

## COVID-19 Updates

# Family Law Toolkit for Survivors of Domestic Violence

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Legal Services of Eastern Missouri's Lasting Solutions Family Law Program has answered the following frequently asked questions about COVID-19. The pandemic is especially challenging for those currently or formerly in an abusive relationship.

**These Frequently Asked Questions are not intended as a substitute for legal advice.** For more information or advice about your legal situation, contact a lawyer or call **Legal Services of Eastern Missouri at 314.534.4200.**

### Lasting Solutions Program

#### Are you taking new family law cases?

**Yes.** In the St. Louis area, you may call 314.534.4200 or outside the metropolitan area, you may call 800.444.0514 to talk with a staff member between 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. Our goal is to have someone answer your call. If we are not available, leave a message and we will call you back as soon as we can.

**You may also submit an application for services online by clicking here.**

We are unable to meet walk-in clients until further notice because our staff is working remotely at this time. We will ask you questions to find out if you are eligible for free legal services. Afterwards, we will notify you if there is an attorney available to help you. If not, we can provide you with referrals for appropriate resources.

#### What cases does the Lasting Solutions Family Law Program handle?

We handle cases involving Orders of Protection, Dissolution of Marriage (Divorce), Paternity/Custody, and other family law matters. In addition to these cases, we can talk with you about any family law emergencies you have as a result of COVID-19. If you require other legal services, please see [our homepage](#) to learn about the other civil legal services we provide.

### General Information about Traveling During a Missouri Stay-at-Home Order

#### When will the Stay-at-Home Orders end?

Missouri is under a state-wide Stay-at-Home order, and many Missouri counties have their own Stay-at-Home orders as well, including St. Louis City, St. Louis County, St. Charles and Jefferson Counties. Orders are being extended and changed, but for up-to-date, clear information, check out this link to

[The Missouri Times.](#)

Here are the links to the orders:

[St. Louis City](#)

[St. Louis County](#)

[Jefferson County](#)

[St. Charles County \(Executive Orders\)](#)

#### Am I allowed to leave my home? If so, for what?

**Yes,** in all counties with stay-at-home orders, you are allowed to leave your residence for certain reasons. Those generally include to shop for food, other essentials, and pet needs; to work as allowed by law; to attend doctor appointments;

to engage in spiritual activities; and to take a walk or run for exercise. Physical distancing and limitations on group size are required for all activities outside the home.

### **Can I travel to exchange my child with the other parent if there is a stay-at-home order?**

**Yes**, you may engage in such travel as you need, so you can follow your current custody plans. Court orders for custody and visitation remain in effect. Parents can agree to make changes to the plan, ideally in writing. If it would be unsafe to travel using your current custody order and your ex will not agree to a change, you may want to talk with your lawyer about asking the court for a temporary restraining order for the situation. If you are a survivor of domestic or sexual violence and have concerns about what you should do to stay safe, you should discuss this with your attorney or call a local advocate (Safe Connections' hotline is 314.531.2003 or ALIVE at 314.993.2777).

### **Do I need a travel authorization or work permit to travel to work?**

**No**. Current law does not require a travel authorization or work permit. Local law enforcement should not stop people to check their reasons for traveling and are not authorized under these stay-at-home orders to do so. Local public health authorities and law enforcement officials state the police will not stop anyone for traveling. They are not enforcing the law in that manner. The public are being urged to voluntarily comply with these orders, for the well-being of our community and ourselves.

### **Can I leave my home if I need to escape from an abuser?**

**Yes**. You are encouraged to leave your home to escape abuse, if it is safe for you to do so. For example, in St. Louis County, the stay-at-home order explicitly states, "Individuals whose residences are unsafe or become unsafe, such as victims of domestic violence, are permitted and urged to leave their home and stay at a safe, alternative location." [IV(A)(4)].

### **If I leave, will the police arrest me?**

**No**. You should not be arrested just because you are leaving for an authorized reason like seeking safety from domestic violence for you or your children by going to a shelter or another safe location. Contact law enforcement to assist you, if needed.

