



The Wise Way

FAMILY LAW SELF-HELP GUIDE

Practical, Trauma-Informed Support for Navigating
the Legal System

Hope. Guidance. Support.

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The WISE WAY Family Law Guide

Step-by-Step, Trauma-Informed Help for Self-Represented Litigants and Families

Preface

Welcome to the The Wise Way, by Apex Paralegal and Tech LLC Family Law Self-Help Guide!

We know navigating family law can feel overwhelming—especially if you’re doing it on your own. This handbook is designed to walk you step-by-step through the legal process, provide trauma-informed tips, and help you feel empowered along the way.

Important Disclaimer:

- *This handbook is for educational purposes only.*
- *It does not constitute legal advice, nor does it create an attorney-client relationship between you and The Wise Way, by Apex Paralegal and Tech LLC or any contributors to this manual.*
- *Laws can change, and each person’s situation is unique.*
- *We strongly encourage you to consult a licensed attorney for advice specific to your case and to fully understand your rights.*
- *If you’re facing urgent safety concerns or complicated legal issues, please do not rely exclusively on this handbook.*

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1. Introduction to Family Law

Family law is the area of the law that deals with family relationships and duties that arise when families change. Common family law cases include:

- Divorce or legal separation
- Creating or changing a Parenting Plan when kids are involved
- Child support
- Custody or visitation for unmarried parents
- Protection from domestic violence or abuse
- Adoption or establishing parentage
- Dividing property or debts after a breakup

If this sounds like your situation, you're in the right place.

If You're Representing Yourself ("Pro Se")

You might hear "pro se," meaning you handle your case without a lawyer.

Your rights:

- You can file your own court papers, go to hearings, and speak directly to the judge.
- You are allowed to review your court file at the courthouse and check what's happening in your case.
- You can visit the court's self-help center or clerk to ask basic questions (but they can't provide legal advice).

Your responsibilities:

- You must follow the same rules and meet the same deadlines as a lawyer.
- You are responsible for obtaining, completing, and filing the correct forms, and for having the other party served with your paperwork.
- You must treat the court, staff, and everyone in your case with respect—even when things feel unfair or overwhelming.

Staying Organized & Informed

- Use folders or binders to keep court orders, money/financial records, communications, and documents for the judge in separate sections.
- Keep a calendar (paper or phone) with all deadlines and court dates—even minor delays or mistakes can cost you time or money.
- Keep a journal and note all calls, emails, or court visits—date, time, who you talked to, and what was discussed.
- Use checklists from the court or from Lighthouse to make sure you don't miss anything.
- Always ask for help. Many counties have a legal self-help center or family law facilitator who can explain which forms you need and the next steps, even if they can't give detailed advice.

Encouragement

- Taking on your own family law case may feel daunting, but you can do it. Take it step by step; you don't need to be perfect, just persistent.
 - For more resources, check [Apexparalegalandtech.com](https://apexparalegalandtech.com) for sample forms, checklists, and information about your local court.
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2. Common Legal Terms Explained

Petitioner: The person who starts the case by filing papers with the court (in a divorce, the one who files first).

Respondent: The other person in the case—the one who must respond to what was filed.

Service (or “Being Served”): Officially delivering court paperwork to the other party so they’re aware and can respond. The court can’t move your case forward until service is done correctly.

Motion: A formal, written request for the judge to decide something before or during the case. (For example, a motion for temporary custody.)

Decree: The final written order from the judge that resolves the entire case. For example, a Divorce Decree formally ends your marriage.

Ex Parte: A court hearing or request done quickly, often without the other person present—meant for emergencies or urgent issues.

Order: Any decision from the judge that both parties must follow; can be temporary or final.

Hearing: A short court meeting where you and possibly the other party speak to a judge or commissioner about certain issues in your case.

Trial: A formal process where both sides show evidence and argue their side, and the judge or sometimes a jury makes the decision.

Continuance: Asking the court to postpone your court date to a later day.

Parenting Plan: The court document listing who your child lives with, each parent’s schedule, and how decisions about the child will be made.

Child Support: Payments from one parent to the other after separation or divorce, used for the child’s needs.

Guardian ad Litem (GAL): A neutral person the court picks to investigate what’s best for your child; they’ll usually write a report and make recommendations to the judge.

Mediation: Meeting with a neutral third person (“mediator”) who tries to help you and the other party resolve your case without going to trial.

Settlement Conference: A judge-led or professional-led meeting for both sides (sometimes with lawyers) to find agreements before trial.

Contempt: When someone doesn't follow a court order, the judge can find them "in contempt" and set a penalty.

Discovery: The process where both sides share information and documents before trial.

Temporary Orders: Court decisions for issues like custody or support while the case is ongoing, before the final order.

Protective Order/Restraining Order: A legal order to protect someone from abuse, threats, or harassment, often in domestic violence situations.

Docket: The court's list of cases scheduled for hearings or trial on a given day.

Tips:

If you don't understand a word, ask for help, check your county's glossary, or look it up at [WashingtonLawHelp.org](https://www.washingtonlawhelp.org) or a legal dictionary.

3. Understanding the Legal Process

Every family law case follows several steps:

1. Filing:

Your case starts when you or the other party files required papers with the court—like a Petition for divorce or a Parenting Plan.

2. Service:

“Service of process” means delivering the papers officially to the other party. The case won’t move forward until this is done the right way.

3. Response:

The person who was served (the “respondent”) is required to file a formal, written “response” by a deadline—usually between 20 and 60 days, depending on the case and how service was done.

4. Motions & Hearings:

Either side can file “motions”—written requests for the judge to decide something before the final order is entered (for example, a motion for temporary custody or support). Most motions require a short hearing, where both sides can explain their side to a judge or commissioner.

5. Discovery:

In some cases, each side will send and answer questions (interrogatories) and request documents (pay stubs, bank records, etc.) pre-trial.

6. Mediation or Negotiation:

Many courts require both parties to try mediation—a meeting (sometimes with a professional) to see if you can agree on some or all issues (custody, support, etc.) instead of leaving everything up to a judge.

7. Final Hearing or Trial:

If you can’t reach agreement on all issues, you’ll go to a trial or “final hearing.” Both sides present their evidence, and the judge decides.

8. Court Orders:

During and after your case, the court will enter written orders—some are “temporary” (just for now), some are “final” (the case is over).

