

**THE 501ST JUDICIAL DISTRICT COURT
RULES OF PRACTICE**

RICHARD T. BELL, PRESIDING JUDGE



The following Rules of Practice apply to all legal proceedings in the 501th Judicial District Court of Fort Bend County, Texas effective December 1, 2025, until further order the Court.

1. **GENERAL POLICIES**

These Rules of Practice shall apply equally to attorneys and self-represented litigants. Each party should also consult applicable state law and the Fort Bend County Local Rules for additional specifics and time limits.

a. **Court Standards**

The 501st Judicial District Court adheres to the Texas Code of Judicial Conduct, Texas Disciplinary Rules of Professional Conduct, and Texas Lawyer's Creed. Violations may result in appropriate sanctions.

b. **Filing Documents**

The 501st District Court is paperless. Documents and pleadings shall be filed with the District Clerk. All questions regarding a file, filing, service, etc. should be directed to the District Clerk's Office at 281-341-4509 or www.fortbendcountytexas.gov.

c. **Communication with the Court**

All communication with the Court shall be through the court coordinator via email at 501courtcoordinator@fortbendcountytexas.gov. Opposing counsel and self-represented litigants shall be included in all communications with the court coordinator, save and except for requesting hearing dates. The Court staff does NOT provide legal advice or participate in ex parte communications.

- d. Court Room Attire
Appropriate professional attire is required for **ALL** court appearances, in person and on Zoom. Hats, sunglasses (unless prescription), jeans, shorts, sleeveless or low-cut dresses/shirts, or other inappropriate clothing are not permitted.

- e. Electronic Devices
All cell phones and/or electronic devices must be in silent mode or turned off in the courtroom. Taking photos, recording (video and/or audio), or screenshotting proceedings in the courtroom or on Zoom is **NOT** allowed, except with permission from the Court.

- f. Drinking and Eating in the Courtroom
Drinking, eating, and chewing gum are **NOT** allowed in the courtroom or on Zoom proceedings. The only exception is during trial where parties and attorneys may have water at the counsel table.

- g. Children in the Courtroom
Children are not allowed in the courtroom or on Zoom without Court approval. Do not bring a child to court to be interviewed without Court approval. If a request to interview a child in chambers is granted, a specific date and time will be provided.

- h. Peace Officers
A peace officer who is a party or who has any interest or personal connection to a case and is in possession of a weapon, shall turn over their weapon to the bailiff for holding until directed by the Court and it will be returned at the conclusion of the court appearance.

- i. Vacation Letters
Vacation letters shall be filed with the District Clerk per the Local District Court Rules. Proof of filing in another county is not sufficient. A courtesy copy of your vacation letter shall be provided to all opposing counsel and self-represented litigants in your case.

- j. Holidays/Court Not in Session
The 501st Judicial District Court will not be in session on any official Fort Bend County holiday. Please consult the District Clerk's website to determine those dates. Closures for inclement weather will be provided on the Court's website.

2. **DOCKET**

- a. **ALL** cases that require a final trial must be scheduled through the court coordinator via email at 501courtcoordinator@fortbendcountytexas.gov and added to the docket to be heard.
- b. **ALL** hearings and trials are scheduled to be conducted **in person**, except for “Friday Zoom Docket” and “Submission Docket”. There will be no hybrid Zoom/in person hearings/trials. The Court reserves the right to allow Zoom.
- c. **ALL** original filings will be set by the court unless the filing party inserts a date previously provided by the court coordinator.
- d. **ALL** hearings and trials are scheduled to be conducted **in person**, except for “Friday Zoom Docket” and the “Submission Docket”. There will be no hybrid Zoom/in person hearings/trials. The Court reserves the right to allow Zoom.
- e. All cases will be assigned to the Presiding Judge for docket call.
- f. Docket call is at 9:00 a.m. unless otherwise scheduled by the Court. Attorneys and parties are expected to timely answer the docket, unless excused by the Court.
- g. Announcements of "pass", conflicts, or late appearances shall be communicated to the court coordinator and all opposing counsel and self-represented litigants via email to 501courtcoordinator@fortbendcountytexas.gov prior to 9:00 a.m. The email should include the cause number, estimated time of arrival, and specific information regarding the conflict or reason for the late appearance. Without a reasonable excuse for conflict or late appearance, the Court may deduct the duration of the delay from the late party's/counsel's time in the hearing. Failure to inform the Court of a conflict or late appearance and reason for the late appearance may result in a hearing being passed or the opposing side moving forward. Failure to appear by the estimated time of arrival may result in a hearing being passed or the opposing side moving forward.
- h. Hearings may only be passed by the party setting the hearing or by the Court. Passing a hearing does not pass any other hearing set by another party.

