

# CHILD CUSTODY IN PHILADELPHIA COUNTY DURING COVID-19

## WHAT IS A CUSTODY ORDER?

A custody order is a written order signed by a judge. It defines the amount of time each party will spend with the child (physical custody) and how major decisions are made about the child (legal custody).

**Note:** People who file for custody and people they file against are called “parties.” Each is a “party.”

**Physical custody** – There are five types:

- **Shared** – More than one party is allowed to take physical custody of the child, and each of them has significant periods of time with the child.
- **Primary** - A party spends the majority (more than half) of the time with the child. The other party may get partial or supervised custody.
- **Partial** – A party spends less than a majority of time with the child.
- **Supervised** – Custodial time during which an agency or adult named by the court monitors interaction between a party and the child.
- **Sole** - One party has physical custody all of the time.

**Legal custody** - There are two types:

- **Shared** – More than one party has the right to make major decisions for the child.
- **Sole** – One party makes all major decisions for the child.

## WHO MAY FILE FOR CUSTODY IN PHILADELPHIA?

**Jurisdiction** – Generally, a child must have lived in Philadelphia for at least 6 months before the court will hear your case. Exceptions: if the child is under 6 months old, or for certain emergencies such as abandonment or abuse of the child or the child’s parent or sibling.

**Standing** – Who may file for custody?

- A **parent** of the child may file for any form of physical or legal custody.
- **Someone who has acted in loco parentis** to a child may file for any type of physical or legal custody. You have acted *in loco parentis* if the child is not your legal child, but you have acted as a parent and taken on the responsibilities of

parenthood for a period of time with the consent of a parent or other legal custodian or under court order.

- A **grandparent** of the child who is **NOT in loco parentis** to the child may file for any form of physical or legal custody, **IF**:
  - A parent of the child allowed the grandparent to form a relationship with the child **OR** the court ordered that the grandparent and child be permitted to form a relationship; **AND**
  - The grandparent is willing to take responsibility for the child; **AND**
  - When one of the following conditions is met:
    - ✓ The dependency court has determined that the child is “dependent” under PA’s child abuse and neglect law; **OR**
    - ✓ The court determines that the child is substantially at risk due to parental abuse, neglect, drug or alcohol abuse or incapacity; **OR**
    - ✓ The child has lived with the grandparent for at least 12 consecutive months (not counting brief absences) and is removed from the home by the parents. In this case, the grandparent must file for custody within six months after the removal of the child from the home.
- Grandparents and great-grandparents may also file for partial physical custody or supervised physical custody in the following situations:
  - The parent of the child has died **OR**
  - A relationship with the child began with a parent’s consent or under a court order **AND** the parents:
    - ✓ Have started a custody proceeding **AND**
    - ✓ Do not agree as to whether the grandparent or great-grandparent should have partial physical custody **OR**
  - The child has lived with the grandparent for at least 12 consecutive months (not counting brief absences) and is removed from the home by the parents. In this case, the grandparent must file for custody within six months after the removal of the child from the home.

This brochure is meant to give you general information and not legal advice.

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- Anyone who establishes **ALL** of the following
  - ✓ Willingness to assume responsibility for the child.
    - ✓ Has a sustained, substantial and sincere interest in the welfare of the child, and
    - ✓ Neither parent has any form of care and control of the child.
  - The above provision does not apply where there is a dependency proceeding or the child has been found dependent.

## HOW TO FILE FOR CUSTODY

While the Family Court building is physically closed to the public, you can still file:

*By Mail:* Complaints and petitions can be filed by mail to the Office of the Clerk of Family Court, 11th Floor, 1501 Arch Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102.

*By Email:* Complaints and petitions can be emailed to [DRClerkRoutine@courts.phila.gov](mailto:DRClerkRoutine@courts.phila.gov). Be sure you include all the required documents along with the complaint or petition, including the Domestic Relations Information. All custody forms with instructions are on the Philadelphia Family Court's website under Court of Common Pleas-Domestic Relations at <https://www.courts.phila.gov/forms/>

- If you are self-represented, meaning you do not have an attorney, and want help filing a complaint or petition in child custody, you may contact the Family Court Intake Unit at 215-686-6311, extensions 19220 and 19221, between the hours of 8:00 A.M. and 4:00 P.M., Monday through Friday (except holidays).
- Intake Unit personnel will conduct an interview and gather your information. The Intake Unit personnel will mail the appropriate pleading to you with instructions on how to complete and return the pleading, and how to pay the required filing fee if there is one. If you cannot afford to pay the fee, you may ask to file without paying by ask for a Petition to Proceed In Forma Pauperis to be mailed along

with the complaint or petition. Make sure you have important information such as birth dates for children, previous custody orders, protection from abuse orders, the opposing party's address, and social security numbers for all parties.

- You will need to file two copies with the Court. One of these copies must be "redacted." This means that confidential information such as a child's name and date of birth, must be blacked out. One copy must include the information and one copy must have it blacked out.

### What does it cost?

- It costs \$107.13 to file for custody.
- It costs an extra \$42.68 to file for emergency custody.
- Fees are different (or none) for other filings.

