FILING A CIVIL CASE WITHOUT AN ATTORNEY: A GUIDE FOR THE SELF-REPRESENTED (PRO SE) LITIGANT

(Instructions Only)

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
NORTHERN DISTRICT OF ILLINOIS

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Accommodations

In accordance with the Guide to Judiciary Policy, Vol. 5 Ch.2 § 255, the Court may provide reasonable accommodations to persons who are deaf, hearing impaired, or have communications disabilities. These accommodations include sign language interpreters or other auxiliary aids and services to participants in federal court proceedings including parties in the case, attorneys, witnesses, and jurors who are deemed legally qualified to serve by the Court.

Individuals seeking assistance should contact the court's Access Coordinator as soon as possible in advance of the scheduled court proceeding, or upon notification, so that appropriate accommodations can be arranged. Requests can be made by contacting Michael Serratore, Access Coordinator, at (312) 435-5359 or email: ilnd_courtservices@ilnd.uscourts.gov.

Requests should include the case number (if applicable), judge before whom the proceeding is to take place (if applicable), time/date of proceeding, and description of requested accommodation. Additional accommodations and services may be provided upon the approval of the presiding judge.

Interpreter Services

Please be advised that the Court cannot provide language interpreter services in civil cases unless the action is initiated by the United States. In civil cases, you will need to bring your own interpreter if you do not speak English.

Notificación Relativa a los Servicios de Interpretación
Por favor tenga en cuenta que el Tribunal no puede proporcionar servicios de interpretación en casos civiles, a menos que la acción sea iniciada por los Estados Unidos. Si no habla inglés, deberá traer su propio intérprete.

Tłmaczenie w sądzie - Komunikat
Uprzejmie informujemy, że sąd nie zapewnia usług tłumacza. Jeśli nie mówi Pan/Pani po angielsku, musi Pan/Pani zatrudnić tłumacza we własnym zakresie.

آخطار بخصوص خدمات الترجمة:
نرجو الآحاطة بأن المحكمة لا تستطيع أن توفر لكم خدمة الترجمة. ستحتاج الى آحضار مترجمك الخاص الى المحكمة آذا كنت من غير القادرين على التحدث باللغة الآنجليزية

Introduction

This Guide is intended to help people who want to file a civil case without an attorney. Someone who files a civil case on their own behalf is often referred to as a pro se party or pro se litigant (pronounced "pro say"). Pro se litigants also sometimes are referred to as self-represented litigants.

If you are a self-represented (or pro se) litigant, this guide will help you understand some of the legal terms you are likely to hear as your case proceeds. It will explain some of the guidelines that control how a civil case moves forward. It will also give you information about a few legal resources you may wish to consult. However, the guide is *not* a substitute for an attorney.

The staff of the Clerk's Office can help you by answering questions about procedures, but they are *forbidden by law* from giving you legal advice. This means, for example, that the Clerk's staff *cannot* do any of the following:

- recommend a legal course of action or suggest ways to help you win your case;
- predict how a district or magistrate judge may decide any issue;
- interpret the meaning of any judicial order; or
- interpret the local rules of this Court, federal procedural rules, or federal statutes.

The rules and procedures that affect the way your case proceeds can be hard to understand. With that in mind, you should seriously consider trying to obtain professional legal assistance. There are legal organizations that can help arrange for you to have an opportunity to speak with a lawyer about your case for a small fee. There are also some organizations that help arrange for attorneys to represent litigants at no charge. A separate section of this guide lists organizations that may be able to offer you legal assistance.

This guide has been organized into the following sections:

- Filing Your Case: What You Must Do to Get Started
- Basic Procedures for Ongoing Cases
- The Clerk's Office
- Getting Legal Assistance
- Federal Agencies and Courts
- Glossary of Common Legal Terms
- Appendix: Map, Rules, and Fee Schedules

Copies of case forms referenced in this packet may be obtained from the Clerk's Office in Chicago and Rockford or the Court's website at http://www.ilnd.uscourts.gov.

The Northern District of Illinois is divided into two Divisions: Eastern and Western. The Chicago Courthouse is the headquarters for the District's Eastern Division. The

Rockford Courthouse is the headquarters for the District's Western Division. A map of the District has been included in the appendix, showing the counties in each division.

The Chicago Clerk's Office is located on the 20th floor of the Dirksen Federal Courthouse at 219 South Dearborn Street. The Rockford Clerk's Office is located on the 2nd floor of the Stanley J. Roszkowski U.S. Courthouse at 327 South Church Street.

Using Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in Your Court Case: Important Information for Self-Represented Litigants

Please Read Before Using GenAI

If you are representing yourself in court, you might be tempted to use generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools such as ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini, or similar programs to help you understand legal information. Remember that these are only tools.

GenAI can be helpful, but it can also be wrong.

You are responsible for everything you file with the court. If a GenAI tool provides incorrect information and you include it in a court filing, you may face penalties, including fines, having your filing rejected, or dismissal of your case. Remember that self-represented litigants are subject to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure Rule 11 and Rule 26(g). Think of GenAI as a research assistant, not a lawyer. GenAI can help you understand legal concepts, but it cannot replace legal advice from a qualified attorney.

What is GenAI?

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) is computer technology that uses patterns from large amounts of information to generate responses.

GenAI does not think, reason, or understand situations the way people do. Instead, it predicts what information may be helpful based on patterns it has learned. Because of this, GenAI can sometimes provide answers that sound correct but are actually wrong.

What GenAI Can Help You Do

GenAI may help you:

- ✓ Understand legal words and court documents
- ✓ Summarize long legal materials
- ✓ Explain legal concepts in plain language
- ✓ Organize information and create checklists
- ✓ Brainstorm legal research topics
- ✓ Draft letters, motions, or other documents *for review*

✓ Understand court procedures and deadlines

✓ Identify legal terms that may help with research

GenAI should be used as a starting point for research, not as the final authority. You need to verify all responses for accuracy. If you certify a document under Rule 11 or Rule 26(g) that contains inaccurate information, you—not the GenAI tool—is responsible.

