

**Washington County  
Court of Common Pleas  
Domestic Relations**

**Guide to Virtual Hearings  
Using Microsoft Teams**

**June 2020**

# Guide to Virtual Hearings and Microsoft Teams

The term 'virtual hearing' is used throughout this guide to refer to court hearings conducted via electronic means, either videoconferencing or teleconferencing.

A virtual hearing is a proper and formal court hearing. The only difference is that it is conducted via electronic means rather than in-person with all parties in a courtroom. The usual Rules of Court, court procedures, courtesies and formalities are still applicable and are expected to be complied with.

The Washington County Court of Common Pleas Domestic Relations is conducting court hearings using Microsoft Teams (videoconferencing and/or teleconferencing) platforms.

Microsoft Teams allows participants to join the hearing using video or audio from a desktop, laptop, tablet or smartphone, or to dial-in to a hearing from a telephone.

**Practice Tip:** Make certain the device you are using is fully charged or plugged in during your hearing.

Practitioners and self-represented litigants will receive correspondence from the Court in relation to the technology that will be used to facilitate their hearing, and whether it is by videoconference or teleconference.

Practitioners and litigants are expected to be proactive and inform the Court promptly if they foresee any difficulty with participating in a virtual hearing, and to propose jointly agreed solutions where possible.

If there is a dispute about whether a trial should proceed via videoconferencing, the presiding Hearing Officer will determine that dispute. Practitioners should not assume that resistance to a video trial will automatically be successful.

## Microsoft Teams

### Establishing the hearing

Virtual hearings via Microsoft Teams are set up using email addresses.

Upon request from the Court, attorneys and self-represented parties are to provide their direct email addresses to the Court so that a hearing invitation can be sent.



To assist the Court, please ensure that a current Praeceptum for Entry of Appearance filed with the court. The scheduling notice for every hearing is being sent out accompanied by a Notice of Participation by AUDIO & VIDEO CONFERENCE. The email addresses provided by parties and counsel will be used by the Court to communicate regarding the hearing.



For represented parties, it is the responsibility of each attorney to assure the meeting details and Microsoft Teams join meeting link has been received by their clients.

## Joining the hearing

Participants can join a Microsoft Teams hearing from a desktop, laptop, tablet or smartphone via the purple '[Join Microsoft Teams Meeting](#)' link included in the hearing invitation.

→ [Join Microsoft Teams Meeting](#)  
→ [+61 2 9161 XXXX](#) Australia, Sydney (Toll)  
→ Conference ID: 333 245 XXX#  
[Local numbers](#) | [Reset PIN](#) | [Learn more about Teams](#) | [Meeting options](#)  
Join with a video conferencing device  
[86201XXXX@t.plcm.vc](mailto:86201XXXX@t.plcm.vc) VTC Conference ID: 132223XXXX  
[Alternate VTC dialing instructions](#)



To use Microsoft Teams via a tablet or smartphone, users need to download the Microsoft Teams app from the relevant App Store.



On a desktop computer or laptop, Microsoft Teams can be used in a web browser version, or by downloading the free desktop app. For a better user experience, download the desktop app. See below for details.

Alternatively, participants can join a Microsoft Teams hearing by telephone, by dialling the conference number, conference ID and #, and following the prompts.

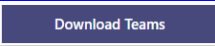
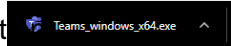
If joining a Microsoft Teams hearing from a desktop computer or laptop, it is recommended that participants download the Microsoft Teams desktop app prior to the hearing.

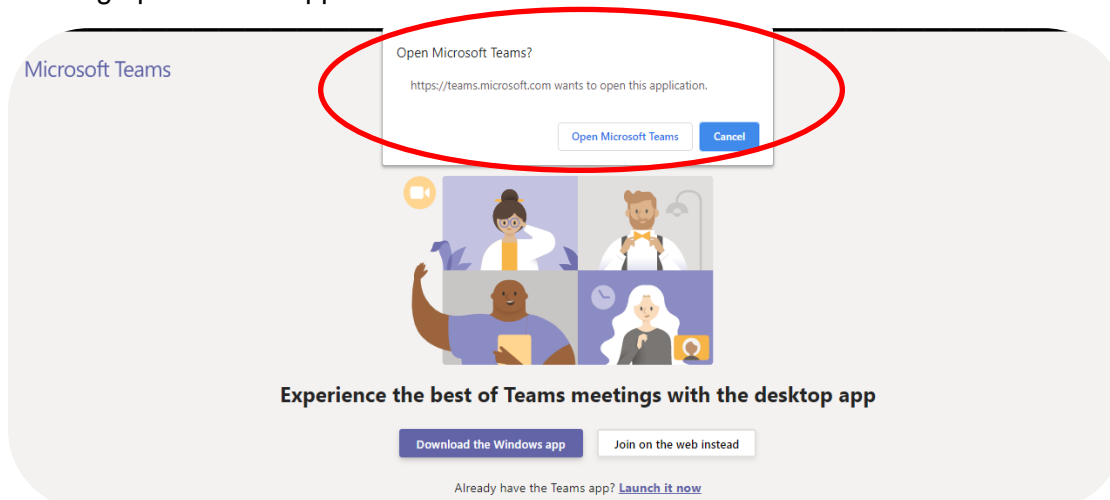
The desktop app can be downloaded for free from the Microsoft website [here](#).



