

Deihm Professional Services, LLC

Process Serving Guide for Non- Attorneys

A plain-English overview of how civil process service works and what to expect from a process server

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Process Serving Guide for Non-Attorneys

A plain-English overview for clients new to civil procedure



Purpose of this guide

This guide is for individuals and small business clients who are not attorneys and need a practical, plain-English overview of process serving. It explains the purpose of service, what information you should provide, and what to expect from a professional process server.

What “Service of Process” Means

Service of process is the formal delivery of court papers or legal documents to a person or entity so that the receiving party has notice of the matter and an opportunity to respond. The exact method, deadline, and required proof can depend on the case type, court, document, recipient, and jurisdiction.

1. Intake & Documents

You provide the filed documents, party names, service address, deadline, and any known safety or access details.

2. Service Attempts

The process server attempts lawful delivery, documents each attempt, and communicates status according to the service request.

3. Proof or Next Steps

If served, proof or affidavit details are prepared. If not served, attempt details help determine the appropriate next step.

Before You Request Service

Please Provide	Why It Matters
Court-filed documents	Provide the exact papers that must be served, including summons, complaint, petition, notice, or other papers issued or filed in the case.
Case and court information	Include the county, court, docket or case number, party names, and any filing or service deadline shown on the paperwork.
Correct service recipient	Provide the full legal name of the person or entity to be served and any aliases, business names, or role information shown in the case.
Best known address details	Provide street address, apartment or suite number, workplace address, gate/access instructions, and any known schedule information.
Special handling concerns	Disclose safety concerns, no-contact orders, known hostility, animals, security desks, facility rules, or language/accessibility needs.
Instructions from court or attorney	If the court, attorney, agency, or filing office provided specific service instructions, share them before service attempts begin.



Important: process serving is not legal advice

A process server can help with delivery and documentation, but cannot decide your legal strategy, choose the correct legal method for you, calculate deadlines, or advise whether your documents are legally sufficient. If you are unsure, contact an attorney, court self-help center, or the filing office before requesting service.

Plain-English Pennsylvania Note

Pennsylvania service rules can distinguish between “original process” and later legal papers. Rule 400 states that, except for listed exceptions and certain rules, original process within Pennsylvania is served only by the sheriff. The Chapter 400 rules also identify related service topics, including who may serve, time for service, manner of service, service by mail, service outside Pennsylvania, return of service, special court orders, and service of legal papers other than original process.

- Because the correct service method can depend on the document and case type, confirm the service requirements before instructing a process server.
- If a private process server is allowed for your matter, the server’s documentation must still meet the requirements for the court or agency involved.
- If your paperwork involves domestic relations, protection orders, landlord-tenant matters, out-of-state service, or service on a business/government entity, additional or different rules may apply.

What to Expect From the Process Server

What the Process Server Does

- Reviews the service request and documents to understand the recipient, address, and instructions.
- Attempts delivery using the service method authorized for the document and jurisdiction.
- Documents service details, including date, time, location, method, recipient, and attempt notes.
- Provides status updates and prepares proof, affidavit, or return information when applicable.

What the Process Server Cannot Do

- Give legal advice, select the legal strategy, or tell you which service method to use.
- Guarantee that a person will be located, served, or that the court will accept service.
- Trespass, impersonate law enforcement, threaten, harass, or force a person to accept documents.
- Change court documents, correct pleadings, calculate deadlines, or advise whether a case was filed properly.

After Service Attempts

When service is completed, the person making service typically documents what happened. Pennsylvania Rule 405 states that a return of service should set forth the date, time, place, and manner of service, the identity of the person served, and other facts needed for the court to determine whether service was proper. Rule 405 also states that a return by someone other than the sheriff is by affidavit and that a return of service or no service is filed with the prothonotary.

- If service is successful, you should receive proof, affidavit, or return information for filing or delivery to the appropriate office.
- If service is unsuccessful, you should receive attempt information, such as dates, times, locations, observations, and reason service could not be completed.
- Unsuccessful service does not mean the case is over. It usually means you need to decide the next lawful step with the court, attorney, or other appropriate resource.

Common Issues That Can Delay Service

- Incorrect or incomplete address, missing apartment/suite number, or outdated workplace information.
- Wrong legal name, business name, registered agent, or recipient type.
- Recipient has moved, avoids contact, works irregular hours, or has limited access through security desks or gated buildings.
- Papers are incomplete, not filed, missing required copies, or unclear about who must be served.
- Client expects the server to answer legal questions, change paperwork, or guarantee court acceptance.



Need assistance before requesting service?

For scheduling, intake logistics, service-area questions, or pre-service preparation, contact Deihm Professional Services. For questions about legal strategy, filing requirements, deadlines, service method, or whether service was legally sufficient, contact an attorney, court self-help resource, or the filing office.

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Client-facing informational guide. This guide is not legal advice and should be reviewed for jurisdiction-specific accuracy before publication.