What GenAI Cannot Do

GenAI cannot:

✗ Give legal advice specific to your situation

✗ Tell you the best legal strategy

✗ Represent you in court

✗ Speak to a judge on your behalf

✗ File documents for you

✗ Fully understand all the facts of your case

✗ Guarantee that information is current or accurate

Only a licensed attorney can provide legal advice and representation.

Important Warning: GenAI May Make Things Up

GenAI sometimes creates information that appears real but is completely false. This is often called a "hallucination." GenAI may:

- Invent court cases that do not exist
- Create fake legal citations and quotations
- Misquote laws
- Misstate court decisions
- Provide outdated legal information

These errors can look very convincing.

Never assume a citation, case, statute, or quote provided by GenAI is real. Always verify it using official legal sources.

Your Responsibility to the Court

Before filing any document prepared with GenAI assistance, you should:

- **Verify Every Citation**
  Make sure every case, law, regulation, and quotation actually exists.
- **Read the Original Source**
  Read the court opinion, statute, regulation, or rule yourself. Do not rely solely on GenAI summaries.
- **Confirm the Law Is Current**
  Laws change frequently. A law or case discussed by GenAI may no longer be valid.
- **Verify Court Procedures**
  Always confirm deadlines, filing requirements, fees, and forms with the court's website or the Clerk's Office.
- **Review Everything Carefully**
  Do not submit any document to the court unless you personally understand and verify its contents.

Protect Your Personal Information

Communications with GenAI are generally not confidential in the same way communications with an attorney may be. Do NOT enter:

- Social Security numbers
- Bank account numbers
- Passwords
- Medical records
- Confidential business information
- Sensitive personal information
- Private details that are not necessary for your question

Do not enter documents marked as “confidential” pursuant to a protective order into any GenAI tool unless the Court allows you.

Always read the GenAI provider's privacy policies and terms of service before uploading documents or sharing personal information.

How to Ask GenAI Better Questions

The question you ask GenAI is called a prompt. Better prompts usually result in more useful answers.

Include Your Location

Laws differ by state and court.

Example:

Poor Prompt: Can my landlord evict me?

Better Prompt: I am a tenant in Illinois. My landlord gave me a notice for unpaid rent. What does that notice mean?

- **Include Important Facts**
  Explain:
  - Who you are
  - What happened
  - Important dates
  - Documents you received
  - What information you need
- **Ask Follow-Up Questions**
  If you do not understand an answer, ask additional questions to clarify.

When You Should Seek Human Help

Do not rely only on GenAI when:

You Are Confused

If GenAI provides inconsistent, conflicting, or unclear answers, seek assistance from a qualified human resource.

You Cannot Verify Information

If you cannot confirm that a case, statute, quotation, or rule is accurate and current, do not rely on it.

You Have an Upcoming Deadline

Missed deadlines can seriously affect your rights. Contact a court self-help center, law library, legal aid office, or attorney if you are uncertain about what to do.

Best Practices

When using GenAI in connection with a court case:

- ✅ Use GenAI as a tool, not as a decision-maker
- ✅ Verify all legal authorities and citations
- ✅ Save copies of important GenAI conversations
- ✅ Keep notes about your research
- ✅ Check official court and government websites
- ✅ Be honest about your use of GenAI if asked by the court

- ✅ Use critical thinking and common sense
- ✅ Seek human help when appropriate
- ✅ Review all documents before filing them with the court
- ✅ Make sure every statement submitted to the court is accurate

REMEMBER: GenAI IS NOT YOUR LAWYER

GenAI can help you learn about the legal system and understand legal information. However, GenAI cannot replace professional legal judgment, legal training, or legal advice.

You are responsible for every document filed in your case. Improper use of GenAI can lead to serious results, including monetary sanctions and dismissal of your case.

Before relying on GenAI-generated information:

1. Verify it.
2. Confirm it.
3. Understand it.
4. Then decide whether to use it.

If you are unsure, seek help from a lawyer, legal aid organization, or self-help center.

This handout provides general information only. It is not legal advice and does not create an attorney-client relationship.

Filing Your Civil Case: What You Must Do to Get Started

Format Requirements

Local Rule 5.2 details the format requirements for documents filed with the Court in paper form. The Court requires that the documents you file meet the following requirements:

- the document must be on paper that is 8 1/2" x 11" in size, flat, and unfolded;
- it must be typed or neatly handwritten;
- it must be bound at the top of the document, preferably with a staple or in the alternative with a binder or paper clip; and
- it must be signed by you on the final page of the document, including your name, address, **e-mail address,** and telephone number. The document must bear your ***original signature, not a photocopy of your signature.***

If you present a document for filing to the clerk that does not meet the format requirements set out in Local Rule 5.2, a deputy clerk may call your attention to the format problems. The clerk will not refuse to file your document on these grounds, but Local Rule 5.2 allows the judge to have your document stricken, which means removed from the case file. If a document is stricken, you will need to refile it once you fix it to conform with the

rules. Therefore, you should read Local Rule 5.2 and comply with the format requirements to the best of your ability.

Documents You Are Required to File

When you file a civil case, you must submit each of the following documents:

- **Complaint**
  In addition to your original complaint, you must submit one extra copy for you to receive a "filed" or "received" stamped copy for your records. If you do not pay the filing fee and submit a petition to proceed without prepaying the fee (*In Forma Pauperis (*IFP) Petition), you will need to submit one extra copy of your complaint for each defendant. (IFP petitions are discussed in detail in the IFP section). A complaint is a statement of your claims. There is a more detailed description of what you should include in a complaint below.

- **Civil Cover Sheet**
  The civil cover sheet, which must be filed, is required for the purpose of initiating the civil docket sheet. This form can be found on the Court's website under the "Forms – Common Case" section.

- **Appearance Form for Pro Se Litigants**
  The appearance form, which must be filed, provides your name and address information. Your name, address, and email address are listed on the case docket. It also identifies where notices of orders and filings in your case are sent. If you have access to email, you should indicate on your appearance form that you wish to receive notices electronically rather than in paper form.