### **Is there anywhere I can go if I need to escape from my abuser?**

**Yes**, Domestic violence and homeless shelters are allowed to stay open at this time. Some shelters may decide, on a shelter-by-shelter basis, to close right now. Please call before going to a shelter to ask if they are open and if they have availability. You may also consider whether you could stay with a friend or family member at this time.

For shelter numbers or other resources, you can call our local hotlines: Safe Connections at 314.531.2003 or ALIVE at 314.993.2777. [You can find a list of local DV shelters here](#). For information online about local shelters and other non-shelter service providers across the state, [click here for the Missouri Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence website](#).

## **Court Attendance**

### **Do I need to go to court for a conference in April 2020?**

**Probably not**. On April 1, 2020, the Missouri Supreme Court stopped most in-person appearances until May 1, 2020 to slow the spread of the coronavirus. Many cases are being rescheduled or continued for a date in the next few weeks. Some courts are holding hearings and conferences at this time by phone or video conferences on a variety of court cases, including family law cases.

The court will send you information about your new court date and the use of remote technology for court appearances. Be sure the court has your current mailing address to ensure you receive these updates. If you have not received a new court date when your current court date nears, check your case on the [court's website here](#), contact your lawyer, or [call the court clerk](#).

### **What are the COVID-19 pandemic procedures for Missouri courts?**

[Click here for court information](#).

### **I've heard one thing from my local court and another from the state supreme court. What should I do?**

Please be patient as the courts across Missouri are working hard to ensure public safety. To confirm your court date, check your case on the [court's website](#), contact your lawyer, or [call the court clerk](#).

## Are there any in-person civil court proceedings still happening?

**Yes.** Across the state these in-person court proceedings, as well as others, can still move forward:

- Juvenile delinquency, child abuse and neglect, and termination of parental rights
- Adoptions
- Order of Protection Cases
- Temporary Restraining Orders (or other forms of temporary injunctive relief)
- Emergency Child Custody Orders

## Will remote communication be done in a way that protects my privacy and confidentiality?

You have the right to such privacy protections even during these very challenging times. Our constitutional and privacy rights should be protected even during times of fast change. Survivors of domestic and sexual violence, in particular, should not have to compromise confidentiality and privacy.

## Is there support for advocates about how to ensure survivor confidentiality?

**Yes.** As an advocate, or someone else who is working with a survivor, please be sure all communications with survivors are confidential, even in the midst of the pandemic. Here is a helpful resource from the [Safety Net Project of the National Network to End Domestic Violence \(NNEDV\)](#) about how we can best use technology to assist survivors during a pandemic.

## Orders of Protection

### Can I still get an order of protection at this time?

**Yes.** The courts understand the importance of orders of protection and are giving them priority. If the court enters a “put out” order, a sheriff still has authority to remove an abusive person from the home. The court also can enter orders for safety, custody, and support. At this time, in St. Louis City, St. Louis County, Jefferson County, and St. Charles County, you can still file a petition at the courthouse. Be prepared for a medical screening before you can to enter.

St. Louis County has created a way to complete and submit an order of protection petition online on [their website](#). Other local courts may be promoting a remote access process. [Call the court clerk](#) or your local police department to ask about the current process for filing a petition for an order of protection. [See blank petition here](#).

### What is the current process to ask for an order of protection in St. Louis County?

On April 2, 2020, St. Louis County Circuit Court created a process for handling orders of protection due to coronavirus, reflecting an Administrative Order dated March 26. It is the only court in our area at this time to issue such an Order. Some of its provisions include:

