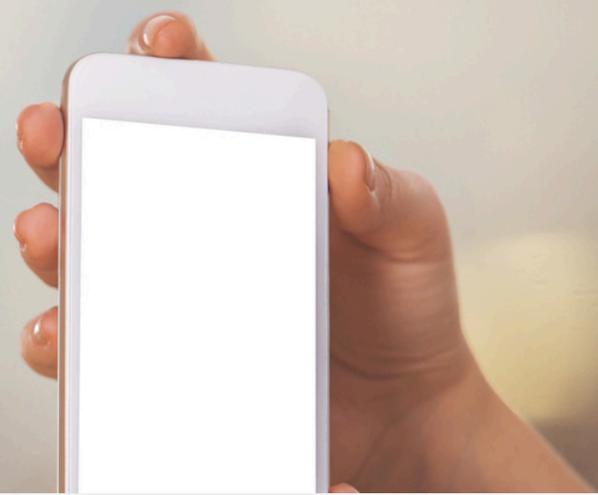


CELL PHONES IN MASSACHUSETTS COURTHOUSES



BACKGROUND

In the past, 56 courthouses in MA banned the public from bringing in cell phones, creating inconsistent rules across the state.

Exemptions typically applied to lawyers, court staff, police, jurors, and sometimes social workers.

PURPOSE OF THE BAN

- **Preventing** unauthorized recordings and harassment.
- **Protecting** privacy in sensitive cases.
- **Stopping** witness coordination.
- **Blocking** gang activity at courthouses.
- **Reducing** phone-related disruptions.
- **Avoiding** costs of building storage solutions.

OUR 2018 REPORT

- Found that **blanket cell phone bans denied access to justice**, especially for people without lawyers and those with low incomes.
- Highlighted problems like **blocked evidence access, communication barriers, and unfair treatment**.
- Recommended **practical reforms**: phasing out bans, allowing exemptions for self-represented litigants, and using secure alternatives like Yondr pouches.
- Emphasized creating a **consistent statewide policy** focused on fairness and equal access for all court users.

PROBLEMS WITH THE BAN

- Extra burden on people without lawyers who could not show evidence or access online legal forms and research.
- Low-income court users struggled to arrange childcare, transportation, and work without phones.
- Many paid businesses to store phones or risked theft by hiding them outside.
- Court users lost access to translation and hearing-assistance apps.
- Some avoided court entirely due to a lack of safe storage, with domestic violence survivors risking encounters with abusers at third-party storage locations.



Policy Reform Timeline

November: First major discussion at MA Access to Justice Conference

July: MA Appleseed releases *Cell Phones in the Courthouse* report

May: MA Access to Justice Commission endorses reforms

June: COVID-19 emergency order suspends bans statewide

2017

2018

2019

2020

2021

August: Chief Justices urge MA to review cell phone policies

October: Half of bans removed; Yondr pouch pilots begin (Framingham, Worcester, Dorchester)

June: MA Court officially eliminates ban on cell phones in courthouses

Implemented Policy Reform Since Our 2018 Report

Policy Changes

- MA replaced blanket bans with practical solutions to balance security and access.
- By late 2019, over half the courthouses ended cell phone bans, increasing consistency.
- The goal is to eliminate possession bans where there is no real security risk.

Secure Storage Solutions

- Some venues introduced Yondr pouches, allowing visitors to keep their phones but not use them in courtrooms.
- Other venues added supervised lockers or drop-off points for safe phone storage.

Improved Access for Self-Represented Litigants

- Exemptions have been expanded for self-represented individuals who need phones for evidence or communication.

Temporary COVID-19 Measures

- During the pandemic in 2020, all courthouse cell phone bans were suspended statewide.

Better Communication and Training

- Courts have improved signage and staff training to ensure clearer, fairer policies.

