

13.0 FAMILY LAW, CHILD WELFARE, & FOSTER CARE ISSUES

13.1 Overview—General Family Law

Displacement during and after a natural disaster can cause unique legal issues in the family law context. In addition to issues regarding custody, visitation, and child support, incidents of domestic and sexual violence increase after natural disasters according to a 2015 global study by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.¹ Researchers attribute this increase to a combination of loss of family members and homes, scarcity of basic resources, displacement, increased stress, and marital conflict. In addition, the lack of security in temporary disaster-relief shelters increases sexual violence towards women and young girls.

This chapter is designed to provide some guidance for attorneys facing family law issues related to a natural disaster.

13.2 Most Common Issues/Questions

- What do I do if I lost the physical copy of my protective order in a disaster and it is not in the police database?
- I had to relocate to a different state following a disaster. Is my protective order still enforceable?
- How can I make sure my abuser doesn't find me in a disaster-relief shelter?
- I have been sexually assaulted in a disaster-relief shelter. What can I do?
- I am the child's grandparent (or other family member), but I do not have custody. Can I still enroll my grandchild in school and obtain medical care?
- I had to evacuate my home. Where do I go to modify my child's custody or support order?
- What if my child's other parent refuses to pay child support after the disaster?
- During the disaster, my child's other parent evacuated with my child and will not bring them back. What do I do?
- I have a pending child support/custody/divorce proceeding. What do I need to do to stay notified of any future hearings?
- Our court order requires exchanges at a location I cannot get to due to the evacuation. What should I do?

¹ International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, *Unseen, unheard: Gender-based violence in disasters*, 20 (2015).

13.3 Summary of the Law

A. *Protective Orders*

One common way to combat domestic violence and other violence is by obtaining a protective order from a court. Texas law authorizes the courts to issue protective orders for domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, or trafficking. A protective order is a civil court order to prevent continued acts of violence.

Protective orders for family violence are issued under Title 4 of the Texas Family Code and protective orders for sexual assault, stalking, or trafficking are issued under [Chapter 7B of the Texas Code of Criminal Procedure](#). Protective orders for sexual assault are discussed further in the “FAQ” section.

Family violence includes any intimate partner violence and violence from current or former members of the same household. For a family violence protective order, after notice and a hearing, a court must issue a protective order if it finds family violence occurred. [Tex. Fam. Code § 85.001](#). An adult member of the family may file an application for a protective order to protect not only the applicant, but also any member of the applicant’s family or household. [Tex. Fam. Code § 82.002](#). Any adult can apply for a family violence protective order on behalf of a child. [Tex. Fam. Code § 82.002](#). An application for a protective order may be filed in the county where either the applicant resides, the respondent resides, or where the violence allegedly occurred. [Tex. Fam. Code § 82.003](#). Certain violations of a protective order can be charged as a criminal offense under [Tex. Pen. Code § 25.07\(g\)](#). Other violations can be punished by contempt of court, fines, or jail time.

There are many similarities between protective orders issued under Title 4 and Chapter 7B, but the most important distinctions are that, unlike family violence protective orders, no specific relationship must exist between the victim and the abuser to request a sexual assault, stalking, or trafficking protective order. [Tex. Code Crim. Proc. § 7B.001](#). The court must issue a protective order under Chapter 7B if the court finds that there are reasonable grounds to believe that the applicant is the victim of sexual assault or abuse, indecent assault, stalking, or trafficking. [Tex. Code Crim. Proc. § 7B.003](#). A sexual assault protective order may be requested for an adult or by a parent or guardian on behalf of a child victim against a family member or an unrelated alleged perpetrator. [Tex. Code Crim. Proc. § 7B.001\(a\)](#).

The duration of a family violence protective order typically cannot exceed two years. [Tex. Fam. Code § 85.025\(a\)\(1\)](#). However, in certain circumstances, the court can enter a family violence protective order that lasts longer than two years and, for sexual assault, stalking, or trafficking, protective orders up to the duration of the lives of the offender and victim. [Tex. Fam. Code § 85.025\(a–1\)\(1\)–\(3\)](#); [Tex. Code Crim. Proc. § 7B.007](#).

The protective order suit begins when an “Application for Protective Order” is filed. If a court finds, through information provided in the protective order application as required under [Tex. Fam. Code § 83.009](#), that there, “is a clear and present danger of family violence,” the court may enter a temporary ex parte protective order under [Tex. Fam. Code § 83.001](#) without any notice to the individual who allegedly committed the family violence. Ex parte orders are temporary and last no longer than 20 days but can be extended in 20-day period increments on the request of the applicant or the court. [Tex. Fam. Code § 83.002](#).

A hearing on the protective order will be scheduled within 20 days of the issuance of the temporary ex parte protective order. The abuser must be served in person with the protective order application and ex parte protective order. If the abuser appears in court and does not agree to the protective order, a hearing will be required where you and any witnesses for both parties will testify. After hearing from both sides, the Judge will make the decision whether to issue a final protective order.