- St. Louis County Courthouse Adult Abuse Office hours are 8 a.m. - 4 p.m. M-F; 9 a.m.-12 p.m. Sat.
- Petitioners filing an order of protection should [use the court’s website](#) to complete the forms.
- Petitioners can submit the petition [online here](#). If you cannot submit the petition online, you can bring it to the court as the court requests. If you have an emergency, after-hours order of protection, petitioners should call their local Police Department to ask about how to file the petition with them.
- The court will provide instructions for how litigants may participate remotely by Zoom in the proceedings.
- Details about the new court process will be sent by mail to all litigants in pending cases.
- When Respondents are served with the order of protection papers, they will receive instructions on how to appear remotely at court.
- Parties may choose to appear in person for the proceedings.
  - Order of protection dockets will be staggered and shared by several judges at one time.
  - No more than 10 people will be in the courtroom at one time.
  - Additional bailiffs will be present to ensure there is no contact between the parties.
  - Respondents will be asked to wait to leave for 15 minutes after petitioners leave.
- Indirect criminal contempt dockets will be held in person.
  - Parties will be allowed to participate in such proceedings remotely.

### How do I ask for an order of protection?

[Click here](#) for information about how to complete a petition to request an order of protection. Contact your county’s local Adult Abuse Office, your local police department, or a local advocate to obtain more information about how you will get your petition to the court. The petition is available on the website of most county courts or [here](#).

## Are courts still holding Order of Protection hearings in person at this time?

**No.** Not at this time. After filing your petition, the court may grant you an ex parte order. This is a temporary order. A hearing must be held before the court will issue a full order of protection. At this time, some courts are holding remote hearings, and others are continuing the case to a future date. The ex parte order will stay in place until the hearing. Before going to an order of protection hearing at this time, please check to be sure the hearing will still be held by contacting your lawyer or by [calling the court clerk](#).

## Can the person abusing me be asked to leave my home?

**Yes.** Courts recognize the importance of having a law enforcement officer ask an abusive person to leave the home, even during the COVID-19 pandemic. You first will need to file a petition for an order of protection. If an ex parte order is granted, the order may require the person being abusive to leave the home.

## Child Custody Issues

### What are Judges saying about sharing child custody during the pandemic?

Missouri Judges hope you will work with the other parent in a way that keeps everyone safe. They want you to know that your current custody plans remain in effect. The plans you have now should work well, with perhaps some changes by agreement of both parents. They want all parents to be sure to act in a safe manner for the children's health. They urge you to follow the orders issued by health and other authorities to keep your children safe, such as physical distancing and avoiding playgrounds. They understand it may be difficult to follow your regular custody plan during the pandemic. When it is dangerous or impossible to comply with the custody plan, parents are encouraged to make alternative arrangements such as using Skype or FaceTime or making-up time for missed visits when it is safe to do so. If you have an attorney or a Guardian ad Litem, you may contact them with your specific questions.

You can check your court's website for specific information. Courts are issuing mandatory orders and informal statements about custody.

For example, on March 27, 2020, the Jefferson County Court entered a statement acknowledging there is "a lot of confusion regarding enforcement of court orders of custody and visitation of children." The Court stated that a valid court custody order remains in "full force and effect" during the pandemic. "Law enforcement have authority to enforce custody" and visitation orders, with deference to current state and federal health orders.

In addition to stating that custody orders are enforceable, the Court wants parents to know that in deciding what is appropriate during the pandemic, it will be considering factors such as whether parents are acting both safely and fairly. The Jefferson County Court recognized that when compliance "would be impossible or dangerous (for example, because a member of the receiving parent's household has been exposed to COVID-19), the parents are encouraged to make alternative arrangements for exchange by agreement. For example, if one parent loses visitation time, make-up time at a later date may be appropriate. The Court adds that if the parents cannot work out an agreement, they may return to court using lawful process.

The Court summarized that, "in the absence of an agreement (preferred) or court order, all parties are expected to safely comply with existing court orders." The Court warned that a temporary restraining order could be entered against a parent who fails "to exercise prudent caution." The Court also warned that a contempt order could be entered against a parent who does not have an adequate reason to withhold the child. Either action could result in adverse custody orders and financial costs being entered against the unsafe or unreasonable parent.

### Are Guardians ad Litem (GALs) who represent the child's best interests saying anything about how to handle custody issues during the pandemic?