3. **PARENTING CLASS/COUNSELING**

- a. **IMPORTANT:** For any case involving children, the Court at its discretion may refer parents to an education course or for counseling.

APPROVED IN PERSON COURSES

- Depelchin Children's Center - (713) 730-2335 - www.depelchin.org
- Divorce As Friends - (713) 520-5370 - www.divorceasfriends.com

APPROVED LIVE ZOOM

- Positive Parenting Through Divorce - www.livevideocoparentingclass.com

APPROVED ONLINE COURSES

- <https://puttingkidsfirst.org>
- <https://kidsfirsttoday.com>
- <https://www.familyaffairs.org>
- <https://www.parentingchoice.com>
- <https://www.txparent.com>
- <https://www.parentclassonline.com>
- <https://coparentingintothefuture.com>
- <https://www.courtapprovedparenting.com>

4. MEDIATION

- a. Mediation is required **PRIOR** to any Temporary Orders hearing if conservatorship, possession and access, or geographical restriction is contested, unless waived by the Court. Failure to mediate may result in your hearing being reset. The mediator's report and MSA must be filed.
- b. Mediation is required **PRIOR** to any Temporary Orders hearing if the time estimate exceeds 1 hour, unless waived by the Court. Failure to mediate may result in your hearing being reset. The mediator's report and MSA must be filed.
- c. Except for Applications for Protective Orders, Motions for Enforcement/Contempt actions, and No Answer Defaults, mediation is required **PRIOR** to trial, unless waived by the Court. Failure to mediate may result in your case being reset or dismissed. The mediator's report and MSA must be filed. The Court reserves the right to order mediation on any case.
- d. Mediation may be waived after filing a motion and showing of good cause.
- e. Parties may agree on a mediator or may file a motion for the Court to appoint a mediator. Fort Bend County Dispute Resolution Center "DRC" also provides mediation on an income-based fee scale for each party and can be reached at www.fortbenddrc.org or 281-342-5000.

5. **DISCLOSURES FOR TEMPORARY ORDERS AND FINAL TRIAL**

Failure to Comply with the Rules Below May Result in the Hearing or Trial Being Reset or Dismissed.

a. Temporary Orders

In any hearing for Temporary Orders in which child or spousal support is in dispute, the parties **SHALL** exchange by 12 noon on the business day before the hearing a Financial Information Statement, income tax returns for the previous two years, each party's two most recent payroll stubs, and Proposed Support Calculations. For any hearing for Temporary Orders for child support, the Financial Information Statement **SHALL** contain sufficient information regarding each party's available health and dental insurance, including but not limited to the cost for the children, so the Court may render a medical support order regarding health and dental insurance for the children. For all hearings for Temporary Orders, the parties **SHALL** exchange by 12 noon on the business day before the hearing Proposed Requested Relief. This rule shall constitute a discovery request and failure to comply may be grounds for sanctions.