The same “clear and present danger” requirement is necessary for ex parte applications in protective orders filed under [Tex. Code Crim. Proc. § 7B.002](#). An applicant can apply for a protective order as its own case, or as part of a divorce or a suit affecting the parent-child relationship. [Tex. Fam. Code § 82.005](#). Protective orders can do more than prevent violence: protective orders may also establish possession of a child, prohibit the transfer of property, award property temporarily, require payment of child support, and require the abuser to vacate the residence. See [Tex. Fam. Code §§ 85.021-.022](#) for a full list of what a court may include in a protective order. Additionally, recent changes to the Texas Family Code allow protective order recipients to separate their wireless telephone number, or their child’s wireless telephone number, from the Respondent’s account. No penalties may be imposed for early contract termination, and the applicant should not be held responsible for any outstanding balance on the account. Although some fees may apply, no fees should be charged for the transfer of the phone numbers. These changes only apply to a petition for protective order which is filed on or after September 1, 2021. [Tex. Fam. Code § 85.0225](#), [Tex. Bus. & Com. § 608.001](#).

B. Conservatorship and Possession

In Texas, custody is referred to as “conservatorship” and “possession.” “Conservatorship” refers to the rights and duties regarding the child and “possession” refers to access to the child. When a Texas court is asked to issue an order affecting child custody, visitation, or support, the original petition filed is called a suit affecting the parent-child relationship (SAPCR). Determining whether Texas has jurisdiction over a custody case may be complicated if the child has lived in multiple states. Prior to filing suit, it is important to know which state is the child’s “home state.” “Home state” is defined as the state in which a child lived with a parent or a person acting as a parent for at least six consecutive months immediately before the commencement of a child custody proceeding. In the case of a child less than six months of age, the term means the state in which the child lived from birth with a parent or a person acting as the parent. [Tex. Fam. Code § 152.102\(7\)](#).

A Texas court has jurisdiction to make an initial child custody determination if: (1) Texas is the home state of the child (or was the home state within the six months before the proceeding and the child is absent but the parent still lives in Texas), (2) the home state of the child does not have jurisdiction or has declined to exercise jurisdiction (and the child and the child’s parent have a significant connection with the state of Texas and substantial evidence is available in Texas), or (3) all other courts having jurisdiction have declined to exercise it because a Texas court would be the more appropriate forum. [Tex. Fam. Code § 152.201](#).

A Texas court can also have temporary emergency jurisdiction if the child is present in Texas and has been abandoned or it is necessary in an emergency to protect the child because the child, or a parent or sibling, is threatened with abuse. [Tex. Fam. Code § 152.204\(a\)](#).

One of the main issues in a custody case is allocating rights and duties between the parties. There are two types of conservatorship in Texas: sole managing conservatorship (SMC) and joint managing conservatorship (JMC). [Tex. Fam. Code § 153.005](#). Most custody orders name the parents joint managing conservators. A court will order joint managing conservatorship unless there is a good reason not to, such as family violence. [Tex. Fam. Code § 153.131\(b\)](#). A JMC order normally requires that the parents share decision making about the child’s education, medical treatment, legal decisions, and similar issues. A JMC order does not mean that the child’s time is split equally between the parents. [Tex. Fam. Code § 153.135](#).

In most custody orders, one parent will have the right to decide where the child lives. [Tex. Fam. Code § 153.134\(b\)\(1\)](#). This person usually has the right to receive child support on behalf of the child. This parent may be referred to as the custodial parent.

When there is a good reason to do so, a court can name one parent as a sole managing conservator. [Tex. Fam. Code § 153.131](#). A SMC order can limit or take away the noncustodial parent’s access to the child and right to make decisions about the child. The parent who is the sole managing conservator has the exclusive right to make important decisions for the child. See [Tex. Fam. Code § 153.132](#) for a list of the rights and duties of a parent sole managing conservator.

Existing custody orders must be modified in the court which issued the original order (the “court of continuing jurisdiction”) unless the case is transferred. See [Tex. Fam. Code §§ 155.201–202](#) for when a SAPCR can be transferred from the court of continuing jurisdiction to another court in Texas. Under [Tex. Fam. Code § 156.101](#), the standard for modification is that modifying the order is in the best interest of the child and “the circumstances of the child, a conservator, or other party affected by the order have materially and substantially changed.” Some common qualifying changes are relocation of the child or change of a parent’s employment or income. However, there is heightened standard to modify the right to decide where the child lives within a year of the last court order being rendered. [Tex. Fam. Code § 156.102](#).

C. *Useful Websites*

- For general information on many family law issues and sample forms, visit [Texas Law Help](#).
- For general information on services for crime victims, visit the Office of the [Attorney General](#).
- For general information on getting child support orders in cases involving family violence, visit [here](#). For general information on modification of child support orders, visit [Modify Child Support](#).
- To apply for legal aid, contact:
 - ***Legal Aid for Survivors of Sexual Assault***
1-800-991-5153
 - [Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas, Inc.](#)
1-888-529-5277
 - [Lone Star Legal Aid, Inc.](#)
1-866-659-0666
 - [Texas Advocacy Project](#)
1-800-374-HOPE (4673)

- [Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, Inc.](#)
1-833-329-TRLA (8752)
- [Texas Legal Services Center](#)
1-800-622-2520
- Helpful websites and phone numbers:
 - [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#)
1-800-799-7233 (24/7/365 hotline)
 - [Texas Department of Family and Protective Services](#)
 - [Office of the Attorney General Child Support Division](#)

13.4 **FAQs—Domestic Violence/Sexual Assault**

Q. 13-1 What do I do if I lost the physical copy of my protective order in a disaster and it is not in the police database?

