some examples: the call breaks up and you cannot hear or see anything, Zoom stops working, or your phone battery is about to die.

If you accidentally get disconnected:

- **On Zoom**, the court can see if someone “leaves” the Zoom. Try to re-enter the Zoom. Use the same link you used to join. The court will try to call you back at the phone number you gave if you do not re-enter the Zoom.
- **Over the phone**, it might be harder for the court to notice if you get disconnected. If they notice, they will try to call you back. If the Court does not call you back, call them. Let them know you got disconnected. Give the court the best phone number to reach you, even if you already gave it to them. Once you are re-connected, ask the court to tell you what you missed.

### If your hearing is by telephone

Remember the judge cannot see you nod or shake your head. Give a verbal response.

If there are a lot of people in the telephonic hearing, it is helpful to identify yourself each time you speak.

If you have someone else with you and you are on speakerphone, tell the judge.

If someone needs an interpreter for this hearing:

- Speak in short sentences.
- Pause between sentences so the interpreter has a chance to interpret what you said. Talking for a long time without a break makes it difficult for the interpreter to do their job.
- The interpreter might ask you to repeat

yourself if say too much at once.

Have all of the Court documents and your documents or photos ready in front of you, so you can find them easily during the hearing. It is helpful to organize in the same way as the documents you sent to the court. So if you refer to “page 4,” you and the judge are both looking at the same document.

If you need the judge to look at a document you filed, say clearly which document you are referring to.

- Give the judge a chance to find the document.
- For example: “I’d like to turn the court’s attention to my email to my landlord, dated May 20, 2020.”

Sometimes, the case being heard before your case might run a little late.

- If the court is still hearing another case and is not finished yet, or if you call the court a little early, the court might ask you to wait a few minutes so it can finish up the other case.
- You can call back, or you can stay on the line and wait for your case to be called.
  - ◇ If you decide to wait, mute yourself until your case is called. You can listen to this other hearing, but do not disrupt it.
  - ◇ If you decide to hang up and call later, ask the court what time you should call back.

If you are being questioned by the court or the other side:

- Listen to each question carefully.



- Wait until the person is finished asking the question before you answer.
- If you do not understand a question, tell the judge.
- If you do not hear a question, tell the judge. Ask the judge to repeat the question.

At the end of the hearing, the judge will tell you what happens next.

- The judge might say what his or her decision is, or the judge might say the case is “under advisement” and you will get a written decision later.
- Listen to the judge. Write down if you need to. If you do not understand what the judge says, ask the judge to explain.
  - ◇ Most people will get the Court’s decision by email. But you can ask the Court to send you a copy by regular mail.
  - ◇ Do not hang up until the judge says the hearing is over.

### More tips on using Zoom

For more on Zoom, click here for the Zoom Help Center: <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/categories/201137166>

Find more tips here:

- <https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/8/21202907/zoom-tips-video-call-lighting-audio-look-your-best>
- <https://www.theverge.com/2020/3/19/21185472/video-confere-call-tips-zoom-skype-hangouts-facetime-remote-work>

### Additional Help

You can also get additional help with your case at the Court Service Center, the locations and contact information can be found at <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/learn-about-court-service-centers>

You can also call a law librarian for help with research on your case at (800) 445-8989

You may be able to get some of your legal questions answered at Mass Legal Answers Online: <https://mass.freelegalanswers.org>

If you would like to see if you qualify for a free or reduced cost lawyer to help you check this website: <https://www.masslegalservices.org/findlegalaid>

These guides were created in collaboration with the Massachusetts Access to Justice Commission



# A Guide to Virtual Hearings for Practitioners in Probate Matters

## 1. *Keep Up to Date with Standing Orders and Probate Court Guidance*

- <https://www.mass.gov/guides/court-system-response-to-covid-19#-probate-and-family-court->
- Operating procedures, phone numbers and email addresses for specific counties and emergency matters can be found under “Division Protocols for Court Operations” on the Probate and Family Court’s website: <https://www.mass.gov/guides/court-system-response-to-covid-19>
- Review the Frequently Asked Questions page on the Probate and Family Court’s website: <https://www.mass.gov/guides/probate-and-family-court-faqs-related-to-covid-19>
- Phone numbers to coordinate hearings on emergency matters are as follows:

**Barnstable:** 508-375-6710

**Hampshire:** 413-586-8500

**Berkshire:** 413-442-6941, Ext. 7200

**Middlesex:** 617-768-5906

**Bristol:** 508-977-6040

**Nantucket:** 508-228-2669

**Dukes:** 508-627-4703

**Norfolk:** 781-830-1278

**Essex:** 978-740-4143 (Salem); 978-686-9692 (Lawrence)

**Plymouth:** 508-897-5400

**Franklin:** 413-775-7464

**Suffolk:** 617-788-8300

**Hampden:** 413-748-7758

**Worcester:** 508-831-2200

## 2. *Working with Other Attorneys*

- Assented to motions may be allowed administratively.
- Consider mediation and/or conciliation to resolve matters.
- Work cooperatively on discovery disputes and deadlines.
- Be considerate of technology barriers and disabilities of other parties.