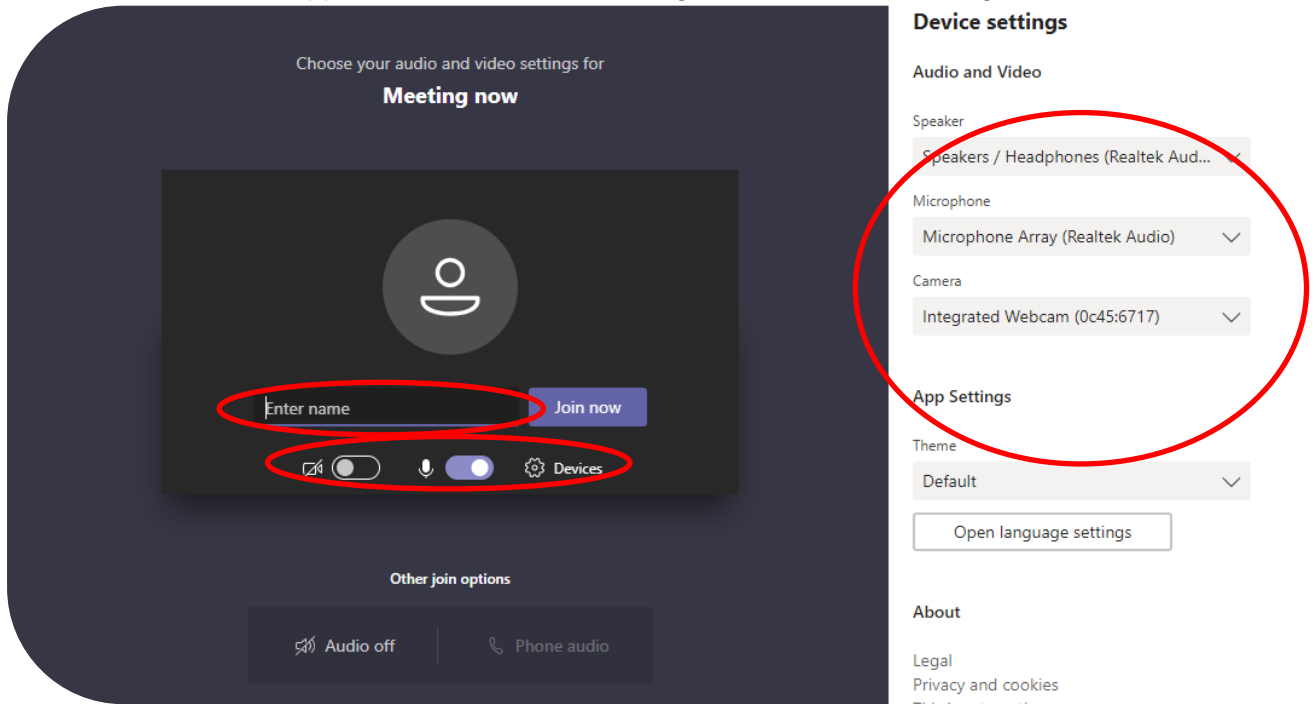
The Microsoft Teams webpage and web version work better in the Google Chrome web browser or Microsoft Edge web browser. All links should be copied and pasted into Chrome or Edge, rather than Internet Explorer, Mozilla Firefox or Safari.