Deadlines & Organization

Missing a deadline can mean you lose your chance to be heard. Here’s how to keep track:

- Read each court paper carefully—deadlines are usually printed on the first page.
- Use a calendar for every event, filing, and deadline.
- Set reminders in your phone for key dates.
- If you are unsure, ask the court clerk (they can explain dates/procedures, but not legal strategy).

People in the Courtroom

- **Judge:** Makes the final decisions in your case; issues the orders and final decree.
- **Commissioner:** A judicial officer with similar authority in motions and family law hearings.
- **Clerk:** Court staff who process paperwork, track files, and help with scheduling.
- **Bailiff:** Keeps everything running safely in the courtroom.
- **Facilitator/Self-Help Staff:** Explain processes, check paperwork, and guide you through forms (no legal advice).

Tips for a Stress-Free Process

- Double-check paperwork for missing information or signatures.
- Store one copy of every court document in your folder.
- Make a list of questions for each court visit.
- Stay calm and respectful, even if you feel frustrated or afraid.

4. Filing Your Case: Summons & Petition

Overview of Required Forms

- **Summons:** Official paper that notifies the other party a case has started, gives them a case number, and assigns a response deadline.
- **Petition:** Main document stating what you're asking the court to decide. (In a divorce case, the Petition asks for divorce and describes what you want for custody, support, and property.)
- **Confidential Information Form:** Provides sensitive details for the court record (Social Security numbers, birth dates, addresses).

How to Complete and File

- Find forms: Download at www.courts.wa.gov/forms, get them from your courthouse, or ask [Apex Paralegal and Tech LLC](#) for help.
- Fill out each section honestly, using black or blue ink if handwriting.
- Check for all signatures/dates. Missing them is a top reason for delays.
- Make at least 3 sets—one for the court, one to serve on the other person, one for your records.
- File at court clerk's office (most common) or see if your county accepts e-filings.

Court Fees, Waivers, and Local Rules

- Courts charge a case filing fee (often \$200–\$350).
- If you cannot pay, ask for a fee waiver form ("Motion and Declaration for Waiver of Civil Fees and Surcharges").
- Attach proof of income (pay stubs, DSHS award letter, TANF, SSI/SSD), file with the court, and a judge will decide quickly.
- If approved, you can file for free or at lower cost.
- Please note that each county court has its own local Family Law Rules. These rules inform you about deadlines, pages limits and other court requirements. Pro se litigants are expected to follow the same rules as the

attorneys. Please download a copy of the court rules or ask [Apex Paralegal and Tech LLC](#) and we can assist you.

Extra Tips

- Read instructions attached to forms—nearly all have step-by-step guides.
 - Ask the clerk or facilitator to check that you have everything before you file.
 - Keep your case number handy—it goes on all later papers.
-

5. Service of Process

What Does It Mean to "Serve" Legal Papers?

- "Service" = officially giving the other party copies of all paperwork filed, so they have fair notice and time to respond.
- If service isn't done right, the court won't process your case—even if you did everything else correctly.

Ways to Serve Papers

- **Process Server:** A professional delivers the papers for a fee.
- **Sheriff:** The sheriff's office may serve papers (for a fee), especially if there are safety concerns.
- **Certified Mail:** Allowed in some non-starting cases. Must be return receipt requested, keep the signature/card.
- **Publication:** If you cannot find the other party after a good-faith search, ask the judge for permission to serve by publishing a notice in a newspaper. Only as a last resort, with court approval.
- **Family/Friends:** In some cases, an adult (over 18) not involved in the case may serve, but always double-check—many counties do not allow this in family law.

What To Do After Service

- **Proof of Service / Return of Service:** The person who served papers completes a legal form describing what was served, to whom, and when.
- File your proof at the court clerk's office. Your case cannot move forward until this is on file.
- Keep a copy of your proof for your own file.

Tips for Success

- Serve as soon as possible—delays can slow your case.
- Double-check your county's rules about who may serve and how.
- Track all paperwork, dates, and receipts (if you use certified mail or process server).

6. ⌚ Temporary Orders and Immediate Relief

Family law cases can take months, but sometimes you need quick decisions about custody, support, safety, or property. Temporary Orders are “rules for now”—they set the stage until your case is over.

Why Seek Temporary Orders?

- To set a parenting/visitation plan while your case is undecided.
- To ensure one parent pays child support starting right away.
- To protect against threats, domestic violence, or harmful behaviors.
- To control who uses the family home, car, or money during the case.
- These orders are NOT permanent, but they can shape final outcomes.

How to Request Temporary or Emergency Orders:

1. **File a Motion for Temporary Orders:**
 - Use your county court’s specific form (find at www.courts.wa.gov/forms or apexparalegalandtech.com).
 - Write a declaration—a sworn statement explaining what you need and why. Attach documents (ex: paystubs, police reports, texts/pictures if safety is an issue).
2. **Emergency/Ex Parte Orders:**
 - For urgent needs (abuse, threats, immediate danger), ask for “ex parte” or emergency relief, often possible within 1–2 days, sometimes without notifying the other party.
 - Some courts have daily “ex parte” calendars—ask your clerk or facilitator.
3. **Prepare/Serve Papers:**
 - After filing, serve copies on the other party; file your proof of service.
4. **Temporary Orders Hearing:**
 - Attend the hearing (in person or virtually, depending on your county). Bring paperwork, supporting documents, and a summary of what you’re asking for.

At the Hearing:

- Both parties may briefly explain their side.
- The judge/commissioner decides within a few days (sometimes immediately) and signs a Temporary Order.
- The Order lasts until:
 - Another court order changes it
 - Your case is finalized

Quick Tips:

- Read local court rules. Each county has steps for scheduling, filing deadlines, and required paperwork.
- Practice telling your story briefly (“I’m asking for temporary custody because...”).
- Focus on kids’ routines, safety, and any immediate needs.
- Bring a support person, or request a DV advocate if you feel unsafe.

If You Need Emergency Help NOW:

- Call 911 if in danger, then ask for a protection order right away at your local courthouse or online.
 - Some counties have a fast-track for survivors needing immediate safe parenting or restraining orders.
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7. Preparing for Your First Court Hearing

Facing your first hearing is intimidating, but being prepared and organized will help you feel more confident and be heard.

Gathering Documents and Evidence:

- Collect all court filings (petitions, responses, motions, orders).
- Organize evidence:
 - Financial: paystubs, bank records, bills, support payment proof
 - Written communications: texts, emails, co-parenting app logs
 - School/medical records, police reports, photos.
- Make at least 2 copies of everything (court, other party, yourself).
- Use folders, tabs, or binders for quick access.