## 3. *Filing Pleadings*

- **Emergency matters**  
When in doubt, call the Probate Court and ask for their preference in how to file your emergency matter and ensure that it is promptly addressed.
- **E-Filing** - <https://efilema.tylerhost.net/ofsw eb>.  
E-Filing has been encouraged by court personnel for as much as can be utilized, as it ensures that the case is immediately docketed and the judges can view the e-filed documents remotely much more quickly.
- **Filing by mail**  
Mail filings are still being accepted, but be prepared for a bit longer of a lag time than usual between mailing and processing.
- **Original signatures**  
Confirm with court personnel as to whether original signatures should still be mailed to the Probate





Court if the filings have otherwise been e-filed or filed via e-mail.

Review the order issued by the Supreme Judicial Court: <https://www.mass.gov/supreme-judicial-court-rules/supreme-judicial-court-order-concerning-electronic-signatures-of>

#### **4. Communication with Court Personnel**

- More than ever before, court personnel are increasingly responsive to e-mail communication. E-mail is the preferred mode as some personnel may be working remotely and not available at their usual telephone extensions. If you do not have the e-mail address for your matter's assigned sessions clerk, reach out to the Probate Court and ask for it.

#### **5. Notices of Hearing**

- For matters requiring in-hand service, the certificate of service must state the exact circumstances in which the person was served and a Motion to Accept Service as Rendered may be required.
- Consider acceptance of service from other attorneys.

#### **6. Format of Hearings**

- Work with court personnel to determine if a hearing is going forward and whether it will be held telephonically or by Zoom. Ultimately, this is the particular judge's preference.
- In-person hearings are being held on an extremely limited basis and only for certain emergency matters.
- Make sure you communicate any case specific needs to court personnel (i.e. technology barriers for clients, interpreters, disabilities, etc.) well in advance of any scheduled remote hearing so that the Probate Court has adequate time to address them.
- If there is an active restraining order in the case, remind the sessions clerk in advance of the hearing so that the judge has a copy of the order at his or her side for the hearing.
- Attorneys are expected to prepare their clients prior to the hearing, confirm with their clients that their technology is working and to ensure their clients have blocked off a sufficient amount of time to participate in the hearing. Incoming calls from the Probate Court sometimes appear as a blocked number, so make sure clients can receive calls from blocked numbers.
- Until further guidance is issued, it is likely that all evidentiary hearings and trials will be postponed until the Probate Court is re-opened at a later date.

#### **7. Decorum During Remote Hearing**

- Treat the hearing as if you were present in the judge's courtroom.
- Do not talk over one another. Defer to the judge as to his or her preference on who should speak at a given time. If a motion is being heard, expect the moving party to speak first and the responding/opposing party to speak second.
- If it is an uncontested s.1A divorce hearing, and you are the plaintiff, still be prepared to walk your client through the colloquy.
- Mute your telephone when you are not speaking. Be in a quiet room away from potentially distracting noise. Be careful with being outside if it is a windy day or there are other potential noise detractors such as lawn mowers, leaf blowers, etc.
- If participating in a hearing to be held on Zoom, make sure to check your camera view to ensure the background is appropriate and the lighting is correct. Also, you and your client should be dressed appropriately to appear before a judge.

*These guides were created in collaboration with the Massachusetts Access to Justice Commission.*





# A Guide to Virtual Hearings for Self Represented Litigants in Probate Matters

During the current novel coronavirus pandemic, the courts of the Commonwealth, including the Probate and Family Courts, have shifted to remote operations. A “remote hearing” means a hearing that is held by either telephone call or Zoom video-conference.