To download the desktop app and join the hearing through the app:

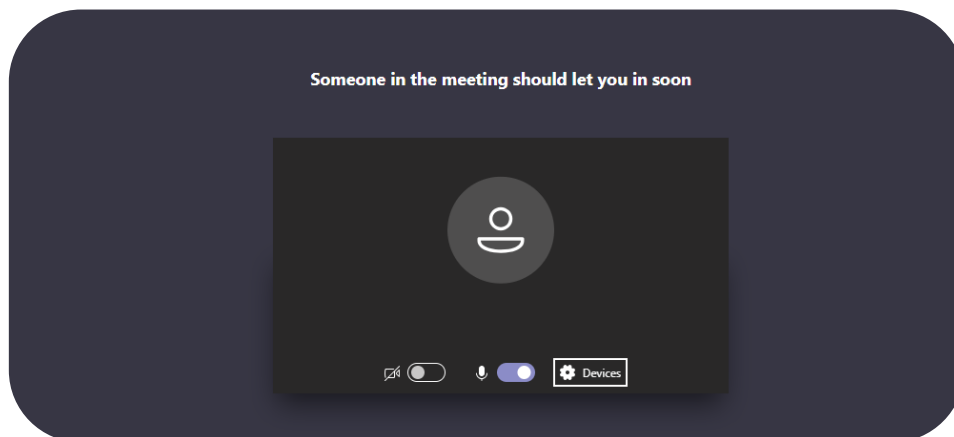
1. Visit <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/microsoft-teams/download-app>;
2. Click on the purple download button; 
3. A download will begin. Once completed, click on the file to begin installation 
4. Once installation is complete, press Continue to check that Microsoft Teams will open. If it opens, no further action is required until the day of the hearing.
5. *On the next screen (which will read "You're not on Teams yet, but you can set it up for your organization"), participants do not need to sign up for a Teams account – it is sufficient to have the desktop app downloaded onto the computer;*
6. On the day of the hearing, at least 15 minutes before the listing time, click on the '[Join Microsoft Teams Meeting](#)' link. It will open in the web browser, but a dialogue box will pop up that says 'Open Microsoft Teams?' or 'Launch Microsoft Teams now'. Click open or launch so that the meeting opens in the app.



7. The Microsoft Teams app should launch the meeting and show the following screen:



8. Fill in the 'Enter name' field with name and party description, such as 'Mr/Ms Last Name (Attorney for Plaintiff/Defendant)' if the participant is a legal practitioner, or 'Ms/Mr Last Name' if the participant is a case member.
9. Use the sliders next to the camera icon and microphone icon to turn camera or microphone on and off.
10. Clicking on the 'Devices' cog wheel will open the Device Settings menu, which allows the user to select the correct microphone, speakers and webcam that they are using, and to make a test call.
11. When ready to join the hearing, click on 'Join Now'.
12. All participants will wait separately in a virtual lobby. The below screen will be displayed. The Hearing Officer running the hearing can see when participants are waiting in the lobby, and will accept each participant into the hearing when ready to do so. Please wait patiently, do not exit the lobby if you are not immediately admitted. If you have joined the meeting early, or the Court is delayed, the lobby may time out. If this occurs, please re-join the meeting.



If a participant clicks on 'Join Microsoft Teams Meeting' from an email or calendar invite and does not have the desktop app installed, the below webpage will open. Select 'Join on the web instead', and then follow steps 8 to 12 above.

Microsoft Teams



Experience the best of Teams meetings with the desktop app

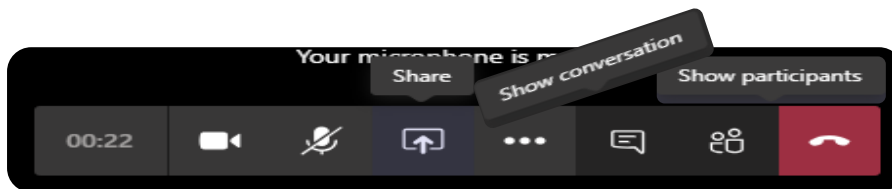
Download the Windows app

Join on the web instead


Already have the Teams app? Launch it now

Related to step 5 above, if users wish to sign up for a Microsoft Teams account, they may do so. There is a trial option and paid options. An account may be useful for legal practitioners as it allows for greater functionality in Microsoft Teams, such as access to the calendar function and the ability to pin selected participants' video feeds to the screen during a hearing. However, it is a matter for each user and an account is not required to effectively use Microsoft Teams.