- **Summons**
  You need to provide an original and one copy of a summons for each defendant. If you are suing the federal government or one of its agencies, you must provide three more copies *in addition to* the copies for the named defendants.

- **Filing Fee**
  You must *either* pay the filing fee *or* file the forms used to request permission to proceed IFP. If you are requesting leave to proceed IFP, you must submit an original IFP petition and a copy for the judge. IFP is an abbreviation for a Latin phrase, *in forma pauperis*, which means without paying a filing fee.

- **Motion for Attorney Representation**
  If you wish to have a court-appointed attorney, you may file a motion for attorney representation when you file the documents listed above. As with every document filed with the court, you must file an original and one copy of the motion for the judge and one copy for yourself should you wish to keep a stamped copy for your records. Please note that there are requirements that must be met to have an attorney recruited to represent you. The assigned judge will review this motion and enter a ruling.

A separate section of this Guide covers the steps involved in filing a petition for leave to proceed IFP. In *this* section of the Guide, assume that you can afford to pay the filing fee and that you are not filing a civil rights employment case.

How to Receive Electronic Copies of Filings and Orders Entered in Your Case

As a self-represented litigant in the United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, you can choose to receive notices of electronic filings via e-mail. By choosing this option, you will receive real-time notices and avoid delays that can occur when receiving postal mail. Currently, lawyers who practice in federal court are required to receive filings and orders via e-mail. We want to offer you the same access to real-time information.

If you choose to sign up for e-mail notifications, under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 5(b)2(E), you are waiving your right to receive a paper copy of all documents filed electronically and orders entered by this Court. This means that you will no longer receive mail with hard copies of court filings and orders. You will only receive notices via e-mail as soon as filings are submitted to the Court avoiding potential delays in the U.S. mail. Please note, you should not sign up for this service if you do not frequently check your e-mail.

You are under no obligation to sign up for this service. If you would like to receive notices electronically, you must complete the Appearance for Pro Se Litigant form and return it to the Clerk's Office. Please be certain to print your e-mail clearly and sign the form. You can submit the form through our online portal on this website. Once you submit the form, you will no longer receive paper copies but will receive electronic notifications immediately.

The Complaint

The basic information that identifies the document is sometimes called the "case caption." Below is an example of the case caption information that should be included on all documents filed in your case, including the complaint. In the top left of the first page of your complaint you should list the names of the parties in your case. Your name (the plaintiff) should appear first. On the next line, enter the letter "v." which is short for "versus" or "against." List the names of the defendant or defendants below the "v." You must list *all* the parties. Each person should be identified as a plaintiff or a defendant. Underneath the party names and the name of the court, enter the word "Complaint" to identify your document.

United States District Court
Northern District of Illinois

	)
A. Smith,	)
Plaintiff	)
	)
v.	)
	)
B. Jones,	)
Defendant	)

COMPLAINT

After the caption, write a description of your case. You should describe what happened to you and why you believe that the defendant is responsible for the damage or injury you experienced. You should state why the court has jurisdiction over the case ("jurisdiction" is defined in the legal terms section of this guide). You must also state what you want the court to do, for example, the amount of money or other relief (such as order to do something or stop doing something) you are seeking from the defendant.

If possible, you should write your complaint in the form of numbered paragraphs, with each paragraph covering a separate point of your case.

Your complaint is your side of the case and your version of events. It is important for you to be careful, complete, and as clear as possible in your complaint.

You must sign the complaint on the last page. Below your signature, you need to include your printed name and address.

What Happens When You Submit the Complaint

You should complete the complaint, civil cover sheet, appearance form, summons, and any other documents you want to file *before* you arrive at the Courthouse. Your documents are to be filed with the Clerk's Office at the Intake Desk located as follows: Eastern Division, Chicago Courthouse, Northeast Corner of the 20th floor, or Western Division, Rockford Courthouse, 2nd floor.

When you present your documents, the deputy clerk will review them to be sure that they appear to have been properly completed. The deputy clerk will then assign the next available civil case number to your complaint. A computer program will be used to randomly assign a district judge and designate a magistrate judge to your case.

If you have paid the filing fee and have the summons, the deputy clerk will issue an original and one copy for each defendant and will give them back to you for service.

If you are filing a petition for leave to proceed IFP – that is, without paying the filing fee -- *see* the section below. In all other cases, it is your responsibility to ensure that the

summons and a copy of the complaint are served on the defendant. However, *you may not serve the summons yourself*. You have the following options for serving the summons:

- You can arrange for a private process server to serve the summons. The server will file an affidavit with the court stating how the service was carried out. A summons may be served by anyone over the age of 18 who is not a party to the case.
- You can file a motion asking the Court to direct the U.S. Marshal to serve the summons, on the grounds that you cannot afford to prepay the cost of a process server.
- You can ask the defendant to waive the right to formal service. If you want to use this approach, you need to send the defendant a Notice of Lawsuit and Waiver of Service Form.
- If the Defendant(s) are in a foreign country, business entities or the Unites States, please see Rule 4 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure for more information.

Service in a civil case must be carried out properly. The basic guidelines for service are described in Rule 4 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure. Failure to serve correctly may result in a case being dismissed. Questions concerning proper service can be addressed by the Pro Se Assistance Program Attorney discussed in the section beginning on page 8 .

Filing a Petition to Proceed In Forma Pauperis

If you are unable to pay the filing fee for a civil case, you may ask the assigned judge to allow you to proceed without paying the fee in advance. As noted above, the Latin phrase used for proceeding in this way is “In Forma Pauperis.” This phrase is often shortened to “IFP.” Cases of this type are sometimes called IFP cases. To proceed with IFP, you will need to demonstrate to the judge that you have limited income and other financial resources.

A separate document is used to ask permission to proceed in forma pauperis. The full name of this document is an “In Forma Pauperis Application and Financial Affidavit." This document is almost always referred to by the shorter name of “IFP Petition.”

An IFP petition may be obtained from the Clerk’s Office or the Court’s website at www.ilnd.uscourts.gov. If you want to proceed in forma pauperis, you need to submit a completed original IFP petition and a copy for the judge while you submit your complaint and associated documents. Please note that you are required to complete the form in its entirety.

