

FRIENDLY ADVICE

- ** Do not bring children to the Courthouse
- ** Do your Homework - Be prepared
- ** File original notarized documents
- ** Provide the other person with a copy of everything you file
- ** Read all Orders and Notices carefully
- ** Don't be late for Court Appearances, CMCs, Mediation, etc.
- ** Dress appropriately, with respect for the Court
- ** Do not bring new boyfriends/girlfriends
- ** Keep emotions under control - be civil
- ** Cellphones are NOT PERMITTED in the Courthouse
- ** Advise of any special accommodations you may need
- ** Provide your own language interpreter

RESOURCES

www.flcourts.org (click on FAMILY LAW FORMS)

Florida Bar Attorney Referral	800-342-8011
Clerk of Court-Civil/Family	863-612-4780
Legal Aid (FRLS)	239-334-4554
Domestic Violence (Clerk)	863-675-5279
Child Support -Records	863-675-5218
Child Support - DOR	800-622-5437
Clewiston (message center)	863-902-3332

Parent Education & Family Stabilization Course
www.educationprograms.com. To enroll, call 800-767-8193

Family Law Case Manager - AOC 863-612-4717
(Self Help Program requests)

Judicial Assistant Tel: 863-675-5225
(to shedule hearing time ONLY) Fax: 863-675-5361

REPRESENTING YOURSELF IN FAMILY LAW CASES



FAMILY LAW SELF-HELP PROGRAM

GENERAL INFORMATION

<http://www.ca.cjis20.org/home/hendry/hendfcs.asp>

FAMILY LAW CASES

Typically, "Family Law" cases include DIVORCE, PATERNITY, and OTHER legal actions affecting family relationships. These are often emotional and difficult times for all persons involved.

Officially, these are LAW SUITS, and it is highly advisable to consult with an attorney who will represent you and your interests. There is no such thing as a "court-appointed" lawyer in family cases. In some cases, you may qualify for free "legal aid" through the Florida Rural Legal Services, Inc. Private attorneys who specialize in Family Law matters can be located thru the local telephone directory and internet. Many private attorneys provide a free consultation, prior to accepting your case. The Florida Bar offers a low-cost referral service, to match you up with a local attorney who specializes in your type of case. Legal resources are referenced in greater detail on the back of this flyer.

SELF REPRESENTATION

If you choose to represent yourself in a family law case, you will be considered "pro se" (Latin for "on one's own behalf"). As a pro se litigant, you are required to comply with all rules and procedures, as though you are a trained attorney. You should prepare yourself by doing your "homework"! Some helpful resources are included on the last page. You will be interacting with various employees in the courthouse during your case. **Staffs of the Clerk of Courts and Court Administration are not permitted to provide legal advice.** Also, you are not permitted to directly contact the Judge / Magistrate (or staff).

FILING PROCEDURES

A Family Law case begins with the filing of a "petition", which opens the law suit. The person who files the petition is referred to as the "**PETITIONER**", and is responsible for paying the required fees to the Clerk of the Court. The Petitioner must make sure the other person is aware of the law suit, by "serving" papers to him/her. Usually, this requires a "summons" to be issued and delivered by the Sheriff or process server. The person being sued must respond (in writing) to the summons within 20 days. The person responding is called the "**RESPONDENT**". Packets of pre-printed family law forms are available for Petitioners and Respondents in most Family Law cases (printing fee will be charged by the Clerk of Courts). Required forms are also available from the Florida Courts website (no charge). In most cases, the Petitioner and Respondent are issued "STANDING ORDERS" which must be obeyed while the case is pending. A Motion for Temporary Relief is used to request an interim order (support/time-sharing/etc.) while the case is on-going.

SELF-HELP

The Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) offers a "Family Law Self-Help" program for pro se Petitioners and Respondents. This program assists the Court by keeping cases "on-track", and helps self-represented individuals move through the legal process more easily. As already noted, staff involved with the Family Law Self-Help program are not permitted to give legal advice. Self-help services are provided free of charge, and include explaining procedures, identifying required forms, and notarizing papers being filed with the Clerk of Courts. Due to limited staffing/resources, walk-in service is not available. Family Law Case Managers may be contacted by phone, but in-person meetings are generally by appointment only. Self-Help guidance is also available on the 20th Circuit website (see front of flyer).

CASE MANAGER REVIEWS & CASE MANAGEMENT CONFERENCES

Most newly filed cases will be reviewed by a Case Manager within 60-90 days of filing. The Case Manager may prepare a written report with recommendations, which will be mailed to each Party/Attorney. Follow-up reviews will be conducted to review compliance and progress of the case. In some cases, the Parties may be ordered to attend an in-person Case Management Conference (CMC), conducted by a Judge or Magistrate. As a result of the CMC, an order will be prepared with specific instructions; failure to comply may result in an Order to Show Cause for contempt. These case management procedures are intended to help keep the case moving to a conclusion/final judgment in a timely manner. Parties/Attorneys may contact a Case Manager to request a review or CMC.

MEDIATION

In most cases, the Judge will require the Petitioner and Respondent to participate in "mediation". This is an opportunity to meet with a neutral person and try to reach an agreement. Very few cases are actually set for a "trial", because most individuals prefer to resolve the case on their own terms. There will be a fee for mediation, so you may decide to reach your settlement outside of a formal mediation. Certified Mediators are trained to help each Party consider settlement options, but do not "order" either person to any terms. Only the named-Parties and attorneys are permitted to participate in the Mediation. Everything discussed during mediation is considered CONFIDENTIAL, and may not be used at any future court hearings. If Mediation is successful, the Mediator will draft the agreement for each Party to sign. It is then sent to the Judge to approve, bringing the case closer to "Final Judgment". If there is no agreement reached, a Notice for Trial may be filed. Regardless of the outcome of Mediation, you may contact the Self-Help Case Manager for procedural guidance.