THE ABOVE MUST BE SUBMITTED TO THE COURT DURING THE HEARING.

b. Final Trial

Each party's final Sworn Inventory, Financial Information Statement and financial information required under the Tex. Fam. Code including, but not limited to, the party's income tax returns for the past two years and the party's two most recent payroll stubs, last statement furnished to the employee concerning the employee's rights and monetary interest in each retirement and savings plan, Proposed Child Support Calculation, Proposed Division of Property, and Proposed Requested Relief **SHALL** be exchanged no later than ten (10) days before commencement of final trial. If child support/medical support is at issue, the Financial Information Statement **SHALL** contain sufficient information regarding each party's available health and dental insurance, including but not limited to the cost for the children, so the Court may render a medical support order regarding health and dental insurance for the children. Each party shall also furnish sufficient information to enable the Court to render a Qualified Domestic Relations Order (QDRO), if applicable. Sworn Inventories **or the Proposed Division of Property SHALL** list and total, in column format, all property values and liabilities, and shall show the net worth of the community estate and the net worth of any claimed separate estate. This rule shall constitute a discovery request and failure to comply may be grounds for sanctions.

*Sworn Inventory and Proposed Division of Property

Each Sworn Inventory and Proposed Division of Property shall list each item of property and its fair market value, each liability and amount, property securing payment, and name of each creditor. Any property or liability shall be characterized as separate or community. All beneficial interests in insurance and benefits arising from a party's employment (such as pensions, profit sharing plans, savings or thrift plans, whether vested or non-vested) shall be identified. Supporting documentation may be either attached or submitted as an exhibit.

THE ABOVE MUST BE SUBMITTED TO THE COURT DURING THE TRIAL.

6. **EXHIBITS/WITNESSES**

- a. Exhibit List and Witness List **SHALL** be exchanged and filed with the clerk by 12 noon on the business day before any hearing or trial.
- b. Exhibits shall be pre-marked, exchanged and copies provided to all counsel and self-represented litigants by 12 noon on the business day before any hearing or trial.
- c. Exhibits should be pre-marked identifying the offering party (Petitioner, Respondent, Intervenor, etc.) and using numbers only. For example, "Petitioner Ex. 1," but not "Petitioner Ex. A."

7. **HEARING SETTINGS**

- a. Request for hearing dates shall be made by emailing the court coordinator at 501courtcoordinator@fortbendcountytexas.gov **PRIOR** to filing a motion. The estimated time needed for the hearing should be included with the request.
- b. Notice and proof of notice to opposing counsel and self-represented litigants shall be pursuant to the Texas Rules of Civil Procedure and shall be filed.
- c. When there are no contested parent-child issues, the Temporary Orders hearing is limited to 1.5 hours. When there are contested parent-child issues, the Temporary Orders hearing is limited to 3 hours. The Court will allocate time evenly between the parties.
- d. A Motion for Modification of Temporary Orders must have a supporting affidavit and must be approved by the Court.

8. **TRIAL SETTINGS**

- a. Trial should occur within one year of the initiation of an original suit. Trial should occur within 6 months of the initiation of a modification suit.
- b. Request for trial dates shall be made by emailing the court coordinator at 501courtcoordinator@fortbendcountytexas.gov. The expected length of trial should be included in your email. All counsel and self-represented litigants must be included in the email. (The Trial Setting Request form is no longer being used and will not be accepted).
- c. Notice and proof of notice to opposing counsel and self-represented litigants shall be pursuant to the Texas Rules of Civil Procedure and shall be filed
- d. Pretrial conferences for bench trials are set by motion only, scheduled through the court coordinator.
- e. Pretrial conferences are **mandatory** for all jury trials and shall be completed no less than seven (7) days prior to the trial start date.
- f. Pretrial conferences are **mandatory** for all adoptions and shall be completed no less than seven (7) days prior to the trial start date.

9. **FRIDAY ZOOM DOCKET**

On Fridays of each week, beginning at 9:00 a.m., the Court will have a Zoom docket for the following matters **ONLY**:

- Agreed Divorce Prove-Ups
- Agreed SAPCR Prove-Ups
- Uncontested Prove-Up of Other Agreements
- Name Changes
- Contested Entry of Orders

Default judgments will not be held on the Zoom Docket.

