

February 2013

Your day in court

A guide for people going to
the Magistrates' Court for
minor criminal offences

 **Victoria
Legal Aid**

Lawyers And
Legal Services

Your day in court

Do you need this booklet in a different format?

Please ring us on 9269 0223 so we can talk with you about what you need.

Victoria Legal Aid

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www.legalaid.vic.gov.au

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Changes to the law

The law changes all the time. To check for changes you can:

- call Victoria Legal Aid's Legal Help phone line on 9269 0120 or 1800 677 402 (country callers)
- visit Victoria Legal Aid's website at www.legalaid.vic.gov.au
- contact a community legal centre. Call the Federation of Community Legal Centres on 9652 1500 to find your nearest community legal centre.

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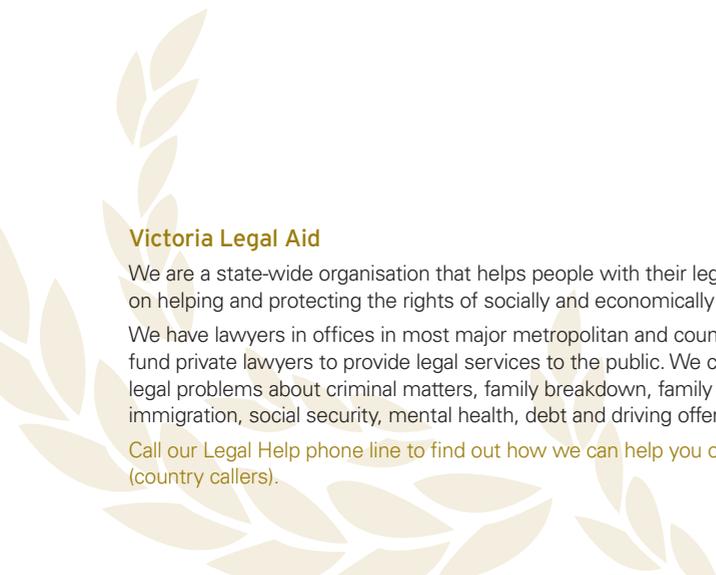
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Your day in court

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Victoria Legal Aid

We are a state-wide organisation that helps people with their legal problems. We focus on helping and protecting the rights of socially and economically disadvantaged Victorians.

We have lawyers in offices in most major metropolitan and country regions. We also fund private lawyers to provide legal services to the public. We can help you with your legal problems about criminal matters, family breakdown, family violence, child support, immigration, social security, mental health, debt and driving offences.

Call our Legal Help phone line to find out how we can help you on 9269 0120 or 1800 677 402 (country callers).

About this booklet



This booklet is a guide for people going to the Magistrates' Court. This booklet can help people with charges for minor criminal offences, who may be able to represent themselves in the courtroom.

If you have charges for a minor criminal offence and the magistrate finds you guilty, you may get a penalty.

Minor criminal offences include the following.

Driving offences

- careless driving
- driving without a licence
- drug driving
- drink driving
- driving while disqualified or suspended
- hoon driving.

Public transport offences

- using offensive language or behaving offensively on public transport
- placing feet on public transport furniture
- smoking on public transport
- failing to give your name and address
- failing to show a concession card.

Infringements

- matters where you have chosen to challenge the infringement in court.

Offences where the prosecuting agency is not the police

- behaviour of a dangerous dog
- not lodging a tax return
- fishing without a licence.

Other offences

- hindering police (but not actually assaulting anyone)
- using or possessing a drug of dependence (small quantity of cannabis)
- being drunk in public
- shop theft.

Your day in court

This booklet is for people who are charged as adults (18 years or over). If you are charged when you are under 18, your charges will be heard in the Children's Court. This booklet is only about the Magistrates' Court.

Getting more help

This booklet gives general information not legal advice. We strongly recommend that you get legal advice before you go to court. If you are going to court for serious offences, it is even more important that you see a lawyer. See 'Where to get help' on page 39.

Legal words

We have explained some words in the next section 'What do these words mean?' These words are also highlighted in **bold** the first time they appear in each section.

What do these words mean?



accused – a person charged with committing an offence

adjourn/adjournment – where the court puts your court case off until a later date. If the court allows this, it is called an adjournment

allege/alleged – to accuse another person of having done something

arrest – when the police hold you in custody because they think you have committed an offence

bail – an ‘undertaking’ that you will go to court to face charges on a certain date. You may have to agree to conditions like reporting to the police or living at a certain place while you are on bail

breach/breaching – to break a law or court order. This is the same thing as contravention

brief of evidence – the evidence that makes up the police’s case against you. This can include the charge sheet, the informant’s statement, your criminal record, witness statements and other documents or things the police have

case – your legal matter

charge – the offence that the police or prosecuting agency allege you have committed

charge sheet – a document that lists all the offences the police or the prosecuting agency have charged you with. The charge sheet can have more than one offence if the police or prosecuting agency think that you have broken more than one law

conviction – if the magistrate finds you guilty, they can give you a penalty with or without a conviction. A conviction shows that your offending was particularly bad or your crime was more serious

court list – a list at court that shows the cases to be dealt with that day and which courtroom they will be heard in

Your day in court

court order – where the court tells you to do something. For example, you may have to come to court again or write an apology to someone. A court order can also be an order for you to carry out a penalty such as paying a fine or doing community work. If you do not obey a court order, you can get into serious trouble

criminal record – a list that shows findings of guilt and convictions against you for previous offences that have come before a court

custody – when you have been arrested and the police hold you in prison

defence – a legal reason for why you are not guilty of the offence you have been charged with

evidence – information (documents or material) used in court to prove something

finding of guilt – when a magistrate decides there is enough evidence before the court to prove that you committed the offence you have been charged with

hoon driving – a term used to describe risky driving behaviour and improper use of a vehicle. This includes some cases of drink driving, drug driving, speeding, deliberate skidding, unlicensed driving and carrying too many passengers

indictable offence – an indictable offence is more serious than a summary offence. Many indictable offences can be heard in the Magistrates' Court. Other offences are heard in a higher court like the County Court or Supreme Court

informant – the police officer or government official (for example, a ticket inspector) who charged you. They also give evidence to be used in the case against you. The prosecutor presents the case in the courtroom, not the informant

magistrate – a person who hears cases in the Magistrates' Court or the Children's Court. They can make decisions about whether you are guilty or not. They can give sentences

mention date – the date given on your charge sheet for when you need to go to court and any hearing dates after that

notice to appear – a document the police can give you when they suspect you of breaking the law. The document tells you to go to court on a certain date. The police will usually give the notice to appear to you rather than send it to you

offence – when you have broken the law, you are said to have committed an offence. See also 'charge'

penalty – a punishment for breaking the law

plea/pleading – a plea is your response in the courtroom to the charge. You can plead guilty or not guilty

police case – what the police say about what happened and why they charged you. This is based on the brief of evidence

