



Circuit Court

Harford County, MD

20 West Courtland St, Bel Air, MD 21014

Phone: 410-838-4952

Open: 8:30 AM–4:30 PM

Family Court Services Program

Circuit Court for Harford County

The Office of Family Court Services

101 South Main Street, Suite 300

Bel Air, MD 21014

Telephone: 410- 638- 3100

Fax: 410- 893- 3953

Director: Sharon M. Iannacone, LCSW-C

Office Manager: Kathleen Hennessy

The Office of Family Court Services provides support services to families who have an open court case in Harford County Circuit Court. These cases are primarily child custody and/or visitation issues. Child Support Issues are not referred to this office. The Mission of the Office of Family Court Services is to identify, support and promote the needs of the children in the delivery of these services.

In general, the Office of Family Court Services serves persons who are income eligible. "Income eligible" means that parties need either a free service or a reduced fee service because of limited income or demonstrated financial hardship. The **Family Law Case Coordinator** screens each parent's income to determine whether a case will be referred to the Office of Family Court Services or to a private service provider approved by the Court. When a case is referred to a private service provider, the Court has determined that the parties have the financial ability to pay the full cost for service.

For all services requiring a Court Order contact the **Family Law Case Coordinator**

Family Law Case Coordinator

Karen.Tracy@mdcourts.gov 410-638-3038

Karyn.Merrifield@mdcourts.gov 410-638-3464

The Family Law Case Coordinator's staff review all domestic cases, except Harford County Department of Social Service child support cases. The office is not permitted to offer legal advice; however, we can answer any procedural or general questions regarding family law case procedure. Our primary goals are to ensure that cases are processed timely, efficiently and to order appropriate alternate dispute resolution services.

The Office of Family Court Services provides the following family support services in an open child custody and/or visitation case in Harford County Circuit Court:

ADR Services

Co-Parenting Education

Mediation

Evaluation

Psychological Evaluation

Parent Access Program (PAP)

Voluntary Mediation

Children's Support Group

Quick Initial Substance Abuse Screening (QISS)

Developmental Need Assessment of Children (DNA)

Supervised Visitation and Monitored Exchanges

Reunification Counseling

Parenting Coordinator – (MD Rule 9-205.2)

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Home Study Investigations

Independent Adoption Investigation

Dependency Mediation in CINA Cases (Juvenile Court)

Family Law Assistance Programs (Self Help Center)

ADR Services

ADR stands for “Alternative Dispute Resolution”. In family disputes, the Court considers “the best interest of the child”. The first action the Court takes in the best interest of children is to provide the litigants an alternative way of resolving the family dispute – i.e., an alternative to a trial. The reason is this:

Mental Health Research informs us that the most important factor that influences a child's healthy adjustment after parents separate or divorce is the level of conflict between the parents.

Since a trial sets up family members to fight each other and the Court decides the winner of the contest, a trial is not the best “first option” to address a family conflict. So the first decision the Court makes in a child’s best interest is to provide parents with an “alternative” to a trial.

ADR (alternative dispute resolution) options are usually mandatory in contested child custody and/or visitation cases, before a trial. In Harford County Circuit Court, the three basic ADR services are: Co-Parenting Education, Mediation, and Evaluation. Generally these services are provided by The Office of Family Court Services.

Co-Parenting Education

The Court will order education for parents who are unable to resolve child custody and/or visitation issues to the following On Line Co-Parenting Courses (MD Rule 9-204) :

- The Court offers a 6 hour On-Line Co-Parenting class at <https://HarfordMD.onlineparentingprograms.com>. Cost is \$69.99 or scholarships available with income documentation. If you are eligible for a scholarship, you will receive a code from the Family Law Case Coordinator’s Office at 410-638-3038.
- For those high conflict cases that continue to demonstrate conflict over time and return to court, there is an additional education option:

Parenting Without Conflict (A 12 Hour On-Line)
<https://HarfordMD.onlineparentingprograms.com>

Cost is \$69.99 or scholarships available with income documentation.

If you are eligible for a scholarship, you will receive a code from the
Family Law Case Coordinator’s Office.

Mediation – (Confidential negotiation)

Contact the **Family Law Case Coordinator**

(Please Note: Cases where there exists a genuine concern about safety, domestic violence, or where a protective order is in place, are not eligible for Court Ordered Mediation).

