



THE BEGINNING: COURTS OF LAW

Disputes may be settled in one of the different levels of courts in Texas. Depending on the presiding judge and his preferred method, an alternative dispute resolution is generally required before a case is tried in court. Mediation and arbitration (link to blog posts on the subject) are two of these methods. If a settlement is not reached in one of the alternative dispute resolutions, the case will go to trial in a court of law. In the court of law, your case will either be decided by a judge or a jury.

In a court of law, witnesses are heard, testimony is received, exhibits are offered into evidence, and a verdict is rendered. The level of trial court the case is heard in depends on the scope of the case.

District Courts:

The district courts are the trial court of general jurisdiction in Texas. Each county must be served by at least one district court, and in sparsely populated areas of the state, several counties may be served by a single district court. Alternatively, an urban county may be served by many district courts. District courts have jurisdiction over civil matters in which the amount of money or damages involved is \$200 or more.

Constitutional County Courts:

Constitutional county courts are provided by the Texas Constitution in each of the 254 counties of the state. They have original jurisdiction over all criminal cases involving Class A and Class B misdemeanors. The constitutional county courts also have appellate jurisdiction in cases appealed from justice of the peace and municipal courts, except where county courts of law have been established.

County Courts at Law:

The Legislature has created several statutory county courts at law in the more populous counties of Texas to aid the single county courts. The legal jurisdiction of the special county-level trial courts varies from county to county and is established by the statute that creates that particular court. While the jurisdiction varies, the county courts at law also usually have appellate jurisdiction in cases appealed from justice of the peace and municipal courts, similar to the constitutional county courts.

Justice Courts:

The Texas Constitution requires that each county establish at least one justice of the peace court. These courts have jurisdiction in both minor criminal cases and minor civil matters. The justice of the peace may issue search and arrest warrants and may serve as the coroner when there is no medical examiner. The justice courts also handle small claims matters.

Municipal Courts:

Municipal courts are created by the Texas Legislature in each of the incorporated cities of the state. These courts have exclusive jurisdiction over violations of city ordinances. When those city ordinances are related to fire safety, zoning, public health or sanitation, fines of up to \$2,000 may be charged. Municipal courts may also issue search and arrest warrants, but do not have jurisdiction in most civil cases.

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