prosecution, prosecutor – the police officer who presents the informant's case against you in the courtroom. The prosecutor can also be a government official (for example, a Corrections worker) or someone working for an agency that issued you with an infringement notice

preliminary brief – this is a shorter version of the brief of evidence. You should get this early on in the process. The preliminary brief will give you details of the prosecution's case

registrar – an administrative worker at court

registry – the court's front counter

sentence – if the magistrate finds you guilty, they will sentence you. This means the magistrate gives you a penalty and, if your offence was serious, the magistrate may also give you a conviction

serve – delivery of a document to someone

summary offence – a minor offence that is usually heard in the Magistrates' Court or the Children's Court without a jury

summons – a court document that tells you when and where you must go to court

triable summarily – when an indictable offence can be dealt with by a magistrate in the Magistrates' Court

undertaking – a promise to the court to do or not to do certain things

warrant – an order by the court for your arrest

witness – a person who gives evidence in writing or in person at the court

Your day in court

Important things to know



The court is adversarial

This means that the **prosecution** are on one side and the defence is on the other side. The prosecution could be the police, a local council or a government department. The defence is you and your lawyer, if you have one. Each side may give evidence to the magistrate.

You are innocent until proven guilty beyond reasonable doubt

Even if you plan to **plead** guilty at court, the prosecution must prove to the magistrate that you are guilty of the **offence** 'beyond reasonable doubt'. You are innocent until the magistrate believes without reasonable doubt that you are guilty. If there is a reasonable doubt in the magistrate's mind they must find you not guilty.

You should go to your court hearing

If you have been **served** with a **summons**, you should go to court. If you do not turn up, the magistrate may issue a warrant or **sentence** you and give a court order with a harsh **penalty**. Going to court gives you the chance to tell the magistrate about how your life will be affected by getting a penalty. For example, losing your driver licence could mean you are not able to help a sick relative. The magistrate may take this into account.

You must go to court if you are on bail. If you do not go the magistrate may issue a **warrant**. A warrant allows the police to **arrest** you and take you to court. The police may hold you in **custody** until the magistrate can deal with your case.

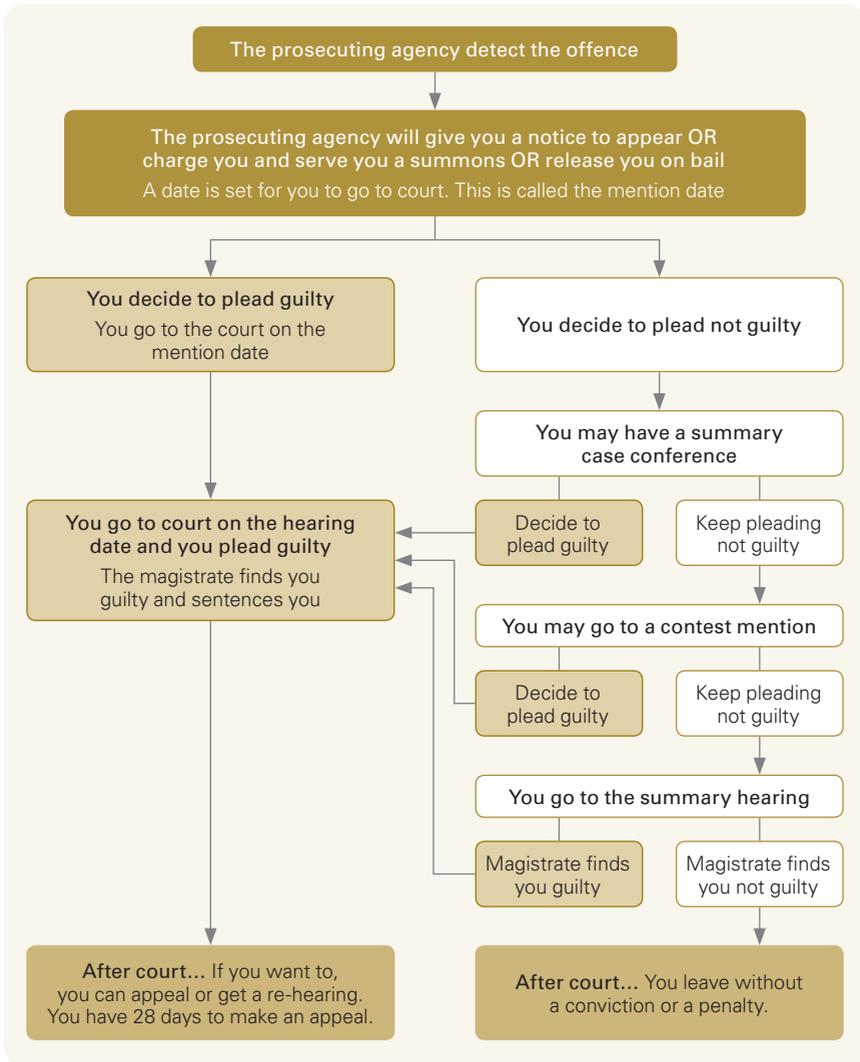
Do not be late

Your **charge sheet** or **notice to appear** will give you the time to be at court. Remember this date and be on time. You should get to the court 30 minutes before the time stated. The magistrate can issue a warrant for your arrest if you are late to court.

If you need an interpreter, get one before you go to court

Ring the court where your matter is listed to arrange this. Do this at least five days before going to court. The court will pay for the interpreter. Only qualified interpreters work at court.

How does the court process work?



How does the court process work?

Your day in court

Explanation of the flowchart

The prosecuting agency detects the offence

For example, an Authorised Officer from the Department of Transport saw you committing an offence or police equipment recorded you running a red light.

The prosecuting agency will give you a notice to appear

Police officers and other people who work for the government can give a notice to appear.

A notice to appear is a written document. It tells you:

- what **offence** the police officer or government officer alleges that you committed
- when and where you have to go to court.

See an example on page 36.

The officer can give you the notice to appear on the spot or soon after. You will go to court quicker than if the officer gives you a **summons**. A summons is a document that tells you to go to court on a certain date. It includes the **charges**. See an example on page 37. A summons could be issued weeks or even months after the date the offence is said to have been committed.

Notices to appear are usually for cases that are not too complicated.

...or the prosecuting agency will give you a charge and summons

In this situation, the prosecuting agency files a **charge sheet** with the court and **serves** a summons on you. They usually do this in person. Sometimes they will mail it.

...or release you on bail

In this situation, the police have **arrested** you and interviewed you at a police station. If you are given bail, you can leave the police station. You will need to sign an **undertaking** promising you will go to court on a certain date to **plead** guilty or not guilty to the charges against you.

You may have a summary case conference

You may have a summary case conference if you want to plead not guilty to an offence the police have charged you with. You must have the conference before going into the courtroom. The conference is a discussion between you, or your lawyer (if you have one), and the police prosecutor. It is a chance to work out what you and the police disagree over.

You must have a summary case conference before you can have your case **adjourned** for a contest mention or a contested hearing.