If you file an IFP petition, you should provide the deputy clerk with an original and one copy of the summons for each defendant at the time that you present your IFP petition. The summons will be kept with your file. The IFP Petition, the complaint, and any other documents you submitted along with the complaint will be sent to the assigned district judge.

There are a number of possible results of this review. Some of the more common outcomes are the following:

- The judge may grant the IFP petition. If this happens, the summons will be issued. The judge may also direct the U.S. Marshal to serve the summons and complaint on the defendant.
- The judge may determine that you *can* afford the filing fee. If this happens, you will need to pay the filing fee usually within a specified period of time before your case can proceed and the summons is issued.
- The judge may require you to pay part of the filing fee. If this happens, you must comply with the judge's instructions within a specified time before your case proceeds.
- The judge may ask for more information from you before ruling on your IFP petition.
- The judge may also review your complaint and decide, on review, that your case should be dismissed on legal grounds. If this happens, your case will not proceed, but you may still be liable for the filing fee.

Basic Procedures for Ongoing Civil Cases

E-Filing (Electronic Filing)

Most of the documents filed with the Court are not filed in paper form. Instead, they are filed electronically. That is, the documents are produced in an electronic form and filed over the internet. E-filing is mandatory for attorneys. It is *not* mandatory for pro se litigants. However, pro se litigants who have participated and successfully completed the free e-filing training program can e-file their pleadings. Electronic filing provides 24-hour access to filing documents in your case and emailed notices and copies of documents filed in your case. It is often viewed as time-saving and a cost-effective tool for pro se litigants. Information on e-filing and the Court's training requirements may be found on the Court's website under the E-Filing tab, or by email: ILNDmL_EFilingtraining@ilnd.uscourts.gov.

Electronic Submission of PDF Documents through the Court's Website

If you do not wish to take the course on e-filing, we strongly encourage self-represented litigants to use an option that allows you to submit your filings through the Court's website. This portal allows you to file into an existing case or initiate a new case. Prior to filing, it is encouraged that you review all the requirements regarding formatting and utilize the checklist that is available on our website at the Pro Se Filer PDF Submission page. Even if you submit your documents through the website Portal, you can still sign up to receive notifications through email. (*See* How to Receive Electronic Copies of Filings and Orders Entered in Your Case section of this Guide for further information)

Document Length

The Court's Local Rules do not limit the length of your complaint. However, if you later file a brief in support of one of your own motions or a brief in response to a motion filed by the defendant, you need to be aware that Local Rule 7.1 sets a limit of 15 pages for documents of this type. If you want to file a brief that is longer than 15 pages, you need to have the Court's permission to do so. To do this, you need to file a separate motion requesting leave to file a brief in excess of 15 pages.

Filing Motions

In an ongoing civil case, you may need to ask the judge to instruct the defendant to do something connected to your case, or you may need to ask the judge to allow you to do something yourself. Examples would be asking the judge to direct the defendant to give you access to certain records during the discovery phase of your case or asking the judge to grant you an extension of time to file a document. When you request the court to take a specific action, you do so by filing a motion.

Some of the Court's basic procedural rules for motions are contained in Local Rules 5.3 and Rule 78.1, 78.3 to 78.5. Copies of these rules are found on the Court's website.

When you file a motion in paper: you must provide a copy of the motion to the defendant and inform the defendant that you are filing the motion. If the defendant has an attorney, the copy of the motion and the notice should go to the attorney. This is called giving the defendant notice of your motion. You also must file a statement with the Court indicating that you have given the defendant the required notice.

When you file a motion in an ongoing case through CM/ECF or the Court's Portal after the defendant has entered an appearance: you do not have to provide a copy of the motion to the defendant or their attorney. These documents will be provided through email to the defendant's attorney.

If you want to appear before the judge in person to formally present your motion, you must also file a notice of motion. The notice must specify the date, time, and courtroom where you will appear before the judge. In addition to filing this notice with the Court, you must also provide a copy to the defendant. The notice must take into consideration the judge's motion practice, and the date selected for presenting the motion must be consistent with the judge's motion practice. Please consult each judge's webpage, which can be accessed at www.ilnd.uscourts.gov, to determine the applicable dates, times, and practices for the judge who is handling your case.

Judges hold court sessions to address motions on different days of the week. In other words, if the judge hears motions on Tuesday and Thursday, do not plan to appear on a Wednesday to present your motion. Judges also vary in the number of days of advance notice they require for motions. Many require two days of advance notice. Some require more advance notice. Again, information on the number of days of advance notice and the standard motion practices of all judges can be obtained from the Clerk's Office or the Court's website. Check this information *before* you get ready to file your motion.

The Clerk's Office

Mailing Address

The mailing addresses for the two divisions of the Clerk's Office are:

Eastern Division	Western Division
Clerk's Office, U.S. District Court 219 South Dearborn Street Chicago, Illinois 60604	Clerk's Office, U.S. District Court 327 South Church Street Rockford, Illinois 61101

Office Hours

The Clerk's Office is open to the public Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m. through 4:30 p.m., except for legal holidays. The intake desk and the area used to review case dockets and case files for the Eastern Division are all located in the northeast corner of the 20th floor of the Courthouse in Chicago and for the Western Division are located on the 2nd floor of the Rockford Courthouse.

Reviewing Dockets and Case Files

PACER

The Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER) service provides electronic public access to federal court records. PACER provides the public with instantaneous access to more than 1 billion documents filed at all federal courts.

Registered users can:

- Search for a case in the federal court where the case was filed, or
- Search a nationwide index of federal court cases.

The PACER Service Center can assist you at (800) 676-6856 between the hours of 7 a.m. and 6 p.m. CT Monday through Friday or by email at pacer@psc.uscourts.gov.

Clerk's Office Terminals

Computer terminals are available in the public area of the Clerk's Office (Chicago courthouse – 20th floor/ Rockford courthouse – Room 2200) which allow the public to review automated dockets for civil and criminal cases. These dockets may also be used to check the Court's party index (a list of all parties in civil cases) and case index (a list of case numbers).