Creating a Timeline and Summaries:

- Write a timeline of key events: separation, new jobs, child care changes, important incidents.
- Jot down the main points you want the judge to remember about your case (“Top 3 points”).
- Prepare a clear list of the specific orders you are asking for (what you want the judge to do—ex: “order temporary custody to me, require parenting time with set exchanges”).

Court Etiquette and Personal Preparation:

- Dress respectfully (no need for a suit—just neat and clean).
- Arrive 15–30 minutes early; account for parking, security checks, and finding your courtroom.
- Silence your phone and bring paper/pen for notes.
- Show respect to everyone present, including opposing party and court staff.

What to Expect at the Hearing:

- The judge or commissioner may call your name or case number.

- Stand when you speak, address the judge as “Your Honor.”
- Answer questions clearly; don’t interrupt the other side.
- Keep emotion in check, focus on facts and solutions for your child.
- Take notes, especially if new dates or orders are given.

Getting Your Court Orders Afterward:

- Ask for a copy of any orders before you leave, or ask when they’ll be ready.
- Review what the judge decided. Write down any tasks you must do next or new deadlines.

Special Trauma-Informed Tips:

- Allow time before and after court to calm and regroup.
- Practice grounding techniques (deep breathing, holding a comfort object).
- If you feel triggered or overwhelmed, it’s okay to ask the judge politely, “Your Honor, may I have a brief moment?”
- Plan to debrief with a friend, advocate, or therapist afterward.
- Let court staff know if you need support, a safe waiting area, or flexibility.
- Bring a support person—even if just for the ride or waiting room.

**** If you feel you need coaching to appear at the hearing or prefer an attorney to appear in a limited scope capacity for the hearing, please contact apexparalegalandtech.com and we can refer you to one of our trusted attorneys. ****

8. Discovery and Information Gathering

“Discovery” is the formal exchange of information between both sides in your case.

The goal: Everyone knows the facts and can prepare fairly for hearings or trial.

Types of Discovery:

- **Interrogatories:** Written questions you must answer about facts, finances, relationships, etc.
- **Requests for Production:** Written requests you or the other side make for documents—bank/retirement statements, tax returns, employment records, child’s schedule, health info.
- **Subpoenas:** Formal demands sent by the court (to banks, employers, schools) to get records that a party can’t provide directly.

How Much Information Must I Share?

- The law says you must turn over “relevant” information (what the judge will need to decide your case).
- Don’t hide or destroy evidence—it can hurt your case.
- If something seems too personal, irrelevant, or puts you/your child at risk, you can ask the judge to limit its sharing.
- Redact (black out) Social Security numbers or confidential health details if needed (ask your court/clerk).

Discovery Steps:

1. *Read any discovery requests carefully.*
2. *Note all deadlines—write on your calendar, set phone reminders.*
3. *Make labeled folders/binders (“Discovery” file).*
4. *Gather records:*
 - Income: recent pay stubs, tax returns, child support receipts
 - Assets: bank and retirement statements, property deeds, car titles
 - Debts: credit card bills, loan statements
 - Communication: texts, emails, call logs
5. *Answer each request truthfully. Attach or provide copies as required.*

6. *If you don't have a document, or if it doesn't exist, state so in writing.*
7. *Keep a complete copy of everything you send/receive for your records.*

If You're Requesting Discovery:

- Draft requests clearly and politely—ask for exactly what you need.
- Track responses and follow up in writing if something is missing.
- If you're struggling or overwhelmed, ask legal aid, the facilitator, or The Wise Way, by [Apex Paralegal and Tech LLC](#) for review/help.

Self-care and Trauma-Informed Strategies:

- Take breaks—review a few pages at a time.
 - Ask for help from a trusted friend or support person.
 - Let the other party or court know if sharing certain info would put you or your child at risk.
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9. Motions: Making and Responding to Requests

A “motion” is a written request for the court to decide something before or during the case—such as temporary custody, support, or permission to travel.

How to Write and File a Motion:

1. **Get the right court-approved form:**
 - Go to www.courts.wa.gov/forms or apexparalegalandtech.com for a template.
2. **State what you’re asking for at the top:**
 - Example: “I ask the court for temporary custody of our child during the case.”
3. **Explain why you need it, in a declaration:**
 - Attach supporting evidence—paystubs, calendars, supporting texts or emails, childcare expense documents, medical notes, etc.
4. **File a Note for Motion:**
 - Pick a hearing date per your county’s rules (these list timing for serving, responding, and confirming hearings).
5. **Serve all paperwork on the other party (and their attorney, if they have one):**
 - Use a neutral adult (not you), a process server, or sheriff if required.

6. **Keep proof of service for your records.**

How to Respond to a Motion:

1. When you receive a motion, read it carefully and highlight deadlines, what the other side is asking for, and any hearing date.
2. Fill out the “Response to Motion” form or write a declaration stating what you agree/disagree with and why.
3. Attach your evidence/documents.
4. File the response by the court’s deadline—this is often a few days before the hearing.
5. Serve a copy on the moving party/their attorney, keep proof for the court.
6. Bring all paperwork and a summary of your main points to the hearing.

Hearing Preparation:

- Practice your key talking points: “I’m asking for ___ because ___.”
- Organize exhibits in order (“Exhibit A, B...”) for easy reference.
- Be prepared to answer the judge’s questions factually and clearly.

If You Receive Multiple Motions:

Ask the court or self-help center if you can address them all in one hearing.

Trauma-Informed Tips:

- Don’t feel pressure to share every painful or traumatic detail—focus on what the judge needs to decide.

SIDEBAR:

Declaration Do’s & Don’ts

DO:

- Say exactly what you saw, heard, or did (facts, not emotions).
- Use specific dates and examples.
- Attach proof (texts, photos, records) if possible.
- Stay brief and stick to the point.
- Use respectful words, not insults.
- End by saying what you need from the court.

DON’T:

- Exaggerate, guess, or include rumors.
- Vent or insult your ex (even if you’re upset).
- Use “always/never”—be specific.
- Wander off-topic or add drama.
- Use handwritten forms unless required.

Tip: A clear, honest tone makes your story stronger.