The prosecuting agency may not be the police. For example it may be the Department of Transport or a local council. In this situation, if you want to plead not guilty, you will need to talk with the person appearing on their behalf at court. You must do this before going into the courtroom.

You may go to a contest mention

This is the next step for a matter where you are pleading not guilty. The contest mention must happen before the contested hearing can happen. The one exception is where you have just a single charge.

At the contest mention the magistrate will want to know:

- the main issues you and the prosecution disagree over
- the number of witnesses that will be called at the hearing
- how long your hearing might take.

The informant will usually be there. So will the prosecutor. The magistrate will try to get you and the prosecutor to agree on as much as you can. You can ask the magistrate what would happen if you were to plead guilty. The magistrate may give an idea of the **penalty**. This is called a sentencing indication.

You might now feel that the prosecution has a strong case against you. You can choose to plead guilty at the contest mention stage. If you are charged with more than one offence, the prosecution may drop some charges if you plead guilty to others.

Contested hearing

This usually only happens after you have had:

- the summary case conference
- the contest mention.

The hearing takes place where you maintain that you are not guilty. It can include:

- **witnesses** giving **evidence**
- you giving evidence as one of your own witnesses
- submissions and arguments on points of law
- the magistrate deciding on whether you are guilty or not guilty
- the magistrate deciding on penalties, if they have found you guilty.

If you change your mind and decide to plead guilty, your case can still go ahead on that day. You should tell the court and prosecution as soon as you can if you decide to plead guilty. This way the prosecution does not get witnesses to come to court.

Your day in court

I have to go to court: what should I do first?



Understand what the charge is

What offence has the informant charged me with?

This is on the **charge sheet**. Look at the 'Details of the charge' section. You can see what the **informant** wrote about your **offence**. The magistrate refers to this in the courtroom. The **preliminary brief** of evidence can also give you more information about the offence.

Summary or indictable offence?

The charge sheet tells you whether the prosecuting agency **charged** you with a **summary offence** or an **indictable offence**.

The Magistrates' Court usually deals with summary offences. An indictable offence is more serious. A higher court like the County Court or Supreme Court often deals with indictable offences. These courts use a judge and jury.

Most indictable offences, however, are **triable summarily**. This means you can ask to have your case heard by a magistrate in the Magistrates' Court instead of by a judge and jury. People often choose the Magistrates' Court because costs are lower, **penalties** may be less severe and cases are dealt with quicker. Get advice from a lawyer about this.

Do I agree with the charge?

It is not as simple as asking yourself 'Did I do it?' You may have done what the informant says but you may have a **defence**. For example, the informant charged you with shoplifting but you took the item by accident.

Do I agree with every charge?

The informant may have charged you with more than one offence. The **prosecution** may drop some of the charges, especially if you want to **plead** guilty to the rest of the charges. Your lawyer, if you have one, can speak with the prosecution about this.

Get legal advice

When should I get legal advice?

Do this as soon as you can – even if the police or court staff have said that you do not need a lawyer. No matter how small the charge may seem, treat it seriously. If the magistrate finds you guilty, you may get a criminal record.

Getting legal advice early can help you decide if you need a lawyer to speak for you in court. You will be able to work out if you can represent yourself.

What should I ask the lawyer?

Ask them questions such as:

- Should I plead guilty or not guilty?
- What sort of penalty might I get?
- Will I go to prison?
- Would having a lawyer in court make a difference to the penalty?
- If I get a lawyer to represent me, how much will it cost? (weigh up this cost against the likely penalty and if you plan to plead guilty or not guilty)
- What do I need to take to court?
- What will happen in court?

Where do I find a lawyer?

See 'Where to get help' on page 39. You may have to pay for a lawyer.

Decide to plead guilty or not guilty

This is up to you. To help you decide, think about:

- the legal advice you got from your lawyer
- your defence and the strength of the prosecution's case against you
- your chances of being found not guilty.

You may need to think about the penalties for the offence. For some offences the only way to avoid a penalty is to plead not guilty and win. This can be hard. If you plead guilty, the court must take this into consideration and you will get a lighter penalty.

You may feel pressured to plead guilty. Only plead guilty if you think you are guilty. Do not do it just to get the case over and done with.

Your day in court

I want to plead guilty. Can I get help from Victoria Legal Aid?

On the day you go to court, the duty lawyer service at court can give you information and advice or represent you in the courtroom, depending on your circumstances. The duty lawyer service is free. For more information about duty lawyers, [see](#) page 19 or visit www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/lawyeratcourt

It is best to get advice before going to court. Call our Legal Help phone line.

[See](#) 'Where to get help' on page 39. We can give you information and help you understand the charge sheet. We may be able to tell you if one of our lawyers can give you advice and representation for your whole case. This depends on things like your income and circumstances. More information is on our website www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/fundingcases

Some private lawyers can also apply to Victoria Legal Aid to get a grant to fund your case.

Delaying your court date



Can I ask to delay the date?

This is called an **adjournment**.

You may be able to adjourn your case if:

- you want to plead not guilty and have had a summary case conference
- you have accepted responsibility for the offence and want to ask for a diversion recommendation from the **informant**. See page 16 for more information about diversion
- you need more time to prepare and want to find a private lawyer
- you need more time to get legal advice. The magistrate may want to know whether you will **plead** guilty or not guilty.

Generally, the magistrate will only adjourn a case if they believe there is a very good reason.

How do I delay the date?

If you have a good reason for an adjournment, you can speak to your lawyer or the court co-ordinator about how to adjourn your matter. You can do this when you get to court on the day of your hearing.

If you are not on bail you can call the court before your hearing date to adjourn the matter if you have not adjourned it before. You must do this by 3 pm on the day before your hearing.

If your matter is adjourned you will need to turn up to all future hearing dates. If you want to adjourn your matter again, you will have to go to court on the day of your hearing and ask the magistrate for this.

What if I am on bail?

You must turn up on the day of your hearing. You can ask the magistrate to adjourn your case, but you will need a good reason for this.

Your day in court

What if I am sick on the day or there is an emergency?

Ring the court co-ordinator. Ask them to put off your case to another day. Tell them what has happened. Make a note of the time of your call and the name of the person you spoke with.

Get a doctor's certificate, especially if you are on **bail** or charged with an **indictable offence**. Get someone to take it in or fax it to the court as soon as possible. The court must know why you are not there.

Remember: if you cannot get to court, let the court co-ordinator know.

