

COURT PROCEEDINGS & LEGAL ADVOCACY PROGRAMS BRIEF



Overview

Teen parents may encounter a variety of legal matters that require them to establish or enforce their rights in court or respond to actions brought against them. Depending on their age, this may be done individually or may require involvement of the parent or legal guardian of the teen parent, for individuals who are too young to petition the court directly. Possible issues include traffic violations, contract disputes, landlord-tenant issues, the need to secure protection orders in domestic violence/dating violence cases, and more. The most common type of proceeding teen parents are likely to face are family law issues—primarily the need to establish paternity or secure child support orders, parenting time plans, or a divorce. It is important that teen parents assert their legal rights for a variety of reasons including:

- to obtain court orders necessary to protect themselves or their children,
- to guard against problems in the future,
- to establish clear legal parameters governing parent-child relationships and co-parenting arrangements, or
- to avoid adverse rulings or default judgments.

Navigating the court system and appearing in court can be confusing and intimidating. Without support, many teen parents may opt to forego dealing with legal matters altogether, resulting in uncertainty or negative outcomes over the long run. Fortunately, there are several things that teen parent providers and teen parent-serving organizations can do to help.

Self-Help Resources

Many teen parents may choose to represent themselves in legal proceedings due to concerns over the cost of hiring an attorney. This is especially true for low- and middle-income individuals involved in family law proceedings. As a result, most courts in Colorado have self-help or court-based resource centers that are intended to





provide **pro se parties** (i.e. individuals without an attorney) with the documents needed to pursue and/or respond to matters in their court case and help them navigate court processes and procedures. Despite the prevalence of these resources, most teen parents will likely still find the court system difficult to navigate without the help of trusted adults and professionals who are more familiar with the court system. Teen parent providers can become knowledgeable about free legal resources in their communities and educate teen parents about these services and how to access them. Information on available resources, as well as information on the court's processes and procedures specific to each Colorado county, can be located on the [Courts by County](#) page on the Colorado Judicial Branch website.

Legal Advocacy Programs

Some nonprofits and teen parent-serving organizations have established in-house legal advocacy programs, staffed by employees who serve as legal advocates, that are designed to help their clients understand and complete necessary paperwork, navigate the legal process, and make informed decisions about their case. Nonprofits that do not currently have such programs may want to consider establishing one. While similar in purpose to court-based self-help centers, a nonprofit's own legal advocacy program can tailor services specifically to meet the unique needs of their service population and leverage trust and pre-existing relationships built in the course of providing other services.

Nonprofits may be able to seek grant funding to support a legal advocacy program or utilize some of their general operating funds for this purpose. Nonprofits should expect that clients may seek help on a wide range of legal issues, though protection orders and family law cases are among the most frequent needs. In addition to helping clients complete required documents, legal advocates can help clients request a waiver of the filing fees in family cases and arrange for service of process or service by publication. In some cases, legal advocates will attend court proceedings with their clients to provide additional support. It is important to note, however, that legal advocates working within a nonprofit's legal advocacy program are not typically attorneys and cannot provide legal representation. Many programs have relationships with attorneys who will take cases on a reduced fee or pro bono basis, when the assistance required goes beyond what can be provided by the legal advocate.



Legal advocacy programs can help teen parents overcome some of the biggest obstacles to participating in court proceedings including difficulty in understanding court pleadings, lack of understanding about how to file case documents and inability to pay the associated cost, inability to print court documents and filings at home, and lack of transportation or child care needed to attend court proceedings or to make multiple trips to the courthouse to file documents.

The Colorado Judicial Branch website provides [self-help forms](#) needed for any case, including family cases, housing cases, small claims, and protection orders. Legal advocates can work with teen parents to review and complete their forms and provide instruction on how to file documents with the court. Fortunately, some counties allow pro se parties to file documents electronically through the Colorado Court E-Filing system, eliminating the need for in-person trips to the courthouse.

This service is currently available in Arapahoe, Douglas, El Paso, Grand, Larimer, Moffat, Routt, and Teller counties. You can access the e-filing system as a pro se party [here](#).

While some counties provide child care for individuals attending court proceedings, it is not available in all areas nor is it always reliable. As a result, legal advocates can work with clients to prepare for court appearances and trips to the courthouse by helping them develop child care plans and to secure transportation that will ensure a timely appearance.

Unbundled Legal Services

Unbundled legal services refer to services provided by an attorney that are limited in scope and provide clients with a flexible and affordable way to get help with their legal needs. Clients hire an attorney to assist with specific tasks or elements of their case—legal advice, document preparation or review, preparation and coaching for mediation or negotiations, or limited court appearances. The client and attorney establish an agreement for the attorney to perform work on certain tasks and the client represents themselves in all other aspects of the case. Teen parent service providers may find it helpful to build relationships with attorneys who offer unbundled services to secure help when the additional expertise of an attorney is needed. Limited scope representation can be used in combination with the services and support of a legal advocate as a way of saving the client money.



Unbundled services in family cases may include negotiating and drafting parenting time agreements or assistance with less common actions such as emergency matters or contempt citations for noncompliance with previously established orders. Access to unbundled legal services allows clients to decide what aspects of their case they feel comfortable handling on their own and what areas require the services of an attorney. Teen parent-serving organizations should be aware however, that unbundled services and self-representation may not be appropriate for all clients. It may be preferable or necessary to hire an attorney to handle complex matters, high conflict cases, or to provide full representation in cases in which the power dynamics between the parties is such that self-representation is not in the client's best interest.

Additional Resources

The [Colorado Legal Help Center](#) provides information to help you understand the process of specific types of cases, provides legal resources, and access to laws and legal forms.

Calculate estimated child support and/or spousal support using the Family Law Software [calculator](#). (You will need to create an account by establishing a username and password, then selecting Colorado as the state of residence.)