Mediation is a confidential negotiation process that generally consists of 2 sessions. Children are generally not seen. Attorneys generally do not attend. Sessions are conducted by a trained Mediator approved by the Court. If parties reach an agreement, the mediator will draft a document called a "Parenting Plan". Parties have the right to review the Parenting Plan document with an attorney or Parties may waive that right. Once the Parenting Plan document is signed by both parties, it is submitted to the Court and a request is made that the Court issue a Consent Order that incorporates the terms of the Parenting Plan. Once that Consent Order is issued and signed by a Judge, the terms of the Parenting Plan are enforceable by the Court.

If no agreement is reached, the mediator cannot be called to testify because it is a confidential process and only reports the outcome as "no agreement" to the court.

- **Note: During the Covid 19 Pandemic, all mediations are being conducted remotely – using the Social Platform called ZOOM.**

Evaluation – (information gathering process with the option to settle)

Contact the **Family Law Case Coordinator**

A licensed mental health provider gathers information about the child(ren)'s needs and each parent's ability to meet those needs. There is no confidentiality. Consists of 4 sessions, children are seen at the appropriate time. Parties are given the option to draft a parenting plan. If parties elect to draft a Parenting Plan, the evaluator drafts the proposed Plan and forwards copies to both parties and their attorneys if they are represented. Unrepresented parties are advised of their right to have the Plan reviewed by Counsel if they so choose. If acceptable, the Parenting Plan document is submitted to the Court and a request is made that the Court issue a Consent Order that incorporates the terms of the Parenting Plan. When this option is chosen, no evaluation report is given to the Court because the parties have exercised their option to resolve their dispute.

On the other hand, if a parenting plan is not elected, the evaluator will conduct a 5th session with parties and attorneys to provide an oral summary of the evaluation report before placing an oral report on the record at a scheduled Hearing before a Magistrate. At the hearing, the evaluator provides the report verbally under oath and there is an opportunity for cross examination. Evaluations are conducted by a licensed Mental Health professional approved by the Court.

If combined incomes are less than \$50,000, Parties will be referred to Office of Family Court Services staff and a fee will be assessed according to ability to pay. Parties with a combined income greater than \$50,000 will be referred to a private provider (fees range from \$1,050 to \$1,350 per case). Parties who have a combined income over \$50,000 and cannot afford to pay a private provider may complete a Fee Waiver Request Form with income documentation attached and if approved by the court, will be referred to Office of Family Court Services staff.

Contact the **Self Help Center** for a Fee Waiver Request Form.

- **Note: During the Covid 19 Pandemic, all but one evaluation appointment is conducted remotely via the Social Platform called ZOOM. Evaluators will meet with the child(ren) and each parent in person at the**

Office of Family Court Services for the 3rd appointment only. That 3rd appointment requires all persons to wear masks. Additionally, temperatures are taken and Family Court Services staff follows all CDC guidelines for this one IN PERSON appointment.

Psychological Evaluations (Court Order required)

Contact the **Family Law Case Coordinator**

As a result of a custody evaluation, or independent of a custody evaluation, the Court may Order an additional Mental Health Evaluation conducted by a Psychologist when a parent or a child's mental health is at issue. All Psychological Evaluations are conducted by Private providers approved by the Court. **Note: During the Covid 19 Pandemic, parties referred for this service will receive information from the Private Provider regarding how appointments will be conducted.**

Fees range from \$1,500 per person to \$2,500 per parent depending on the specific service selected. An additional fee is required if the psychologist is subpoenaed to testify in court. Limited scholarships are available with submission of Fee Waiver Request Form and financial documentation attached. Contact the **Self Help Center** for a Fee Waiver Request Form.

- **Psychological Evaluation of an individual:** determines if there is a diagnosable mental health condition that would impact or impair parenting. It also addresses if there are other conditions that need to be treated. Includes testing. No recommendation about custody is provided.
\$1,500 per person.
A written report is submitted to the Court.
- **Parenting Evaluation :** includes Psychological evaluations of each parent (not child(ren)); observations of parents and child; interview of the child; limited collateral contacts; and a written report.
\$1,300 per parent with 1-2 children (Total cost: \$2,600)
\$300 for each additional child
\$300 travel fee*
**(may be added if the psychologist conducts service at the Office of Family Court Services in Bel Air)*
- **Custody Evaluation conducted by a Psychologist:** includes everything listed above in a Parenting Evaluation PLUS psychological testing of each child.
Recommendations regarding custody and visitation are included in written report.
\$2,000 per parent with 1-2 children (Total cost: \$4,000)
\$2,500 per parent with 3-4 children (Total cost "\$5,000)
If more than 4 children, fee to be negotiat

Parent Access Program (PAP)

Contact the Office of Family Court Services at 410-638-3100

The Parent Access Program (PAP) is a special grant that provides free voluntary mediation and other services if child support arrearage is also a primary issue.