You can obtain free, certified copies of your protective order by contacting the court clerk for the court that issued your order. [Tex. Fam. Code § 81.002](#). Copies of the protective order should also have been sent to your local law enforcement by the court issuing your order. [Tex. Fam. Code § 85.042\(a\)](#). After receiving an order from the clerk of the issuing court, law enforcement must immediately enter the information into the Department of Public Safety statewide law enforcement information system. [Tex. Fam. Code § 86.0011](#) requires that law enforcement enter the information from a protective order into the system no later than the next business day that they receive the order. If you find out that the court clerk did not forward the protective order to law enforcement, you should ask them to do so immediately.

Even if not filed in the law enforcement information system, your protective order is still enforceable. If you believe your protective order is being violated, you can immediately call 9-1-1. In Texas, a police officer must arrest the violator if the police officer witnesses a violation of your protective order; if the violation occurred outside the police officer’s presence, the officer can still choose to arrest the violator. [Tex. Code Crim. Proc. § 14.03\(a\)\(3\), \(b\)](#). Additionally, the police officer must remain at the scene if it is reasonably necessary to verify allegations of a violation of your protective order or family violence and prevent any further protective order violations or acts of family violence. [Tex. Code Crim. Proc. § 14.03\(c\)](#).

Alternatively, a motion for enforcement of your protective order can be filed with the court with original jurisdiction over the protective order, or any county where either of the parties reside, or where an alleged violation occurred. The court has the authority to hold the protective order violator in contempt. [Tex. Fam. Code § 81.010](#).

Further, if you relocated to Texas after a disaster and have a protective order that was issued by a court in a different state, it is still enforceable. According to [Tex. Fam. Code § 88.004\(a\)–\(c\)](#), Texas does not require you to have a certified copy of your protective order for it to be enforced. As long as the officer “determine[s] that there is probable cause to believe that a valid foreign protective order exists by relying on any relevant information,” the order will be enforced.

Although not required, it is good practice to keep multiple copies of the protective order, including an electronic version stored on your phone or email. And, if your protective order has been violated, regardless of where the violation occurred or what state you reside in, you can call the police immediately.

Q. 13-2 *I had to relocate to a different state following a disaster. Is my protective order still enforceable?*

Likely yes. The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) states that a foreign protective order that meets federal requirements “shall be accorded full faith and credit by the court of another State . . . and enforced . . . as if it were the order of the enforcing State” [18 U.S.C. § 2265\(a\)](#). A protective order meets federal requirements if (1) the issuing court had jurisdiction over the parties and matter and (2) reasonable notice and opportunity to be heard was given to the respondent. [18 U.S.C. § 2265\(b\)](#).

Further, you generally do not need to register or file the protective order in the new state for it to be enforceable. [18 U.S.C. § 2265\(d\)\(2\)](#). However, some states do have specific rules regarding registration and filing of protective orders, which may make enforcement easier. Consult an attorney or the laws of the state you relocate to in order to make sure you are in compliance.

If you have relocated to Texas, your foreign (meaning out-of-state) protective order will be judicially enforced if the order is valid on its face. [Tex. Fam. Code § 88.003](#). A valid order has the names of both the protected individual and respondent, is current, was rendered by a court with jurisdiction over both the parties and the subject matter, and was rendered after the respondent was given reasonable time for notice and an opportunity to be heard. [Tex. Fam. Code § 88.003](#). And, under [Tex. Fam. Code § 88.004](#), a law enforcement officer will enforce a protective order when there is probable cause that a protective order exists and it has been violated. You do not need to register or file your protective order in Texas in order for it to be enforced. [Tex. Fam. Code § 88.004\(e\)](#).

It is important to note that if you have any orders for custody of a child and you are planning to move with that child out of state, or you do move due to an emergency, consult with an attorney as soon as possible to review your orders.

Q. 13-3 *How can I make sure my abuser doesn’t find me in a disaster-relief shelter?*

If you have a protective order, it may include a provision that your address remain confidential. [Tex. Fam. Code §§ 82.011, 85.007](#).

If you have a final order from a SAPCR, such as a child custody or child support order, it must contain the addresses of each party. [Tex. Fam. Code § 105.006](#). Further, each party is under an obligation to notify all other parties of any change of address. However, if a court finds that requiring this disclosure of information subjects the child or conservator to family violence, the court may order that the information not be disclosed to the other party. So, you should first find out if your order exempts you from disclosing your change of address. If it does not, you can file a motion for the court to waive this requirement, under [Tex. Fam. Code § 105.007\(c\)](#), if providing your address would likely expose you or your child to harassment, abuse, or serious injury.

Texas also has a program called the Address Confidentiality Program (ACP). The ACP is administered by the Office of the Attorney General and designates a post office box address for participants as a way to increase the safety of family violence victims. Participants can use this address in place of an actual residential, business, or school address, and it can be used as the main address for driver's licenses, school registration, and for most court and government documents. For more information on the program and how to apply, visit the [Office of the Attorney General](#). Also, see the information in the "Protective Order" overview above, which discusses when a protective order recipient may separate their wireless telephone number, or their child's wireless telephone number, from the Respondent's account.

Q. 13-4 *I have been sexually assaulted in a disaster-relief shelter. What can I do?*

If you have been sexually assaulted, consider reporting this to the police. You can also contact [your local rape crisis center](#). Sexual assault is not your fault. The National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-HOPE (4673) can help you find support in your own community after a sexual assault. You can consider a sexual assault exam, which is available to you even if you do not want to involve the police. You can find more information about reporting sexual assault to law enforcement on [RAINN's website](#).

