

**IN THE THIRTEENTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT
HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY, FLORIDA**

**ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER S-2024-057
(Supersedes Administrative Order S-2021-048)**

FAMILY LAW MEDIATION

Chapter 44, Florida Statutes, and Florida Family Law Rules of Procedure 12.740 and 12.741 provide for mediation of family law actions. The Family Diversion Program has been established as a court program under Mediation and Diversion Services to implement an equitable and expeditious alternative dispute resolution process for family law cases. In light of recent amendments adopted by the Florida Supreme Court to Rule 12.740 in Opinion SC2023-1472 (*In Re: Amendments to Florida Family Law Rules of Procedure*), it is necessary for the proper and efficient administration of justice in the Family Law Division to update the internal operating procedures for the mediation of family law cases.

By the power vested in the chief judge under article V, section 2(d), Florida Constitution; section 43.26, Florida Statutes; and Florida Rule of General Practice and Judicial Administration 2.215(b)(2), it is ORDERED:

1. Court Referral of Family Matters to Mediation

All issues in marriage dissolution and post dissolution proceedings and in domestic proceedings between unmarried parents may be referred to mediation by the presiding judge unless excluded by statute or court rule. All court-ordered referrals will be made through the Family Mediation Program ("Program"). Matters referred will be handled by Florida Supreme Court certified family mediators. See Florida Rule for Certified and Court-Appointed Mediators 10.100 for certification requirements. Any Order Referring Parties to Family Mediation will be electronically signed and served by the court to each party or party's counsel of record and also to the Program.

2. Selection of Mediators and Scheduling

A. Private Mediation

If the case is referred to the Program and the parties agree to use a private mediator not affiliated with the Program, the parties or their counsel will have 10 days from the date of the Order Referring Parties to Family Mediation in which to select a mediator. Thereafter, the petitioner or petitioner's counsel will be responsible for notifying the Program.

B. Family Diversion Program

i. One or Both Parties are Represented by Counsel

If either or both of the parties are represented by counsel and the parties elect not to use a private mediator, either party or their counsel must contact the Program to schedule the mediation conference. The parties must agree on the date and time for the mediation conference prior to scheduling. If a mediation conference is not scheduled within 10 days from the date of the Order Referring Parties to Family Mediation, the case will be closed and an outcome form will be sent to the Clerk of the Circuit Court, Family Law Division ("clerk") indicating that the parties did not timely contact the Program.

ii. Both Parties are Self-Represented

If both parties are self-represented, the petitioner or respondent may contact the Program to schedule the mediation conference. The Program will arrange the conference date and time and then prepare and send the Notice of Mediation Conference to both parties, advising the parties of the date, time and location of the mediation conference. If neither party contacts the Program within 10 days from the date of the Order Referring Parties to Family Mediation, the case will be closed and an outcome form will be sent to the clerk indicating that the parties did not timely contact the Program.

3. Deferment

Within 15 days of the Order Referring Parties to Family Mediation, any party may file a motion to defer the mediation conference. The moving party will use best efforts to set the motion to defer for hearing prior to the scheduled date for the mediation

conference. If a hearing on the motion to defer cannot be set prior to the mediation conference date the moving party will, more than 48 hours before the originally scheduled conference, take necessary steps to reschedule the conference. Failure to comply with this time standard may result in the imposition of monetary sanctions as determined by the court. Notice of the hearing on the motion to defer will be provided to all parties, the Program, and the appointed mediator. The court will forward to the Program a copy of any order granting a deferment of the mediation conference. If a deferment has been granted, the order will include the actual period of deferral and another mediation conference will be scheduled.

4. Mandatory Post-Judgment Mediation

Whenever a post-judgment family law case is initiated, as a prerequisite to scheduling a hearing before the presiding judge or general magistrate, the parties will submit such matters to mediation. Such post-judgment matters are automatically referred to the Program without further order of the court. The party initiating the post-judgment action will have the responsibility of initially contacting the Program to arrange for its service.

A. Scheduling

The Program will set a reasonable time for a mediation conference on the matter(s) in controversy. The conference will be held within the time frames outlined in Rule 12.740(e), unless the parties agree to an extension of time or the court, for good cause, extends the time. The Program will notify the parties and their respective attorneys of the time and place of the mediation conference.

B. Discovery Not Limited

Nothing in this administrative order will be construed as limiting the parties or their attorneys from scheduling discovery prior to the mediation conference.