Para obtener información sobre el testamento y el tribunal de familia en español, acceda a la siguiente dirección web: <https://www.mass.gov/guides/preguntas-frecuentes-del-tribunal-de-asuntos-de-familia-testamentos-y-sucesiones>

1. ***You can still file new cases with the Courts.*** Most new matters may be filed by mail, e-mail, or e-filing where available. If possible, you should file new matters via mail. If this is not possible, you should file via e-mail using the appropriate e-mail address as provided in the Division protocol for the applicable court. E-filing (via <https://efilema.tylerhost.net/ofswab>) should be used as a last resort because there are restrictions regarding what types of documents may be e-filed, and in order to e-file you must register.
2. ***Most Courts are not conducting trials or evidentiary hearings remotely.*** Most hearings that require the presentation of evidence and any trial will be rescheduled for a later time when the courts are open to the public. However, as noted above, some judges are scheduling evidentiary hearings and plan to conduct trials remotely.
3. ***The Courts are conducting remote hearings for all non-emergency matters and emergency matters that can be heard remotely.*** The Court will notify you if a hearing is scheduled in your matter. Please note that the Court may call you from a **blocked** number or setup a **Zoom** video conference.
  - If you are calling in and your phone plan uses “minutes” be sure you have at least 90 minutes of available talk time. Let the Judge or the Court Clerk know right away if you have limited minutes on your cellphone.
  - If you are using a mobile device be sure it is fully charged or plugged into a power supply.
  - If you are preparing for a video conference over **Zoom**, download and test the application 48 hours in advance of your scheduled hearing. (**Zoom** is **free** to download at <https://zoom.us/>.)
  - If you are unable to conduct a video conference notify the court immediately to change your hearing to a **teleconference**.

## ***Before the hearing***

### **Plan ahead. Make sure you know:**

- **When** your hearing is,
- **How** the Court will hold the hearing, and
- **You know** how to “go to” the hearing

### **Call or email the court as soon as you can if:**

- You do not get a letter from the court.



- You do not understand the instructions for Zoom or the telephone conference call line
- You need an accommodation from the court like:
  - ◇ You are hard of hearing.
  - ◇ You need a break during the hearing.
  - ◇ Your eyesight is not good.
  - ◇ You need an interpreter.
- You cannot do the hearing on the date the court gave you, because you have to work or you have another scheduling conflict. You must have a very good reason to change the date.
- You do not have enough minutes on your cell phone plan to do the entire hearing. Most hearings are about one hour.
- To find the number or an email for the court go to: [https://www.mass.gov/orgs/probate-and-family-court/locations?\\_page=1](https://www.mass.gov/orgs/probate-and-family-court/locations?_page=1)

If you do not currently have internet service at home and you are a low-income household, you may qualify for free or discounted internet:

- Comcast may be contacted at 1-800-COMCAST or visit [https://www.internetessentials.com/covid19#thingstoknow&all\\_AmIeligibleforIE](https://www.internetessentials.com/covid19#thingstoknow&all_AmIeligibleforIE)
- Verizon may be contacted at 1-800-VERIZON or visit <https://www.verizon.com/info/low-income-internet/>.
- RCN may be contacted at 1-800-746-4726 or visit <https://www.internetfirst.com/>.
- Charter-Spectrum may be contacted at 1-844-488-8395.
- Starry may be contacted at 1-888-231-9403 or visit <https://starry.com/starryconnect>.
- You may also contact your mobile phone provider regarding high-speed data packages including hot-spot connectivity.

4. ***If your matter is scheduled for a remote hearing and you do not “appear” at the hearing, the court can proceed without you.*** For this reason, it is equally as important to show up for remote hearings as it is to show up for hearings that occur in-person in a courthouse. If there is a reason that you cannot attend your scheduled hearing, you need to contact that court well in advance of the hearing to attempt to reschedule your hearing.
5. ***Treat remote hearings with the same formality as you would an in-person hearing at the courthouse.***

#### ***Before the hearing:***

- **Prepare your arguments.** Before your hearing, plan what you want to say to the Court. It may help to write yourself a bulleted list of your key points and any support or examples you may have. If you will need the Court to look at any exhibits during your hearing, be sure that the Court has those documents in advance of your hearing.



- **Prepare your space.** You should arrange to be in a quiet and private space for your hearing. You will want to minimize any distractions during your hearing. Common distractions include children, pets, televisions, radios, and lawn mowers.
- **Prepare yourself.** Dress for court! It may be tempting to dress more casually because you are at home, but resist this.
- Remember: anything you give to the Court, you also have to give a copy to the other side.”
- If you are unsure how to file a document or picture or are having problems filing a document or a picture call the court right away. You can also call the Court Service Centers, Court Libraries, or Court helpline for assistance if they have documents they need to file and cannot. All of those numbers or websites are listed in section 8 of this guide.

***During the hearing:***

- **Arrive early.** Call in to the teleconference or join the video conference at least ten minutes before the scheduled start of your remote hearing. This extra time will allow you to address any technology issues that may arise.
- **Announce yourself.** When you join a remote hearing you should announce yourself by saying, “This is the [Plaintiff/Petitioner/Defendant/Respondent][Insert Name].” You should also do this each time before you speak so that the record is clear as to who is saying what.
- **Speak clearly.** Speak in a loud and clear voice so that the Court and the other parties can hear you. When you are not speaking mute your computer or phone to reduce background noise and feedback.
- **Do not speak over others.** You should wait until others have finished speaking before you speak. It is particularly difficult to understand who is saying what during a remote hearing when multiple people are speaking at the same time. You will help the Court (and yourself) by waiting until you are the only one speaking before making your arguments.