If the offender is arrested, a magistrate's order for emergency protection (MOEP) may be issued and provided to you. At the time of arrest, an MOEP may be requested on your behalf by the judge, a peace officer, your parent or guardian, or the state's attorney. [Tex. Code Crim. Proc. § 17.292](#). An MOEP will be granted if the offense involved serious bodily injury or the display or use of a deadly weapon. [Tex. Code Crim. Proc. § 17.292\(b\)](#). The duration of these orders may be anywhere in the range of 31 to 91 days, depending on the circumstances. [Tex. Code Crim. Proc. § 17.292\(j\)](#). You do not have to be present for the order to be issued. [Tex. Code Crim. Proc. § 17.292\(d\)](#). If the defendant violates the MOEP by committing family violence, communicating with you or a member of your family, or going within a minimum distance of your residence or place of employment, they may be subject to jail time, a fine, and additional criminal charges. [Tex. Code Crim. Proc. § 17.292\(g\)](#).

Even if you have not called the police, you can file for a sexual assault protective order (SAPO). [Tex. Code Crim. Proc. § 7B.001\(a\)](#). You do not have to pay court costs to request a protective order. For help with applying for an SAPO, contact the county or district attorney or the legal aid program covering your area. An SAPO can be filed in the county where you live, the county where the offender lives, or where an element of the offense occurred. [Tex. Code Crim. Proc. § 7B.001\(b\)](#) *et seq.* Texas law says a SAPO may be granted for a victim of several offenses, including indecent assault. [Tex. Code Crim. Proc. § 7B.001\(a\)\(1\)](#).

At the time you file your application for an SAPO, the judge can enter a temporary ex parte order to protect you and other members of your family or household on a finding that there "is a clear and present danger of sexual assault or abuse." [Tex. Code Crim. Proc. § 7B.002](#). To grant this temporary order, the judge will review the affidavit that you submitted in your protective order application. The purpose of the temporary protective order is to protect you until the protective order hearing takes place. At the final hearing, the court will grant the SAPO if it finds there are reasonable grounds to believe the applicant is a victim of sexual assault. [Tex. Code Crim. Proc. § 7B.003](#). Find a pro se SAPO packet [here](#).

Lastly, sexual assault victims are guaranteed certain rights under Texas law, regardless of whether you have reported the assault. For an overview discussion of these rights, see generally:

- [Sexual Assault Survivors: Know Your Legal Rights!](#)
- [Sexual Assault Examinations Without Police Involvement](#)
- www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/cvs/sexual-assault-information-for-adult-survivors

13.5 FAQs—Conservatorship

Q. 13-5 *I am the child's grandparent or other relative, but I do not have a court order for custody. Can I still enroll my grandchild in school and obtain medical care?*

Yes. There are a couple of different routes a nonparent can take to gain the authority needed to make these types of decisions for the child.

Under Texas Family Code § 32.001, a grandparent, adult brother or sister, or adult aunt or uncle may consent to health-care treatment (other than immunization) of a minor when the parent or conservator having the right to consent to treatment cannot be contacted, and that individual has not given express notice to the contrary. You may also visit [Texas Law Help: Consent to Medical Treatment by a Non-Parent](#) for more information.

Federal law also provides protection for students who are homeless or displaced as the result of natural disasters. A federal law called the McKinney-Vento Act defines 'homelessness' as it applies to public school students. Under this law, the definition of 'homelessness' includes children and youth who do not have a regular and adequate nighttime residence and specifically applies to children and youth residing in shelters, transitional housing, cars, campgrounds, motels, and staying with friends or family temporarily because of economic hardship, loss of housing, and natural disasters. [42 U.S.C. § 11434A\(2\)\(A\)-\(B\)](#). Even families and youth who are living with others on a temporary basis and are unable to return to their homes because of a disaster would be considered homeless under the Act. Children and youth who are homeless as defined above are entitled to be enrolled immediately in the school district where they are currently living. It doesn't matter if it is different from their original school or if you don't have documentation, like proof of residency, birth certificates, immunization, and health records, etc. Every school district in Texas is required to have a liaison who is responsible for coordinating efforts to assist homeless or displaced students. This link contains a directory of each Districts liaison: [Texas Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program \(TEHCY\)](#).

If you have one parent's cooperation, under [Tex. Fam. Code § 34.002](#) a parent can sign an "authorization agreement" to authorize an adult caregiver to provide temporary care for a child. If the agreement is signed and sworn to before a notary public, the adult caregiver can authorize medical treatment, obtain health insurance coverage for the child, enroll the child in school, authorize the child's participation in recreational activities, authorize the child to obtain a driver's license, authorize the child's employment, receive public benefits on behalf of the child, and obtain personal identification documents for the child. For a full list of what the agreement must contain, see [Tex. Fam. Code § 34.003](#).

However, under [Tex. Fam. Code § 34.008](#), an authorization agreement will be terminated if the parent revokes consent, gives notice to all parties, and files the revocation with the appropriate clerk of county. Further, if a court enters an order regarding custody or placement of the child, access to or visitation with

the child, appointment of guardianship, or anything affecting the parent-child relationship, the authorization agreement will be terminated. Find the form, along with instructions for completing it [here](#).