### Options in the Microsoft Teams desktop app during a hearing



During a Microsoft Teams hearing, moving the mouse brings up a ribbon of meeting options across the screen. Participants can take the following actions:

- Click on the **camera icon** to turn the video on and off;
- Click on the **microphone icon** to turn the microphone on and off (mute and unmute);
- Click on the **share icon** to share a document on the screen for all participants to see – this option is only available to the Hearing Officer;
- Click on the **ellipsis (...)** for more options, including to check device settings, blur background, turn off incoming video;
- Click on the **show conversation icon** to see the chat window on the right hand side of the screen;
- Click on the **show participants icon** to see a list of all the participants in the hearing;
- Click on the **red phone icon** to end the meeting when the hearing is finished.
- In the desktop app, participants can right click on up to four participants' videos to **pin** them to the screen so that they are always visible.
- If using the web browser version, by default, Microsoft Teams will display the video of the person speaking. One participant's video can be pinned by either:
  - clicking on 'show participants' to bring up the people menu, clicking on the ellipsis next to the participant you want to pin, and selecting 'Pin'; or
  - right click on the circled initials of the participant you want to pin.  Pin
  - if you have Participant A pinned, to pin Participant B, you must first 'unpin' Participant A.



Please note, on different devices, these options may appear in a different location. For example on an iPad, the show conversation/chat function, and the show participants/people function   are in the top right hand corner.

## Options on the telephone during a Microsoft Teams hearing

If a participant joins the hearing by dialling the conference number and conference ID, it is a standard telephone call. Participants only have the options presented to them on their phone screen, such as to mute, place the phone on speaker and hang up the call.



Participants should not place the Court on hold, or put the phone on loudspeaker, as this will decrease audio quality. The Court has the ability to mute participants who have joined the hearing by telephone. If you are muted, a voiceover will inform you of this, and how to unmute. To unmute, press \*6. A voiceover will inform you when you are unmuted.



If a participant is experiencing poor video quality during a hearing, or cannot maintain a connection through the desktop app or web version, they can join via the teleconferencing option. The details are included in every meeting invite. If practitioners or litigants do not have a strong internet connection, or do not have access to the technology to appear by video, communicate with the Court prior to the hearing about participating by telephone.

## Preparation and testing

Participants should download the Microsoft Teams desktop app well in advance of the hearing, and ensure they are familiar with the microphone, webcam and speakers on their device, and that any external hardware is installed and working properly.



Once you have received a link to a Microsoft Teams hearing from the Court, the link may be accessed at any time prior to the hearing to check that the correct microphone, webcam and speakers are being recognised by Microsoft Teams, make a test call and to see what your video will look like.

Depending on the case, the Court may schedule a test between the parties prior to the hearing. This is of benefit to all parties, and the Court expects that practitioners and case members will make themselves available to participate to reduce delay on the day of the hearing.



Prior to any hearing, attorneys should agree with their clients on a method of confidential communication and how they will obtain any urgent instructions during the hearing. Otherwise, instructions must be obtained **prior** to the commencement of the hearing.

**Please note that it is expected that practitioners and parties will have engaged in serious negotiations prior to the commencement of the matter to attempt to resolve or limit the issues.**

## Conduct of a virtual hearing

Similar to an in-person Court hearing the Hearing Officer will run the Microsoft Teams hearing.

The Hearing Officer will:

- admit participants into the hearing through the virtual lobby;
- administer oaths or affirmations when necessary;
- record participation in the hearing utilizing the FTR system or other available secure electronic recording systems to create a record of the hearing;
- present documents that have been submitted prior to the hearing by parties and attorneys and share documents offered as evidence on the screen for all parties to see; and
- direct participants through the hearing process and to its completion.

## **Guidelines for Participants, Attorneys & Witnesses**

The below information is provided as guidance. The conduct of the hearing remains a matter for the presiding Hearing Officer. Witnesses, parties and lawyers should follow any direction given by the Hearing Officer in relation to the conduct of the proceedings and manner in which they are to give evidence.

- As stated above, a virtual hearing is a proper and formal court hearing. The only difference is that it is conducted via electronic means rather than in-person with all parties in a courtroom. The usual Rules of Court, court procedures, courtesies and formalities are still applicable and are expected to be complied with.
- A participant is to be in a secure room with doors closed. They may be accompanied by the attorney of record but only the attorney.

**PRACTICE TIP: When safely possible attorneys and clients may find it useful to appear in a single connection from conference space or other large office space that allows for social distancing**