Preparing for your hearing



Checklist for pleading guilty

- It is important that you get legal advice. See 'I have to go to court: what should I do first?' on page 10.
- Find out about the police case. Get the **preliminary brief** of evidence. You can also ask for the full police **brief of evidence**. Write to the **informant** at least 14 days before the first court date. Details of the informant's station should be on the **charge sheet**. You can still write to them after 14 days but they may not send you the information in time.
- Think about what you want to say in court. See page 26. Write down what you want to say and practise it.
- Get an interpreter if you need one. Ask the court to arrange this for you. Do this at least five days before your case. You will not need to pay for the interpreter. Only qualified interpreters work at court.
- Organise your paperwork. This includes character references and any paperwork about your finances. The magistrate may need to know about your weekly wage and things you have to pay for. For an example of a character reference see page 38.
- Arrange counselling or training that may show the magistrate you are serious about not breaking the law again. For example, you may want to do a drink driving course.
- Visit the court beforehand so you know what to expect. You can also do an online tour of the court by visiting the Magistrates' Court website at www.magistratescourt.vic.gov.au

If you are ready to go ahead with your case on the day, the court will try to deal with your case on that day. Remember, it is important that you get legal advice. See 'I have to go to court: what should I do first?' on page 10.

Your day in court

Programs you could do if pleading guilty

Contact a lawyer or the court as early as you can if you want help from these services.

Court Integrated Services Program (CISP)

You can do CISP at the Latrobe Valley, Melbourne and Sunshine Magistrates' Courts. It is a program to help you reduce the chances of breaking the law again. It is for people who are given a **summons**, are on **bail** or are on remand waiting for their bail hearing.

Through CISP you can get help with short-term housing, medical treatment (such as methadone treatment), drug and alcohol counselling, job programs, travel cards, food vouchers, passport photos and court date reminders or diaries.

You will be in the program for up to four months.

If you keep to the program it shows you have done something positive about your situation. It may help when the magistrate gives you your **sentence**.

CREDIT/Bail Support Program (CBSP)

You can do CBSP at Ballarat, Broadmeadows, Dandenong, Frankston, Geelong, Heidelberg, Moorabbin and Ringwood Magistrates' Courts.

Like CISP, it goes for up to four months and can help you with similar services.

Depending on which court your case is being heard at, you can talk with the CISP or CBSP workers to see whether they can help you.

Diversion program

The diversion program is a way to deal with your matter outside of the court system. It is normally for less serious cases. You do not plead guilty but you must accept responsibility for the offence. You will still get demerit points if your offence attracted demerit points. However, you do not get a **criminal record**.

If the informant gives you a diversion recommendation and the magistrate agrees that you are eligible, you will be put on a diversion plan.

You must follow certain conditions in this time. You might have to:

- write a letter of apology to the victim
- get counselling
- do an education course
- do community work
- pay for any damage or loss you have caused.

If you follow the conditions of your diversion plan, no further action is taken and there will be no **finding of guilt**. That means no criminal record.

A diversion plan usually goes for one year.

Checklist for pleading not guilty

- It is important that you get legal advice. See 'I have to go to court: what should I do first?' on page 10. Representing yourself when you plead not guilty can be very hard. It is better to get a lawyer to speak for you in court if you can. Duty lawyers will not be able to represent you on the day of your summary hearing.
- Find out the police case. Get the preliminary brief of evidence. You can also ask for the full police brief of evidence. Write to the officer-in-charge at the informant's station at least 14 days before the first court date. Details of the informant's station should be on the charge sheet. You can still write to them after 14 days but they may not send you the information in time.
- Carefully read the brief of **evidence**. Note the evidence the police have. Use the brief of evidence to get your **defence** ready. Think about whether you have **witnesses** who can give evidence that can help your case. For example, were you with someone at the time and in a different location from where the **offence** is said to have occurred? Can this person confirm you were elsewhere?
- Get an interpreter if you or your witnesses need one. Ask the court to arrange this for you. Do this at least five days before your case. If the court arranges the interpreter for you it will be free. Only qualified interpreters work at court.
- Organise your witnesses. Tell them when they have to come to court. You might need to get a witness **summons** if your witness refuses to come or if their employer wants proof that they need to be in court. A witness summons is a court document telling witnesses they must go to court. Ask a lawyer or the court co-ordinator about how to fill this out.
- Think about what you want to say to the magistrate in case they find you guilty. See page 26.
- Organise your character references and any paperwork to do with your finances. The magistrate may need to know about your weekly wage and things you have to pay for. For an example of a character reference see page 38.
- Visit the court beforehand so you know what to expect. You can also do an online tour of the court by visiting the Magistrates' Court website at www.magistratescourt.vic.gov.au

Your day in court

Going to court: getting ready and arriving



Before you arrive

Here are some things to think about two weeks or so before your hearing:

- time off work – you may need to get the whole morning or afternoon off
- childcare – you may need to organise someone to look after your children
- bringing a friend – organise for a friend to come with you. You may need someone to drive you home if you are at court for a driving offence and you end up losing your licence.

If you are young, ask your parents to come along. This can make a good impression. Even for adults, magistrates like to see people with you. This shows that you are treating the matter seriously. It shows that you have support. The magistrate may let these people speak for you.

Here are things to think about in the morning:

- clothing – dress to impress, look clean and neat
- paperwork – remember to bring your papers with you.

Arriving

Go to the **registry** and tell the court co-ordinator your name. They will:

- ask if you are pleading guilty or not guilty
- tell you which courtroom your case will be in.

The court co-ordinator may ask you if you have a lawyer. If you want to see the duty lawyer, ask the court co-ordinator where the duty lawyers are.

If you are **pleading** guilty, the court co-ordinator will send your file into the courtroom. This lets the magistrate know that your case can be heard.

If you are pleading not guilty, the court co-ordinator will tell you to have a summary case conference with the police **prosecutor**. If the prosecuting agency is the Department of Transport or someone else, you will need to talk with the person appearing on their behalf at court.

If you cannot agree with the prosecution and you maintain that you are not guilty, tell the court co-ordinator that you are still pleading not guilty. The court co-ordinator will send your file into the courtroom. This lets the magistrate know that your case can be heard.

Waiting

Once the court co-ordinator has sent your file into the courtroom, stay close by or go in there and wait for your name to be called. This may take a while. Make sure you bow to the magistrate as you go into the courtroom.

If you wait in the courtroom, you can watch how other matters are heard.

Be patient, you might not be first. Your **charge sheet** may say that your case is on at 9.30 am. This just means that the court starts hearing cases at 9.30 am.

In the courtroom do not:

- talk (unless it is your case) or whisper
- smoke, eat or chew gum
- listen to music, even if you have earphones
- have your mobile phone switched on
- answer your phone. If you do, the magistrate may take it from you
- wear your sunglasses on the top of your head
- wear a hat.

Seeing a duty lawyer

We have duty lawyers at most courts.

