

## What is a Court Case?

A court case is a dispute that goes to court. The court is asked to decide (1) what the facts are and (2) how the laws of Alaska apply to the facts. There are two main kinds of cases: civil cases and criminal cases.

*Civil law* deals with relationships between *individuals*. (A corporation is an “individual” under the law.) The word *suit* simply refers to a civil court case and *to sue* means to start a civil lawsuit. The State of Alaska, just like an individual, can bring a civil action. An example of a civil case is a suit resulting from an automobile accident. One person sues another person for damages to the car or for personal injury due to the accident. Other examples of civil cases are suits to collect money, suits for divorce, and suits to recover property. *Criminal law* deals with cases brought by the federal, state, city, or borough government against a person who has done something against the interest of all people in the community. The government charges an individual with violating a criminal law and brings a court action to decide guilt and impose a punishment. The charging of a person with a crime and bringing him to trial is called a *prosecution*. The prosecution for all cases under criminal law must be brought in the name of the federal, state, city, or borough government, even though the case may be started by the complaint of a private person — called the *complainant*. Some examples of crimes are murder, assault, disorderly conduct, and driving under the influence.

An event or action can result in both criminal and civil cases. For example, a person who steals and wrecks a snowmachine could be prosecuted by the state for the crime of theft and also sued for damages in a civil action by the owner. The criminal case might result in punishment through a fine or a term of imprisonment. The civil case might result in money being awarded to the owner as compensation for the loss of the machine.

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