CALIFORNIA WEDDING ASSOCIATION

California Marriage License and Name Change Guide

A clear planning overview for the license, ceremony, recording, certified copies, and optional name-change steps.

Rules and procedures can change. Always confirm current requirements, fees, appointment availability, and acceptable identification with the county clerk issuing your license.

A complimentary planning resource for California couples

Important
This resource is general educational information, not legal advice. County procedures differ. If your situation involves age, capacity, immigration, an existing marriage, a confidential record, an out-of-state or international ceremony, or a prior name change, contact the county clerk or a qualified attorney.

1. Before applying

- [ ] Choose the California county clerk that will issue the license and review its current appointment and identification instructions.
- [ ] Decide whether a public or confidential marriage license fits your situation; eligibility and access to records differ.
- [ ] Confirm both applicants' legal names, identification, prior-marriage information, and intended name choices before completing the application.
- [ ] Check the fee and accepted payment methods directly with the county.
- [ ] Schedule the license close enough to the ceremony that it remains valid; California marriage licenses are generally valid for 90 days.

2. Receiving the license

- [ ] Review every name, date, and identifying detail before leaving the clerk's office.
- [ ] Do not write on, erase, cross out, or alter the license unless instructed by the issuing office.
- [ ] Give the license to the officiant or responsible coordinator before the ceremony.
- [ ] Keep the license dry, flat, secure, and away from decor, food, drinks, and guest-signing areas.

3. Ceremony and signatures

- [ ] Hold the ceremony within the license's validity period and within California when using a California license.
- [ ] Confirm that the person solemnizing the marriage is authorized under California law.
- [ ] For a public license, confirm witness requirements with the issuing county and officiant; confidential licenses follow different rules.
- [ ] Ask everyone completing the license to print and sign carefully, using the instructions supplied with the license.
- [ ] Before anyone leaves, have the officiant review the completed document for missing or inconsistent information.

4. Returning and recording

- [ ] Decide in writing who will return the completed license to the county recorder; this is commonly handled by the officiant.
- [ ] Ask the responsible person when and how it was returned, and retain any available mailing or delivery record.
- [ ] The ceremonial license or keepsake is not the same as a certified copy of the recorded marriage certificate.
- [ ] After recording, order the number of certified copies you expect to need from the appropriate county or state office.
- [ ] Processing times vary. Do not make travel or benefit deadlines depend on receiving a certificate immediately.

Public vs. confidential license

Topic	Public marriage license	Confidential marriage license
Record access	The marriage record is generally part of the public record.	Access to certified copies is restricted; confirm eligibility and process with the county.
Eligibility	Standard statewide and county requirements apply.	Additional eligibility applies, including requirements related to living together; confirm directly with the issuing county.
Witness	A witness is generally part of the ceremony documentation.	A ceremony witness is generally not required; confirm county instructions.
Best next step	Review the issuing county's application instructions.	Discuss privacy needs and eligibility with the issuing county before applying.

Optional name-change checklist

California Courts explains that a person getting married may be able to change a middle or last name by listing it on the marriage license. Confirm the permitted choices before completing the application; changing it later may require a court process.

Suggested order

- [ ] Decide on any permitted new name before applying for the marriage license and enter it exactly as instructed.
- [ ] Wait until the marriage is recorded and obtain certified marriage-certificate copies.
- [ ] Update the Social Security record first. SSA determines whether the request can be completed online or requires an appointment.
- [ ] After Social Security is updated, complete the California DMV application and visit a DMV office with the required identity and name-change documents.
- [ ] Update passport, employer/payroll, banks, credit cards, insurance, voter registration, professional licenses, utilities, medical providers, travel programs, and other records as applicable.
- [ ] Keep a private checklist of the date, confirmation number, and documents submitted to each organization.

Order matters
California DMV states that it verifies the new name with Social Security before issuing a changed driver license or identification card. Update SSA first and make sure the names match exactly.

Official sources - verified September 2026

- California Department of Public Health - Marriage License General Information: https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CHSI/Pages/California-Marriage-License-General-Information.aspx
- California Department of Public Health - Types of Marriage Licenses: https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CHSI/Pages/Types-of-Marriage-Licenses-.aspx
- California Courts Self-Help - Change your name when you get married: https://selfhelp.courts.ca.gov/name-change/marriage
- California DMV - Update information on a driver license or ID card: https://www.dmv.ca.gov/portal/driver-licenses-identification-cards/updating-information-on-your-driver-license-or-identification-dl-id-card/
- Social Security Administration - Change name with Social Security: https://www.ssa.gov/life-events/change-name
- Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk - Recording your marriage certificate: https://www.lavote.gov/home/county-clerk/marriage-licenses-ceremonies/apply-for-a-marriage-license/recording-your-marriage-certificate