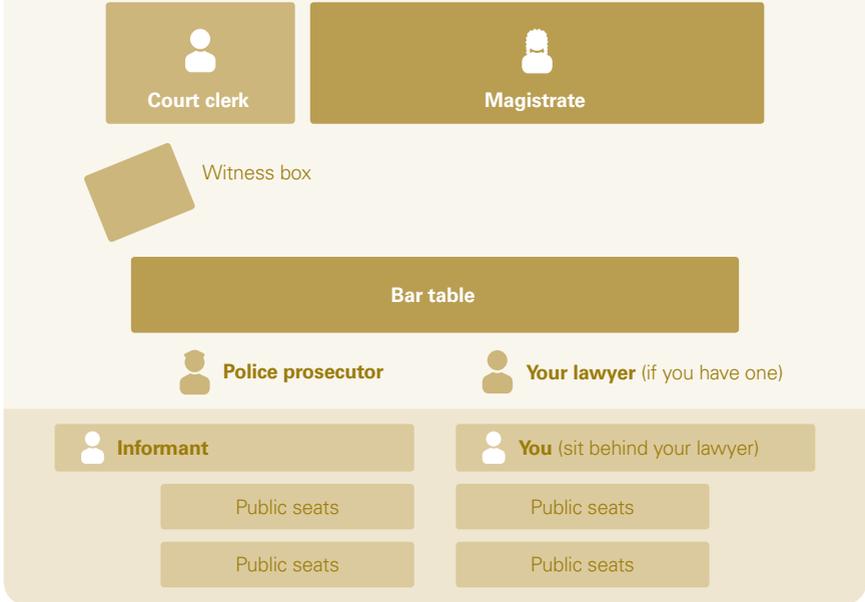
Depending on your background and things going on in your life, the duty lawyer may be able to help with:

- information – if we cannot meet with you to give you advice, we will give you detailed fact sheets about the **offence** and about what happens in the courtroom
- advice – if we can meet with you, we will tell you about the law, what your options are and what happens in the courtroom. We may talk to the prosecution on your behalf
- representation in court – if we can give you more help, we may appear for you in the courtroom. We can only do this for people most in need and/or people facing serious charges.

There may be a lot of people wanting to see the duty lawyer. Again, be patient. You may have to queue up or take a number.

Your day in court

What the courtroom looks like



See for yourself what happens in the courtroom

You can do an online tour of the court by visiting the Magistrates' Court website at www.magistratescourt.vic.gov.au

Going to court: what happens in a guilty hearing



The hearing begins

When your name is called, go to the bar table. Stand at the opposite end of the table from the **prosecutor**.

The charge is read and you make your plea

The court clerk or magistrate reads out the **charge**. Then they ask you if you are **pleading** guilty or not guilty. This is when you say you are pleading guilty.

If the prosecution has charged you with an **indictable offence** that is **triable summarily**, the magistrate then asks you if you want your case heard in the Magistrates' Court or the County Court. Only the Magistrates' Court will be able to hear your case that day. If you choose to have your case heard in the County Court, it will be scheduled for another day.

The prosecutor reads out the summary

The prosecutor reads out the statement of alleged facts. This comes from the **brief of evidence**. The magistrate asks you if you agree with the statement or if it is a fair account of what happened.

If you do not agree with something major in the summary, tell the magistrate. Ask for your case to be stood down so you can see the duty lawyer, if you need to. Being stood down means your case is put on hold briefly and called back on that same day for completion.

If you agree with the summary, the magistrate will say 'I find the charge proved'.

The prosecutor hands up your prior history

The magistrate asks the prosecutor if there is anything 'known' or '**alleged**' (your **prior convictions**). They are asking if the prosecutor knows of any previous times you went to court. If they do, the prosecutor will normally "hand up" a document that lists appearances you have had at court.

If you are guilty of similar **offences**, and if the magistrate finds you guilty this time, they will probably give you a harsher sentence.

You can read the priors. They should be in the brief of evidence. If not, get a copy of your priors from the prosecutor.

Your day in court

If there is anything you do not agree with, tell the magistrate. If you disagree with or do not remember one of the entries on your record, usually your case would need to be stood down. This will give you the chance to sort things out with the prosecutor.

The prosecutor may comment on your priors. They may also tell the magistrate what they think your **sentence** should be.

You get a chance to speak

The magistrate asks if you want to say anything. Although you accept that what you did was against the law, this is a chance to give your side of the story. This can be important in helping the magistrate decide what penalty they give you. For what to say to the magistrate, [see](#) 'What to say in court' on page 26.

You can disagree with things the prosecution say happened. However, you cannot plead guilty but say that you did not break the law.

Remember to call the magistrate 'Your Honour' or 'Sir' or 'Madam'.

Speak clearly and loudly enough for the magistrate to hear you. Look at them when you speak. However, it is okay to look down and read from your notes.

The magistrate will ask you questions if they need more information.

The magistrate announces the sentence

After listening to you, the magistrate announces your sentence. [See](#) 'Being found guilty' on page 28 for an idea of what **penalties** may be in your sentence. For some offences, the magistrate must give you mandatory penalties, which means they do not have any choice but to give you those penalties. This is the case with many driving offences.

Going to court: what happens in a not guilty hearing



The hearing begins

When your name is called, go to the bar table. Stand at the opposite end of the table from the **prosecutor**.

The charge is read

The court clerk or magistrate will read out the **charge**. Then they will ask if you are **pleading** guilty or not guilty. This is when you say you are pleading not guilty.

If the prosecution has charged you with an **indictable offence** that is **triable summarily**, the magistrate then asks you if you want your case heard in the Magistrates' Court or the County Court.

The courtroom is cleared

If there is more than one **witness**, they should not hear each other's **evidence**. At this point the magistrate will order all witnesses to leave the court. The magistrate will call them back when it is their turn to speak. The **informant**, who is a witness, can stay.

The prosecution's witnesses will speak

The prosecutor will question their witnesses first. One of these will be the informant. Take notes of what the witnesses say. This will help you to get your questions ready.

The prosecution has to prove their case beyond a reasonable doubt.

You can cross-examine the police witnesses

After each of the prosecution's witnesses has given evidence, you can question them. This is called cross-examination. Your main aim is to ask questions that put doubt on the prosecution's witnesses' evidence. This can be hard to do. Witnesses may have different versions of the same event.

Your day in court

Try to:

- challenge witnesses on things you disagree with
- show up any contradictions
- show up things that do not make sense
- show up things that they have left out.

Always be polite. Ask short and clear questions related to your case.

The prosecution can re-examine their witnesses

The prosecutor can ask their witnesses more questions to clear up anything you have asked when you did your cross-examination.

You can give evidence

You can give evidence once the prosecution has finished questioning their witnesses. You will go into the witness box and swear an oath or make an affirmation that you will tell the truth.

Look at the magistrate and explain what you saw, heard or did. Keep to the facts. Remember to call the magistrate 'Your Honour' or 'Sir' or 'Madam'. The magistrate may ask you questions.

You do not have to give evidence. If you do, the prosecutor may cross-examine you. Talk to a lawyer about this before you go to court.

You can also call your own witnesses to give evidence that is different to what the prosecution is saying. Ask your witnesses about what they saw or heard. Let them say it in their own words. The prosecutor can also cross-examine your witness.

The prosecution may cross-examine you

The prosecutor can ask questions:

- to you, while you are in the witness box
- to your witnesses, after they give evidence.