Paper Documents

Because electronic filing is so prevalent, the only categories of documents that are still available in paper from the Clerk's Office are documents that scan poorly and sealed documents. Poor quality scanned documents can be reviewed by completing a files request card at the intake area (Chicago courthouse – 20th floor/ Rockford courthouse – Room 2200). Sealed documents require a Court Order to be viewed. Case files may not be taken out of the Clerk's Office.

The Clerk's Office will provide you with copies of documents for 50¢ per page. Customers in need of archived cases can request directly from the Federal Record Center (FRC) or through the Clerk's Office.

The Court's Website

Information about procedures, the local rules, fees, as well as several other subjects covered in this Guide may be found on the Court's website. The website also lists the activity scheduled before each judge for the coming week. The site also has links to several other judicial websites. If you have access to the internet, the address of the Court's website is www.ilnd.uscourts.gov.

Getting Legal Assistance

Settlement Assistance Program for Pro Se Litigants

Through the Settlement Assistance Program for Pro Se Litigants ("SAP"), the judges of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois may assign a volunteer attorney to assist a pro se party in settling — rather than litigating — their case at no cost to the pro se party.

The Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights locates attorneys who wish to provide free legal assistance to pro se parties regarding settlement of their cases, including attending and assisting with settlement conferences conducted by District Judges or Magistrate Judges of the Court. Once an attorney expresses interest in assisting the pro se party, he or she is assigned to the case by the judge. Assistance under the SAP will be limited, however, only to efforts to settle the case and will not extend to any other part of the litigation process. In other words, the attorney assigned to assist the pro se party with settlement will not file or respond to pretrial motions or discovery requests or prepare the case for trial.

The assigned attorney will confer with the pro se party, evaluate the case, and advise the pro se party of the strengths and weaknesses of the case, discuss the damages permitted by law and the consequences of settling, and help determine the settlement value of the case. The volunteer attorney will draft a letter that makes a specific settlement demand and sets forth the rationale for the demand. Finally, the volunteer attorney will assist the party in preparing for the settlement conference, represent the pro se party at the settlement conference and, if the case is settled, finalize a settlement agreement and corresponding motion to dismiss. If the case does not settle after diligent efforts, the volunteer attorney can ask the court to be relieved of his or her duties and the

pro se party reverts to pro se status.

A pro se party who has been denied trial counsel by the court, or who is interested in pursuing settlement rather than full-blown litigation, can ask the District Judge or Magistrate Judge to assign counsel through the SAP for the limited purpose of achieving a settlement. Seeking SAP counsel early avoids the stressful, time-consuming, and burdensome process of written discovery requests and responses, depositions, motion practice, and trial preparation. Having counsel to assist the pro se party in a settlement conference sometimes allows the party to secure a quicker, confidential resolution to the dispute. The pro se party is not guaranteed that an attorney will be interested in assisting with their case, but usually a volunteer is located.

William J. Hibbler Memorial District Court Pro Se Assistance Program

Pro se litigants have an opportunity to receive free, virtual legal assistance through The Honorable William J. Hibbler Pro Se Assistance Program. The assistance program is staffed by volunteer attorneys with experience in federal court and administered by Uptown People's Law Center (UPLC). The Program attorneys operate only by virtual or telephone appointment. Appointments are made online at https://hibbler-memorial-pro-se-assistance-program.appointlet.com. For further questions, please contact hibbler@uplcchicago.org or call 773-250-0359.

The Program attorney ***will:***

- Assist you by providing information about federal court procedure and the law as it applies to the facts as you describe them;
- Assist you in preparing certain of your own pleadings, motions, and other court documents;
- Assist you in accessing other sources of information about your legal issues;
- Refer you, in appropriate cases, to other providers of civil legal services or to social service agencies; and
- Keep any personal information you provide confidential, unless you agree to its disclosure in writing.

The Program attorney ***will not:***

- Appear on your behalf in court;
- Research or write court documents for you;
- Conduct any investigation into the facts of your case; or
- Negotiate with your opponent or your opponent’s attorney.

The Program attorney may decline to assist you after interviewing you if:

- The Program attorney has already given advice to your opponent;
- Your legal problem is beyond the scope of our program; or
- In the Program attorney’s view, giving legal advice conflicts with any provision of the Illinois Rules of Professional Conduct.

Recruited Attorney

Upon receipt of an application for the recruitment of counsel, the judge may first suggest plaintiff contact the William J. Hibbler Memorial Pro Se Help Desk or consider whether referral of the case to the Settlement Assistance Program is appropriate. There is no right to court-appointed counsel in federal civil litigation. The assigned judge may, however, request that an attorney represent an indigent litigant on a volunteer basis under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(1). In deciding whether to recruit counsel to assist a litigant in a civil case, the Court engages in a two-part analysis. The district court first considers whether the plaintiff made a reasonable attempt to secure counsel for themself. Failure to include documentation that substantiates attempts to retain counsel on your own could result in the denial of your motion. The second part of the analysis focuses on the plaintiff's ability to gather evidence, prepare and respond to motions, and try the case. This includes, but is not limited to, consideration of plaintiff's communication skills and litigation experience. The judge may also consider the stage of the case, and the potential merit of the claims as set forth in the pleadings.

Other Legal Services

These groups provide legal services covering a wide variety of topics, including adoption, bankruptcy, criminal matters, divorce and related family matters, employment, immigration, landlord-tenant problems, probate, and social security. Some of these services deal with topics that may fall within the jurisdiction of this Court. Since some of the agencies and organizations listed do not handle all types of legal matters, you should call or write to the agency for specific information.