- Bring a support person or advocate.
 - If you need extra time or a break, ask the court.
 - After the hearing, plan for rest or a comforting activity.
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10. □ Mediation: What It Is and How to Prepare

Mediation is a meeting with a neutral mediator (often a family law professional or lawyer) who helps you and the other party discuss your issues and try to reach agreement—without a judge making the decision.

How Mediation Works:

- Most sessions are private; only both parties and the mediator are present. Sometimes, you might be in separate rooms (“shuttle mediation”) if you don’t feel safe together.
- Discussions are confidential—they won’t be shared with the judge or used as evidence if you don’t settle.
- Each side shares their priorities, listens, and proposes solutions. The mediator helps keep things respectful and constructive.

Preparing for Mediation:

- Clarify your “must haves” and your “willing to compromise” areas for parenting, money, or property.
- Write down your list of key points, and any documents to support your position (proposed parenting calendars, budgets, copies of communication, proof of expenses).
- Know which issues you can be flexible about, and where you need a firm boundary (especially if safety is an issue).
- Ask if you can bring a support person, therapist, or advocate (get approval ahead of time).
- Sleep, eat, and hydrate before mediation—long sessions can be draining.
- If you need accommodations (separate rooms, multiple breaks, remote participation), ask in advance.

During Mediation:

- Be respectful; let the other party talk (even if you disagree).
- Take breaks if you get emotional, tired, or overwhelmed—this is completely okay.

- Don't agree just to "be done"—only say yes if you can truly follow through.
- If you don't reach full agreement, that's okay—you can still settle part of the case.

If You Have Safety or Trauma Concerns:

- Request shuttle mediation (separate rooms) or remote participation.
- Ask the mediator for ground rules and to intervene if discussions are disrespectful or triggering.
- Use written notes if it's hard to speak.
- Bring grounding tools (fidget, affirmation, calming object) and plan a soothing activity after mediation.

If an Agreement Is Reached:

- The mediator will write up the agreement.
 - Review before signing. Ask to take it home for review if unsure.
 - After signatures, it can be submitted to the court and become a legally-binding order.
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11. Parenting Plans & Residential Schedules

A parenting plan is a written agreement or court order that describes how parents will share time and responsibility for their children after a separation or divorce. The court considers a child's best interests and looks for stability, safety, and each parent's ability to care for their kids.

What the Court Looks For:

- Your child's needs, including age, health, school, routines.
- Each parent's relationship with the child and ability to care for them.
- Whether there is a history of domestic violence, substance abuse, or instability.
- Parents' willingness to support the child's relationship with the other parent, unless safety is a concern.
- Consistency—courts like to keep kids' lives stable during big changes.

Parts of a Parenting Plan:

- Regular schedule: where the child will live during school year, weekends, holidays, and summer.
- Decision-making: who chooses about health, school, religion, activities.
- Methods for parents to communicate about the child, and how the child will communicate with both parents when apart.
- Rules for exchanging the child, and how to handle changes, emergencies, or disputes.
- Special provisions for supervised visitation or safe exchanges if there are safety concerns.

Proposing a Parenting Plan:

- Use your court's official forms and fill in as much detail as possible.
- Provide realistic, specific schedules—including pick-up/drop-off locations and times.
- Cover all holidays, school vacations, and birthdays.

- If you have concerns about the other parent's ability to provide care, be specific about your concerns and attach evidence (previous orders, school or police reports).
- Consider your own work schedules, transportation, and what will help your child feel calm and secure.
- If you and the other parent agree on a plan, submit it together—even if there are some issues to work out in court.

If There Are Safety Concerns:

- Propose supervised visitation if necessary.
- Specify safe places for exchanges (school, police station, etc.).
- Clearly state any no-contact or protection order conditions.

Tips for Working Through a Parenting Plan:

- Think about your child's daily and weekly routines, not just what is "fair" to each parent.
 - Use a calendar to lay out alternating weekends, holidays, and school breaks.
 - Be realistic about changes, transportation, or activity costs.
 - Try to include ways of resolving future disputes (like agreeing to mediation first).
 - Request help if you're unsure—facilitators, navigators, or LHA can provide sample plans or review what you draft.
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12. Child Support and Financial Declarations

Child support is the money one parent pays to another to help cover the child's needs after separation or divorce. Financial forms are required, and all parent income, expenses, and special needs must be honestly listed.

How Child Support is Calculated:

- Both parents' gross monthly income (wages, self-employment, benefits, child support from other cases).
- Number of kids.
- Time each parent spends with the children (overnights).
- Add child-related expenses: insurance, daycare, special needs, education costs.
- Use your state's child support worksheet or online calculator for an estimate. Most courts require you to submit worksheets with proof.

Completing Your Financial Declaration:

- Include all sources of income: jobs, Social Security/disability, benefits, alimony, rental or investment income.
- List your ongoing monthly expenses: rent, mortgage, utilities, food, transportation, health insurance, childcare, out-of-pocket medical costs.
- Attach proof for all items: recent pay stubs, last year's taxes, benefits letters, insurance bills, child care receipts.
- Sign, date, and review forms for missing info—errors can delay your case.

If Your Situation Changes:

- Loss of job, new job, major income change, change in custody, increased expenses for the child?
 - Request a modification (new court order) right away.
- Use the "Motion/ Petition to Adjust Support" forms from your court or LHA.

Dealing with Back-Owed (Arrears) Support:

- If you owe: Contact the court or child support agency to set a payment plan. Never ignore the situation.
- If you are owed: Ask the court how to enforce support, garnish wages, or intercept tax refunds.

Trauma-Informed Tips:

- Financial paperwork can be overwhelming—break it up into small sessions.
 - Request written communication only if speaking with your ex about money is distressing.
 - Remember: Court support offices and Lighthouse can provide help with forms and budgeting if you're struggling.
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13. Property and Debt Division

During divorce or separation, the law requires you and your ex to honestly list and fairly divide all property (things you own) and debts (money you owe).

Kinds of Property:

- Community property: Anything earned or acquired during marriage (even if one name is on the item).
- Separate property: Things owned before marriage, or gifts/inheritances received by only one person and kept separate.
- Some items may be “commingled” (mixed community and separate).

How Courts Divide Property and Debts:

- Both must make a full list of all assets (house, cars, bank accounts, retirement savings, household goods, debts, credit cards, student loans, tax refunds).
- Decide if property is community, separate, or mixed.
- Each item is assigned a value (use recent statements or appraisals).
- Courts try to divide community property fairly (often—but not always—50/50), and each keeps their own separate property.
- You can propose a property division agreement together; if not, the judge will decide at a hearing or trial.