- Witnesses should appear separately.
- The participant is to ensure that there will be no interruptions or distractions for the duration of the video appearance at the hearing.
- Counsel are expected to dress as per usual, unless otherwise indicated by the Hearing Officer.
- Attorneys, case members, and witnesses should dress professionally as if they were attending an in-person hearing in a courtroom.
- Participants are not expected to stand when the Hearing Officer joins the hearing electronically, and should remain seated when addressing the Court.
- Aside from water or other soft beverage, participants should not eat or drink during the hearing.
- The participant may take notes and have pen and blank paper for doing so but the taking of notes will not be permitted where it impedes the flow of the evidence.
- A participant should have recently re-read all relevant materials related income and certain expenses that they have provided to the Hearing Officer prior to the hearing.
- All participants and attorneys will be provided with electronic copies of all evidence & materials provided by both parties to the court in advance of the hearing.
- Attorneys and parties should mute their microphones in Microsoft Teams when they are communicating.
- The party cross-examining the participant is to ensure that the participant has all documents to which they may be referred. This means that a cross-examiner must know in advance what documents will be shown to the participant and ensure that those documents are available to the participant in a timely manner.
- Participants cannot communicate with anyone about their evidence while under cross-examination:
- Where an objection is made and discussions are required in the absence of the participant, the participant may be asked to mute their computer or otherwise be virtually moved to the waiting room and invited to re-join when the objection has been dealt with.

## Documents to be relied upon during virtual hearings

In accordance with the directions provided and the PA Rules of Evidence, all documents relied upon by parties must be provided to all participants and attorneys prior to the scheduled hearing.

Participants will not be permitted to communicate with the Hearing Officer outside of the hearing. Participants may contact the Domestic Relations office for assistance with connecting to MS Teams hearings and other case related issues.

Any proposed consent orders should be emailed to the Hearing Officer email at [WAHRG@pacses.com](mailto:WAHRG@pacses.com) in Microsoft Word format by no later than 4:00 p.m. at least one (1) business day prior to the hearing, or as otherwise directed by the Hearing Officer or her Legal Assistant.



At the start of the hearing, participants must ensure that they have ready access to electronic copies of all filed documents and material in order to be able to reference them during the hearing if required.

The Hearing Officer in control of the Microsoft Teams hearing will be able to share a document on the screen for all participants can see. This is how documents offered as evidence will be presented and accepted.

### **Required income and some expense information must be submitted at least two business days before your scheduled hearing.**

#### **This includes but is not limited to:**

- personal and/or business Federal Income Tax Returns, including W-2's, and 1099's
- supporting documentation for tax returns should also be provided
- paystubs for the preceding six months
- net income from business or property
- child care expenses
- proof of medical coverage
- proof of inability to work such as disability

#### **Submitting information:**

**Email:** WAHRG@pacses.com with your name in the subject line

**Mail:** Washington County DRS, Ste 311, 29 W. Cherry Ave, Washington PA 15301

**Fax:** 724-228-6899

**All documentation submitted will be shared with all parties and provided to the hearing officer but will only be admitted into evidence and considered at hearing after an appropriate request to make it an exhibit is made. Documents submitted less than two days prior to the hearing may only be considered with the permission of the hearing officer.**



## Recording and transcription

Virtual hearings are being recorded by the Courts' recording and transcription services provider, "For The Record" (FTR), and through the Microsoft Teams recording function if emergency dictates. Participation in a Virtual Hearing indicates a participant's consent to being recorded.

Transcript will be available through FTR in accordance with the usual ordering processes as established by Washington County Court Administration. Some delays may be experienced during this time of transition to virtual hearings.

## Technology tips



Use a headset, or headphones that have a microphone (such as most headphones that come with smartphones), to avoid echo and increase audio quality. Ensure you select the headphones in the settings for 'Devices' as the microphone and speaker. If you have the volume turned up and audio coming through the speakers of your device, it may be picked up by your microphone and echo. If other participants are complaining of echo and you cannot hear any echo, it is likely that you are the cause.



Ensure you are located in a quiet, distraction free location with good lighting and minimal background noise. Use an appropriate camera angle and background to your video.



If litigants are participating from their home, as far as is possible, ensure that they are out of earshot of any children present in the household to which the proceedings relate.



Participants should have their microphone muted and cameras switched off when they are not speaking or not required to be seen, as the Judge directs.



If appearing by telephone, do not place the Court on hold. Speak directly into the phone. Do not place the phone on loudspeaker, as it will decrease audio quality.



Ensure devices are fully charged before the hearing, and have the charger handy nearby. Videoconferencing can drain the battery of devices quickly.

## Privacy & Safety in virtual hearings

Litigants should be mindful of their personal safety when participating in virtual hearings, including by considering the following:

- If joining the hearing using video, consider turning on background blur, or sitting in front of a neutral background such as a blank wall, blind or door;
- If there are safety concerns about appearing with video turned on, the Judge may permit litigants to participate in the hearing using only audio;

Hearings can be observed by any member of the public. This is subject to a Hearing Officer's usual discretion to determine that in particular cases, only certain people should be present during the hearing, or that certain people are not to be present during the hearing. Generally this is not an issue in Domestic Relations but may be requested.