

# Served Right the First Time

A practical guide to ordering service of process in California: what your process server needs from you before the first attempt, what to watch while attempts are underway, and what to check before the proof of service is filed.

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## Who it's for

Attorneys, paralegals and legal assistants at law firms and legal departments who order service of process in California cases. Most of it applies to subpoenas, too.

Direct Legal Support has served legal papers for California law firms since 1961, with registered, bonded process servers throughout the state and service in all 50 states.

Most service problems start before the first attempt: a name that doesn't match the summons, an address that's a few years old, a gate the server can't get past, a hearing date nobody mentioned. Each one costs days, and some cost a default. Most of them can be fixed with information your office already has. This guide follows an order from the moment you open it to the day the proof of service is filed, with the California rules that matter at each step.

## 1 Know exactly who you're serving

Start with the summons or subpoena, not your intake notes. The name on the order should match the name on the papers, including any capacity, such as an individual doing business under a trade name or a trustee.

- **One order for each person or entity.** Each party is a separate service with its own proof of service, even when two defendants live at the same address. Separate orders keep the attempts and the proofs from getting mixed up.
- **Tell people apart.** When relatives share a name, give the server what separates them: a middle name or initial, Jr. or Sr., an approximate age.
- **Individual or entity?** It decides which rules apply. A corporation is served through its agent for service of process, or an officer or general manager (CCP § 416.10). LLCs and partnerships are usually served through their agent. Check the current agent on the California Secretary of State's business search before you order, and look at the date of the latest filing.

- **Commercial agents.** Many companies name a commercial registered agent, such as CT Corporation or CSC. We serve both every business day.

**When the agent is gone:** If the agent has resigned or can't be found at its address, a court can order service through the Secretary of State (for a California corporation, Corporations Code § 1702). Our article [Serving Legal Documents on a California Registered Agent](#) covers the steps.

## 2

### Send the best address, and know what the portal checks

Give us every address that could work: home, work, a second home, each with its unit or suite number. A missing apartment number can cost a full round of attempts.

#### What the portal's address check does

When you type an address into a process serving order, our portal checks it against USPS address data. It fills in anything missing, such as the ZIP code, and shows whether the address is a residence or a business.



| Enter Business Name or Address*         | Type            |
|-----------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1716 E Almanac Dr, West Covina, CA, USA | 🏠 Residential + |

**A deliverable address isn't a confirmed location:** The check tells us that mail can be delivered to the address. It doesn't tell us who lives or works there. Whether the person you need to serve is still at that address is a separate question, answered by your own records or a skip trace.

If an address turns out to be vacant, no longer the person's, or nonexistent, the full fee applies and no more attempts are made there. When you aren't sure an address is current, order a [skip trace](#) first so service starts at the right door.

#### Addresses the law treats differently

- **USPS post office boxes** can't be used for service.
- **Private mailboxes** at a mail store, such as a UPS Store: when that's the only address reasonably known, the papers can be left there on the first attempt and then mailed (CCP § 415.20(c)).
- **Gated communities and larger apartment and condominium buildings** with a guard or security staff controlling the entrance must let a registered process server in for a reasonable time (CCP § 415.21). When no one is staffing the gate, the rule doesn't help, so a gate code or call box name still matters.

## 3

### Tell the server what you know

**Special Instructions** is the most useful box on the order. A server who knows when someone leaves for work, what they drive and which door they use plans better attempts. Include what you

can:

- **Description.** Approximate age, height and build, hair, glasses, tattoos or other features. A recent photo is better still.
- **Schedule.** Work hours, shifts, days off, regular appointments, travel.
- **Vehicles.** Make, model, color and plate, and where they usually park.
- **Getting in.** Gate codes, the name on the call box, the building office, which entrance or parking level to use.
- **Work.** The employer, the office location and the hours, and whether you're comfortable with service at work.
- **Safety.** Dogs, threats, a history of confrontation, or a restraining order in the case.
- **What they know.** Whether the person expects the papers, has been dodging them, or has a lawyer.

**Is there a lawyer on the other side?** Ask whether counsel will accept service before you send a server. Service by mail with a Notice and Acknowledgment of Receipt (form POS-015) is complete only when the acknowledgment is signed and returned (CCP § 415.30).

#### 4

### Send complete papers and say when service is due

A server can't fix a packet in the field. Before you upload, check that:

- The summons has been issued by the court, and the copies you send are the ones to be served.
- Everything that has to go with it is there: the complaint, the court's ADR information package (Cal. Rules of Court, rule 3.221(c)), any notice of case assignment or hearing, and every exhibit and attachment.
- Each party has a complete set of its own.
- For a subpoena that requires attendance, the witness fees and mileage are ready. Our [witness fee calculator](#) shows the amounts.
- Pages are legible and in the order they should be served.

Then tell us the deadline, in the order itself:

- **The date and the reason:** a hearing, a response deadline, or the 60 days the Rules of Court allow for filing the proof of service of the summons (rule 3.110(b)).
- **The service level that fits:** Standard (first attempt in 3 to 5 days), Priority (the next day), Urgent (the same day for California orders received by 1:30 p.m. Pacific) or On Demand (a server sent as soon as possible).
- **The calendar math for substituted service:** the attempts, the mailing, and 10 days after the mailing before service is complete (CCP § 415.20).

