

PLAIN-ENGLISH GUIDE

Family Law in Cuyahoga County

A plain-English map for divorce, dissolution, custody, support, and adoption in Cleveland and across Cuyahoga County. Learn which court handles your case, what to file, and when to get help.

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- 01** See how Cuyahoga County splits family law across three courts.

 - 02** Know the difference between dissolution, divorce, juvenile custody, and probate adoption.

 - 03** Find the right form, the filing office, and the local steps that trip people up.

 - 04** Pick a next step that fits your budget, your timeline, and how much conflict there is.

START HERE

Use this guide like a map, not a rulebook.

Family law gets easier once you name a few things: the court, the path, the paperwork, and your next step. This guide is built on those questions for Cuyahoga County.

01

Which court handles this?

Married couples file divorce or dissolution in the Domestic Relations Court. Unmarried parents file custody in the Juvenile Court. Adoptions go to the Probate Court. Each is its own court.

02

Do we agree, or is there a fight?

Agreement changes everything. Dissolution and uncontested filings run on signed paperwork. If someone disagrees, misses deadlines, or safety is a worry, plan for a more protective path.

03

What should I gather first?

Gather any current orders and your income records. Add insurance details, the kids' birth certificates, school and parenting-time notes, and a short list of what you want the court to decide.

THIS GUIDE IS INFORMATION, NOT LEGAL ADVICE

It explains how things usually work in Cuyahoga County. It cannot cover the facts of your case. Reading it, downloading it, or contacting Gavvl Law does not make you a client. Only a signed engagement agreement does that. For advice about your own case, talk with a licensed Ohio attorney.

CONFIRM CURRENT FEES AND DETAILS

Cuyahoga's courts set their own filing fees, and these change. This guide flags what to confirm with the court before you file, like deposits and any required class.

FREE SELF-HELP IS AVAILABLE

The Domestic Relations Court offers free online tools through Ohio Legal Help. They build many divorce and custody packets for you, step by step.

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QUESTION ONE

Which court is actually handling your case?

One family can touch more than one court. Cuyahoga County has separate courts for divorce, juvenile matters, and adoption. Start with the relationship, and with what you need a judge to decide.

MARRIED OR FORMERLY MARRIED

Domestic Relations Court

Divorce, dissolution, legal separation, annulment, spousal support, and dividing property and debt.

WHERE

Old Courthouse, 1 W.
Lakeside Ave. (216)
443-8800.

PARENTS NEVER MARRIED

Juvenile Court

Custody, parenting time, parentage, and child support for unmarried parents. Also abuse, neglect, and dependency.

WHERE

9300 Quincy Ave. (216)
443-8400.

ADOPTION

Probate Court

Stepparent, kinship, and adult adoption, plus name changes and guardianships.

WHERE

Old Courthouse. (216)
443-8764.

Three separate courts

Divorce and dissolution are heard in the Domestic Relations Court, led by Administrative Judge Diane M. Palos. That court and the Probate Court share the Old Courthouse on Lakeside Avenue. The Juvenile Court is on Quincy Avenue. File with the right one for your case.

PART ONE

The Domestic Relations Court ends marriages.

If you are married, ending the marriage runs through the Domestic Relations Court. The first real question is simple: can both spouses sign a full agreement?

| WHERE YOU FILE | E-FILING | SELF-HELP | RESIDENCY |
|----------------|-----------|-----------------|------------------|
| Old Courthouse | Available | Ohio Legal Help | 6 months in Ohio |

QUICK PATHFINDER

Do you agree on everything?

If yes, dissolution may fit. If no, divorce is the safer or required path. Agreement means more than wanting the case over. It means signed terms on property, debt, support, and parenting.

Dissolution is built on agreement.

Both spouses file together as co-petitioners. They ask the court to approve a signed Separation Agreement. The court holds a hearing 30 to 90 days later. Both spouses must appear and confirm the agreement.

Divorce is a lawsuit.

One spouse files against the other. Use it when you do not yet agree. Use it when you cannot find your spouse, or when you need the court to decide something.

CONFIRM THE DEPOSIT WITH THE CLERK

Cuyahoga County's divorce and dissolution filing deposits are set by the court and are not listed in this guide. Confirm the current amount, and any guardian or service fees, with the Domestic Relations Court at (216) 443-8800 before you file. One spouse must have lived in Ohio six months.