6. ***The Courts are conducting in-person hearings for certain emergency matters.*** Check the Division protocols to see what types of matters the court in your county has designated as emergency matters that may be held in-person. To contact the Divisions regarding emergency matters, use the following telephone numbers:

**Barnstable:** 508-375-6710

**Berkshire:** 413-442-6941, Ext. 7200

**Bristol:** 508-977-6040

**Dukes:** 508-627-4703

**Essex:** 978-740-4143 (Salem);  
978-686-9692 (Lawrence)

**Franklin:** 413-775-7464

**Hampden:** 413-748-7758

**Hampshire:** 413-586-8500

**Middlesex:** 617-768-5906

**Nantucket:** 508-228-2669

**Norfolk:** 781-830-1278

**Plymouth:** 508-897-5400

**Suffolk:** 617-788-8300

**Worcester:** 508-831-2200

7. ***The courts are releasing new Standing Orders on a regular basis.*** It is important to review the Standing Orders *before* you contact the courts. The most up-to-date Standing Orders can be accessed by visiting <https://www.mass.gov/guides/court-system-response-to-covid-19#-probate-and-family-court->.



Further, each Division of the Probate and Family Courts has a separate protocol for court operations that outlines what each Division classifies as “emergency”. Those protocols and contact information can be accessed as follows:

**Barnstable:** <https://www.mass.gov/doc/operating-procedure-for-the-barnstable-division-of-the-probate-and-family-court-under-standing/download>

**Berkshire:** <https://www.mass.gov/doc/operating-procedure-for-the-berkshire-division-of-the-probate-and-family-court-under-standing/download>

**Bristol:** <https://www.mass.gov/doc/operating-procedure-for-the-bristol-division-of-the-probate-and-family-court-under-standing/download>

**Dukes:** <https://www.mass.gov/doc/operating-procedure-for-the-dukes-division-of-the-probate-and-family-court-under-standing-order/download>

**Essex:** <https://www.mass.gov/doc/operating-procedure-for-the-essex-division-of-the-probate-and-family-court-under-standing-order/download>

**Franklin:** <https://www.mass.gov/doc/operating-procedure-for-the-franklin-division-of-the-probate-and-family-court-under-standing/download>

**Hampden:** <https://www.mass.gov/doc/operating-procedure-for-the-hampden-division-of-the-probate-and-family-court-under-standing/download>

**Hampshire:** <https://www.mass.gov/doc/operating-procedure-for-the-hampshire-division-of-the-probate-and-family-court-under-standing/download>

**Middlesex:** <https://www.mass.gov/doc/operating-procedure-for-middlesex-division-of-the-probate-and-family-court-under-standing-order/download>

**Nantucket:** <https://www.mass.gov/doc/operating-procedure-for-the-nantucket-division-of-the-probate-and-family-court-under-standing/download>

**Norfolk:** <https://www.mass.gov/doc/operating-procedure-for-the-norfolk-division-of-the-probate-and-family-court-under-standing/download>

**Plymouth:** <https://www.mass.gov/doc/operating-procedure-for-the-plymouth-division-of-the-probate-and-family-court-under-standing/download>

**Suffolk:** <https://www.mass.gov/doc/operating-procedure-for-the-suffolk-division-of-the-probate-and-family-court-under-standing/download>

**Worcester:** <https://www.mass.gov/doc/operating-procedure-for-the-worcester-division-of-the-probate-and-family-court-under-standing/download>

**8. If you need more help** call the Court Helpline at 833-91COURT (833-912-6878)

- You can also get additional help with your case at the Court Service Center, the locations and contact information can be found at <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/learn-about-court-service-centers>
- You can also call a law librarian for help with research on your case at (800) 445-8989
- You may be able to get some of your legal questions answered at Mass Legal Answers Online: <https://mass.freelegalanswers.org>
- If you would like to see if you qualify for a free or reduced cost lawyer to help you check this website: <https://www.masslegalservices.org/findlegalaid>

Please also note that different judges are operating their courtrooms differently. For this reason, it is important to contact the session clerk for your judge to confirm how that particular judge is handling motions and hearings during the pandemic, in addition to reviewing the Standing Orders and applicable Division protocol.

**For general questions for the Probate & Family Court, call 1-833-912-6878**

*These guides were created in collaboration with the Massachusetts Access to Justice Commission.*