The magistrate may also ask you questions. The magistrate is not trying to help the prosecution. If a magistrate asks you questions, these will usually be about clarifying the information.

You can re-examine what you said and your witnesses

You get another chance to speak about anything the prosecutor has asked you in cross-examination. You can also ask your witnesses about things that came up in cross-examination.

The magistrate announces a decision

After the magistrate has heard all the evidence, they will announce their decision.

They could find you not guilty. If so, they will dismiss the case and you are free to go. You can ask to be paid back for your costs and any witnesses' costs. This could include wages you lost because you had to be at court.

The magistrate could find you guilty. If so, the magistrate will ask the prosecutor if there is anything 'known' or 'alleged'. That is, if the police want to say anything about your **criminal record**. See 'The prosecutor hands up your prior history' on page 21.

The magistrate will then ask if there is anything you want to say. Think about the things happening in your life right now. Think about how your life could be affected by getting a **conviction**. Be ready for this. See 'What to say in court' on page 26.

The magistrate gives you a sentence if you are found guilty

The magistrate then decides on a **sentence**. See 'Being found guilty' on page 28 for an idea of what penalties may be in your sentence.

Your day in court

What to say in court



Fill in this checklist to help you reply to the magistrate. Write notes in the spaces below. You can read from these notes in court but make sure you look at the magistrate too.

Support people

Who is at court supporting you? The magistrate may ask these people questions.

.....

.....

About the offence

How and why did the offence happen? For example, why were you driving?

.....

.....

What have you done to make up for it?

For example, you paid for the damage caused, you were co-operative with police, you have apologised to the victim.

.....

.....

What have you learned and how do you feel about what you did?

.....

.....

What are you doing to stop the behaviour happening again?

For example, sorting out any drug or alcohol problems, seeing a counsellor or social worker, selling your car.

.....

.....

Your day in court

Being found guilty



What happens if I am found guilty?

The magistrate will **sentence** you. This may include a **conviction** and will include a **penalty**. The sentence will depend on:

- how serious the **offence** is
- if you have been found guilty of similar offences before
- what else is going on in your life.

What sort of penalty will I get?

You may get one or more of the following:

No penalty

The magistrate can find the matter proven but dismiss it without giving you a penalty. This means the magistrate has found you guilty of the offence but has not given you a penalty because the offence was so minor. Or there are things going on in your life that mean the magistrate does not think it is useful to punish you with a penalty.

Undertaking

The magistrate may give you a chance to avoid a conviction if you sign an **undertaking**. An undertaking is a promise to the court that you will not commit any more offences. The undertaking usually goes for twelve months. The undertaking may have other conditions. You may have to pay money to the court fund or do a driver education course.

There are serious consequences if you do not keep your promise. You can be brought back to court and the magistrate can re-sentence you on the original matter.

Fines and other payments

The magistrate can order you to pay:

- a fine
- money to the court fund (instead of a fine). This money goes to charity and is usually a part of an undertaking
- money to a victim, for example, to cover any property damage. Also, any profits from the crime may be taken from you.

Community corrections order

You may have to do things like:

- unpaid work with a community group (such as gardening at a local school)
- an education program
- counselling
- alcohol or drug tests
- reporting to a community corrections centre.

You must not commit any offences while you are on the order.

To get a community corrections order you must go to court, get assessed by a Corrections officer and agree to stick to the order.

Imprisonment or youth detention

In some cases, especially if it is not your first offence and the offending is serious, the magistrate may sentence you to jail or detention.

There are different types of detention:

- suspended sentence – you serve this sentence in the community and not in jail. You get to stay in the community because you promise to behave well
- detention in jail, or in a youth centre (for people under 21).

You must not breach your suspended sentence or community corrections order.

You will breach it if you commit an offence that could be punished by jail.

If you are in breach, the magistrate can sentence you to jail straight away.

The only time this would not happen is if you can prove to the court that you have 'exceptional circumstances'. Get legal advice. See 'Where to get help' on page 39.

What penalties might I also get for driving offences?

Licence loss

The magistrate may:

- suspend your licence or permit. This means you cannot drive for a certain period of time
- cancel your licence or permit. This means that your licence no longer exists and you are disqualified from driving for a period of time. When the disqualification ends, you can apply to the court to get your licence back. This is called a licence restoration.

For many drink driving and speeding offences, the magistrate must cancel your licence.

Your day in court

Demerit points

You will get demerit points if the magistrate finds you guilty of a driving offence that attracts demerit points. The magistrate has no power to do anything about demerit points. They apply automatically.

You might lose your licence if you get too many points:

- 12 or more points (fully licensed driver)
- five or more points (probationary driver).

For more information on demerit points, see the VicRoads website www.vicroads.vic.gov.au

Alcohol interlock

An alcohol interlock is a device that stops a car from starting if the driver has been drinking alcohol. The interlock is fitted to a car. The driver must blow into the interlock. It measures and records the amount of alcohol on the driver's breath. The car will not start if there is alcohol on your breath.

Your vehicle will be fitted with an interlock if:

- your licence was cancelled for drink driving and you were disqualified from driving, and
- when the disqualification period ended, the magistrate restored your licence. But they did this on the condition that you have an interlock fitted to your vehicle for a period of time.

Hoon driving penalties

Police can search for and take a vehicle if they believe it was used in a **hoon driving** offence. They can impound the vehicle by taking it away to a garage or holding yard, or immobilise it by attaching a wheel clamp or steering wheel lock. Police can impound or immobilise the vehicle immediately for 30 days.

Hoon driving offences include:

- speeding
- skidding
- continuing to drive after police order you to stop
- driving in or organising a street race
- deliberately driving into a crossing where a train or tram is approaching
- driving with too many passengers
- repeat drink or drug driving
- repeat offences of unlicensed or disqualified driving.

There are two tiers (levels) of hoon driving offences. The police may impound or immobilise a vehicle for longer than 30 days depending on which tier the offence is in, and how serious it is. Police can take a vehicle permanently for very serious offences.

If police take your vehicle, you may have to pay for all impounding and immobilisation costs.

What else might happen if I am found guilty?

Compensation

The magistrate may order you to pay a victim for damages your offence caused.

Criminal record

What happens in court goes on your criminal record. This includes:

- the finding of guilt
- a conviction, if there is one
- the penalties you got.

The court and the police can see your criminal record. Sometimes they can let other people know what is in your criminal record. For example, a criminal record, especially with convictions, may make it harder for you to get some jobs or get visas to some countries.

The police have a policy for when they will give out information about your criminal record. Look for the Police Release Information Policy on their website www.police.vic.gov.au for more information.

What if I am unhappy with the court result?

You may want to make an appeal or have a re-hearing. [See](#) page 34.

Your day in court

Leaving court: what happens now



What if I got a penalty?

You need to understand what the **penalty** means and what you have to do next. If you are at all unsure, ask the court registrar before you leave court. You may have to sign something before you leave court (such as an **undertaking**). The magistrate will ask you to sit in the court until the court clerk brings you the document to sign.