DISSOLUTION

The dissolution packet, step by step.

Dissolution uses the Ohio Supreme Court forms. In Cuyahoga County, the free Ohio Legal Help Form Assistant can build the packet for you.

FILE JOINTLY, THEN ATTEND THE HEARING

Both spouses sign and file the joint petition with the Separation Agreement. The hearing is 30 to 90 days out, and both spouses must appear and affirm the agreement is voluntary and that they still want the dissolution.

| FORM | WHERE TO GET IT | WHAT IT'S FOR |
|---|--------------------------|--|
| Petition for Dissolution https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domestic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1 | Ohio Supreme Court forms | Both spouses sign; opens the joint case |
| Separation Agreement https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domestic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1 | Ohio Supreme Court forms | Your signed terms; notarize this first |
| Form Assistant (self-help) https://ccdrcc.ohiolegalhelp.org/ | ccdrcc.ohiolegalhelp.org | Builds many DR packets for free |
| Affidavit of income & property https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domestic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1 | Ohio Supreme Court forms | Each spouse's finances |
| Parenting plan + worksheet https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domestic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1 | Ohio Supreme Court forms | With children; the plan and support math |
| Proposed Decree https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domestic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1 | Ohio Supreme Court forms | The judgment the court signs |

CONFIRM THIS**Any parenting class**

Many Ohio courts ask divorcing parents to take a parenting class. This guide does not list Cuyahoga's current requirement, so confirm whether a class is required, and the provider, with the court before your hearing.

E-FILING

Most domestic relations documents can be filed online through the court's e-filing system at efiling.cp.cuyahogacounty.us. The Help Center at (216) 443-8880 can point you to the right office.

DIVORCE

Filing a divorce when you do not agree.

Divorce is filed in the Domestic Relations Court, with the Clerk of Court in Room 35 of the Old Courthouse. The free Form Assistant can build the starting packet.

| FORM | WHERE TO GET IT | WHAT IT'S FOR |
|---|--------------------------|--|
| Complaint for Divorce https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domestic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1 | Ohio Supreme Court forms | Starts the lawsuit; with or without children |
| Form Assistant (self-help) https://ccdrcc.ohiolegalhelp.org/ | ccdrcc.ohiolegalhelp.org | Builds the divorce packet for free |
| Affidavit of income & property https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domestic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1 | Ohio Supreme Court forms | Your financial picture |
| Parenting Proceeding Affidavit https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domestic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1 | Ohio Supreme Court forms | With children; the UCCJEA affidavit |
| Affidavit 5 (Temporary Orders) https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domestic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1 | Ohio Supreme Court forms | File if you want orders during the case |

How filing works

You file with the Clerk of Court in Room 35 of the Old Courthouse, or online through e-filing. Service on the other spouse is arranged through the Clerk. The Help Center at (216) 443-8880 can guide self-represented filers.

WANT ORDERS DURING THE CASE?

You can ask for temporary support or a parenting schedule while the divorce is pending by filing Affidavit 5. See the next page for how the timing works in Cuyahoga County.

TEMPORARY ORDERS

Getting orders while the case runs.

A divorce can take months. Temporary orders set the rules in the meantime — things like temporary support or a parenting schedule.

The 14-day rule

For standard temporary orders, you file Affidavit 5, the motion and affidavit for temporary orders without an oral hearing, under the civil rules. The other spouse then has 14 days to file a counter-affidavit before the court decides.

True emergencies

Cuyahoga's Domestic Relations Court does not publish a do-it-yourself emergency custody form; an emergency ex parte motion is usually attorney-drafted and directed to your assigned judge. Confirm your judge's current practice before filing.

UNMARRIED PARENTS AND SAFETY

If you were never married and need emergency custody, that is a Juvenile Court matter under its emergency rule. If the emergency involves violence, a protection order can be the fastest tool, and it can include temporary custody. If anyone is in danger right now, call 911.

CHILDREN

Custody, parenting time, and child support.

Ohio uses specific words for custody. Cuyahoga County handles support through the county child support office.

SOLE CUSTODY

Residential parent and legal custodian

One parent is the residential parent and legal custodian. The other parent usually has parenting time. Ohio does not use the words “full” or “primary” custody.

SHARED PARENTING

A shared parenting plan

Both parents share rights and duties under a written plan. Shared parenting is not the same as equal time. The schedule is whatever the plan or order says.

