

RULE 1920.51. Hearing by the Court. Appointment of Master. Notice of Hearing

A. Master's Authority. A master shall hear claims in an action of divorce under Section 3301(a), (b) and (d)(1)(ii) of the Divorce Code, in an action for annulment and in claims for alimony, equitable distribution of marital property, counsel fees, costs and expenses.

B. Filing Fees and Costs. The party filing a Motion to Appoint Master pursuant to this rule shall pay the sum required by the Prothonotary's fee bill, in addition to any normal filing fees. This sum is not refundable. If a hearing requires more than one-half day, an additional fee will be due for each one-half day or part thereof and paid for as directed by the Divorce Master.

C. Motion for the Appointment of a Master. Once a party has complied with Pa.R.C.P. 1920.31(a)(1) and 1920.33(a), a party may file a motion and proposed Order to Appoint Master. The motion and proposed order shall be in conformity with Pa.R.C.P. No. 1920.74 and L.C.R.C.P. No. 1920.74.

D. Actions Not Requiring a Hearing or a Master. In the following cases, neither a master nor a hearing will be required:

1. No hearing will be required in an action which is filed under Section 3301(c) or Section 3301(d) of the Domestic Relations Code and in which an agreement is to be incorporated into the divorce decree relative to claims for equitable distribution, alimony, counsel fees, costs and expenses. Instead, the master shall review the record and file a recommendation with the Court within twenty days after receipt of the record.

2. Pursuant to Pa.R.C.P. No. 1920.51(a)(2)(ii), no master will be appointed where a divorce action contains a claim for divorce under Section 3301(c) or Section 3301(d) of the Domestic Relations Code and there are no claims for equitable distribution, alimony, counsel fees, costs and expenses or there are no other factual disputes and there is no agreement to be incorporated into the divorce decree. Instead, after all pleadings and other documents have been filed, either party may file with the Prothonotary a praecipe in the form prescribed by Pa.R.C.P. No. 1920.73, and the Prothonotary shall transmit the record to the Court, which shall review the record and enter an appropriate decree.

E. Hearing Pursuant to Local Rule. In all other actions for divorce in which there are no claims for alimony, counsel fees, costs, expenses, or equitable distribution or if all such claims have been resolved by an agreement which is to be made a part of the Court order, the master may conduct a hearing in the manner set forth in Paragraph M.

F. Hearing Pursuant to Pa.R.C.P. No. 1920.53. In all other cases, the master

shall take testimony and file a report which complies with the requirements of Pa.R.C.P. No. 1920.53.

G. Special Relief Hearings. Any request for a special relief hearing is subject to approval by the assigned Family Court Judge.

H. Telephonic Conference before Pre-hearing Conference. There shall be a telephonic conference between the parties and the master before any pre-hearing conference to discuss the status of discovery, the need for appraisals, general issues and the scheduling of a pre-hearing conference by the master.

I. Pre-hearing Conferences and Pre-trial Statements. Pre-hearing conferences shall be held in a Court facility designated by the District Court Administrator. Each party shall attend the pre-trial conference prepared to stipulate to items not in dispute. The master shall have the discretion to require the attendance of the parties, if necessary. Clients shall be consulted by counsel in advance of the pre-hearing conference as to authority respecting stipulations as to items not in dispute and settlement, including definite maximum or minimum limits, as appropriate, and regarding such other questions as may reasonably be anticipated to be relevant. The parties shall also prepare and furnish to the master and other party, at least five business days prior to the date scheduled for conference, a pre-trial statement as described in Pa.R.C.P. No. 1920.33(b). At the hearing, the parties will be limited to those witnesses, exhibits and documents set forth in their pre-trial report unless:

1. All parties affected by any changes agree in a writing which shall be filed with the Court.

2. Prompt notice of changes in the list of witnesses, exhibits or documents is made by filing with the master and by serving the other party with a supplemental pre-trial statement. A proof of service shall be filed with the supplemental pre-trial report pursuant to Local Rule 440.

3. Supplemental pre-trial statements will be liberally received by the master, absent a showing of failure to give prompt notice, undue inconvenience, expense or prejudice. Any objections shall be ruled on by the master or the Court. If no pre-hearing conference is required by the master, a pre-trial statement, as set forth herein, shall be furnished to the master and opposing party at least five business days before the hearing.

J. Scheduling and Notice of Hearing. The master shall give at least twenty days written notice of the time and place of the hearing to all parties unless waived in writing by all parties. All hearings shall be held in a facility designated by the District Court Administrator.

K. Evidence in Uncontested Cases. A plaintiff who believes the action will be uncontested shall submit to the master at the hearing the following:

1. Plaintiff's Record of Testimony in question and answer or narrative form, signed and verified by plaintiff;
2. The testimony of each of plaintiff's witnesses, in question and answer or narrative form, signed and verified by the witness; and
3. Any exhibits identified in the testimony.

L. Uncontested Hearings Using Plaintiff's Record of Testimony. The master shall conduct the hearing in an uncontested hearing as follows:

1. The plaintiff and all witnesses whose evidence has been prepared in advance shall attend the hearing, and shall swear to or affirm their prerecorded evidence.

2. The master may examine the plaintiff and the witnesses with respect to the evidence prepared in advance in order to evaluate the credibility of those offering pre-recorded evidence, and, to this end, may interrogate the plaintiff and the witnesses as to any relevant matters, including any post-nuptial agreement, whether or not included in the prepared Record of Testimony,

3. The master, upon being satisfied that the Plaintiffs Record of Testimony is credible evidence, shall accept it and include it in the report in lieu of findings on the merits, provided, however, that, in the report, the master certifies:

- a. That, at the hearing, the plaintiff and the witnesses offering pre-recorded testimony were placed under oath or affirmation and were examined and that they, by credible evidence, substantiated the facts set forth in the Plaintiff's Record of Testimony; and

- b. That no witness, who was sworn or affirmed, presented testimony or evidence to the contrary of the facts set forth in such Record of Testimony.

M. Master's Report in Uncontested Cases. After the hearing wherein the Plaintiff's Record of Testimony has been accepted, the master shall prepare and file the report together with a recommendation in accordance with Pa.R.C.P. No. 1920.53.

N. Master's Status Report if Filing Not Timely. Masters shall submit a status report to the Court and the parties if the report is not timely filed.