If you have trouble keeping to your **sentence** and obeying **court orders**, get legal advice as soon as you can.

How do I pay a fine?

You can pay the fine at any Magistrates' Court. Go to the **registry** and ask the staff for help.

Let the court registrar know if you might have trouble paying the fine. There are options. You can ask the court to:

- make a plan for you to pay bit by bit every month
- give you extra time to pay it off
- convert your fine into community work instead.

If you cannot pay all of it, pay what you can – it shows the court you are trying. Do not leave it until it is too late or you could end up back at court. If you do not pay, you might have to pay more money or the court can issue a warrant for your arrest.

What happens if I have lost my licence?

You should not drive at all during this time. There are no exceptions. For example, you cannot drive to work or to pick up your children. There are no special licences that allow you to drive some of the time. There are very serious penalties for driving when you are not supposed to.

What happens if I have to do a drink driving course?

Get in touch with a driver education agency as soon as you lose your licence. The agency will tell you what you have to do and what the costs are. You usually do two sessions with the agency. This lets them look at your progress over time. They will write a report about your drinking or drug use. The agency sends the report directly to court. The magistrate will consider this report when you apply for a licence restoration.

Contact Direct Line for information about your closest driver education agency. See 'Where to get help' on page 39.

What happens if I get put on a community corrections order?

Someone from Corrections may interview you. Do not leave the courthouse until this is done and the magistrate has made a final decision.

Once you are on the order, you must follow the conditions of the order. You must turn up at the Corrections Office that is supervising your order. If you do not follow your order, you may be charged with breaking the order (this is called 'contravening the order'). This carries serious penalties. Talk to a lawyer as soon as you can. You will have to go back to court. The magistrate may give you a heavier penalty or send you to jail.

If you are sick or have trouble getting to the Corrections Office, tell your supervisor. Get a doctor's certificate. Keep a record of conversations with your supervisor in case there is a problem later. Make sure the court has your current address. The court may need to write to you.

What if I do not understand the sentence?

Ask the magistrate or court registrar before you leave the courthouse. You can also ring the court later.

Appeals and re-hearings



What is an appeal?

An appeal allows you to challenge a decision made by a court. If you disagree with the magistrate's decision, you can appeal in a higher court, such as the County Court.

You can appeal to the County Court against the:

- **conviction** – the magistrate's decision to find you guilty
- **sentence** – the penalty or other sentencing order the magistrate gave you.

The appeal involves:

- filling out court forms
- going to the County Court for an appeal hearing.

Get legal advice before lodging an appeal. A lawyer can advise you on whether your sentence was appropriate. The decision might feel really unfair but this does not mean that you will get a better result if you appeal.

It is very important to keep in mind that a judge hearing your appeal can give you an even heavier sentence than what the magistrate gave you.

You have 28 days to lodge an appeal. It may take several months after that before the judge hears your appeal.

What is a re-hearing?

A re-hearing means your case is heard all over again.

You can ask for a re-hearing if you did not go to court for your hearing.

Sometimes, if you did not turn up, the magistrate will:

- listen to the **charges** against you
- find you guilty
- decide on a penalty, and
- sentence you without you being there to tell your side of the story.

If the magistrate makes an order without you there, the court will **serve** a notice in writing to your address.

This notice tells you what order the magistrate made. It will also tell you that you can apply for a re-hearing. You have 28 days from the date you get the notice to apply for a re-hearing.

The police may try to stop a re-hearing from happening. Get legal advice if you are thinking about these options. **See** 'Where to get help' on page 39.

Your day in court

Example documents



Notice to appear

Accused Copy		Form 8 - Rule 13	
Notice to Appear			
Person served			
Accused	Given Name	Surname	Date of Birth
Address	Street Name and No.		
	Suburb/Town	Post Code	
You are required to appear before a Magistrates' Court at			
Venue	Name	Date Notice Served	
Address	Street Name and No.		
	Suburb/Town	Post Code	Suburb/Town
When	Time	Day	Month Year
You are suspected of having committed the following offences			
<small>(These are general particulars of the offences; only)</small>			
The suspected offences were committed in the following manner			
<small>(General facts of the circumstances of the suspected offence(s))</small>			
Member of the police force or authorised person			
Signature			Date
Authorised Person	Name	Rank	Reg. No.
Agency and Address	Station		
	Street Name and No.		
	Suburb/Town	Post Code	
	Telephone	Fax No.	E-mail
IMPORTANT INFORMATION			
DO NOT IGNORE THIS NOTICE - GET LEGAL ADVICE			
When you must go to court			
You must go to court if you get a copy of the charge-sheet and preliminary brief. This means you have been charged with an offence. You will get a copy of the charge-sheet and preliminary brief within 21 days of getting this notice.			
If you do not appear at court, the magistrate may:			
• Make a decision without you about your case and issue a penalty based on the information in the preliminary brief			
• Order that you be arrested and get the police to bring you to court.			
When you do not need to go to court			
You do not have to go to court if you get a written notice that says that a charge-sheet has not been filed and you do not have to go to court.			

Charge and summons

Revised 01/03 VP Form 402

CHARGE AND SUMMONS

Defendant Copy - Bring this with you to Court Magistrates Court General Regulations 60/2000 Form 7

TO THE DEFENDANT		Unsuitable Dates	
		Preferred Dates	
		M <input type="checkbox"/>	F <input type="checkbox"/>
		Co. <input type="checkbox"/>	Date of Birth
You have been charged with an offence against the law. Read these pages to see what you must do.		Registration No.	State
		Licence No.	State

Details of the charge against you

What is the charge?

Under what law? State Act Other - Specify Commonwealth Reg

Act or Regulation No. Section/Clause (if any)

Type of Offence Summary Offence (You should go to Court) Indictable Offence (You must go to Court)

Are there more charges? No Yes - see "Continuation of Charges" attached.

Informant Phone No.

Agency and Address

Informant Signature Date

Where will the case be heard

Where you must go The Magistrates' / Children's Court of Victoria at

Address Phone No.

When Time 10:00 am Fee Adult Yes

Details about this summons 6:30

Issued at Date

Issued by Registrar Magistrate Police Informant

Charge Filed at by (member) Emp No

Method of Filing mail / personal also magistrate Date

Your day in court

Letter from employer

[Heading]

To the Magistrate,

[Reference]

My name is Albert Locklear. I am the sales manager at New Quality Motors at 1 Coburg Avenue, Coburg.

[Knowledge of you]

Luke Thomas has worked under my supervision as a sales representative for three years. In that time I have found him to be a good worker and from my experience of his driving, a safe driver. He has a bright future at this company.

[Referee's knowledge of court case and reason for writing reference]

I understand that Luke has to attend court about a drink-driving charge. Due to other commitments, I am unable to attend court to give character evidence on his behalf.

[Consequences of loss of licence]

Luke's job involves some driving and a licence is important so he can properly perform his work. Therefore, I can say that if the court cancels or suspends his licence, Luke will have difficulty performing his job. His future prospects may be affected and he may be laid off.

