

Frequenting Asked Questions: DOCUMENTING YOUR CASE!
.. It can make the difference between winning or losing your
case--

WHAT IS “DOCUMENTATION”?

“Documentation” is what’s written on paper. You need documentation because courts, lawyers, social service agencies, and a lot of other people make decisions by looking at what’s written on paper. Documentation helps you to convince these people that what you are saying is true so they are more likely to make decisions that help you.

HOW DO I DOCUMENT WHAT HAPPENS TO ME?

The main thing you can do to document the things that happen to you is to save papers. Save court papers, notices, letters, receipts, notes, and anything else you receive that is important and written on paper. Keep the envelopes, too.

You can also make notes of conversations and events. Always put the date of the conversation or event in your notes. You might want to keep your notes on a calendar.

Another way to document things that have happened to you or things you have seen is to make a police report. Some people don’t call the police because they don’t think the police will do anything. But, sometimes a report just documents what happened, even if no charges are filed and no one is arrested. Remember to get and keep a copy of the report, too.

If you believe that your child has been physically abused in some way, you should report what you know to Children’s Protective Services to help you prove later what happened. In the same way, if you have problems with visitation with your child, make a complaint to the Friend of the Court. Get and keep copies of the paperwork.

HOW DO I DOCUMENT WHAT I TOLD SOMEONE?

You can document what you say to someone by sending the person a letter. Always remember to put a *date* on the letter so you can show *when* you sent it, and always make and keep a photocopy of the letter so you can show *what* you sent.

There are two ways to prove that you mailed your letter. The first is to send the letter by certified mail with a return receipt requested. You get the certified mail receipt at post office when you mail the letter. Staple the certified mail receipt to your photocopy of the letter. You get a green card back after your letter is delivered. When it comes back, staple the green card to the copy of your letter, too.

If you are sending a letter to someone you think will refuse to sign for certified mail, there is another way to prove you sent the letter. You can use a little white slip of paper called a “Certificate of Mailing.” The Post Office calls it “PS Form 3817.”

A certificate of mailing is really a receipt showing that you mailed a letter to someone and the date you mailed it. It is not the same thing as certified mail (even though they sound like the same thing) because no one has to sign for it. You can fill out a certificate of mailing at any post office. Don’t forget to have the clerk stamp the date of it. Staple the certificate of mailing to the photocopy of your letter.

HOW DO I DOCUMENT A PAYMENT?

You document that you paid someone money for rent or some other bill by getting a receipt and saving it. If the person you are paying won’t give you a receipt, make your own. How? Either pay by money order or by personal check. *Never give cash to anyone if you are not sure you will get a receipt. You may not be able to prove what you paid.*

WHERE DO I PUT ALL THIS STUFF?

The best place to save all of your documents is in a large, brown manila envelope. Put all of those important papers in that envelope, and keep them there. Then, put the envelope in a safe place. *(By the way, it is also very important to keep documents like birth certificates,*

social security cards, vehicle titles, deeds, and immigration papers in a safe place.)

The safest place to put your documents would be in a safe deposit box at a bank. You can also keep your papers in any other place that is secure and under lock and key. A car might not be the best place, though, if the car is in danger of being stolen, repossessed or damaged in an accident.

Some people like to give their papers to someone they can truly trust to hang onto them and not lose them. *This is a very good idea if you are in a relationship where there is abuse or domestic violence and you may have to leave in a hurry.*

Making a duplicate copy of your really important papers and keeping them in two different places is also a good idea.

Organize your papers by date, beginning with the paper with the earliest date and ending with the paper with the most recent date. All of this paper tells the story of important things that happened to you or you did. It is like a book, with a beginning and an end.