



NEW SERVICE HELPS PARENTS ADDRESS VISITATION CONCERNS

by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott

THE OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL (OAG), in collaboration with the Texas Access to Justice Foundation, is offering free legal clinics to parents who need help understanding their visitation orders. Although federal regulations do not allow the OAG to use child support funding for legal services about custody or visitation disputes, the OAG does receive limited special funding to provide assistance in visitation matters. The desire to increase positive, safe shared parenting has led the OAG to work with the Texas Access to Justice Foundation (TAJF) to develop a statewide project to help parents with visitation questions. The Parenting Order Legal Clinics, also known as POLC, are offered one evening a month in over 30 locations across Texas. The two-hour clinics are led by experienced attorneys who are trained to address parents' access and visitation concerns.

In a town hall setting, attorneys will provide

- general information about visitation orders
- an explanation of complex legal terms included in most visitation orders
- requirements for changing an order
- local resources to help with visitation concerns.

Parents receive clinic services face-to-face and attorneys are able to spend more time ensuring parents leave with the knowledge and resources needed to resolve parenting time issues. Child

Support attorneys also volunteer their time to be present to answer questions related to child support.

Parents are encouraged to bring their court orders to the clinic so the attorneys can offer information that is relevant to attendees' circumstances and to call the clinic's phone number to ask for childcare or to request an interpreter.

Although attorneys cannot offer legal advice, parents will walk away from the sessions with a better understanding of their parental rights and responsibilities and why it is important for both parents to comply with court orders that regulate parental access to children. Parents can attend multiple clinics if necessary.

In addition to the clinic services, TAJF and the OAG are identifying and developing local resources for visitation order services to help parents resolve their visitation issues.

The first POLC site began in June 2008. Now, POLC is available in more than 30 locations statewide. Childcare and/or Spanish interpreters may be available upon request. To find the clinic nearest you, call (866) 292-4636 any weekday between 1 and 7 p.m. Clinic locations are also available in the family law section of Texas Law Help at <http://texaslawhelp.org/link.cfm?2412> or on the OAG Web site under What's New in the Child Support section.

The Access and Visitation hotline is available for parents who are unable to

attend a POLC in person. Depending on the circumstances, hotline attorneys may help parents understand the terms of their legal orders, identify steps they can take to resolve visitation conflicts without going to court, draft visitation compliance letters, determine if a modification to the visitation or custody order is needed and access local legal resources. Hotline attorneys ensure that safety for children and both parents is addressed on the call and they guide parents to take appropriate steps when concerns are identified. Over 1,500 calls from parents are answered each month and the hotline's companion Web site, which offers helpful legal forms and other legal information, is accessed nearly 4,000 times per month. The hotline is staffed by attorneys trained to answer parents' questions about child custody, visitation, paternity and child support. The hotline's toll-free number (866) 292-4636, is available Monday through Friday from 1 to 7 p.m.

Parents also can visit www.txaccess.org to obtain downloadable legal forms and examples for completing them, samples of parent letters to request compliance with orders, visitation logs, and other tools for resolving custody and visitation concerns.

To learn about other access and visitation services that the Child Support Division offers, visit the child support section of the OAG Web site www.texasattorneygeneral.gov and select Child Support, then select Family Initiatives.

POINTS TO REMEMBER



ACCESS AND VISITATION SERVICES

- The OAG, in collaboration with the Texas Access to Justice Foundation, is offering free Parenting Order Legal Clinics to help parents understand possession orders.
- POLC is available in more than 30 locations statewide. Childcare and/or Spanish interpreters are available upon request.
- To find the clinic nearest you, call (866) 292-4636 any weekday between 1 and 7 p.m. Clinic locations are also available in the family law section of Texas Law Help at <http://texaslawhelp.org/link.cfm?2412>.
- The Access and Visitation hotline, available for parents unable to attend one of the monthly clinics, is staffed by attorneys trained to answer parents' questions about child custody, visitation, paternity and child support. The hotline's toll-free number, (866) 292-4636, is available Monday through Friday from 1 to 7 p.m. and is answered in English and in Spanish.
- To learn about other access and visitation services that the Child Support Division offers, visit the child support section of the OAG Web site www.texasattorneygeneral.gov, and select Family Initiatives.



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