If you do not have the parent's cooperation, another option is to request an order for temporary authority for care of a minor child. Under [Tex. Fam. Code § 35.002](#); [35.005](#), if the child has lived with you for at least the last 30 days before the date the petition was filed, there is not already a written authorization agreement in place, and the parent or guardian of the child does not object to you having authority to care for the child, you can ask the court for temporary authority. After filing the petition, a hearing will be set. Under [Tex. Fam. Code § 35.005](#), if the child does not have a parent available to give consent, the court must award temporary authority if "it is necessary to the child's welfare and no objection is made by the child's parent, conservator, or guardian." This authority also allows you to consent to medical treatment and enroll the child in school. This authority does not modify any existing custody orders and/or court-ordered rights and duties of the child's conservators. The order lasts for one year. [Tex. Fam. Code § 35.005\(d\)](#). It can be renewed for a period of not more than one year based on a showing of continued need for the order. [Tex. Fam. Code § 35.006](#).

Helpful information for grandparents (or other relative) may be found in the [Texas Kinicare Primer](#).

Q. 13-6 *I had to evacuate my home. Where do I go to modify my child's custody or support order?*

After a Texas state court has made a custody determination, that same court maintains exclusive continuing jurisdiction for all future modifications and determinations surrounding a child, unless the child and both parents leave the state or neither the child nor one parent maintains a significant connection with the state. [Tex. Fam. Code § 152.202](#). If the child still lives in Texas but has moved to a different county for at least six months, the court that issued the prior order must transfer the case to the new county if timely requested. [Tex. Fam. Code § 155.201](#). The transfer to another county is discretionary if the child has lived in the new county for less than six months when the case is filed. [Tex. Fam. Code § 155.202](#).

Q. 13-7 *What if my child's other parent refuses to pay child support after the disaster?*

When circumstances change, a parent paying child support can ask the court to modify the child support order. The standard for modification under [Tex. Fam. Code § 156.401](#) is a "material and substantial change in the circumstances of the child or a person affected by the order." Usually this is satisfied if the noncustodial parent's income has decreased or the child's living arrangements have changed. So, it could be possible that loss of a job because of a natural disaster would satisfy the material and substantial change needed to lessen a child support amount. But the parent must file for a modification with the court, request a hearing, and continue paying the support in the current order until the modification is granted.

If the parent does not take these steps, they are still under a legal duty to pay child support. The Office of the Attorney General is responsible for the enforcement of child support orders. If the parent is not paying child support, contact the Child Support Division for help filing an enforcement action. If the noncustodial parent has relocated to a different state because of the disaster, the Uniform Interstate Family Support Act (UIFSA) allows for the enforcement of a child support order over an obligor living in another state.

Custodial parents can call the Child Support Division of the Attorney General's Office 24-hour hotline at 1-800-252-8014 for more information and assistance.

Q. 13-8 *During the disaster my child's other parent evacuated with my child and will not give them back. What do I do?*

You may consider reporting the violation to the police to document that you did not voluntarily allow the other parent to keep your child. Under [Tex. Fam. Code § 157.371](#), if a child has been taken in violation of a custody order, a parent may file a petition for writ of habeas corpus in the court of exclusive continuing jurisdiction or a family court located in the county where the child is found. If the court finds the parent filing is entitled to possession under a valid court order, it must compel the return of the child to that parent. The only instances in which the court may not grant the order is if it finds the previous court order governing possessory rights of the child did not give the other party reasonable notice and an opportunity to be heard, if the person with custody voluntarily relinquished possession for more than six months, or if it finds that there is a serious immediate question concerning the welfare of the child.

[Tex. Fam. Code § 42.002](#) also provides for civil liability for any person who takes a child, retains possession of a child, or conceals the whereabouts of a child in violation of a court order specifying another person's possessory right to that child. Damages can include the costs, including attorney's fees, accumulated in locating and recovering possession of the child and enforcing the order in court. Further, the plaintiff can recover for their mental suffering and anguish that stems from a violation of the possessory order. If the parent who took the child acted with malice or intent to cause harm to the plaintiff, they may also be liable for exemplary damages. [Tex. Fam. Code § 42.006](#). You should consult an attorney to pursue any such action.

Q. 13-9 *I have a pending child support/custody/divorce proceeding. What do I need to do to stay notified of any future hearings?*

If your residence or mailing address changes, you will want to update the court's file with a mailing address where you can receive mail to make sure that you are sent notice of any hearings that are scheduled in your ongoing case. If you have a court order that says your address and other information should be kept confidential, consider using a P.O. box or other safe address that does not disclose your physical location. If you provide an email address, be sure that it is an email address that you can access and check regularly. A sample "[Notice of Current Address](#)" form can be found at www.TexasLawHelp.org. If you plan to move with your children, make sure to consult with an attorney first to ensure you do not violate any current standing orders by moving.

Q.13-10 *Our court order requires exchanges at a location I cannot get to due to the evacuation. What should I do?*

If you are unable to deliver the child to the court-ordered exchange location, you should reach out to the other party to notify them. If it is safe to do so, you can try to reach an agreement regarding an alternative location to exchange the children. If you cannot reach an agreement, it is a good idea to keep a log of what happened that day and why you couldn't make it. It is also advisable to keep a copy of any texts,

emails or voicemails regarding the conversation in case an enforcement suit is filed in the future. This will help you explain the disaster-related circumstances that prevented you from complying with the order to the judge.

13.6 Education

For information regarding enrolling children in school, special education, or any other education issues post-disaster, please see the education chapter.