**Yes.** If you are working with a GAL, you should ask them questions you may have about how best to keep your children safe while allowing appropriate custody time. Crystal Blacketer, a GAL practicing in St. Charles County has provided this helpful information to the parents in her cases: "I hope you both are staying safe during this pandemic. It is certainly uncharted waters for us all. I have been in communication with several of the [local] family court judges over the last week on various matters unrelated to your case. One common theme from all of the judges has been making sure that parents are exercising appropriate precautions such as staying at home if at all possible, practicing social distancing, avoiding play dates, avoiding visitors to the house, hand washing, avoiding public playgrounds, avoiding unnecessary public outings, and following custody and visitation judgments/orders.

I hope that both of you are making sure that [your children] are staying away from friends during this time. It is difficult, but absolutely necessary given the circumstances. Public playgrounds and school playgrounds have

specifically been mentioned in the news as places that are closed and to be avoided. Please make sure your kids are staying home and staying safe. The faster we all adhere to the safe at home measures the faster we can all get back to our normal routines.

In regards to visitation, I encourage you both to work together to allow visitation whether it is daily phone contact, short in-person visits, face-time, skype, etc. The ability of the two of you to work together is one of many factors the Judge must weigh in determining a final custody order in your case. It can't be one way or the other. You both must work together especially during such unprecedented times at these.”

Please note that if you are a survivor of domestic violence, you should speak with your attorney or an advocate to discuss ways to have custody plans put in place that are fair, healthy, and safe. If there is an order of protection in place against one party, you should have communications about what is best for the children through a third party, if possible. Be sure to follow the provisions of any order of protection in place.

### **How can I ask for a change to a court custody order so it will protect my child?**

In general, changes to custody orders require a new court order. You will need to file a motion to modify the order. You must have a reason why the current order is no longer appropriate for the child due to a major change. Missouri does not allow changing a custody order through an order of protection case. Speak with a lawyer about your situation. If you are filing a Motion to Modify on your own, [here is a link with more information and the needed forms](#).

### **What if I have a court custody order and need an emergency change because I'm afraid my child won't be safe with the other parent right now?**

Speak with a lawyer about filing a Motion for a Temporary Restraining Order to request an immediate change in custody. This may be appropriate in some cases if other options are not available. If you need legal assistance with this, please contact Legal Services at 314.534.4200, or toll-free at 800.444.0514, or [go to our website](#). Although we cannot guarantee we can provide you with a lawyer, we will offer resources and information you may find helpful.

### **How do we have supervised visits when the supervisor's office at the court is closed?**

Your court order may address this so first look at your order. You can talk to a lawyer about your particular situation. If a Guardian ad Litem (GAL) is involved in your case, you can contact the GAL for suggestions. Whether the other parent was supervised at court or by a private supervisor, you can contact the current supervisor to see if their services are still available. If not, they may have suggestions for alternative supervisors or other visitation options such as Skype, FaceTime, etc. If you and the other parent agree on changes without a new order, try to get the agreement in writing if it is safe to do so. While many courts are not currently offering supervised visits, they may still be supervising child custody exchanges. Call ahead in case their schedules have changed and be prepared to do a health screening at the door.

### **My custody plan is designed around school, and it's closed now. What custody plan should I follow?**

Look at your parenting plan or custody orders issued to you by the court. It should tell you what plan to use for times and locations to follow until school resumes. Usually, the same plan used during the school term will apply. Adjustments may need to be made in the times and places for exchanges of the children.

### **The other parent is not following the court order and won't return my child to me, is there anything I can do?**

**Yes.** You may file a Family Access Motion, available on the court's website.

### **I don't have a lawyer. How do I get one?**

Contact Legal Services at 314.534.4200, or toll-free at 800.444.0514, or [go to our website](#). Even if we cannot take your case, we may be able to provide you with some information that might assist you or offer suggestions for another agency that could help.

## **Legal Self-Help Measures for Resolving Custody Issues**

### **What legal self-help steps are available to make changes to Missouri child custody orders?**

You can file a motion to modify when the current custody order is no longer appropriate for the child due to a major change. You cannot ask for a current custody order to be changed in an order of protection case. If you are filing the motion to modify on your own, [here is a link](#) with more information and the needed forms. Also, visit your local court's website or call the court clerk to learn about other resources.