Special Property Concerns:

- Retirement accounts: May require special court orders (QDRO) for division.
 - Do NOT cash out retirement early; get advice about tax consequences.
- Real estate: May need appraisal; judge might order sale or a buy-out.
- Debt: All debts, even in one person’s name, may be community if incurred during marriage. Courts try to assign debt fairly.

Tips:

- List everything, even personal items or debts.
- Bring appraisals for homes, titles for cars, statements for all accounts.

- Use calm, practical language—avoid listing property in emotionally charged terms.
- For especially hard conversations, use written lists or request help from a mediator or LHA.

Trauma-Informed Strategies:

- Bring a support person to asset/debt meetings if possible.
 - Suggest mediation or ask for separate rooms if discussing property is highly stressful.
 - Ask about accommodations if facing an abusive or intimidating ex.
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14. Finalizing Your Case: Final Orders and Decrees

At the end of the case, you must complete and submit final paperwork. If you and your ex agree, you may file jointly; if not, each side files their own proposal and the judge decides at the hearing or trial.

Before Submitting Final Orders:

- Double-check every detail: names, birthdates, addresses, numbers, spellings.
- Make sure every issue is covered: parenting plan, support, property, debts, spousal maintenance.
- Confirm all signatures are in place.
 - Both parties (if agreeing) or each person for their own set.
- Review child support worksheets and division of property for errors.
- Attach necessary cover sheets, certificates, or declarations as your local court/form requires.

Court Process:

- If you agree:
 - Submit all signed documents and forms to the court clerk or judge.
 - Some courts require a short “finalization” hearing—be ready to answer simple questions about your agreement.
 - If no hearing is needed, the judge signs your final decree and orders.
- If you disagree:
 - File your “proposed” orders; the judge decides after a hearing/trial.
 - Winning party prepares final order for judge’s signature.

After the Final Order:

- Get certified copies of all final orders (required for name changes, dividing assets, updating accounts, and schools).
- Change your name as allowed (per the decree, then update with Social Security, DMV, bank, employers).
- Update all records with the new status, order numbers, names.

- Begin following the parenting plan, support, or property orders as soon as the judge signs them.
- Store all paperwork in a safe, easy-to-locate place.

Trauma-Informed Healing After Court:

- Allow yourself to process, celebrate your strength, and create new routines.
 - If boundaries are needed, limit contact with others from your case.
 - If you experienced trauma, reach out to support groups or a professional—processing what happened can help you move forward.
 - Small rituals (walk, special meal, note to yourself) can help mark this transition.
-

15. ✨ Tips for Success and Resources for Further Help

Staying Organized:

- File all court orders, support records, communication logs, and financials in clearly marked folders (paper or digital).
- Use a calendar for every deadline, meeting, or payment.
- Take dated notes on all court contacts or important conversations.
- Copy everything you submit to court—nothing gets lost this way.

Where to Find Legal Forms and Help:

- [WA state forms](#)
- Local self-help/facilitator offices at your courthouse.
- [The Wise Way, by Apex Paralegal and Tech LLC Resources](#)

Community Support:

- Legal aid or volunteer lawyer programs (income/qualification varies).
- The Wise Way, by [Apex Paralegal and Tech LLC](#): trauma-informed legal advice, coaching, support, and referrals.
- Local social services and domestic violence programs can provide safety planning, shelter, help with food or housing.
- Many churches, clinics, and community centers run support groups or parenting classes.

When to Seek Extra Support:

- When you feel overwhelmed, stuck, or unsafe.
- For mental health services—navigating court and change is hard, and professional support helps.
- When paperwork gets confusing—the facilitator or LHA can review or explain any legal step.
- Don't hesitate to ask questions or reach out—support is a sign of strength.

16. Preparing for Your GAL Visit

A Guardian ad Litem (GAL) helps the court decide what's best for your child in cases involving custody or safety worries. The GAL is neutral—they do not “side” with either parent.

What Does a GAL Do?

- Meets your child and both parents or caregivers, often at home.
- Observes your parenting, home environment, and parent-child relationship.
- Talks to teachers, doctors, and important adults in your child's life.
- Writes a report and recommendations for the court about what's best for your child.

How to Prepare for a GAL Visit:

- Calm yourself—the GAL's role is to help your child, not judge you.
- Gather documents the GAL may want: previous parenting plans, your child's report cards, medical info, and communications with the other parent about your child's well-being.
- Write down your child's daily routines, special needs, likes, or challenges to share with the GAL.
- Tidy up common areas; check for safety (no trash, unlocked meds, or unsafe items within reach).
- Make sure your child's sleeping space is clean, safe, and age-appropriate. It does not have to be perfect, only safe and cared-for.
- Talk with your child in simple terms: “A person is coming who makes sure kids are safe and listened to. You can talk to them or ask questions.”

During the Visit:

- The GAL may spend time with you and your child both together and separately.
- They'll ask about your routines, child's activities, school, and friends.
- They are watching how you and your child interact, and how you talk about the other parent.

- Be honest if you have challenges—but focus on your child’s needs, not complaints about your ex.

Trauma-Informed Tips:

- Let the GAL know if questions or topics are especially tough (“I’d prefer not to discuss XYZ right now”).
- Practice grounding beforehand—deep breathing, a calming routine, or holding a comfort object.
- If you want support, ask if a friend or advocate can be present or nearby.
- If you have concerns or are triggered, politely ask for a break.

After the Visit:

- The GAL may need more information or follow-up visits—be prompt in responding.
 - They’ll talk to others in your child’s life, then send a report to you and the court.
 - Keep copies of everything you give or receive from the GAL and note dates of all visits.
-

17. Collaborative Divorce

Collaborative divorce is a way for spouses to resolve divorce issues together, outside the regular court process. It's based on respect, transparency, and teamwork.

How Collaborative Divorce Works:

- Both spouses and their lawyers sign a contract promising to work together honestly to solve all divorce issues—child custody, property, money, support—without going to court.
- You attend meetings together (with lawyers and sometimes “coach” professionals or financial neutrals).
- Both sides share all relevant info: finances, parenting, schedules. There is no “hiding” or using surprise evidence.
- If you cannot agree, both collaborative lawyers must withdraw and you'll each need new attorneys for court—which motivates everyone to find solutions during the process.