CARPLS (312) 738-9200 www.carpls.org	Greater Chicago Legal Clinic (312)726-2938 www.gclclaw.org	World Relief – Chicago Immigration Legal Services (773) 583-9191 www.worldrelief.org/chicago
Legal Aid Chicago (312) 341-1070 www.lafchicago.org	Chicago Volunteer Legal Services (312) 332-1624 www.cvls.org	Center for Disability and Elder Law (312) 376-1880 www.cdelaw.org
Lawyers for Creative Arts (312) 649-4111 www.law-arts.org	National Immigrant Justice Center (312) 660-1370 www.immigrantsjustice.org	Bankruptcy Desk Monday-Friday 9:30-12:30 (312) 435-6032
Cabrini Green Legal Aid (312) 738-2452 www.cgla.net	Legal Aid Society of Metropolitan Family Services (312)986-4105 www.metrofamily.org	Center for Conflict Resolution (312) 922-6464 www.ccrchicago.org
Guardianship Assistance Desk for Minors (312) 603-0135	Access Living (312) 640-2100 voice (800) 613-8549 toll free (312) 640-2169 TTY (888) 253-7003 toll free TTY www.accessliving.org	Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (312) 641-4141 (800) 940-1119 www.chicagohomeless.org

Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law (312) 630-9744 www.clccrul.org	Equip for Equality (312) 341-0022 se habla español (800) 537-2632 voice (800) 610-2779 TTY www.equipforequality.org	Lambda Legal (312) 663-4413 www.lambdalegal.org
Roger Baldwin Foundation of ACLU, Inc. (312) 201-9740 www.aclu-il.org	The Law Project (312) 939-3638 www.thelawproject.org	Chicago Bar Association Bar Attorney Program (312) 554-2001 voice (312) 554-2055 TTY www.chicagobar.org
Law Office of the Cook County Public Defender (312) 603-0600	Federal Defender Program (312) 621-8300	First Defense Legal Aid (800) 529-7374 www.first-defense.org
Office of the State Appellate Defender (217) 782-7203 www.state.il.us/defender	Midwest Center on Law and the Deaf (800) 894-3653 voice (800) 894-3654 TTY www.mcld.org	Health & Disability Advocates (312) 223-9600 voice (866) 584-8750 TTY www.hdadvocates.org
Uptown People's Law Center (773) 769-1411	Domestic Violence Legal Clinic (312) 325-9155 www.dvlcchicago.org	Life Span Center for Legal Services and Advocacy (312) 408-1210 www.life-span.org
James B. Moran Center for Youth Advocacy (847) 492-1410 www.moran-center.org	Chicago Bar Association Senior Citizens Will Program (312) 554-2001 www.chicagobar.org	Illinois Department of Human Rights (312) 814-6200 www.state.il.us/dhr
U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (312)872-9744 www.eeoc.gov	Center for Economic Progress, Tax Clinic (312) 252-0280 www.economicprogress.org	Circuit Court of Cook County Mortgage Foreclosure Mediation Program (877) 895-2444 www.cookcountyforeclosurehelp.org
Lawyers' Committee for Better Housing, Inc. (312) 347-7600 www.lcbh.org	Centro Romero (773) 508-5300 www.centroromero.org	Indo-American Center (773) 973-4444 www.indoamerican.org
Latinos Progresando (773) 542-7077 www.latinospro.org		

Federal Agencies And Courts

Citizenship and Immigration Services 101 West Congress Parkway Chicago, Illinois 60605 (800) 375 - 5283 www.uscis.gov	Social Security Administration 77 West Jackson Blvd., Room 300 Chicago, Illinois 60604 (800) 772-1213 www.ssa.gov
Department of Health and Human Services 233 North Michigan Ave, Suite 1300 Chicago, Illinois 60601 (312) 353 - 5160 www.hhs.gov	Department of Labor 200 Constitution Avenue, NW Washington, DC 20210 (202)693-4770 www.usdol.gov
Department of Housing and Urban Development 77 West Jackson Blvd., 26th Floor Chicago, Illinois 60604 (312) 353-4246 www.hud.gov	United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit 219 South Dearborn, Room 2722 Chicago, Illinois, 60604 (312) 435–5850 www.ca7.uscourts.gov/
United States Bankruptcy Court for the Northern District of Illinois 219 South Dearborn Chicago, Illinois 60604 (312) 435-5694 www.ilnb.uscourts.gov	United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois 219 South Dearborn Chicago, Illinois 60604 (312) 435-5691 www.ilnd.uscourts.gov
Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 500 West Madison Street, Suite 2000 Chicago, Illinois, 60661 (800) 889-4000 www.eeoc.gov	Federal Bureau of Investigation Chicago Division 2111 West Roosevelt Chicago, Illinois 60608 (312) 421-6700 www.chicago.fbi.gov

GLOSSARY OF COMMON LEGAL TERMS

Amount in controversy	The phrase "amount in controversy" is sometimes used to describe the amount of money requested in a civil case.
Answer	The answer is the name for the document filed as the defendant's basic response to the complaint filed by the plaintiff. The answer must respond to each of the points made in the complaint.
Appearance form	An appearance form is a document form that records the name and address of someone who is representing one or more of the parties in a case. It is called an appearance form because it is a formal statement by the person who files it that he or she will "appear" in court on behalf of a party. The information entered on the appearance form is used by the Clerk's Office to send copies of notices and orders. Appearance forms are completed by both attorneys and pro se litigants.
Civil case	A civil case is a legal action in which one party (the plaintiff) sues another party (the defendant). In a civil case, the plaintiff claims that the defendant or defendants failed to carry out some type of legal duty (for example, the duty to comply with a contract or the duty not to violate constitutional rights). The plaintiff also claims to have suffered a financial loss or personal injury because of the defendant's actions. In most civil cases the plaintiff asks the court to order the defendant to pay for the harm suffered by the plaintiff.
Civil cover sheet	The civil cover sheet is a form completed by the plaintiff that is submitted along with the complaint. The civil cover sheet records basic information about the civil case, including the names of the parties, the type of case, and the damages being requested by the plaintiff. The plaintiff may also use the civil cover sheet to request that the case be tried by a jury. Civil cover sheets are used to collect statistical information for the federal government about the kinds of cases filed in district courts.
Complaint	The complaint is the document filed by the plaintiff that begins the lawsuit. It names each defendant, describes how the plaintiff was harmed by each defendant, explains why the court has jurisdiction (defined below) over the case, and describes the money damages or other forms of relief requested by the plaintiff. The complaint *must* be signed, either by an attorney or by the pro se party.
Counsel	"Counsel" is another name for attorney.
Damages	"Damages" is the word used to describe the harm that the plaintiff says was caused by the defendant. It is also used to describe the amount of money requested by the plaintiff in the complaint.
Default judgment	A default judgment is a judgment entered in the plaintiff's favor because the defendant failed to answer or respond to the complaint.
Defendant	In a civil case, the defendant is the person being sued by the plaintiff.
Discovery	"Discovery" is a word used to describe the phase of a civil case where each side collects information from the other. This may mean getting copies of documents or holding interviews, called depositions, where one side answers questions asked by the other side about facts and events

