

A Guide to Virtual Hearings for Self Represented Litigants in Boston Municipal Court and District Court

How to Prepare for and Represent Yourself in Virtual Hearings in Boston Municipal Court and District Court:

Massachusetts courts have started doing virtual hearings in many cases because of COVID-19.

- There will be a judge to listen to you and the other side.
- The big difference between virtual hearings and hearings in court is that virtual hearings take place over the phone or computer (using a video chat software called Zoom).
- Below is information about how to get ready for and attend your virtual hearing.
- Please **call or email the court** before your virtual hearing if you have questions.
 - ◇ You may call the court at the **Trial Court Help Line** at 1-833-91COURT.
 - ◇ The courts' email addresses are here: <https://www.mass.gov/guides/court-department-emails>.
- If you want a lawyer, you can search for free or low-cost lawyers in your area at <https://www.masslegalservices.org/findlegalaid>.

I. BEFORE YOUR HEARING

A. Respond to Court Letter

- You should get a letter from the court that says when your virtual hearing will be and how to attend. Make sure you carefully read this letter.
- After you get the letter, contact the court and tell them:
 - ◇ The best phone number and email address where they can contact you, if any;
 - ◇ If you need an interpreter for the hearing and what language you need;
 - ◇ If you need an accommodation for the hearing (for example, if you are deaf or hard of hearing, blind or have trouble seeing, or will need a break during the hearing);
 - ◇ If there is a good reason why you cannot attend the hearing on the scheduled date (for example, if you have a doctor's appointment);
 - ◇ If you do not have many minutes on your cell phone; and
 - ◇ If you have any questions about the instructions for joining the virtual hearing.
- **Note:** If you have a case, but didn't get a letter, please call or email the court and ask about your case.



B. Two Options for Joining Your Hearing

- You will probably have two options for joining the hearing—one using video chat with Zoom and one calling in by phone.
- You get to choose which option is best for you.
- Video chat with Zoom may be the best option for you if:
 - ◇ You have a smart phone or a computer with a webcam;
 - ◇ You will be somewhere with a strong Wifi connection, including a library parking lot or somewhere else with a hot-spot;
 - ◇ You feel comfortable being on camera; and
 - ◇ You feel comfortable using technology.
- If you choose to use video chat with Zoom, you should do the following before your hearing date:
 - ◇ Download the free Zoom software here: <https://zoom.us/download>;
 - ◇ Test it out by starting a new meeting by yourself;
 - ◇ Practice muting and un-muting yourself;
 - ◇ Practice adjusting the volume;
 - ◇ Practice turning your camera on and off;
 - ◇ Prepare what you want to say at the hearing and write down notes; and
 - ◇ Pick a spot to do the hearing where you can charge your phone or computer. If you can, pick a spot with a plain background (for example, a blank wall) and lighting that makes it possible to see your face on camera.
- If you choose to call in by phone, you should do the following before your hearing date:
 - ◇ Make sure that you have enough minutes for the hearing, if possible;
 - ◇ Practice muting and un-muting yourself;
 - ◇ Prepare what you want to say at the hearing and write down notes; and
 - ◇ Pick a spot to do the hearing where you can charge your phone.

C. Sending Evidence to Court

- If you have documents or other evidence that you want the judge to see, it is best if you send the evidence to the court before the hearing.
- Before the hearing, call or email the court to ask the best way to send evidence.
- Remember: anything you give to the Court, you also have to give a copy to the other side.



D. If you do not currently have internet service at home and you are a low-income household, you may qualify for free or discounted internet:

- Comcast may be contacted at 1-800-COMCAST or visit https://www.internetessentials.com/covid19#thingstoknow&all_AmIeligibleforIE.
- Verizon may be contacted at 1-800-VERIZON or visit <https://www.verizon.com/info/low-income-internet/>.
- RCN may be contacted at 1-800-746-4726 or visit <https://www.internetfirst.com/>.
- Charter-Spectrum may be contacted at 1-844-488-8395.
- Starry may be contacted at 1-888-231-9403 or visit <https://starry.com/starryconnect>.
- You may also contact your mobile phone provider regarding high-speed data packages including hot-spot connectivity.”

II. GETTING READY ON DAY OF YOUR HEARING

- Charge your phone or computer.
- Make sure you have all these things with you:
 - ◇ Your notes about what you want to say;
 - ◇ The documents you want to talk about;
 - ◇ Paper and a pen or pencil; and
 - ◇ Your phone or computer charger.
- Try to make sure there will not be a lot of background noise during the hearing.
- Turn off the TV and any music. Ask other people around you to go into a different room or be as quiet as possible.
- If you are using video chat with Zoom, dress as if you are going to court. Turn on lights if it is difficult for people to see your face.
- Be on time –the court can start without you, so you don’t want to be late.
- **Call the court if you cannot attend the virtual hearing.** This is very important. If you don’t call the court and don’t show up to your virtual hearing, you could automatically lose your case.

III. DURING THE HEARING

- Remember that:
 - ◇ The virtual hearing is being recorded.
 - ◇ It is helpful to identify yourself each time you speak.
 - ◇ It is best for one person to speak at a time so it is not hard to hear.
 - ◇ Speak respectfully to everyone and call the judge “Your Honor.”



- Tell the judge if you need an interpreter for the hearing and what language you need. Tell the judge if you need an accommodation for the hearing (for example, if you are deaf or hard of hearing, blind or have trouble seeing, or will need a break during the hearing).
- Listen carefully to instructions by the judge or clerk and ask questions if you don't understand something.
- The judge or clerk will tell you when it is your turn to speak.
- Keep yourself on mute when you are not speaking.
- Ask the judge if you can respond to something the other side said.
- At the end of the hearing, the judge will tell you what will happen next in your case.
- **If you get disconnected, call back or log in again and tell the judge that you got disconnected.**

IV. ADDITIONAL HELP

- You can also get additional help with your case at the Court Service Center, the locations and contact information can be found at <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/learn-about-court-service-centers>
- You can also call a law librarian for help with research on your case at (800) 445-8989
- You may be able to get some of your legal questions answered at Mass Legal Answers Online: <https://mass.freelegalanswers.org>
- If you would like to see if you qualify for a free or reduced cost lawyer to help you check this website: <https://www.masslegalservices.org/findlegalaid>

These guides were created in collaboration with the Massachusetts Access to Justice Commission.