Benefits of Collaborative Divorce:

- Private, respectful, and usually much faster than fighting in court.
- Easier on children; focuses on future relationships—crucial for co-parenting.
- Spouses stay in control (together) instead of leaving life decisions to a judge.
- Trauma-aware process; coaches or mental health professionals can participate to support emotional needs.

Is Collaborative Divorce Right for You?

- Best if both spouses can be honest, negotiate, and keep the kids' well-being in focus—even amid conflict.
- Not ideal where there is ongoing abuse, manipulation, or extreme power imbalance.

Trauma-Informed Tips:

- Bring a therapist, friend, or trauma-informed coach to meetings as needed.
- Take breaks if sessions become emotional or overwhelming.
- Let your team know about any triggers—so sessions are structured for safety and mutual respect.

Next Steps:

- If interested, ask The Wise Way, by Apex Paralegal and Tech LLC for referrals to local collaborative-trained lawyers, coaches, or financial neutrals.
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18. Enforcing Your Court Orders

Sometimes, even after an order is entered, the other party may not follow what the court decided—missing child support, ignoring a parenting plan, not dividing property as ordered. “Enforcement” means making sure everyone follows the rules.

What to Do if a Court Order is Not Being Followed:

1. **Document the Problem:**
 - Keep a written log of every missed payment, denied visit, or violation.
 - Save texts, emails, voicemails, or any other evidence.
2. **Try Communication (If Safe):**
 - Politely remind the other party of the order and ask them to follow.
 - Sometimes, honest mix-ups can be fixed informally.
3. **Seek Mediation/Facilitated Meeting:**
 - Some courts require you to attempt mediation before seeking enforcement from the court.
4. **File a Motion for Enforcement or Contempt:**
 - If the issue is not resolved, fill out and file your court’s enforcement/contempt forms.
 - Attach all proof of what was missed/violated.
 - Serve the other party as required.
5. **Attend the Hearing:**
 - Be clear, factual, and polite.
 - Bring copies of everything—your order, your log, your documents.

Common Enforcement Situations:

- **Missed Child Support/Spousal Support:** Your state’s child support office/agency can help collect (garnish wages, take tax refunds, etc.).
- **Parenting Time Blocked/Denied:** The judge can order “make-up” time, counseling, or limited sanctions.
- **Property Order Not Obeyed:** The court can order transfer of property or debts to comply and may impose fines.

Trauma-Informed Tips:

- If you feel unsafe, don't contact the other party directly—let the court, a lawyer, or a support person help.
 - Bring an advocate or trusted friend to any enforcement hearing or meeting.
 - Journaling what happened helps for court—and to process your feelings.
 - Seek emotional support, as enforcement processes can be draining and triggering.
-

19. Protection Orders in Washington State

Protection Orders are court orders designed to keep you (and your children) safe from abuse, threats, or harassment.

Types of Protection Orders:

- Domestic Violence Protection Order
- Sexual Assault Protection Order
- Anti-Harassment (including stalking) Order
- Vulnerable Adult Protection Order
- Extreme Risk Protection Order (firearms removal)

Each order type is for a specific type of harm or threat.

Who Can Ask for a Protection Order?

- Anyone experiencing threats, violence, stalking, or severe harassment.
- You may be able to get an order for yourself, your children, or someone unable to apply for themselves.

How to Get a Protection Order:

1. **Get forms:** Download from the Washington Courts website, pick up at your courthouse, or contact legal aid.
2. **Fill out the petition:** Explain what happened, why you need protection, and what the order should cover. Be detailed and honest—plain language is okay; legal jargon is not needed.
3. **File the forms:** File at the courthouse or online (in some counties).
4. **Get a Temporary Protection Order:** Often, you can see a judge the same day for a temporary order that gives immediate protection, usually lasting until the next court hearing.
5. **Serve the Respondent:** The restrained person will be served court papers officially.

6. **Attending the Court Hearing:** Both sides may appear before the judge within 2 weeks. Bring all evidence (texts, photos, witnesses, receipts) and, if possible, a support person.
7. **After the Hearing:** If granted, the final protection order can last for 1 year or longer. Police can—and should—enforce the order.

If You Need to Change or Extend an Order:

- File paperwork to modify, renew, or make the order permanent.
- If the restrained person violates the order, call 911 immediately.

Safety and Trauma-Informed Tips:

- Bring a support person, friend, or advocate to court. Their presence can reduce anxiety.
- Ask the court to keep your address confidential or to use a separate waiting area if you are afraid.
- Schedule rest or hear calming music after your hearing for recovery.
- Refresh your safety plan with an advocate if possible. Think about any special steps (changing routines, work patterns, sharing info with schools or trusted friends).

Resources:

- Washington State DV Hotline: 1-800-799-7233
 - Legal Voice Toolkit & WashingtonLawHelp for forms and guides
 - h Alliance.org/resources for survivor tools and personal assistance
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20. Modification of Court Orders

Life changes—and so should your court orders if needed. If your parenting plan, child support, or other orders no longer fit your situation, you can request a modification.

Common Reasons to Modify:

- A big change: job loss, move, drastic income change, remarriage, new school schedule, change in your child's needs.
- Safety issues: new incidents of harm, changing risks to kids or to a parent.
- Significant changes in parenting time or in either parent's life.

How to Request a Modification in WA:

1. **Gather proof:** Documents showing the change (pay stubs, medical records, school letters, police reports).
2. **Get and fill out the proper forms:** Available at the court, online, or through Lighthouse.
3. **File your forms:** Explain exactly what's changed, and what you want the judge to order now.
4. **Serve the other party:** Papers must be delivered officially.
5. **Attend your hearing:** Bring your proof and calmly explain your situation.

If Both Sides Agree:

File and sign the new order. The judge can approve without a hearing.

If the Other Party Disagrees:

Prepare to explain your side and bring all documentation; the judge will decide after the hearing.

Can I Request a Temporary Modification?

If a change is urgent, you can ask the court for a temporary order while the main case is processed.

Trauma-Informed Tips:

- If telling your story is hard, bring a support person or use a written statement.
 - Ask for remote appearance or address privacy if there's any safety risk.
 - Take time for self-care before and after court—even a big change can retrigger old stress.
-

21. Relocation with Children

Relocation means moving your child's primary residence—often to another city, county, or state. If you share custody, even a move across town may matter. Washington law requires you to notify the other parent and sometimes get court approval before moving.