	relevant to the case, with the answers being formally recorded as part of a record that may be used in the case. The judge will set a schedule for discovery. You must ask for documents that you may want and you must notify the other side if you want to interview (depose) any witnesses.
District judges	These are the judges of the Court. District judges are sometimes called "Article III" judges because they are appointed for life under Article III of the United States Constitution.
Docket	The docket is a short-written record of what happens in a civil case. Each document filed in the case and each order entered by the judge is noted on the docket. In federal district courts, including the Northern District of Illinois, the docket is a computerized record. This computerized docket is part of an automated system called the Case Management/Electronic Case Filing system, or CM/ECF. "The docket" and "the CM/ECF docket" are different names for the same thing.
Federal Rules of Civil Procedure	The Federal Rules of Civil Procedure are a set of rules that govern the way civil cases are handled in all federal district courts. Approved by the Supreme Court and by Congress, these rules have the force of law. They are often referred to by the abbreviation FedRCivP, FRCP, or FRCvP. An electronic copy of the Federal Rules can be found on the Court's website. Copies may be consulted at the William J. Campbell Law Library on the 16th floor of the Dirksen Building. In addition, an electronic version of the Federal Rules may be consulted in the public area of the Clerk's Office at each divisional office.
In forma pauperis	A person who cannot afford to pay the filing fee for a civil case has the option of asking the court for permission to file a case without paying the fee in advance. To make this request, the party files a petition called an in forma pauperis petition, or IFP petition. This petition is a sworn statement that lists the plaintiff's income and other assets and is used by the judge in deciding whether the plaintiff should or should not be allowed to proceed without paying the filing fee. To proceed IFP, you must convince the judge that you have limited income and financial resources.
Internal Operating Procedures	The Court's Internal Operating Procedures (IOPs) are procedural guidelines established by the Court that govern the administrative aspects of the Court's operation. Like the local rules, the IOP's may be purchased from the Clerk's Office, consulted in law libraries, and found on the Court's website at www.ilnd.uscourts.gov.
Judgment	The judgment is the final decision made by the judge that ends the case.
Jurisdiction	Jurisdiction is the legal authority of the court to hear a civil case. The Federal district courts have jurisdiction only over the following types of civil cases: • cases where the U.S. government is a plaintiff; • cases where the U.S. government is a defendant; • cases involving a constitutional right or a federal law (these are called federal question cases); and • cases where the plaintiff and defendant live in different jurisdictions, for example, cases where the parties live in different states. This last type of case is called a diversity case. In diversity cases, the dollar amount in controversy in the case must be *at*

