**KNOW YOUR LEGAL RIGHTS**

**Life after divorce: How to modify, enforce, and navigate court orders**

*Know Your Legal Rights* is a bi-monthly column distributed by the State Bar of Wisconsin. It is sponsored by the State Bar of Wisconsin’s Lawyer Referral Service (LRS), which connects Wisconsin residents with lawyers throughout the state. To find an attorney in your area, visit [wislaw.org](http://wislaw.org/).

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Divorce is rarely final. Even after a Wisconsin court finalizes your divorce, issues like changing circumstances, custody disputes or noncompliance with court orders may require legal action. Here’s what you need to know about common post-divorce legal issues and how to address them.

**How to Modify Court Orders When Circumstances Change**

Life is unpredictable, and the terms of your divorce may not always fit your changing situation. Wisconsin law allows you to request a modification of court orders related to child custody, placement, or financial matters if there is a substantial change in circumstances.

For example, if you lose your job or experience a significant reduction in income, you may need to seek a modification of child support or spousal maintenance. Changes in your child’s life, like starting school or needing nonemergency medical care, or changes in your job, may require adjustments to custody or placement

If you and your ex-spouse agree to changes, you don’t need to go back to court, but the changes must be submitted in writing for court approval. If you disagree, you can file a motion, and the court will hold a hearing to decide whether the changes should be made.

**Enforcing Court Orders When Your Ex-Spouse Doesn’t Comply**

Unfortunately, not everyone follows court orders. If your former spouse refuses to comply with the terms of your divorce judgment, legal action may be necessary.

Common enforcement issues include unpaid child support, violating custody and placement agreements or refusing to divide assets. In some cases, enforcement may involve filing a motion with the court to require the other party to comply.

Courts can enforce orders through wage garnishment, tax refund seizures and make-up parenting time. You have a right to expect that court orders will be followed and that violations will be addressed.

Sometimes unanticipated events make it difficult or impossible for you to follow court orders. If this happens, you can file a motion to modify orders that no longer apply or seek relief from orders you are unable to follow.

**Contempt of Court: Consequences of Willfully Ignoring Orders**

If your ex-spouse willfully disobeys a court order, you may need to request that the court hold them in contempt. Unlike accidental or unavoidable noncompliance, contempt is the intentional violation of a court order. It is a serious legal matter with significant consequences.

Examples of contempt include refusing to provide required financial information, failing to make support payments without a valid reason, or making major decisions for a child (such as schooling or healthcare) without the other parent’s consent

If you file a motion for contempt, the court will hold a hearing where both parties can present their case. If the court finds contempt, it may impose sanctions such as fines, jail time, make-up parenting time or other measures to enforce compliance

**Take Action: When to Seek Legal Help**

If you need to modify or enforce a court order, it’s crucial to seek legal advice. An experienced family law attorney can explain your options and guide you through the process.

Post-divorce legal issues can be complex and emotionally charged, especially when children are involved. Addressing them quickly with legal help protects your rights and improves outcomes.

You’re not alone—laws exist to help you adapt, enforce your rights, and ensure compliance with court orders. Acting sooner can make all the difference.

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