## Are there on-line resources to help me so I can file a family law case or motions on my own without a lawyer?

**Yes.** The Missouri courts have an [online resource here](#). Also, visit your local court's website or call the court clerk to learn about other resources.

## Do you have any suggestions for how my ex and I can work out a new custody plan now?

If you have a lawyer, work with your lawyer to develop a custody plan. If you do not have a lawyer, you may want to begin by reading about general principles found in this [joint statement](#) by two highly respected national organizations, printed fully here:

### SEVEN GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS WHO ARE DIVORCED/SEPARATED AND SHARING CUSTODY OF CHILDREN DURING THE COVID19 PANDEMIC

From the leaders of groups that deal with families in crisis:  
the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers (AAML)  
and the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC).

**1. BE HEALTHY.** Comply with all CDC and local and state guidelines and model good behavior for your children with intensive hand washing, wiping down surfaces and other objects that are frequently touched, and maintaining social distancing. This also means **BE INFORMED**. Stay in touch with the most reliable media sources and avoid the rumor mill on social media.

**2. BE MINDFUL.** Be honest about the seriousness of the pandemic but maintain a calm attitude and convey to your children your belief that everything will return to normal in time. Avoid making careless comments in front of the children and exposing them to endless media coverage intended for adults. Don't leave the news on 24/7, for instance. But, at the same time, encourage your children to ask questions and express their concerns and answer them truthfully at a level that is age-appropriate.

**3. BE COMPLIANT** with court orders and custody agreements. As much as possible, try to avoid reinventing the wheel despite the unusual circumstances. The custody agreement or court order exists to prevent endless haggling over the details of timesharing. In some jurisdictions there are even standing orders mandating that, if schools are closed, custody agreements should remain in force as though school were still in session.

**4. BE CREATIVE.** At the same time, it would be foolish to expect that nothing will change when people are being advised not to fly and vacation attractions such as amusement parks, museums and entertainment venues are closing all over the US and the world. In addition, some parents will have to work extra hours to help deal with the crisis and other parents may be out of work or working reduced hours for a time. Plans will inevitably have to change. Encourage closeness with the parent who is not going to see the child through shared books, movies, games and FaceTime or Skype.

**5. BE TRANSPARENT.** Provide honest information to your co-parent about any suspected or confirmed exposure to the virus, and try to agree on what steps each of you will take to protect the child from exposure. Certainly, both parents should be informed at once if the child is exhibiting any possible symptoms of the virus.

**6. BE GENEROUS.** Try to provide makeup time to the parent who missed out, if at all possible. Family law judges expect reasonable accommodations when they can be made and will take seriously concerns raised in later filings about parents who are inflexible in highly unusual circumstances.

**7. BE UNDERSTANDING.** There is no doubt that the pandemic will pose an economic hardship and lead to lost earnings for many, many parents, both those who are paying child support and those who are receiving child support. The parent who is paying should try to provide something, even if

it can't be the full amount. The parent who is receiving payments should try to be accommodating under these challenging and temporary circumstances. Adversity can become an opportunity for parents to come together and focus on what is best for the child. For many children, the strange days of the pandemic will leave vivid memories. It's important for every child to know and remember that both parents did everything they could to explain what was happening and to keep their child safe.

**Additional comment from Legal Services:** These are great guidelines that we encourage you to follow when it is safe to do so. In most cases, it should be safe to follow these guidelines. However, if you experience domestic and sexual violence, adapt them to maintain health and safety. Speak with an attorney or an advocate at a local agency if you have any concerns. Your custody order may require that changes to custody plans be in writing and signed by both parents – even when you both agree. If that is impossible, unsafe, or unhealthy under the present circumstances, try documenting your agreement in another way like e-mail or text message.

## Financial Issues

### Will I still get my child support or other support check?

If there is an order in place for you to receive child support or other financial support like maintenance (alimony), that order is still in effect. This does not guarantee you will get the money or receive it on time, especially with job loss or other difficulties due to the crisis. Unpaid support will continue to build up as debt. There are ways to collect the debt through the Missouri Family Support Division or a lawyer. Child support adjustments can be made through the court process as needed.