Building a parenting plan

The free Form Assistant at ccdc.ohiolegalhelp.org can help you build a parenting plan and the supporting forms. A guardian ad litem may be appointed in a contested case to speak to the children's best interests.

CHILD SUPPORT RUNS THROUGH OCSS

The Office of Child Support Services handles support, at (216) 443-5100. Support is set under Ohio's guidelines, collected by income withholding, and paid through the state.

THE REST OF A DIVORCE

Spousal support, property, and other paths.

Beyond custody and child support, a divorce sorts out spousal support and divides what you own and owe.

Spousal support

The court can order one spouse to support the other for a set time. Ohio weighs income, the length of the marriage, health, and other factors. There is no fixed formula.

Property and debt

Ohio divides marital property and debt fairly. Fair does not always mean a 50-50 split. Property you brought into the marriage may count as separate.

Legal separation and annulment

Both are filed in the Domestic Relations Court. Legal separation sets terms without ending the marriage. Annulment is rare and has narrow grounds.

A note on dividing retirement

If a divorce divides a pension or retirement account, it usually takes a separate order to split it with the plan. Getting the wording right matters, and a mistake can cost real money later, so many people use a lawyer for this step.

AFTER THE DECREE

Changing or enforcing a Cuyahoga County order.

Life changes after a case ends. Post-decree motions stay in the same Domestic Relations case that issued your decree.

Modifying and enforcing

To change custody or support, you file a motion in the existing case. The Form Assistant at ccdrc.ohiolegalhelp.org includes a Motion for Custody Change. Support changes can also start through OCSS at (216) 443-5100.

Confirm post-decree fees

Filing deposits for post-decree motions are set by the court and are not listed here. Confirm the current amount with the Clerk or the Help Center at (216) 443-8880 before you file.

ENFORCING AN ORDER

If the other parent ignores a court order, you can file a motion to enforce it, sometimes called a contempt motion. The court can order compliance and, in some cases, award attorney fees.

HELP ALONG THE WAY

Mediation, GALs, and self-help.

Cuyahoga County offers ways to settle disputes. It also offers free tools to help you prepare your case.

Mediation

The Domestic Relations Court offers mediation to help parents reach an agreement on their own. It is never used for a domestic violence case or to decide a protection order.

Guardians ad litem

The court can appoint a guardian ad litem to look into the children's needs in a contested case. The guardian's role is to speak to the children's best interests.

Free self-help

The court's Form Assistants at ccdrcc.ohiolegalhelp.org build many packets for free, and the Help Center at (216) 443-8880 guides self-represented filers.

NOT SURE WHERE TO START?

Two minutes to a clear next step.

Gavvl's Find My Service quiz gives you a recommendation and your payment options. Or talk with our team about full or limited-scope help in Cuyahoga County.

Find My Service · gavvl.com/find-my-service

Get started · gavvl.com/start

Call · (844) 694-2885

Email · support@gavvl.com

PROTECTION ORDERS

When safety comes first.

A domestic violence civil protection order can order someone to stay away. It can also set temporary custody and support. Your safety drives the timeline.

| FILING FEE | WHERE | EX PARTE ORDER | FINAL ORDER |
|-------------------|----------|----------------|---------------|
| \$0 to petitioner | DR Court | Same day | Up to 5 years |

How it works here

A protection order is filed in the Domestic Relations Court under R.C. 3113.31, with no fee to the petitioner. The court can hold a same-day ex parte hearing, and that emergency order can include a temporary custody decision.

Where to go

The DV Help Center is in the Old Courthouse. The room has been listed two ways, so call ahead at (216) 443-8800 to confirm where to go. A full hearing follows the emergency order.

IF YOU ARE IN DANGER NOW

If you or your children are in danger right now, call 911. A protection order is a civil court process, not an emergency response. Domestic violence is also a crime, handled separately.

PART TWO

The Juvenile Court is for parents who were never married.

Were the parents never married? Then custody, parenting time, and child support are decided in the Juvenile Court, at the Juvenile Justice Center on Quincy Avenue.

Parentage comes first

In Ohio, the mother of a child born outside marriage is the only legal custodian until a court says otherwise. So a father usually has to prove he is the father first. You can do that by a signed form, through the child support office, or by a court case.