13.7 Powers of Attorney

A power of attorney (POA) may be a useful tool in the care of a child or an elder parent. A POA is a legal document that authorizes one person to take action on behalf of another person. The scope authorized in a POA can be very broad or limited to a specific purpose or transaction.

A power of attorney for a nonparent caregiver gives an agent permission to make decisions for a child that a parent would usually make. An example of this is the “authorization agreement” discussed in detail in Q. 13-5 above.

To assist in the caregiving of an elder parent, a person may wish to be able to have decision-making authority over the affairs of their elder parent. In this case, a person may wish to take control (1) immediately (*durable power of attorney*), (2) upon the incapacity or disability of an elder parent (*springing power of attorney*), or (3) when a medical treatment decision arises and the elder parent is mentally or physically unable to make a decision (*medical power of attorney*).

For a POA to be legally enforceable, an adult must acknowledge the authorization of power in writing in the witness of a notary public or other person authorized to “take acknowledgments to deeds of conveyance” or “administer oaths.” [Tex. Est. Code § 751.0021](#). In Texas, the easiest way to ensure a POA will be in compliance with the legal requirements is to utilize the form titled [Statutory Durable Power of Attorney](#) that the Texas legislature has provided at [Tex. Est. Code § 752.051](#). This form will allow an elder parent to give their child permission to access bank accounts, sell property and make other important decisions when such elder parent becomes incapacitated or unable to make decisions. By default, the durable POA will stay in effect until revoked by the elder parent or until such elder parent dies.

13.8 Family Law and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic presents unprecedented challenges in the area of family law. Below is a brief summary of how family law issues are being affected by COVID-19 and the resulting Texas courts orders, closures and updates.

In addition to the resources presented in the **Useful Websites** section above, [TexasLawHelp](#) provides general information related to family law and COVID-19 at [Family Law Issues During COVID-19](#).

A. Possession Orders

Possession of and access to a child is not affected by any shelter-in-place order or other order restricting movement issued by a government entity because of COVID-19. If a parent is already subject to a court-ordered possession schedule, the existing trial court order controls for purposes of determining a parent's right to possession of and access to their child. If a child's possession schedule is tied to the school calendar, the original published school schedule will still control the schedule, and possession of and access to the child will not be affected by any school closure that arises due to COVID-19.

If a parent is concerned about their child staying with the child's other parent (e.g., someone in the household has been diagnosed with or exposed to COVID-19), the most expedient option is to discuss their concerns with the other parent to arrange a plan for possession and access that allows for the child to remain safe and healthy. If a discussion with the child's other parent is unsuccessful and the parent believes that the child is in imminent danger, a person may call 9-1-1 (for an emergency) or CPS at 1-800-252-5400 (if abuse or neglect is suspected).

The possession order remains in effect unless and until you go to court to modify it and the judge agrees that it is in the best interests of the child to modify the current schedule. In the event that a parent chooses to withhold their child from the child's other parent because of concerns related to COVID-19, they will be violating a court order and subject to the associated risks. See **Conservatorship and Possession** above for more information regarding modifying a possession order and [Coronavirus and Child Visitation](#) for general information regarding the effect of COVID-19 on possession orders.

B. Court Procedure Rules

The Texas Supreme Court issued a series of emergency orders to adjust court procedure rules in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The final emergency order expired on March 1, 2023. However, the Texas Supreme Court issued revised Texas Rule of Civil Procedure 21 and 21d to authorize courts to allow or require participants to appear at court proceedings electronically. Unless a hearing notice states otherwise, the hearing will be held in person in the courtroom. Hearing notices should include the location of the proceeding or instructions for joining the proceeding electronically. A party can object to the method of appearance upon a showing of good cause within a reasonable time after receiving the hearing notice.

Contact your local county or the applicable court in your jurisdiction to determine the latest information. See [here](#) for more information regarding Texas courts orders, postponements, closures and updates due to COVID-19.

C. Job Loss and Child Support

A parent is still responsible for child support payments despite job loss during the COVID-19 pandemic. A court ordered child support order may only be amended through a court order. There is no suspension of wage withholding from paychecks as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

If a parent has lost their job and begun receiving unemployment benefits, those benefits do count as income for the purposes of child support calculations. Child support will be taken from your unemployment benefits through wage withholding. In contrast, if a parent receives a stimulus check from the federal government pursuant to the CARES Act, child support obligations will likely remain unaffected, as these checks are not considered income for purposes of calculating child support. Note, however, that there is no exception for child support payments in arrears. Therefore, in some instances, a stimulus check may be intercepted up to the total amount of child support owed. See the [Office of the Attorney General](#) for more information.

Although it will not affect a parent's obligation to provide child support, job loss may provide a basis for asking the court to modify the amount of the child support payment. Modifying a child support order is discussed in detail in [Q. 13-7](#) above.

See [Find Child Support Locations](#) for physical child support offices. Additionally, the Office of the Attorney General Child Support Division services will continue to be provided over the telephone and internet. If a parent has specific questions about child support payments, the Office of the Attorney General Child Support Division also offers the ability to chat with live child support customer service specialists through their [website](#).

13.9 Overview—Child Welfare and Foster Care Issues

Disasters can uniquely impact families involved in the child welfare system and children and youth in foster care. This section provides a brief overview of how these systems function, resources to support clients involved in these systems, and answers to specific questions that may arise during disasters.