### How can I get my share of the stimulus check if the check goes to my abuser because we filed a joint return last year?

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act is a stimulus package that includes many provisions. Stimulus checks are one part of the Act. If you filed your tax forms in 2019 (or last filed in 2018), the check will be sent automatically to the direct deposit information you have on file with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS).

For many people, the check will be sent to the person who filed a tax return in 2019 (or 2018 if the 2019 form has not been filed), and no action needs to be taken. This will not work for many people, including those who filed a joint return, but are now separated or divorced from their spouse.

The IRS created a website to submit your information if you do not file taxes, or if you receive certain benefits and want to include your children in your household. For more details and to submit your information, [click here](#). Also, you still have time to file an income tax return for 2019 because the filing deadline has been extended until July 15 this year. If this process does not work, and your part of the stimulus check goes to the person who filed taxes either for 2019 (or 2018 if 2019 not filed), you still are entitled to your share of the check.

If the person receiving the check does not give you your fair share, there are actions you can take. This may be an emergency matter that our office could handle. Please call Legal Services at 314.534.4200, or toll-free at 800.444.0514, or go to [Legal Services' website](#). We cannot guarantee we can take your case due to limited resources, but we may be able to provide you with helpful resources.

If we are unable to take your case and there already is a pending family law case in court, you may need to be prepared to tell the court on your own that you would like your fair share of the check. The check amounts are \$1200 for an adult, \$2400 for a married couple, and \$500 for each child under age 17. This amount starts to decrease at an annual income of \$75,000 for a single filer.

## Living with an Abuser

### Are there any resources on living with an abuser during a stay-at-home order? Are other people in the same situation as me?

**Yes.** There are local and national resources available to help you through this. You are not alone. You may want to try visiting one of these sites: [Futures Without Violence](#) or [The National Domestic Violence Hotline](#).

For a listing and description of local resources, visit the [St. Louis Ending Violence Against Women Network website](#), or call our local hotlines: Safe Connections at 314.531.2003 or ALIVE at 314. 993.2777.

## Concerns about Children

### What if I'm afraid my child is at risk of physical harm or has suffered physical harm?

You may contact Missouri Children's Division's Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline at 1.800.392.3738 to explain your concerns. This is a toll-free number that is answered 24/7/365. For persons with hearing and speech impairments, please contact Relay Missouri 1.800.735.2466/voice or 1.800.735.2966/text phone. If there is an emergency, Children's Division is required to respond within a set amount of time. They can take what action may be needed to keep your child safe.

### How do I talk with my children about COVID-19?

We understand that there is a lot of anxiety surrounding COVID-19. Here are some helpful resources for talking to your children about the outbreak:

- [PBS: How to Talk to Your Kids About Coronavirus](#)
- [PBS: 10 Tips for Talking About Coronavirus with Your Kids](#)
- [Coronavirus Disease 2019: Prepare Children](#)
- [NPR: Just for Kids: A Comic Exploring the New Coronavirus](#)

## Financial and Legal Resources

### What is in the federal stimulus CARES Act that might help me?

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, also known as the CARES Act, is a law meant to address the economic fallout of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic in the United States. Legal Services is in the process of reviewing what provisions you may find most helpful in the stimulus package. [Click here to search for information about the federal government's response to COVID-19.](#)

The new laws include:

- Expansion of unemployment insurance provisions.
  - \$600 each week for 4 months in addition to state benefits.
  - Missouri provides up to \$320 per week for 20 weeks.
  - 13 weeks of extended benefits.
  - Gig workers, contractors, and the self-employed now qualify for unemployment benefits.
- Paid sick leave benefits.
- Paid leave for 14 days when a parent must stay home to care for a child whose school has closed.
- Federal tax filing deadline extended from April 15, 2020 to July 15, 2020.
- Suspension of student loan payments until September 30, 2020.
- Suspension of all foreclosure proceedings until at least May 17, 2020.
- Suspension of Real ID requirements until September 2021.
- Changes allowing easier access to emergency food and Food Stamps/SNAP.
  - More money provided for SNAP.
  - Work requirements are waived during the national emergency.
- Investments will be made in housing and to reduce homelessness.
- Free diagnostic testing for COVID-19.
- Small business loans.
- Money for domestic violence services.