10. **THURSDAY SELF-REPRESENTED LITIGANT DOCKET**

The Court has a Thursday **8:30 a.m.** Self-Represented Litigant Docket for prove-up of uncontested matters only. Self-represented litigants must sign up for this docket no later than 72 hours before the docket by emailing the court coordinator at 501courtcoordinator@fortbendcountytexas.gov. All orders and closing documents must be filed 72 hours before the docket. Failure to file an order signed by all parties and file all required documents, shall result in removal from this docket.

Default judgments will not be held on the Thursday Self-Represented Docket.

11. **SUBMISSION DOCKET**

On Fridays of each week, at 9:00 a.m., the Court will have a Submission Docket. If the Court believes that an oral hearing is needed, the court coordinator will contact counsel and self-represented litigants with further instructions, or the Court will make a docket entry requesting the matter be set for an oral hearing.

The following contested motions may be heard by submission:

- Motion to Consolidate*
- Motion for Continuance*
- Motion to Enter/Sign Order **
- Motion for Judgment Nunc Pro Tunc*
- Motion for Substitute/Alternative Service
- Motion for Summary Judgment
- Motion for Withdrawal of Counsel/Substitution of Counsel

Notice

Movants must serve the notice of submission setting at least ten (10) days before the date of the hearing, or more if required by statute or rule. The notice must state that: (1) the motion will be heard by submission; (2) no party may appear for the hearing in person; and (3) any response to the motion must be on file at least three (3) days before the submission date, or longer if required by statute or rule. An amended motion requires a new 10-day notice of submission setting.

Responses

Responses must be filed and served at least three (3) days before the submission date, or earlier if required by statute or rule.

*Additional Requirements

The caption of the Motion must state either Opposed or Unopposed. Opposed motions shall contain a Certificate of Conference which (1) states that the parties have conferred with each other and in good faith have attempted to resolve the matter or (2) states that the parties have not been able to confer and detailing all efforts made to confer, including dates and methods of attempted communication.

**Contested Motion to Enter

Movant's Motion to Enter must have the Proposed Order as an exhibit. Nonmovant's Response must have a marked up copy of Movant's Proposed Order which identifies the proposed edits.

12. **MOTIONS FOR CONTINUANCE**

- a. Generally, for cases less than a year old, the first Motion for Continuance will be granted, subject to the Court's approval.
- b. For cases more than year old, a Motion for Continuance shall be filed by submission or set for a hearing. The caption of the Motion must state either Opposed or Unopposed. Opposed motions shall contain a Certificate of Conference which (1) states that the parties have conferred with each other and in good faith have attempted to resolve the matter or (2) states that the parties have not been able to confer, and states in detail all efforts made to confer, including dates and methods of attempted communication. The Motion should contain if the parties have mediated and or if mediation has been scheduled and the date.
- c. Motions for Continuance must be set for submission or hearing at least ten (10) days prior to the trial date.

13. **ENTRY OF ORDERS**

- a. An entry date will be set by the Court in its rendition or after the parties have announced an oral agreement. Entry by zoom will be set on a Friday at 9:00 a.m., unless the Court sets another date and/or time.
- b. Proposed Orders must be sent to the opposing counsel or self-represented litigant five (5) days prior to the entry date, unless the Court sets a shorter time period.
- c. On entries by submission, an objection to the Proposed Order must be filed by 12:00 p.m. on the day before the entry date. If an objection is filed, all counsel and self-represented litigants need to appear at 9:00 a.m. via Zoom on the entry date or alternatively set a hearing for a contested entry. If an objection is not filed, the Court will review the Proposed Order as submitted.
- d. Failure to file a Proposed Order by the entry date and time may result in the case being dismissed.
- e. For finals orders, all required documents/information must be filed by the entry date. The Court will not sign an order until all required documents/information have been filed. Failure to file all required documents at the time of entry may result in the case being dismissed.
- f. **ALL** Orders must be signed as APPROVED TO FORM by the parties' counsel and self-represented litigants.