13.10 Common Issues/Questions

- Can reports of abuse or neglect be made during a disaster?
- I've been reported for abuse or neglect of a child—what do I do now?
- What do I do if I cannot comply with my CPS service plan?
- What is CPS supposed to do during a disaster?
- How will my CPS court hearings be impacted by a disaster?
- What do I do if I am displaced during a disaster and CPS is investigating me?
- How can I make sure my child, who is in foster care, is safe during a disaster?
- How am I supposed to have visits with my child who is in foster care during a disaster?
- How can I make a complaint against CPS?
- How can I help children and youth in foster care during a disaster?
- What resources are available for homeless youth during disasters?

13.11 Useful Websites

A. *General Information*

- [Children's Commission](#)
- [DFPS Policy Handbooks](#)

- [DFPS Office of Consumer Affairs](#)

B. For Parents/Caregivers

- [Parent Resource Guide](#)
- [Padres y Madres de Familia \(Parent Resource Guide in Spanish\)](#)
- [TLSC Family Helpline](#)

C. For Current and Former Foster Youth (and those that help them)

- [Foster Care Ombudsman](#) (only for those under 18 and in foster care):
- [Rights of Children and Youth in Foster Care](#)
- [Texas Foster Youth Justice Project](#)
- [Texas Youth Helpline \(call, text, or chat\)](#)
- [DFPS Regional Preparation for Adult Living \(PAL\) Coordinators](#)
- [DFPS Regional Transition Centers](#)
- [DFPS Understanding the Roles of the People Involved in a CPS Case \(videos\)](#)
- [DFPS Reentry Liaisons for Extended Foster Care](#)
- DFPS [Housing Programs](#) and [Regional Housing Liaisons](#)
- [Texas Homeless Youth Handbook](#)

13.12 FAQs

Q. 13-11 *Can reports of abuse or neglect be made during a disaster?*

Yes, even in a disaster the Statewide Intake (SWI) division of the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) will remain open and will accept reports of abuse or neglect. Reports can be made to the Texas Abuse Hotline at **1-800-252-5400** or online via the [Texas Abuse Hotline Website](#) if the situation is not urgent. Reports will be investigated according to DFPS procedures. For additional information about how DFPS should operate during a disaster, you may view [DFPS' Disaster Plan](#).

As of September 1, 2023, DFPS will no longer be permitted to receive anonymous reports of abuse or neglect. The reporter will be required to provide their name, address and phone number, facts leading the reporter to believe abuse or neglect has occurred, and the source of the information. Individuals not willing to share the required information will be referred to state or local law enforcement agencies. [Tex. Fam. Code § 261.104](#).

***Attorneys should remember that they are considered “mandated reporters” under [Tex. Fam. Code § 261.101](#) and have a duty to report suspected child abuse and neglect that supersedes all privacy, confidentiality, and privilege protections. Best practices for reporting include telling clients about your duty to report so they can choose what to tell you. If you must report, invite your client to make the report with you and, if the situation is not urgent, report using the website so you can control how much and what information is shared with DFPS.

Q. 13-12 *I've been reported for abuse or neglect of a child—what do I do now?*

Make sure you have all the information about the investigation. Find out the contact information for the caseworker and the caseworker's supervisor. Make sure you have copies of any safety plan, service plan, or any other document related to the investigation. Communicate with the investigator often and update them whenever anything changes—your contact information, your availability, or any changes regarding your child. Check your voicemail, text messages, email, and regular mail often to make sure you do not miss a communication with the investigator or someone else related to the investigation. Keep all documents and contact information in a safe place. Call the [CPS Family Helpline](#) if you want to talk to someone about your questions and review the **Parent Resource Guide (English) / Manual de Recursos para Padres y Madres de Familia (Spanish)** so you know what to expect from the investigation and any future court case that may be filed.

If the investigation finds there is “reason to believe” you committed abuse or neglect, your name will be included in the DFPS central registry of abuse and neglect which, while not available to the public, can limit your opportunities to work with children or foster or adopt children. [Tex. Fam. Code § 261.002](#); [40 Tex. Admin. Code § 702.251](#). You should know that even if they don't remove your children or take any other action, they may still make this finding and it will stay on your record unless you take required steps to challenge the finding by the applicable deadline.

You can request an Administrative Review of Investigation Findings (ARIF) to challenge a reason to believe finding. An ARIF provides an informal review process for a person who has been designated as a perpetrator of abuse or neglect. [40 Tex. Admin. Code § 707.505\(a\)](#). If you want to request an ARIF, you must submit a written request to DFPS within 45 days after receiving notice of the findings of the investigation. [40 Tex. Admin. Code § 707.505\(b\)](#). You may hire an attorney to represent you at the ARIF, but you do not have to. [40 Tex. Admin. Code § 707.505\(g\)](#). If the ARIF is not favorable, you can then request a due process hearing to be held before the State Office of Administrative Hearings (SOAH) or you can waive the ARIF and proceed directly to the SOAH hearing. [40 Tex. Admin. Code § 707.505\(k\)](#).

Q. 13-13 *What do I do if I cannot comply with my CPS service plan?*

If you are not able to comply with your CPS service plan because of a disaster or another reason, you should contact your investigator or caseworker as soon as you find out that you will not be able to comply, but you should make every effort to comply. Try to find creative ways to access services (for example, find out if virtual counseling or parenting sessions are available). If the services you are required to complete are not being offered, you should not have to resume the services until they are offered again.

As of September 1, 2023, a parent who is required to complete a service plan may obtain services from a qualified or licensed provider selected by the parent, and CPS will be required to reimburse service providers who are not under contract with CPS. [Tex. Fam. Code § 263.1021](#).