### What is being done locally to provide help for me and my children right now to ensure our housing, financial, and food stability?

Local and state governments are taking action to help people who are struggling as a result of COVID-19 emergency. Social services agencies are working hard to provide support. Check the Legal Services' website for updated information. [Click here for LSEM COVID-19 updates.](#)

Information about state and local services:

- Homeless and domestic violence shelters are open.
- Ensuring access to food is a major priority.
- Evictions are put on hold.
- If you have lost your job, you may apply for unemployment insurance. You are encouraged to [apply online here.](#)



- Municipal ticket court cases are being continued in many local courts.
- Safety requirements for childcare have increased in St. Louis County.
- Local utility companies are offering relief.

Creditors understand that special accommodations may be required at this time. Consider contracting your creditor to find out if you can make better arrangements for the repayment of your debt. Consumer protections might be available as needed, [including help offered through Legal Services' office](#).

### **I usually get food from a Food Pantry or Food Bank. Are those still open?**

**Maybe.** In St. Louis County, “Businesses that provide food, shelter, social services, or other necessities of life for economically disadvantaged people or people otherwise in need of social services” can remain open during this time [III(F) (7)]. Other local counties also allow such businesses to continue. Some of these businesses may be choosing to close at this time. Please make sure you call before you try to visit one of these businesses to ensure that they are open and serving clients. A different process may be in place for you to receive food outside the food pantry location at places like the parking lot. Some libraries are assisting with food distribution. Please work with the food pantry staff to ensure the safest experience possible for everyone. You can also call 211 or go to [Operation Food Search](#) to look for other food options.

### **My children receive food through their school. Can they get the food somehow?**

**Maybe.** Contact your local school district for more information. Different procedures may be in place at the various locations. For example, you may be asked to drive to a set location, hold up your fingers for how many bags of food you need, and then wait as the bags are loaded into your trunk. Also, for families whose children receive free or reduced meals in a Missouri school district and whose children’s school has closed for at least 5 consecutive days, Missouri will send the families a Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transaction card with benefits for March, April, and May, with the amount provided still to be determined.

### **Are there any resources for especially vulnerable people?**

We understand that certain populations may be experiencing additional stress at this time because they may be more vulnerable during any crisis. We will continue to provide resources for those who are at an increased risk of harm due to their age, economic status, immigration status, physical limitations, and other factors. If you are concerned about the abuse or neglect of a person who is elderly or disabled, you may call the Missouri Elder Abuse Hotline at 800.392.0210. If you seek assistance with immigration issues, [click here](#) for a list of nonprofit immigration service providers.

### **How do I apply for legal assistance from Legal Services of Eastern Missouri?**

In the St. Louis area, you may call 314.534.4200 or outside the metropolitan area you may call 800.444.0514 for an intake. We are open from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. If we are not available, leave a message and we will call you back as soon as we can. You may also submit an intake online by [clicking here](#). We are unavailable to do walk-in intakes until further notice. We would like to speak with you about your family law case as well as any family law emergencies you are having from COVID-19.

### **Is there any other place where I can get free legal advice?**

You may qualify to receive answers to many legal questions from volunteer Missouri lawyers at the Missouri Bar’s Free Legal Answers program here. Any citizen who is currently 250% of poverty level (this is expected to temporarily go to 400%) can obtain free answers to a multitude of questions that are arising.

### **As a survivor of domestic/sexual violence, are there advocates who can help me?**

**Yes.** Shelter and other advocate locations may remain open during the pandemic, though some may close or reduce services. [You can find a list of DV shelters here](#), or for more local resources, [click here](#). For information online about providers across the state, [click here](#) for the MCADSV website. [The National Domestic Violence Hotline](#) is also a great resource.