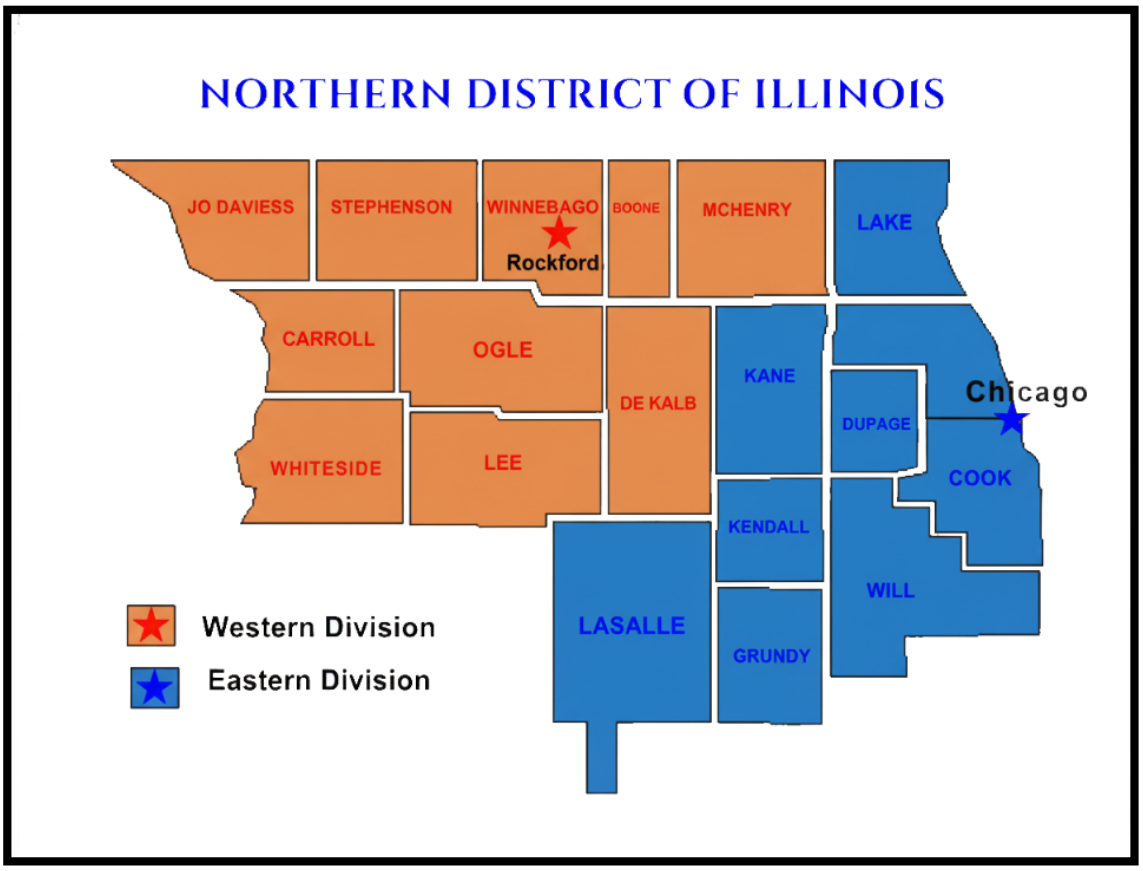
	least $75,000.
Leave to	The words "leave to" or "leave" are often used when a party is asking for the Court's permission to do something. For example, an attorney's request for leave to appear in a case is a request for the Court's permission to appear.
Litigant	The word litigant is another name for the parties involved in a case, generally the plaintiff and the defendant.
Local Rules	District courts have a set of their own rules that control aspects of civil cases. Copies of the local rules may be purchased from the Clerk's Office. They may also be consulted in law libraries and are available for free on the Court's website at www.ilnd.uscourts.gov.
Magistrate judges	Magistrate judges are judicial officers appointed by the Court for an eight-year term of office. In civil cases, magistrate judges can handle a wide range of matters referred to them by district judges. If all the parties in a civil case give their consent, a civil case can be reassigned to a magistrate judge for trial. When a civil case is filed, a magistrate judge is designated for that case. If the case requires the involvement of a magistrate judge at any point, it will go to the designated magistrate judge.
Minute entry	A minute entry is a form used by judges to issue short orders such as setting schedules in cases and brief rulings.
Order	An order is a decision or set of instructions by a judge that usually rules on a motion or directs the plaintiff or defendant to do something.
Party	Each person or company named in the lawsuit on either side of the case is called a party.
Plaintiff	In a civil action, the plaintiff is the party who files the case.
Pleadings	A pleading is a written document that sets out the basic position and argument of one of the parties in a case. In most cases, the basic pleading for the plaintiff is the complaint and the basic pleading for the defendant is the answer. In some cases, the basic response of the defendant on some occasions is a motion to dismiss the case instead of an answer.
Relief	"Relief" is another name for the money or other damages requested by the plaintiff in the complaint. When a party files a motion, the word "relief" is sometimes used to describe what action the party filing the motion is asking the judge to take.
Referral	A referral is an order entered by a district judge that directs a magistrate judge to handle one or more aspects of a case. Examples of matters that are sometimes referred to a designated magistrate judge are the supervision of the discovery process, settlement negotiations, or the handling of a specific motion filed by one of the parties.
Service of process	"Service of process" is a phrase used to describe the act of formally serving a summons and a copy of the complaint on the defendant. Plaintiffs may not serve the summons on the defendant themselves. Service of process is usually carried out by a process server. Where ordered by the court, service in certain circumstances may be made by the U.S. Marshal (see also "waiver of service").
Settlement	A settlement is one of the ways a case can end. A settlement occurs when the parties resolve their civil dispute, usually after negotiations

	among themselves rather than the court or a jury deciding the case.
Summons	A summons is a formal notice by the court telling the defendant that he or she is being sued by the plaintiff, and that an answer is required. The phrase used to describe the Clerk's Office providing a signed and sealed copy of a summons to the plaintiff is "issuing the summons." Even though the summons is a notice from the Court, *the plaintiff is responsible for delivering the summons and a copy of the complaint to the defendant, in accordance with F.R.Cv.P. 4*. Phrases that are sometimes used to describe delivering the summons to the defendant are "service of summons" and "executing service."
Waiver of service	"Waiver of service" refers to circumstances where the plaintiff is able to waive (skip) the formal service of the summons on the defendant. For the plaintiff, the benefit of waiving service is not having to pay the cost of serving the summons. For defendants, the benefit of agreeing to waive service is extra time to file an answer to the complaint. Defendants who agree to waive service have 60 days to file an answer instead of the standard 21 days to answer. The U.S. government may not waive service.

APPENDIX:

- **MAP OF THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF ILLINOIS**
- **FEES**
- **LOCAL RULES 5.2 - 5.4**
- **LOCAL RULE 78**
- **RULE 4 OF THE FEDERAL RULES OF CIVIL PROCEDURE**

THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF ILLINOIS
District Map



FEES

The filing fee for a civil case has already been mentioned. Once a case has been filed, there are no additional fees for filing a document in that case. However, there are a series of other fees listed below that may affect the pro se litigant. Most of these fees are set by the Judicial Conference of the United States.

These fees may be paid by mail, electronically, or in person at the Clerk's Office intake desk at either the Chicago Courthouse, which is located in the northeast corner of the 20th floor, or the Rockford Courthouse, which is located on the 2nd floor. Payment may be made in cash, by check, or by credit card (only Visa, Mastercard, and American Express are accepted). If you pay by check, your check should be made out to "Clerk, U.S. District Court." Your name, address, and phone number must appear on the front of your check.

For those litigants who would like to pay their new case filing fee electronically, you must first obtain a case number and then submit your request to pay through Pay.gov. Visit certified copies and other service requests section of the website for more information and to start your e-billing process.

Fee Schedule & Services – subject to change. The most current fee schedule is on the Court's website.

FILINGS FEES (as of January 2025)

Civil Filing Fee	$405.00
Habeas Corpus Filing Fee	$5.00
Registration of Foreign Judgment	$52.00
Letters Rogatory or Letters of Request	$47.00
U.S. Court of Appeals Docketing Fee	$600.00
U.S. District Court Notice of Appeal	$5.00
Misdemeanor Appeal (Magistrate to District Judge)	$41.00

COPY SERVICE

Certification Fee (Per Document)	$12.00
Exemplification (Per Document)	$24.00
Copy Fee (Per Page)	$.50 (50 cents per page)
Audio Recording	$34.00
Record Retrieval (Off Site Storage)	$70.00, $43 for additional box
Records Search & Certification (Per Name)	$34.00

MISCELLANEOUS FEES

U.S. District Court Rules (General, Civil, Criminal, Admiralty)	$10.50
Returned Check or any insufficient funds	$53.00