Yours faithfully

Albert Locklear

[Print your name under your signature]

ALBERT LOCKLEAR

Your employer can use this letter as a guide to write their own letter about the effect of licence cancellation or suspension on your employment.

Character reference

[Address to the magistrate]

Your Honour,

[Referee's name and qualifications]

My name is Peter Johnson of 1 Temple Court, Keilor Park, architect.

[Relationship to you]

I have known Jane Citizen of 123 Alphabet Street, South Melbourne, retail assistant for five years.

[Referee's knowledge of your court case and their reason for writing the character reference]

I understand that Jane Citizen has to attend court about a theft charge. Due to other commitments, I am unable to attend court to give character evidence on her behalf.

[Referee's knowledge of your character]

However, I can say that in all the time I have known her, Jane has been a decent, hard working and trustworthy person. I believe any behaviour she displayed that caused her to be charged with theft was a one-off event.

[Circumstance of offence]

She has been under stress due to her mother's difficult battle with cancer. Even though she has been charged with theft I would continue to trust Jane with my money and belongings.

Yours faithfully

Peter Johnson

[Print your name under your signature]

PETER JOHNSON

The character reference is written by someone who knows you, for example, your employer. The letter needs to cover the issues related to the charge, for example, dishonesty, violence, drug use etc.

If possible, have the character reference typed. Make sure it is signed and dated. If the referee (person who is giving you a reference) has a letterhead, ask if they can print the character reference on the letterhead.

Where to get help



If you need an interpreter:

Call the Translating and Interpreting Service for an interpreter to help you speak to any of the agencies in this section. Ask the interpreter to put you through to the agency you need. This is usually free.

Tel: 131 450



If you are deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment:

Use the National Relay Service to phone any of the agencies (including Victoria Legal Aid) in this section. This is free. For more information about the NRS visit www.relayservice.com.au

TTY users: Call 133 677 and then ask for the phone number you need. Include the area code.

Speak and Listen users: Call 1300 555 727 and then ask for the phone number you need. Include the area code.

Internet relay users: See www.relayservice.com.au and click 'Make an internet relay call'.

Victoria Legal Aid

Legal Help

Tel: 9269 0120 or 1800 677 402 (country callers)

Arabic	9269 0127	Polish	9269 0228
Croatian	9269 0164	Serbian	9269 0332
Greek	9269 0167	Ukrainian	9269 0390
Italian	9269 0202		

Monday to Friday between 8.45 am and 5.15 pm

You can also get an interpreter from the Translating and Interpreting Service if you speak another language. Call 13 14 50 and ask to be put through to Victoria Legal Aid.

Local offices

We have offices all over Victoria. See the back cover for office locations and phone numbers.

Website

www.legalaid.vic.gov.au

Your day in court

Federation of Community Legal Centres

Call to find out your nearest community legal centre.

Tel: 9652 1500

www.communitylaw.org.au

Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service

There are country offices too.

Tel: 1800 064 865

www.vals.org.au

Law Institute of Victoria's Referral Service

For referral to a private lawyer – first 30 minutes free.

Tel: 9607 9550

www.liv.asn.au/Referral

Magistrates' Court

To find out the address and contact details of courts in Victoria, more information about the services at the court, to do the online court tour and any other information about the court.

www.magistratescourt.vic.gov.au

Court Network

For personal support and referral to other services at court.

Tel: 9603 7433 or 1800 681 614 (toll free)

www.courtnetwork.com.au

Salvation Army

For personal support and referral to other services at court.

Tel: 9329 6022

www.salvationarmy.org.au/court-and-prison-services

Direct Line

For drink driving courses throughout Victoria and help with drug and alcohol problems.

Tel: 1800 888 236

www.health.vic.gov.au/aod/directline

VicRoads

For questions about drivers licences.

Tel: 131 171

www.vicroads.vic.gov.au

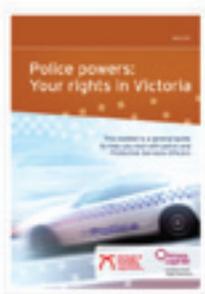
Your day in court



Useful Victoria Legal Aid resources

Victoria Legal Aid has free booklets with legal information on topics such as dealing with family violence, family law and going to court.

Visit www.legalaid.vic.gov.au to order or download booklets or call 9269 0223 to find out more.



Police powers: your rights in Victoria



Fines: the law, your options



Debt problems: the law, your options



Watch our community legal education videos.

Your day in court

Victoria Legal Aid

Legal Help

Tel: 9269 0120

Country callers: 1800 677 402

Offices

MELBOURNE

350 Queen St

Melbourne VIC 3000

Tel: 9269 0120

Country callers: 1800 677 402

Suburban offices

BROADMEADOWS

North western suburbs

Level 1, Building 1

Broadmeadows Station Centre

1100 Pascoe Vale Rd

Broadmeadows VIC 3047

Tel: 9302 8777

DANDENONG

Westernport region

Level 1, 9-15 Pultney St

Dandenong VIC 3175

Tel: 9767 7111

FRANKSTON

Peninsula region

Cnr O'Grady Ave & Dandenong Rd

Frankston VIC 3199

Tel: 9784 5222

PRESTON

North eastern suburbs

42 Mary St

Preston VIC 3072

Tel: 9416 6444

RINGWOOD

Outer eastern suburbs

23 Ringwood St

Ringwood VIC 3134

Tel: 9259 5444

SUNSHINE

Western suburbs

1/474 Ballarat Rd

Sunshine VIC 3020

Tel: 9300 5333

Regional offices

BALLARAT

Central Highlands region

Area A, Level 1

75 Victoria St

Ballarat VIC 3350

Tel: 5329 6222

Toll free: 1800 081 719

BENDIGO

Loddon—Campaspe region

424 Hargreaves St

Bendigo VIC 3350

Tel: 5448 2333

Toll free: 1800 254 500

GEELONG

Barwon region

Level 2, 199 Moorabool St

Geelong VIC 3220

Tel: 5226 5666

Toll free: 1800 196 200

HORSHAM

Wimmera region

29 Darlot St

Horsham VIC 3400

Tel: 5381 6000

Toll free: 1800 177 638

MORWELL

Gippsland region

Cnr Chapel & George St

Morwell VIC 3840

Tel: 5134 8055

BAIRNSDALE

Gippsland region (branch office)

101A Main St

Bairnsdale VIC 3875

Tel: 5153 1975

SHEPPARTON

Goulburn region

36-42 High St

Shepparton VIC 3630

Tel: 5823 6200

Toll free: 1800 119 918

WARRNAMBOOL

South Coast region

185 Fairy St

Warrnambool VIC 3280

Tel: 5559 7222

Toll free: 1800 651 022



Publication orders

To download or order our publications in English or other languages go to www.legalaid.vic.gov.au

If you need help ordering online please call Victoria Legal Aid on 9269 0223