Filing for custody as an unmarried parent

| FORM | WHERE TO GET IT | WHAT IT'S FOR |
|---|--------------------------|--|
| Application to Determine Custody https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domes-tic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1 | Cuyahoga Juvenile Court | Opens a custody case for unmarried parents |
| Complaint for Parentage https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domes-tic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1 | Ohio Supreme Court forms | When fatherhood is not yet established |
| Motion for Temporary Custody (Rule 13) https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domes-tic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1 | Cuyahoga Juvenile Court | For an emergency; needs a sworn affidavit |
| Application for Child Support https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domes-tic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1 | Juvenile Court or OCSS | Sets up the support case with the office |

COSTS AND HELP

The Juvenile Court is at 9300 Quincy Avenue, (216) 443-8400. A Resource Center at (216) 443-3149 helps people who file on their own. Confirm the current filing deposit with the court, since it is not listed here.

AFTER A JUVENILE ORDER

Changing orders and emergencies.

Juvenile orders can change as children grow. Some cases move fast.

Modifying a juvenile order

To change custody, parenting time, or support, you file a motion in the existing case at the Juvenile Court. Support changes can also start through the child support office at (216) 443-5100.

Emergency custody

When there is no divorce case, an emergency goes to the Juvenile Court under its Rule 13. You file a Motion for Temporary Custody. Your affidavit must show the child is in immediate danger. You also file to open the case.

ONE CASE AT A TIME

A pending divorce case usually controls custody of the same children, so the Juvenile Court will not run a parallel case. Confirm no other case is open before you choose where to file. For immediate danger, call 911.

PART THREE

Adoption is handled by the Probate Court.

Stepparent and kinship adoptions go to the Probate Court in the Old Courthouse.

Here is the general shape of the process under Ohio law.

CONFIRM THE CUYAHOGA ADOPTION DETAILS

The Probate Court has an Adoption Department at (216) 443-8974. This guide does not list Cuyahoga's adoption types or per-case costs, so confirm those, and the exact forms, with the Adoption Department. Adoption is governed statewide by R.C. Chapter 3107.

1

File the petition in Probate

File the Ohio Petition for Adoption of a Minor in the Probate Court. Add the child's birth certificate. For a stepparent, add the marriage certificate too.

2

Address consent

The other parent usually must consent. A court can excuse consent in some cases, such as a year of no contact or support without good reason. A child 12 or older also consents.

3

Complete the home study

Ohio law usually asks for a home study. A stepparent or kinship case can be simpler. Ask the Adoption Department which steps your adoption type needs.

4

Attend the hearing

If the court finds the adoption is in the child's best interest, it signs a final decree of adoption. A new birth record can follow.

PART FOUR

How Gavvl Law can help in Cuyahoga County.

Gavvl is a modern Ohio family-law firm serving all 88 counties. We pair skilled lawyers with easy-to-use tech and clear pricing. You choose how much help you need.

FULL REPRESENTATION

An attorney handles the whole case

From the first consult through final orders: strategy, every filing, all court dates, and negotiating. Best for contested, complex, or high-conflict cases. Billed as a retainer plus hourly fees.

LIMITED-SCOPE (FLAT FEE)

Hire us for specific tasks

Pay a flat fee per service — drafting and filing, one hearing, advice, or document review. Best for uncontested cases and tighter budgets. Not built for high-conflict cases that need steady advocacy.

Ways to pay

Your options depend on the service model. Limited-scope work has the widest range: pay in full, Affirm, Klarna, or PayPal Pay Later. Gavvl Direct is an in-house plan with no credit check. Financed amounts carry 19% annual interest, compounded monthly. We work out your exact payment when you enroll.

START IN TWO MINUTES

Take the Find My Service quiz at gavvl.com/find-my-service. You get a recommendation and your payment options. Or call (844) 694-2885. Consultations are low-cost.

BEFORE YOU GO

Important disclosures.

Please read these notes about how to use this guide.

INFORMATION, NOT LEGAL ADVICE

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FEES AND PROCEDURES CHANGE

The court information in this guide was verified as of June 2026 from official court sources. Some Cuyahoga County fees and local steps are not listed here and should be confirmed with the court. Court fees, forms, and procedures change. Always confirm current requirements with the Cuyahoga County courts before you file.

AWARDS AND REVIEWS

Any awards, ratings, and reviews reflect the experiences of other clients and the opinions of rating organizations. They are not a guarantee or prediction of the outcome of your case. Every case is different.

JURISDICTION AND RESPONSIBILITY

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