(Note: Continuation of Grant Funds is not guaranteed each year. Please contact Office of Family Court Services to inquire about the availability of this service).

Voluntary Mediation

Voluntary Mediation is mediation that does not require a court order. Voluntary Mediation is available for those who have a dispute about child custody or visitation and also have a child support case where the non-custodial parent is in the arrears. The Office of Family Court Services can provide voluntary mediation at no cost. Mediation will only address visitation. If visitation is resolved through these services, the parents will return to The Office of Child Support Enforcement with a Consent Order to work out the remaining child support issue.

Other support services (such as parent education, evaluation, supervised visitation, parent reunification counseling) can be arranged through the Parent Access Program at no cost if indicated as necessary. These services do require a court order. This Program is funded by a special Federal Grant through The Maryland Department of Human Resources.

(Note: Continuation of Grant Funds is not guaranteed each year. Please contact Office of Family Court Services to inquire about the availability of this service).

Children's Support Group – “Coping with Parents Who Live Apart”

Contact the Office of Family Court Services at 410-638-3100. Pre-registration required.

For children, ages 5-17 – No cost

Educational Classes run 6 consecutive Tuesdays 6:00 pm – 7:00 pm.

No classes are offered in the summer.

Generally children are referred by Court Order.

(Voluntary referrals are accepted only if parents commit the child will attend all 6 classes).

- **Note: Due to the Covid 19 Pandemic, this service has been temporarily suspended until January 2021. After January, 2021, Office of Family Court Services will continue to review when this service can be reinstated safely. Please call Family Court Services (410 – 638-3100) regarding the current status.**

QISS – (Quick Initial Substance Abuse Screening)

The Quick Initial Substance Abuse Screening is a quick preliminary screening by a certified addictions counselor through the Office of Family Court Services.

- Requires Court Order.
- No Cost
- One 2-hour interview with both parents required
- Completion of SASSI screening tool (paper and pencil) and limited collateral contacts
- One page outcome report to the Court may either recommend or rule out the need for more in-depth evaluation and treatment.
- **Note: During the Covid 19 Pandemic, these IN PERSON appointments follow all CDC guidelines including all persons must wear masks; temperatures are taken prior to entry into the office.**

DNA – (Developmental Need Assessment of Children)

“DNA” here refers to a “Developmental Needs Assessment” of a child (6-17 years of age) whose parents are involved in custody or visitation disputes. It is intended to target those children who may need additional mental health consultation.

- Requires Court Order
- No Cost
- Conducted by a licensed Psychologist at Office of Family Court Services
- 2 child interviews
- Limited objective screening (paper and pencil)
- Parents are not interviewed but will complete a Parent Questionnaire (paper and pencil)
- **Note: During the Covid 19 Pandemic, these IN PERSON appointments follow all CDC guidelines including all persons must wear masks; temperatures are taken prior to entry into the office.**

Supervised Visitation and Monitored Exchanges

The Harford County Visitation Service (HCVS) Program Coordinator: Jill Svrjcek

An impartial third party approved by the Court may be ordered to provide observations to the Court and ensure safety and appropriateness during visits and exchanges of children.

- Requires Court Order
- An Intake interview is required before visits begin
- A report is provided to the Court
- Cost:
 - There is a one-time intake fee of \$70
 - And each supervised visit is \$35.00 per hour
 - Scholarships are available with income documentation
- Harford County Visitation Center, 15 South Main Street, Suite 105 Bel Air, MD 21014. Enter via the back door (from alley next to parking lot).
- For more information : Website : www.hcvs.info
 Telephone: 410-688-5751
 Email: jsvrjcek@hcvs.info
- **Note: During the Covid 19 Pandemic, these IN PERSON appointments follow all CDC guidelines including all persons must wear masks; temperatures are taken prior to entry into the office.**

Reunification Counseling

This is a specialized counseling services provided by a private, licensed, Mental Health Professional that targets those family situations whereby

- a child has had little or no contact with a non-custodial parent who is asking for visitation with that child;
OR
- A child who is resisting or refusing contact with a parent.

In general, this type of specialized counseling can be helpful in addressing the limited goal of how best to introduce or re-introduce the child and the non-custodial parent in a way that is safe, appropriate and takes the child’s needs into consideration.