Q. 13-14 *What is CPS supposed to do during a disaster?*

Foster and adoptive parents caring for children in foster care have to notify their caseworker if they are impacted by a disaster. If required by local city or county authorities, foster and adoptive parents will be required to evacuate their homes. They must take a two-week supply of medication in its bottle, other

medical supplies and equipment, important paperwork, their personalized disaster plan, and contact information for the family's and child's caseworkers and supervisors. [CPS Handbook § 7642](#). Other functions of CPS, such as investigation and casework of active removal cases, will continue.

Q. 13-15 *How will my CPS court hearings be impacted by a disaster?*

You should contact your attorney about any questions you have about your court hearings. If you are not represented by an attorney, you should ask the caseworker, check the courthouse website, and call the court's office to ask about hearings. A disaster may impact whether the courthouse is open and how the hearings are handled. Your hearing may be rescheduled or may take place virtually. You should talk to your attorney about whether it is possible for you to appear at the hearing virtually (by telephone or video) if you are unable to attend.

Q. 13-16 *What do I do if I am displaced during a disaster and CPS is investigating me?*

You need to make sure you communicate with your investigator or caseworker if there are any changes in your residence or contact information. There may be consequences in your case if you do not update your investigator or caseworker of your displacement and they cannot reach you. Lack of communication with your investigator or caseworker and absence from your home could be considered to be interference with an investigation, [Tex. Fam. Code § 261.303](#), or failure to cooperate with investigation [Tex. Fam. Code § 261.3031](#). In fact, it is a criminal offense if you intend to interfere with the investigation and relocate your residence without notifying CPS of your new address or you conceal your child and your relocation or concealment interferes with the investigation. [Tex. Fam. Code § 261.3032](#).

Q. 13-17 *How can I make sure my child, who is in foster care, is safe during a disaster?*

You can contact your caseworker for updates on your child's safety. The caseworker is required to provide you with updates of "significant events", which include any changes in placement, as soon as possible. [Tex. Fam. Code § 264.018](#). Keep in mind that your caseworker will be extremely busy following up with all the children on their caseload and may not be able to contact you immediately.

Q. 13-18 *How am I supposed to have visits with my child who is in foster care during a disaster?*

CPS should make every attempt to coordinate visits as long as the visit will not harm your child. If in-person visits are not possible, CPS should try to arrange a virtual visit. You should communicate with your caseworker about the best way to continue visits in a way that will continue to keep your child safe.

Q. 13-19 *How can I make a complaint against CPS?*

Complaints about CPS can be made through the [Office of Consumer Affairs \(OCA\)](#). You can contact the OCA in a number of ways:

- Phone: 1-800-720-7777, Monday—Friday, 8:00 A.M.—4:30 P.M.
- Complete an online complaint form

- Print a form and return by email, fax, or regular mail
- Email: oca@dfps.texas.gov
- Fax: 1-512-339-5892
- Regular mail: OCA/DFPS, PO Box 149030, Mail Code Y946, Austin, TX 78714-9030

Note that the OCA can only investigate and review decisions made by CPS—they cannot change a court order or review actions taken by law enforcement. If you want to challenge a court decision, you need to talk to your attorney. If you have a complaint about your attorney, you can tell the court or consider filing a [grievance](#) with the State Bar of Texas.

Q. 13-20 *How can I help children and youth in foster care during a disaster?*

Children and youth in the temporary managing conservatorship (TMC) stage of foster care are required to have an attorney ad litem (AAL) and a guardian ad litem (GAL). [Tex. Fam. Code §§ 107.011; 107.012](#). While they are represented by both an AAL and GAL, the child’s objectives, as well as what is in the child’s best interest, should be presented to the court. If you find out that a child who is represented by an attorney is not being properly represented, the youth can contact the [Foster Care Ombudsman](#) to file a complaint. A supportive adult can also try to contact the child’s attorney to advocate on the child’s behalf.

If a child or youth in foster care is no longer in TMC and is currently in permanent managing conservatorship (PMC), they may only have a GAL; courts have the option to continue the appointments of either the GAL or AAL or both. [Tex. Fam. Code § 107.016\(1\)](#). If the child or youth is not represented by an attorney, there is no reason why a private attorney cannot represent the child or youth if the child or youth requests and consents to the representation. While a minor does not have the capacity to enter into a binding contract, an attorney may agree to represent the minor with all the ethical obligations and privileges associated with an attorney-client relationship. Attorneys and supportive adults wanting guidance about working with foster youth can contact the [Texas Foster Youth Justice Project](#).

Supportive adults are critical to the success of a youth’s transition out of foster care. Since many youth are no longer in contact with their family, having a supportive adult to go to for advice and help navigating the adult world can make a positive impact. The needs of a child or youth in or transitioning out of foster care during a disaster are intensified. They are always at great risk of exploitation and homelessness and can experience trauma and instability. Aged out foster youth can connect with supportive benefits and services through their [Regional PAL Coordinator](#) or [Regional Transition Center](#).

Q. 13-21 *What resources are available for homeless youth during disasters?*

Various programs exist across Texas to address the needs of homeless youth. See the [Provider Directory](#) compiled by the Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS) to find emergency shelters, drop-in centers, housing providers, counseling providers, and transition centers. You can find more information for homeless youth in the [Texas Homeless Youth Handbook](#).