**What if I cannot afford the filing fee?** You may ask to be excused from paying the fee by filing a petition to proceed *In Forma Pauperis* (IFP). Ask for and fill out an IFP Petition. If you are on public assistance, medical assistance or SSI, be prepared to show your public assistance photo ID or proof that you receive these benefits by having a copy to send in with the IFP Petition. If you are not on public assistance, medical assistance or SSI, also send proof of income.

**What if I have an urgent situation?** There are 2 ways to try to be seen by the Court quickly:

- **Emergency Petition** – This is used for cases that must be addressed the same day, such as those involving extreme danger to the child.

To file a Petition for Emergency Relief, you must have already filed one of the following petitions at an earlier time or file one at the same time: Complaint for Custody, Petition to Modify, or a Petition for Contempt.

On the day you file a master may give a preliminary assessment of whether your situation is an emergency. You may choose to proceed with the emergency petition or not proceed. If you proceed, the emergency petition is docketed, and the designated Emergency Judge will rule on your petition, usually after holding a hearing via video conferencing. If your emergency custody petition is granted, the court will schedule a hearing in the very near future to hear testimony and receive evidence from both parties.

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While the Court is physically closed, you can file an Emergency Petition by filling out the forms and emailing the Emergency Petition and other documents to

custodyemergency@courts.phila.gov

- **Expedited Petition** – If there is a matter that needs immediate court attention but is not an emergency, you may file a petition for an expedited hearing. Time-sensitive situations for which you may obtain an expedited hearing include when you believe the other party has been charged with a crime and is a risk to the child's safety, the child needs urgent medical or educational attention, you are being denied access to the child, or the other party has changed the terms of the custody arrangement without your agreement. You may only file expedited petitions on Monday, or if the court is closed on Monday, on Tuesday.
- Unless you have already done so, you must also file one of the following petitions: Complaint for Custody, Petition to Modify, or Petition for Contempt.

You will receive a Rule to Show Cause indicating the date and time of your hearing. The Rule and petition must be provided to the opposing party in person. This process is called "personal" service. You cannot do this yourself. It must be done by an adult who is not your relative or employee. The person who delivers it should fill out the affidavit of service and you should bring it to the hearing with you.

**What happens after I file?** You and the opposing party will receive a notice by mail with a hearing date and must appear in court on that date. If you have filed an emergency petition, you will be told that day how to proceed. Be sure to follow the instructions.

## HOW DOES THE COURT DECIDE CUSTODY?

A judge or master, after holding a hearing, decides the custody arrangement based on what is in the *best interest of the child*. The court is required to consider all relevant factors. **It must give more consideration to factors which affect the safety of the child.** The law lists many factors to consider:

1. Which party is more likely to encourage and permit frequent and continuing contact between the child and the other party.
2. Abuse, past and present, by a party or member of a party's household. Is there a continued risk of harm to the child or an abused party? Which party can better protect and supervise the child?
3. What each party does to parent the child.
4. The need for stability and continuity in the child's education, family life and community life.
5. The availability of extended family.
6. The child's relationships with sisters and brothers.
7. The preference of the child. The court must determine if the child carefully thought about his/her preference. The court must also assess the child's maturity and judgment.
8. Attempts of a parent to turn the child against the other parent, except in cases of domestic violence where reasonable safety measures are necessary to protect the child from harm.
9. Which party is more likely to maintain a loving, stable, consistent and nurturing relationship with the child adequate for the child's emotional needs.
10. Which party is more likely to attend to the daily physical, emotional, developmental, educational and special needs of the child.
11. How close the parties' homes are to one another.
12. Each party's availability to care for the child or ability to arrange appropriate child-care.
13. The level of conflict between the parties and the willingness and ability of the parties to cooperate with one another. A party's effort to protect a child from abuse by another party is not evidence of unwillingness or inability to cooperate with that party.
14. The history of drug or alcohol abuse of a party or member of a party's household.
15. The mental and physical condition of a party or member of a party's household.
16. Any other relevant factor.

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**What about criminal convictions and abuse history?** The court must also consider certain criminal convictions and abuse and determine whether they pose a threat to the child. This includes convictions and no contest pleas for violent crimes, including domestic abuse, but also DUI and drug-related offenses. You must file a Criminal Record/Abuse History Verification Form with your complaint and disclose whether you or any member of your household has a criminal or abuse record, and whether you are aware of any criminal record/abuse history of the other party or members of that party's household.

To find out if the other party or members of that party's household has any criminal convictions or pleas in Pennsylvania, go to <http://ujportal.pacourts.us/docketsheets/cp.aspx> and follow the instructions carefully.

If you later learn about criminal charges and believe those charges pose a risk to the child, you may file a motion for temporary custody or, if there is an existing custody order, a motion to modify custody.

**Parenting Plans** – When the parties do not agree on custody, the court may require each party to submit a parenting plan to help it make a decision. The plan must include a detailed description of how the parties will be involved in making decisions about the child and a schedule of when the child will live with each party. Your plan must be presented to the court in a special format. There are limits to how plans may be used in court. See Parenting Plan brochure for more detailed information.