14. **PROVE-UP OF AGREED FINAL ORDERS AND OTHER AGREED ORDERS**

- a. Prove-Up of Agreed Final Orders may be set for hearing on the Friday Zoom Docket or on the Thursday Self-Represented Litigant Docket. Agreed Orders for divorces and SAPCRs may also be proven up by a Prove-Up Affidavit/Declaration. Agreed Orders for Temporary Orders and other ancillary issues may be considered by submission.
- b. Prove-Up Affidavits/Declarations must include the same information that would be elicited during a prove-up with a witness in the courtroom and must contain the actual signature of the party.
- c. Prove-Up Affidavits/Declarations should be e-filed as a separate document at the same time as the Agreed Order along with all other necessary forms.
- d. Agreed Orders include temporary/ancillary issues as well as final orders for divorces, modifications, suits affecting the parent-child relationship, name changes and enforcements. (An agreed enforcement order that holds the Respondent in contempt must be set on a hearing docket).
- e. If an Agreed Order is submitted by Prove-Up Affidavit/Declaration, the appearances section of the Agreed Order must indicate that the parties did not appear in person and that the making of a record was waived (if applicable).
- f. If an Agreed Order is pursuant to a Mediated Settlement Agreement (MSA) the Agreed Order should not state the Court makes findings regarding the best interest of the child(ren) or just and right division of the community estate.

For example:

Incorrect: The Court finds that “X” is ...

Correct: The Court finds that the parties have agreed that “X” is ..., or the parties agree that “X” is ...

- g. Agreed Orders must be signed by all parties, counsel, and self-represented litigants. Signatures are accepted pursuant to T.R.C.P. A Respondent must have made a prior appearance or filed a Waiver or Answer before the Court will consider an Agreed Order signed by a Respondent.
- h. Entries of Agreed Orders do not need to be set for submission or hearing unless the order is missing signatures from a party, counsel, or self-represented litigant. All required documents/information must already be on file or be filed when the Agreed Order is filed. The Court will not sign orders unless all required documents/information have been filed.

- i. A Mediated Settlement Agreement (MSA) must be filed. An Agreement Incident to Divorce (AID) does not have to be filed. If an AID is not filed, it must be sent to the court coordinator for the Court's review.

15. **DISMISSAL FOR WANT OF PROSECUTION (DWOP)**

A case may result in a DWOP for the following reasons:

- a. If the parties fail to mediate.
- b. If parties fail to appear at the scheduled pretrial conference.
- c. If the Petitioner/Movant fails to appear for trial.
- d. If a Proposed Final Order and all required information/documents have not been filed by the entry date.

The Court will also schedule DWOP submission dockets for cases that have not been finalized. Unless a Motion to Retain has been granted prior to the dismissal date, a case on the DWOP docket will result in a dismissal.

16. **REMOTE/ZOOM HEARING PROCEDURES**

- a. Logging In
On the day of the Zoom Hearing, login using the appropriate link provided below. NOTE: You will be prompted to download the Zoom App, which you must do in advance to participate in the hearing.

- b. 501st Judicial District Court Meeting ID
The Meeting ID for the Court is as follows:

Judge Bell 475 782 2292

- c. Hearings
Only Hearings that are outlined in these rules may be set for Zoom Hearing. There will be no hybrid Zoom/in person hearings/trials.

- d. Decorum and Attire

Zoom proceedings are actual court proceedings conducted in a Virtual Courtroom. Participants must treat Zoom proceedings with the same respect as in person court proceedings. Children are not allowed on Zoom. All the usual in person courtroom decorum, demeanor and dress code rules shall apply.

