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A Maryland Judiciary Production

My Laws, My Courts, My Maryland

Day of Court: Tips for Your Day in Court

Most people only know about courts from what they see on TV, where the courtroom is a dramatic place. Go into any Maryland trial court, and you will see people just like yourself. Some will have lawyers, but many will not. Are you feeling nervous or unsure about your case or going to court? Well, those people probably are too. Today, I hope to give you some tips and ease some of those feelings.

First, be on time. Give yourself enough time to find a parking spot, go through security, figure out where your courtroom is, and look through your notes one last time. If you are already late, call the clerk’s office and ask them to let the judge know that you’re sorry and will be there soon. The court normally schedules many cases each day. If you are late, the judge may call your case and go on without you. You may lose your chance to be heard, and you may lose your case as a result.

Second, dress appropriately and professionally. While you should feel free to express yourself through dress, hair, and makeup in your day-to-day life, you may need to “tone yourself down” on the day you appear in court. A dress shirt, slacks, or a conservative skirt or dress are all appropriate. Present yourself in a way that looks professional and not distracting. You want the judge to focus on your case, not your hairdo.

Third, speak clearly and concisely. Write down notes for yourself, and practice what you are going to say to the judge. Try to keep your side of the story short. Stick to the facts. While you may be upset with the other party, now is not the time to tell them every way they’ve ever made you mad – instead, only tell the judge facts that are relevant to THIS CASE.

Be sure to tell the judge clearly what you want him or her to do with your case. Suggest a specific solution to the judge. For instance, instead of saying, “I want to see my kids more,” say “I would like to see my kids on Labor Day weekend each year, and also one more day per week: Tuesday.” Remember, the judge is not your lawyer, so it is up to you to decide what you need. While the judge may or may not be able to say yes, he or she will at least know what you are asking for.

Fourth, treat everyone with respect. When talking to court staff, be patient and polite. Use clean language in the courtroom, and remain civil toward the other party. Use Mr. and Ms. instead of first names. Call the judge “Your Honor” and stand up when you speak to the judge.

Now this is very important: Do not talk over people who are speaking. This includes the judge, as well as the other side. The hearing is being recorded. If an official transcript is later made, it needs to be understandable, not full of interruptions. Even if the other side says something that infuriates you, or that you believe is untrue, write it down so you can remember to address it with the judge and wait your turn. The judge must hear the entire story, and he or she will want to hear your side too. If you don’t get a chance to say what you need to say, politely say, “Excuse me, your Honor” at an appropriate time.

Stay composed while the other side is speaking. Huffing and puffing is distracting and unbecoming. The judge may find this rude.

Finally, remember that you are under oath and that lying is a crime. If you say something and you know the judge thinks you meant something else it, correct the judge’s understanding.

So remember on your day of court:

-Be on time

-Dress appropriately and professionally

-Speak clearly and concisely

-Treat everyone with respect, and

-Tell the truth

While you may not win your case, by sticking to these tips, you will know that you did your best during your day in court.

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