**Order deadline:** California orders received after 1:30 p.m. Pacific are treated as received the next business day.

## 5

## Stay close while attempts are underway

Every California order includes up to 4 to 6 attempts at the address you give us, at different times of day, and no more than one attempt a day unless you arrange extra attempts. Our servers post each update from the field. Updates show the date and time and the server's GPS location, and photos can be attached. You see them on the order's **Status** tab in the portal, and a copy is emailed to you.

Read them. The notes often answer the next question before you have to ask it:

- **"Moved" or "unknown at address"** means the address has gone bad. A skip trace will help more than another attempt.
- **"No access"** means the server needs a gate code, a call box name or a time when the entrance is staffed.
- **Someone answers but won't say whether the person lives there.** A description or photo helps the server know who they're talking to.
- **No answer on every attempt at a good address** is the time to try an early morning or evening attempt, a work address or a stakeout.

When you learn something new, such as a new job, a new car or a change in schedule, add it to the order right away. The sooner we have it, the more attempts it can help.

**Someone avoiding service?** California allows substituted service after reasonable attempts at personal service, and a court can order other methods, including publication and, since January 1, 2026, email or other electronic service (CCP § 413.30). Our article [Defendant Avoiding Service?](#) walks through the options, and we can arrange stakeouts.

## 6

## Check the proof of service before it's filed

When service is complete, the signed proof of service is emailed to you and saved in your account. Read it before anyone files it or relies on it for a default:

- The name and capacity match the summons exactly.
- The list of documents served matches what you sent.
- The method, date, time and address are right. For substituted service, the person who took the papers is named or described, and the mailing date is shown; service is complete on the 10th day after the mailing.
- The server's registration details are filled in. A proof of service signed by a registered process server is presumed true (Evidence Code § 647), which is one reason to use one.

If something looks wrong, call us before you file. When the facts support it, an error can be fixed with an amended proof of service. A server can't add a fact that didn't happen, though, and serving again is often faster than defending a default later. Our article [Before You Request Default, Check the Proof of Service](#) has a longer checklist.

**Have us file it:** Check the eFile Proof box when you order process serving and, for an added fee, we e-file the proof of service with the court once the server signs it. The filing order is created for you.

## What changes on January 1, 2027

Assembly Bill 747, the SPARE Act (Stats. 2025, ch. 563), and the follow-up bill AB 2042 (Stats. 2026, ch. 379) change how a summons is served and proved in California, starting with service on or after January 1, 2027.

- **Three attempts before substituted service on an individual:** at least three good faith attempts at personal delivery, on three different days, at three different times (CCP § 415.20(b)). The rule doesn't apply to substituted service on a corporation or other entity. In consumer debt cases, at least one attempt has to be at the defendant's home if it's known or can be found with reasonable effort.
- **Photos in the proof of service:** for personal delivery, substituted service and unlawful detainer posting, the proof includes photos of the site of each service or attempt, stamped automatically with the date, time and GPS coordinates (CCP § 417.10). No photo of the person served is required.
- **Defaults are easier to challenge:** a defendant who offers evidence that service wasn't lawful rebuts the presumption from the server's return, and the party that took the default then has to prove service (CCP § 473.2).
- **What AB 2042 adds:** § 473.2 applies to service attempted or completed on or after January 1, 2027. CALSPro, the California Association of Legal Support Professionals, reads the bill as treating a photograph as evidence of service rather than a condition of it: a missing or disputed photo doesn't by itself make service invalid, and the court weighs all the evidence.
- **New forms:** the Judicial Council approved revised proof of service forms on October 16, 2026, for use starting January 1, 2027, including a photo item on POS-010 and a new optional Declaration of Diligence (POS-012). Use the forms in effect when service is made.

**What it means for your orders:** tell us whether each party is an individual or an entity and whether the case is a consumer debt case, build three attempt days and the 10-day mailing period into the calendar, and plan for photos to come back with the proof of service. Updates our servers post from the field already carry the date, time and GPS location. Our article [What Changes for Service of Process in California on January 1, 2027](#) has the details.

## Before you submit the order

A one-page check for each person or entity you need served.

### WHO

- ☐ Name matches the summons or subpoena, with any capacity
- ☐ One order for each person or entity
- ☐ Individual or entity noted; for an entity, the agent checked on the Secretary of State's business search

### WHERE

- ☐ Home and work addresses, with unit or suite numbers
- ☐ Address check reviewed: residence or business
- ☐ Not sure the address is current? Skip trace first
- ☐ Gate code, call box name or building access

### WHAT THE SERVER SHOULD KNOW

- ☐ Description, and a photo if you have one
- ☐ Schedule, vehicle and work details
- ☐ Safety concerns

### PAPERS

- ☐ Issued summons, complaint and every required attachment
- ☐ A complete set for each party
- ☐ Witness fees ready for a subpoena that requires attendance

### TIMING

- ☐ Deadline and reason stated in the order
- ☐ Service level chosen to fit the deadline
- ☐ Substituted service time (attempts, mailing, 10 days) on the calendar
- ☐ Consumer debt case noted, for the 2027 rules

### AFTER SERVICE

- ☐ eFile Proof box checked, if you want us to file the proof
- ☐ Proof of service checked against the summons before it's filed

## Questions? We're here to help.

Call our Litigation Division Monday to Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Pacific, or email [info@directlegal.com](mailto:info@directlegal.com). Ready to order? [Log in to the portal](#).

**(800) 675-5376**