(Grant Funding for this service is no longer available. Therefore, parents need to explore counselling services provided through insurance.)

Parenting Coordinator – (MD Rule 9-205.2)

Contact the **Family Law Case Coordinator**

A Parenting Coordinator is a licensed Mental Health professional or attorney approved by the Court who has special expertise working with high conflict or chronic conflict families with continued custody and visitation disputes. A Parenting Coordinator can assist parents in implementing a Court Order, resolving minor disagreements, and improving communication to reduce conflict.

- Referred by Court Order or by Consent of 2 parents
- Cost: \$150 per hour (a retainer of 5 hours (\$750.00) is required)
- No scholarship funds are available

Attorneys for Children (MD Rule 9-205.1)

The Court may appoint an attorney for a child in a contested custody or visitation case if there are financial resources available. When an attorney for a child is appointed, the Court may specify one of the following 3 roles:

- Privilege Attorney – Decides if a child's privileged communication with a therapist can be waived and that information can be disclosed to the Court.
- Advocate – Advocates the child's desire to the court (usually appointed for older children)
- Best Interest Attorney (BIA) – Considers the child's desire but also gathers information from other sources and makes a recommendation to the Court about a custody or visitation arrangement.

The Court maintains a list of approved attorneys who have also completed special training provided by the Court.

- Cost – Attorney hourly rate.
- Limited scholarships are available with documentation attached to a completed Fee Waiver form sent to the Court for approval.
- Contact **Family Law Case Coordinator**.

Home Study Investigations

Contact the **Family Law Case Coordinator**

Requires a Court Order

\$150 fee - must be paid to Harford County, Maryland before appointment is scheduled. Scholarships are available with A Fee Waiver Request Form and attached financial documentation. Contact the **Self Help Center** for a Fee Waiver Request Form

An investigation may be ordered to describe the physical arrangements provided for the child. All persons living in the home, including the child, are required to be present for the investigation. Limited collateral information may be included.

A written report is provided to the Court.

***Note: Due to the Covid 19 Pandemic, this service is temporarily suspended until a safe IN PERSON protocol is approved by the Court. If you are concerned about the status of another person's home, the court encourages parties to seek other alternatives to resolve that concern until this service can be safely reactivated.**

Independent Adoption Investigation

Contact the **Family Law Case Coordinator**

Requires a Court Order

\$150 fee - must be paid to Harford County, Maryland before appointment is scheduled. Scholarships are available with A Fee Waiver Request Form and attached financial documentation. Contact the **Self Help Center** for a Fee Waiver Request Form

An investigation may be ordered prior to finalizing an independent adoption for the purpose of insuring that the consents filed are free and voluntary acts and that the adoptive placement is appropriate.

- **** Due to the Covid 19 Pandemic, this service will be provided consistent with the CDC guidelines.***

This means interviews may be conducted remotely via the Social Platform called ZOOM. And any IN PERSON appointments require wearing masks, taking temperatures before entry into the Office of Family Court Services.

Dependency Mediation in CINA Cases (Juvenile Court)

Contact the Director of Family Court Services at 410-638-3100

No Fee.

Court Order is required

Dependency Mediation is an informal process that provides an opportunity for a confidential discussion about a child in a dependency (abuse or neglect) case before it goes to Court. Cases are referred when there is an action filed by the Department of Social Services in the Juvenile Court to Terminate Parental Rights (TPR). All parties may exercise the option to have legal counsel present. Persons ordered to participate may include (but are not limited to): Birth parents, foster or pre-adoptive parents; attorneys for these parties; attorneys for children; representatives from the Department of Social Services and their attorney. The goal of the mediation is to provide an opportunity to exchange information about the plan for the child. Everyone has the right to disagree with any proposal they do not like. Mediation may also result in a permanent arrangement for the child as soon as possible, providing that all parties agree.

**** Due to the Covid 19 Pandemic, this service is conducted remotely via the Social Platform called ZOOM.***

Family Law Assistance Programs

See **Self Help Center** and **Legal Assistance Programs/Pro Bono Services** which provides free legal consultation on how to represent oneself and complete forms for family law matters.

For more general information regarding family law or to access any family law forms, please visit:

- Maryland Judiciary (www.mdcourts.gov)
- Peoples Law Library (www.peopleslaw.org)
- Harford County Department of Social Services (<http://www.dhr.state.md.us/blog/?p=225>)