

*Commonwealth of Massachusetts*  
Bristol County Probate & Family Court



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*Register of Probate*

## 10 TIPS BEFORE GOING INTO COURT

**1. ARRIVE ON TIME FOR ANY HEARING.**

If you miss the hearing, the Judge can make orders which you may not agree with even if you are not there. If you are late, your case usually takes longer.

**2. DRESS IN A WAY THAT SHOWS RESPECT FOR THE COURT.**

You do not need to dress like a lawyer or buy new clothes. You should, however, dress in a dignified way that shows respect for the Court. Unless it is an emergency, avoid wearing shorts, cutoff shirts, jeans, tank tops, sleeveless athletic shirts, undershirts or T-shirts in the courtroom.

**3. FILL IN AND CHECK EVERY LINE ON YOUR FINANCIAL STATEMENT.**

This is often one of the most important documents in your case. Try to get the form BEFORE your hearing date so you have all the information you need to fill it out. You can be jailed for deliberately putting down false information. Bringing in pay stubs is often a good way to deal with questions about your income or the cost of health insurance.

**4. SIGN AN AGREEMENT ONLY IF YOU CAN LIVE WITH IT.**

You should not sign an agreement (also called a stipulation) unless you agree to do what it says. Be sure any written agreement contains your understanding of what was agreed upon and ask for a copy of it. Often if the Judge finds that the agreement is fair and reasonable, the Judge will make the agreement an order of the Court. If you do not reach an agreement, the Judge will then decide your case.

## **5. THINK ABOUT AND DO WHAT IS BEST FOR YOUR CHILDREN.**

If your case deals with custody or visitation, think about your children's future happiness, safety and well-being. Explain to the Judge why the orders you want are best for your children.

## **6. PREPARE TO GO IN FRONT OF THE JUDGE.**

The Judge is called "Your Honor". Listen carefully to the Judge's questions. Try to talk to the Judge in a way that gets to the point and is clear. Be sure to tell the Judge what you want ordered and give the reasons for it. The party who filed the motion or started the case usually gets to speak first. The other party is then given a chance to reply. Wait until it is your turn to speak and do not interrupt the other party or the Judge.

## **7. RESTRAINING ORDERS/DOMESTIC VIOLENCE.**

If the other party has a history of domestic violence toward you, or if putting your address or phone number on any court papers or disclosing it to the other party will put you at risk, tell the courtroom clerk, the court officers or any Department of Revenue staff or Probation officer involved in your case about any concerns you have for your safety. If you are sent to Probation or DOR and you tell them that you are not comfortable with the face to face meeting with someone who abused you, you should be interviewed separately from the person who abused you.

## **8. ARRANGE FOR AN INTERPRETER IF NEEDED.**

If you or the other party have trouble understanding or speaking English, or are in need of a Sign Language interpreter, talk to the Register's Office about how to arrange for an interpreter AS SOON AS you know your hearing date. Opposing parties, friends and family are not allowed to interpret for each other. If you do not have an interpreter at the hearing, your case may be postponed to another day.

## **9. DO NOT BRING CHILDREN INTO COURT.**

Plan to have someone watch your children while you are at court. Children (under the age of 18) are NOT allowed in the court rooms while a Judge is on the bench.

## **10. GET ADVICE FROM A LAWYER.**

Court orders often have long-lasting effects. It is always advisable that you get representation from an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, you may be eligible for free or reduced legal assistance through local and statewide bar associations or from a legal service program serving your community.