C. Non-Applicability

This mandatory post-judgment mediation requirement will not apply to the following actions:

- i. Title IV-D actions;
- ii. Post-judgment contempt and enforcement actions; and
- iii. Extensions or modifications of injunctions for protection against domestic violence between the parties.

D. Waiver

Any party may request the presiding judge to waive the requirement of mandatory mediation of post-judgment parenting plan or time-sharing disputes. The judge will waive such requirement in cases where the judge finds there has been a history of domestic violence that would compromise the mediation process. The judge may also waive the requirement if it appears mediation of the issues would not be appropriate under the circumstances of the case or because of exigent circumstances a hearing before the judge should be expedited.

5. Mediation Conference

The mediator will be in control of the mediation conference at all times. If a resolution is imminent or likely, the mediator may, at his or her discretion and with the agreement of the parties, schedule another mediation conference. The mediator will then arrange a date and time for the subsequent conference with the parties and notify the Program. The Program will prepare a notice of additional mediation conference and provide a copy to each party. Upon completion of mediation, the mediator will return a completed Outcome of Service form to the Program office within 48 hours of the mediation conference.

6. Report to the Court

The Program will submit to the court a report stating whether or not the parties appeared for the mediation conference, and whether or not any agreement was reached.

7. Agreements

Agreements reached during mediation must be memorialized, completed and submitted in accordance with Florida Family Rule of Procedure 12.740(f).

8. Rescheduling or Cancellation Prior to Mediation

The parties or their counsel must notify the Program of any rescheduling no later than 48 hours, excluding weekends and court holidays, before the scheduled mediation conference. Petitioner, or if petitioner is represented by counsel, petitioner's counsel, must notify the Program in writing if the mediation must be cancelled because a settlement has been reached or the case has been dismissed more than 48 hours prior to the scheduled conference.

9. Disqualification or Withdrawal of Mediator

A party may move at any time to disqualify a mediator. The court will forward to the Program a copy of any order disqualifying a mediator. If a mediator has been disqualified or has withdrawn, a new mediator will be assigned by the Program. Rescheduling may be necessary to accommodate the substitute mediator.

10. Fees

A. Mediation Conference Fees

Fees for court-ordered mediation conference sessions will be assessed and collected in accordance with section 44.108, Florida Statutes. If proof of income is not provided, the fee will be as provided for in section 44.108(2)(a). If payment of any owed fees is not made by the time of the scheduled mediation session, the mediation session will not take place. Payment may be by check (payable to the order of the "Clerk of the Circuit Court"), money order, cash or credit card (Visa / MasterCard / Discover). Credit card payments cannot be made over the telephone.

B. Cancellation Fees

If a party fails to appear at a scheduled mediation session, fails to make payment by the time of the mediation session, or fails to provide at least 24 hours prior written notice to the Program of the canceled mediation session, not counting weekends or holidays, the party will be billed for the cancelled mediation session.

11. Invoicing

The Program will be responsible for generating invoices for all parties participating in the mediation conference. An invoice for

payment will outline each party's portion of the mediation cost. The clerk will accept payment, on behalf of the Program, of the amount due from the parties; however, the clerk will accept payment only in the amount specified on the invoice for payment. All payments made to the clerk must be accompanied by the invoice for payment.

12. Statistical Data

All parties ordered by the court to mediation will provide data as requested by the Program for statistical purposes. The data will remain confidential to the extent that any data published will contain no identifying information.

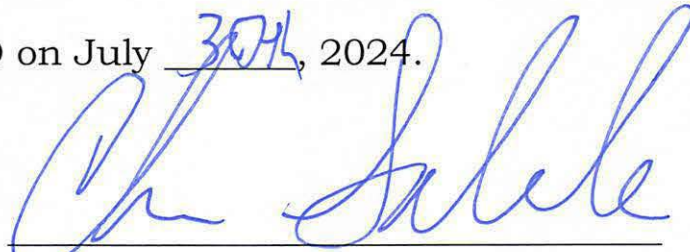
13. Previous Administrative Orders Superseded

This administrative order supersedes Administrative Order S-2021-048 (*Family Law Mediation*).

14. Effective Date

This administrative order is effective immediately.

ENTERED on July 30th, 2024.


Christopher C. Sabella, Chief Judge

Original: Cindy Stuart, Clerk of the Circuit Court

Copy: All Family Law Division Judges, General Magistrates, and
Hearing Officers
Kim Joyner-Diaz, Director, Mediation & Diversion
Services