

Most people cringe at the thought of going to court, especially if they don't have an attorney to represent them. You can reduce that anxiety by planning a course of action before entering the courtroom.

First Steps

Hire an attorney to help navigate legal language and procedures and ensure that you are fully and fairly represented in court. If you can't afford an attorney, there are other options.

- **Find a Pro Bono Attorney:** Do so as soon as possible. Public defenders handle criminal cases while volunteer attorneys represent civil matters, including family law and tax, housing, and other legal issues.
- **Prepare:** If you must represent yourself, contact the court clerk's office in the county where your case is filed to find legal resources that will direct you through the process. These resources include self-help legal clinics where you can learn the law and receive assistance with filing required pleadings or responses. You can obtain necessary forms and other information on the Maryland court's website at mdcourts.gov/forms and the Maryland People's Law Library website at peoples-law.org.
- **File Your Paperwork on Time:** Generally, there is a time limit to file court documents. Failure to do so could result in the case being dismissed or the court entering a default order against you.
- **Service of Process:** Complete, sign and serve the required documents to the opposing party. All pleadings must be mailed to the court and the opposing party with proof that this action was taken. Court documents are often served by a sheriff, an attorney or an adult 18 years of age or older who is not a party to the case. A private process server or certified restricted mail delivery also can be used.

Courtroom Tips and Procedures

- **Stay Calm** – Attending court, especially for the first time, can be unsettling. Eat well and get plenty of rest. Stress can interfere with your confidence and ability to focus during the proceedings.
- **Be Organized** – Chronologically organizing your paperwork in a folder can help you keep track of the day's proceedings and issues that may be discussed during the hearing. Prepare talking points to ensure you portray the right message to the judge deciding your case.
- **Wear Appropriate Courtroom Attire** – Men can dress in a business suit, shirt, tie and shoes and women in a dress or pant suit.

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This is not legal advice. Please consult an attorney about your specific situation. To get free legal help visit:

WWW.MVLSLAW.ORG/APPLY

Or call intake between 9 a.m. and 12 p.m. on Monday through Thursday at 1(800) 510-0050 or (410) 547-6537

Courtroom Tips and Procedures

- **Arrive on Time** – Check the Maryland Judiciary Case Search to ensure your hearing has not been postponed or delayed. Arrive at least 30 minutes before your scheduled court hearing. Allow time to find parking, go through security screening, find the assigned courtroom and speak to the court clerk.
- **Obey the Court Rules** – To avoid reprimand and being removed from the courtroom:
 - Turn off all mobile devices.
 - Do not speak in the courtroom unless instructed by the judge or court clerk and then do so calmly and concisely.
 - Manage your emotions. Avoid angry outbursts and signs of frustration or annoyance.
 - Be respectful to the judge and other court personnel. This includes standing when the judge enters or exits the room and addressing the judge as “Your Honor.”
 - Don’t discuss trial proceedings in the court hallways.
 - Enter and exit the courtroom only during designated breaks in the proceeding.
 - Be attentive during the proceeding and respectful of court rules to make a lasting impression on the judge deciding the case.
 - Don’t eat, drink or chew gum in the courtroom.
 - Familiarize yourself with the courtroom layout. At the rear, there are benches where the public can sit and observe the hearing. Beyond that are two trial tables – one for each party to present its case. The judge will be seated in front of the trial tables, usually on a raised platform, where he or she can direct the court activity, hear testimony and decide the case. There is also a witness stand and a jury box. Other court personnel could include a court reporter, court clerk and bailiff.

With some preparation and an understanding of courtroom procedures and protocols, you can increase your chance of a favorable outcome in court. Take advantage of available resources to help you navigate the process – and contact organizations like the Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service that provide free legal services for those who cannot afford an attorney.