When You Must Give Notice:

- If you are the parent with whom the child lives the majority of the time (primary residential parent), and you want to move.
- Even some short-distance moves require notice if they affect the other parent's time.

How to Give Notice:

1. **Fill out a Notice of Intended Relocation:**
 - Get a form at the clerk's office or from www.courts.wa.gov/forms.
2. **Serve (deliver) notice to the other parent:**
 - Do this at least 60 days before your planned move, if possible (30 days minimum in emergencies).
 - Use the same formal service rules as starting a case.
3. **Wait for a response:**
 - The other parent has 30 days to file an objection.
 - If they do not object, you can usually move as planned after the deadline.

If the Other Parent Objects:

- The court will set a hearing to decide if the move is allowed.
- The judge considers:
 - Reasons for the move and for objection
 - Impact on your child's relationships, school, and well-being
 - Whether the move is in the child's best interest
 - Transportation arrangements for visitation

If there is a history of domestic violence or control:

- Safety for you and your child is most important—ask the court for protections, consider using a confidential address, and speak with an advocate.

Urgent Moves:

- For moves due to danger or threats, you can ask the court to expedite or protect your information.
- Still notify the other party as best you can; keep proof of all steps taken.

Practical Tips:

- Put all plans in writing, keep a folder for letters, emails, moving-related papers, and court filings.
- Plan how to maintain your child's connections—video calls, texts, regular visits if possible.
- If your child is anxious or upset about the move, find supports (counselor, school, advocacy groups) to help them adjust.

Resources:

- Washington LawHelp relocation page
 - The Wise Way, by [Apex Paralegal and Tech LLC](#) relocation and safety handouts
 - Your county's court facilitator
-

22. Tips for Co-Parenting After Divorce

The end of a relationship doesn't end your parenting. Co-parenting after a breakup brings challenges—especially if there's hurt or distrust—but you can support your child's growth and healing through small, steady steps.

Keys to Good Co-Parenting:

- Keep all your communication child-focused and neutral.
 - Stick to facts. Share school, health, or activity updates.
 - Use “I” statements and avoid blame or insults.
- Use co-parenting apps or email to track messages and agreements.
- Try to keep routines—bedtimes, meals, homework—similar in both homes.
- Respect each other's differences unless there is a safety concern.
- Never make your child the messenger—don't ask them to pass notes, money, or complaints.

Dealing with Conflict:

- If emotions run high, ask to communicate only in writing.
- Set clear boundaries; use short, direct sentences.
 - If one parent is high-conflict, set a weekly “kid update” time and avoid responding to bait or insults.
- If talking is too hard, use a third-party like a facilitator, counselor, or church/community member.

Supporting Your Child:

- Let kids share feelings about each home—good or bad—without fear.
- Affirm your child's love for their other parent, even if your feelings are still raw.
- Do not speak badly about your ex in front of your child, even if you're angry or hurt.
- Encourage (but don't force) your child to stay connected to extended family on both sides.

Trauma-Informed Tips:

- Remind your child (and yourself) that it's okay for families to change.
- Watch for signs of stress—sleep issues, school problems, appetite changes—and seek help if needed.
- Give your child warning about schedule changes and transitions.
- Practice self-care before, during, and after co-parenting exchanges.

Getting Help:

- Try co-parenting classes (many courts offer or require them), support groups, or books.
- If conflict keeps escalating, ask for mediation, therapy, or a court-appointed parent coach.
- If there's ongoing abuse or manipulation, ask for protection, safe exchanges, or supervised visits.

Suggested Apps:

- OurFamilyWizard, TalkingParents, 2houses

Above all, remember: Children do best when they feel safe, loved, and free to nurture relationships with both sides, without being caught in the middle.

General Organization Checklist

- Set up a folder or binder for all your paperwork.
- Make a master calendar for deadlines and hearings.
- Keep a list of important contacts (attorneys, case manager, support person).
- Take dated notes on every court-related conversation.
- Print and check off every step you complete.

Case Filing Checklist

- Download required forms (Summons, Petition, Confidential Info).
- Carefully complete and review each form.
- Sign and date all paperwork.
- Make 3+ sets of copies (court, other party, yourself).
- File papers at the court and ask for stamped copies.
- Get a case number and write it on all future forms.
- Apply for a fee waiver if needed.

Service of Process Checklist

- Choose who will serve (process server, sheriff, adult 3rd party).
- Provide complete, unstapled set of papers for service.
- Give correct address/location for service.
- Get and file the signed Proof of Service.
- Keep your own copy for your records.

Temporary Orders Checklist

- Download motion and declaration forms.
- Write clear explanation of what you need and why.
- Attach evidence (paystubs, texts, reports).

- Schedule hearing and give “Note for Motion” to court.
- Serve all papers on the other party.
- Prepare summary of your main reasons for the court.
- Attend the hearing and bring all originals/copies.

Hearing Preparation Checklist

- Review all filed paperwork.
- Bring organized supporting evidence.
- Make a timeline and list of main talking points.
- Dress neatly and plan your arrival time.
- Bring comfort objects or support person if needed.
- Organize court folder/tab for each segment of your case.

Discovery Checklist

- Copy any interrogatories or requests you get; set deadlines on your calendar.
- Gather requested docs: paystubs, bank statements, school and medical records, etc.
- Make a “discovery” file for each topic (money, parenting, safety).
- Respond honestly; redact sensitive details where allowed.
- Keep copy of everything you send/receive.

Motion Checklist

- Get and fill out motion form; attach declaration and evidence.
- Schedule hearing with Note for Motion per local rule.
- File with clerk; serve copies as required.
- Organize all evidence by exhibit name for hearing.

Mediation Preparation Checklist

- List your top priorities/needs and “flex” spots.
- Gather and bring supporting documents.
- Arrange for support person or advocate.
- Eat and hydrate before mediation.
- Request accommodations if you have safety or trauma concerns.
- Take notes during the session.

Parenting Plan Checklist

- Download official parenting plan forms.
- Fill out regular, holiday, birthday, and vacation schedules.
- Clearly list pick-up/drop-off times and locations.
- Note who makes decisions about school, health, etc.
- Add safety conditions if needed (supervision, safe exchanges).
- Review with support person or advocate before finalizing.

Child Support Checklist

- Complete financial declaration and worksheet.
- Gather proof of income and major expenses.
- Submit insurance, daycare, special needs receipts.
- Modify immediately if your income or parenting changes.
- File proof of payment or requests for enforcement if needed.