- e. Noise and Distractions
Participants in Zoom proceedings should minimize outside noise and distractions.
- f. Waiting Room
Attorneys and participants shall enter the hearing Waiting Room at least 5 minutes prior to the hearing start time. Attorneys and participants will remain in the Waiting Room until the Judge takes the bench and commences docket call.
- g. Audio
Audio will be muted in the Waiting Room until the Judge calls the docket or commences your hearing. Video will be active upon entry in the hearing Waiting Room. Attorneys may privately chat with each other. Chatting with (and text messaging) witnesses while they are testifying is strictly prohibited.
- h. Breakout Rooms
If requested, counsel and parties may be moved by the Court into a Breakout Room for private conferences, settlement discussions, etc. Breakout Room discussions are not recorded or live streamed, and only persons in the Breakout Room are able to hear the discussion. The Court is also unable to hear what is being discussed and Meeting ID.
- i. Record
If the Court makes a record of the Zoom proceeding, the Court will not provide copies of the hearing video or audio. As with any hearing or trial, transcript requests must be directed to the Official Court Reporter for the 501st District Court.
- j. Recording Proceedings
IT IS ORDERED THAT RECORDING ZOOM PROCEEDINGS IS STRICTLY FORBIDDEN. ATTORNEYS, SELF-REPRESENTED LITIGANTS, WITNESSES AND ATTENDEES PARTICIPATING IN REMOTE HEARINGS, OR MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC VIEWING A LIVE STREAM, ARE PROHIBITED FROM RECORDING, CAPTURING, SAVING, BROADCASTING, TELEVISIONING, OR PHOTOGRAPHING THE PROCEEDING IN ANY MANNER. FAILURE TO ABIDE BY THIS ORDER MAY RESULT IN CONTEMPT OF COURT PROCEEDINGS.

17. **SELF-REPRESENTED LITIGANTS**

- a. If you are using forms, a Final Decree or Order can not contain any blanks. If a provision does not apply it should be marked N/A or None.
- b. All required documents pertaining to your case as listed in the 501st Judicial District Court Checklist for Entry of Final Decrees/Orders must be filed prior to the Court hearing your case.

- c. The Court and the Court’s staff cannot give you legal advice. The following resources may be helpful, but please seek independent legal advice for additional specifics:
- There is a Self-Represented Litigant Packet available on the Court’s website at <https://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/government/departments/district-courts/501st-district-court/self-represented-litigants> that contains helpful information for those representing themselves in Fort Bend County Family Courts.
 - Free legal information and court forms for many family law matters can be found online at <https://texaslawhelp.org>.
 - Information may also be obtained by email at fbcselfrepprogram@gmail.com
 - The Law Library is located on the 2nd floor of the Courthouse

18. **COURT APPOINTMENTS**

- a. For consideration for Court Appointments, each year, an Application for Court Appointments (located on the Court’s website), must be completed and submitted to the Court coordinator via email to: 501courtcoordinator@fortbendcountytexas.gov.

***The Deadline for Annual Applications is January 31 of each year**

- b. In the absence of agreement, the Court will utilize the wheel for appointments. The Court may deviate from the wheel for good cause.

19. **NOTICE OF RIGHT TO DE NOVO HEARING**

- a. All parties are notified that, pursuant to Texas Family Code Sec. 201.015, if a case is assigned to an Associate Judge, the parties have the right to request a De Novo Hearing before a District Judge as set out in the Texas Family Code.
- b. The right to a De Novo hearing includes IV-D cases (Texas Family Code Sec. 201.1042)
- c. The right to a De Novo hearing includes Child Protection Cases Texas heard in the Coastal Bend Children Court (Family Code Sec. 201.2042)

20. **REFERAL BACK TO PRESIDING COURT FROM COASTAL BEND CHILDREN COURT**

- a. Pursuant to Texas Family Code Sec. 201.204, “on the motion from a party or the associate judge, the associate judge may refer a complex case back to the referring court [the 501st Presiding Court] for final disposition...”.

*The 501st Presiding Court considers all cases where termination is at issue on final trial as complex.

- b. If there is an objection on file to the Associate Judge hearing the final trial and a Stipulated Waiver of Appeal from Associate Judge's Ruling/Recommendation is not filed, the case should be referred back to the 501st Presiding Court.

SIGNED DECEMBER 1, 2025

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. T. Bell', written over a horizontal line.

**RICHARD T. BELL
PRESIDING JUDGE**