## HOW DO I PREPARE FOR THE HEARING?

**Testimony** – Each party may present their side and ask questions of the other side. You may prepare a list of your main points as well as questions that you want to ask the other party and bring that list to court with you.

**Evidence** – You may present school or medical records or other important papers or photographs, such as criminal records printed from <http://ujportal.pacourts.us/docketsheets/cp.aspx>.

Make two copies of whatever you plan on giving to the court — the judge or master gets the original, the other side gets a copy and you keep a copy. When participating in video proceedings, you may be able to submit your evidence electronically. You may receive instructions from the Court on how to do this. You may also contact the Court to ask about submitting evidence prior to a video proceeding if you did not receive instructions.

You have the right to see everything that the other side wants to show the court.

**Witnesses** – You may want to bring witnesses to testify on your behalf. Witnesses must present a subpoena to be admitted into the court. When the Court building is physically open, you can request a subpoena from the Office of the Clerk of Family Court on the 11<sup>th</sup> floor of 1501 Arch Street. While the building is closed, you should send a request to the Clerk of Court, 1515 Arch Street, Phila PA 19102, with a self-addressed, stamped envelope and you should receive the subpoena(s) in the mail. Subpoenas are for both witnesses who are willing to appear and for witnesses who may not want to testify and may be enforced by court order. Give your witnesses the subpoena before the hearing. Subpoenas must be given to the other party a reasonable time in advance of the hearing. An adult can serve them on another adult, or they can be served by certified mail, return receipt requested.

You may want to prepare and bring with you a list of questions to ask your witnesses and any witnesses the other party brings. Remember:

- Witnesses may only testify to events they have actually seen.
- Your witnesses should not be on the video conference with you, or even in the same room with you during your proceeding until they are called as a witness. Letters or affidavits from witnesses will not be accepted without the witness present.

**Tests and evaluations** – If you have concerns about the other party's substance abuse, mental health, or home safety you may ask the court to order the following services:

- Drug test
- Mental Health Evaluation
- Home Investigation

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Be prepared to tell the court why it should issue any of these orders. You may also file a motion asking the court to order these services before your hearing.

## WHAT HAPPENS IN COURT?

Custody cases are handled in several different ways, depending on many factors. At different points in your case, you may:

- meet with a Master to see if you can reach an agreement;
- have a hearing before a master; or
- have a hearing before a judge if there was no agreement before a Master.

Before your case is complete, you will have done one or more of these things.

**Remember:** An agreement made at court cannot become a court order until both parties and a judge sign it. Make sure you understand and agree with any agreement that you are asked to sign. Do NOT sign until you understand it fully and agree with it.

## WHAT IF I DISAGREE WITH THE CUSTODY ORDER?

If a master or judge makes a decision in your case after a hearing, you have the right to appeal that decision. Read your order carefully to make sure that you do not miss any deadlines for appeal if you believe the decision is wrong.

- If you disagree with a master's proposed order after a hearing, you may file *exceptions* within 20 days after the proposed order is mailed to you. In your exceptions, you must explain in writing why you think the master's proposal is wrong. Make sure the court receives your exceptions within 20 days. After you file, you will have a hearing before a judge. You must explain to the judge what the master did wrong.
- If you disagree with a judge's order, you may file a request for reconsideration. You may wish to talk to an attorney if you want to file such a request. You may also file an appeal with the Superior Court of Pennsylvania within 30 days of the date of the court order. Appeals are very complicated. If possible, you should talk to an attorney if you want to appeal to Superior Court. Remember, filing a request for reconsideration does not extend the 30-day time period for appealing to Superior Court.

## WHAT IF THE OTHER PARTY VIOLATES THE ORDER?

If a party violates a custody order, you may file a petition for contempt and the court will schedule a hearing to decide whether the other party is in contempt and whether to issue sanctions, such as a fine or imprisonment, or to temporarily change the terms of the order until a full hearing is held on a petition to modify. A form and instructions are available on the Philadelphia Bar Association's website.

## WHAT IF I WANT TO MOVE AWAY WITH MY CHILD?

The custody law requires parents who want to relocate to take a number of steps. These steps begin with notice to the other party at least 60 days prior to the planned relocation. In limited circumstances, the party who plans to move may be permitted to give notice to the other party later than 60 days before the move, but at least 10 days prior to the move. The steps follow a required order and must have a particular structure. There are strict timelines for the entire process.

You can find the necessary forms for relocation on the Philadelphia Family Court's website under Court of Common Pleas-Domestic Relations at <https://www.courts.phila.gov/forms/>

## IS LEGAL HELP AVAILABLE?

Philadelphia Legal Assistance 215-981-3838  
Monday – Thursday 9:30 am to noon or  
[www.philalegal.org](http://www.philalegal.org)

Philadelphia Bar Association Lawyer  
Referral & Information Service 215-238-6333  
<https://iris.philadelphiabar.org/>

This brochure is meant to give you general information and not legal advice.

You may download all custody forms from the Philadelphia Family Court's website under Court of Common Pleas-Domestic Relations at <https://www.courts.phila.gov/forms/>