Property & Debt Division Checklist

- Make complete list: assets, debts, account numbers.
- Mark which are “community” or “separate.”
- Bring recent statements/appraisals.
- Outline your proposed division plan.

- If agreed, prepare signatures; if disputed, collect supporting evidence for court.

Enforcement Checklist

- Log every missed payment, denied visit, or violation with dates and details.
- Save and organize all proof: texts, emails, receipts, police reports.
- Write polite request for voluntary compliance if safe.
- File motion for enforcement/contempt with logs and evidence.
- Bring support person and all documents to court.

Protection Order Checklist

- Identify order type and download correct forms.
- Write clear, detailed description of why you need protection and what you want.
- Attach supporting documentation (texts, photos, witnesses if possible).
- File at court or online; request same-day hearing if urgent.
- Arrange for confidential address/protection as needed.
- Bring support/advocate to hearings; ask for safety accommodations.

Modification Checklist

- List and gather documentation for all big changes in your/child's life.
- Complete modification petition and any additional forms.
- File and serve the other party per court rules.
- Bring all supporting paperwork and a summary explanation to the hearing.
-

Relocation Checklist

- Review your parenting plan to check what notice is required.
- Fill out and promptly serve written Notice of Intended Relocation.

- Keep proof of service.
- Wait appropriate objection period before moving.
- Respond to objections, and prepare evidence for any required hearing.
- Plan ways for your child to stay in contact with the other parent.



Co-Parenting Checklist

- Set up neutral co-parenting communication tools.
 - Print/share your child's calendar, activities, medical notes with both parents.
 - Agree on major values/routines when possible; respect differences.
 - Check that your child isn't carrying messages or pressure between homes.
 - Have a backup and safety plan for transitions.
 - Get help for you/your child if tensions get high.
-

Do's & Don'ts for Writing Compelling Declarations

A declaration is your chance to tell the judge your side, in writing. Use it to share facts, not feelings, and help the court see your perspective clearly.

Do:

- **Stick to the facts:** Tell the truth, and give specific dates, times, and examples.
- **Stay organized:** Use short paragraphs and headings for each topic (example: “Parenting Exchanges” or “Safety Concerns”).
- **Be clear and direct:** Write what happened, who was there, and what you saw or heard—avoid vague statements.
- **Back up your words:** Attach supporting documents, photos, messages, or evidence when possible.
- **Keep it relevant:** Only include information that relates to the issues before the court.
- **Stay calm and neutral:** Use respectful language and avoid name-calling or blaming.
- **Finish with a clear request:** State what you want the court to order, in simple terms.
- **Sign and date your declaration.**

Don't:

- **Don't include rumors or guesses:** Only write what you personally know—not what someone else told you, unless quoting a professional report.
- **Don't exaggerate or leave out important facts:** The court needs the whole picture.
- **Don't let anger take over:** Avoid venting, insulting, or making personal attacks.
- **Don't use “always/never” statements:** Be specific (e.g., “On June 10, he was an hour late” vs. “He is always late”).
- **Don't include private details unrelated to the case:** Stay on topic.

- **Don't submit handwritten forms unless required:** Typed declarations are easier for judges to read.

Quick Tip:

Before you submit, have a trusted friend, advocate, or Lighthouse paralegal review your declaration for clarity and tone!

Court Websites

Navigating the courts is much easier if you know where to look online and where to go in person. Below are the key websites and contact details you'll need for Snohomish, King, Thurston, and Pierce County Superior Courts:

- **Main Superior Court Website:** The main online homepage for each county's Superior Court. Find general info, family law resources, schedules, and court programs.
- **eFiling Website:** Where you can electronically file your court documents (if available in your county).
- **Odyssey Portal (Court Records):** The Washington statewide (or county) online portal to search court records, case history, and scheduled hearings.

If you need to visit in person, contact the Superior Court Clerk's Office for help with filing paperwork, paying fees, making copies, or checking your case file.

Snohomish County Superior Court

- **Main Website:** snohomishcountywa.gov/184/Superior-Court
- **eFiling:** odysseyportal.courts.wa.gov/odyportal-pub/
Local info: snohomishcountywa.gov/4238/E-Filing
- **Odyssey Portal:** odysseyportal.courts.wa.gov/odyportal-pub/
- **Clerk's Office Address:**
Snohomish County Clerk
3000 Rockefeller Ave, M/S 605
Everett, WA 98201
- **Phone:** (425) 388-3466

King County Superior Court

- **Main Website:** kingcounty.gov/superiorcourt
- **eFiling:** efile.kingcounty.gov
- **Records Portal:** dja-eweb.kingcounty.gov/records/

- **Clerk's Office Addresses:**

King County Courthouse
516 3rd Ave, Room E-609
Seattle, WA 98104
(206) 477-0778

Maleng Regional Justice Center
401 4th Ave N, Room 2C
Kent, WA 98032
(206) 477-3012

Thurston County Superior Court

- **Main Website:** thurstoncountywa.gov/departments/superior-court
- **eFiling:** odysseyfileandserve.wa.gov
Local info: thurstoncountywa.gov/departments/clerks-office/e-filing-and-e-service
- **Odyssey Portal:** odysseyportal.courts.wa.gov/odyportal-pub/
- **Clerk's Office Address:**
Thurston County Clerk
2000 Lakeridge Dr SW, Building 2
Olympia, WA 98502
- **Phone:** (360) 786-5430

Pierce County Superior Court

- **Main Website:** piercecountywa.gov/156/Superior-Court
- **eFiling:** odysseyfileandserve.wa.gov
- **Odyssey Portal:** odysseyportal.courts.wa.gov/odyportal-pub/
- **Clerk's Office Address:**
Pierce County Clerk
County-City Building
930 Tacoma Ave S, Room 110
Tacoma, WA 98402
- **Phone:** (253) 798-7455

If you're not sure where to start, call the clerk's office listed above—they're there to help you find forms, file your paperwork, and explain local court rules.

Prologue

You don't have to do this alone. The Wise Way, by [Apex Paralegal and Tech LLC](#) is here to support you!

If you need personalized guidance, help filling out court forms, access to legal tools, a trauma-informed ear, or a referral for a lawyer who fits your needs, please reach out. Our caring team of advocates and paralegals can assist you every step of the way—from paperwork to preparation, from local resources to emotional support.

—The Apex Team