

[Insurance Consumer Rights in Washington State \(2021\)](#)

Insurance policies are contracts and legal rules come into play when you file an insurance claim. You are “the insured” and your insurance company is “the insurer.” Understanding your basic legal rights will help you be your own best advocate and collect all available policy benefits to cover your losses. After large disasters, it’s common for your insurer to rotate adjusters, which means you’ll be dealing with a series of different adjusters. Knowing your basic legal rights will make it easier for you deal with rotating adjusters and keep your claim on track toward a fair and full claim settlement without unreasonable delays.

Your insurance company and its employees are required to be fair and reasonable and follow Washington laws and regulations. They must do a timely, thorough and unbiased investigation and assessment of your loss(es). They must pay or deny your claim in a timely manner and in full compliance with the policy contract and applicable laws.

Insurance company claim adjusters are supposed to be trained on your state’s laws and claim handling regulations, but it’s often up to the policyholder to insist they follow them. Use the guidance and sample letters you’ll find on United Policyholders’ website (uphelp.org) to navigate the claim process and enforce your right to a fair, full and prompt claim settlement.

The information included here will give you a basic understanding of how the claim process should go and the legal rights that give you leverage to get a fair outcome. Here are the four places where your rights as a Washington insurance consumer are spelled out:

- Revised Code of Washington (RCW) [title 48 Insurance](#)
- Washington Administrative Code (WAC) [title 284 Insurance Commissioner, Office of the](#)

[Chapter 284-30 WAC - Trade Practices](#)

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- Washington - [Insurance Fair Conduct Act \(IFCA\) laws](#)
- Notices and bulletins issued by the [Washington Insurance Department](#).

Claim Communications

UP strongly recommends keeping a daily claim journal. As often as possible, jot down the date, time, and details of conversations, issues, problems and agreements with the adjuster assigned to your claim and other professionals such as contractors, government agencies, etc.

Also, we strongly recommend communicating in writing with insurance company representatives so there is a clear paper trail of how your claim is being handled. These days many communications will be via email, so make sure to save those emails where you can find them. After in-person or phone conversations with insurance company representative you should send short follow-up emails or letters summarizing what was said or agreed to. Document that you're cooperating fully with the insurer. This will prevent them from blaming you for delays and confirm that you're holding up your end of the bargain.

Check out our "Speak UP" tips on being politely assertive, organized and avoiding delays and misunderstandings. (<https://www.uphelp.org/pubs/speak-how-communicate-your-insurance-company>).

Time Frames and Deadlines

Below are timeframes and deadlines to be aware of. After a disaster, deadlines can become unrealistic due to shortages of available inspection, clean up and construction professionals. Speak UP! Document the contractors or service providers you called, who you spoke with, and what they told you in your claim journal. Sometimes following a natural disaster more work exists than skilled labor can support and it is important to document that you kept trying to find someone to help protect your property following a loss.

Processing your claim

10 Working Days - Your insurer must acknowledge your claim within 10 working days after receipt. This information should be included in the insurers claim file. *WAC 284-30-360(1),(b)*.

Promptly - After receiving notice of your claim, your insurer must promptly provide necessary claim forms, instructions, and reasonable assistance so that first party claimants can comply with the policy conditions and the insurer's reasonable requirements. *WAC 284-30-360(4)*.

Communicating information to you

10 Working Days - Your insurer must reply to all pertinent communications from you that reasonably indicate a response is expected within 10 working days after receipt. *WAC 284-30-360(3)*.

Investigating your claim

30 Days - Your insurer must complete its claim investigation within 30 days of receipt of the claim, unless the investigation cannot reasonably be completed in that time. *WAC 284-30-370*.

Paying or denying your claim

30 Days - An insurer must let you know if your claim is being accepted or denied within 15 working days after receipt of a properly executed proof of loss. Your insurer may not deny a claim on the basis of a policy provision, condition, or exclusion unless the denial includes reference to the provision. A claim denial must be in writing. *WAC 284-30-380(1)*.

More time - If the insurer needs more time to determine whether your claim should be accepted or denied, it must notify you within fifteen working days after receipt of the proofs of loss giving the reasons more time is needed. If after that time the investigation remains incomplete, the insurer must notify you in writing and state the reason or reasons additional time is needed for investigation. This notification must be sent within forty-five days after the date of the initial notification and, if needed, additional notice must be provided every thirty days after that date explaining why the claim remains unresolved. *WAC 284-30-380(3)*.

Preserving your right to sue if necessary

There is typically a deadline in your insurance policy for filing a lawsuit related to a claim. Check your policy for a "suit against us" provision, or similarly worded provision, to find that deadline. It's typically 12 months from the date of loss or the date your insurer closes your claim. However, the laws in your

state that apply to lawsuit deadlines may extend the period stated in your policy, so it's best to check with an experienced Washington state attorney to avoid losing your legal rights and the leverage those rights give you to get a fair payout on a claim.

20-day IFCA notice of Potential Lawsuit – Written notice of your intent to sue your insurance company under the Insurance Fair Conduct Act must be provided to the insurance company and the Office of the Insurance Commissioner (OIC) 20 days before filing suit. Frequently asked questions about this notice provision can be found here:

<https://www.insurance.wa.gov/how-file-20-day-insurance-fair-conduct-act-ifca-notice-potential-lawsuit>

Unfair Claim Practices

Your insurer is prohibited from using unfair claim practices and/or treating you badly during the claim process. These practices are set out generally in the Revised Code of Washington (“RCW”) and more specifically in the Washington Administrative Code (“WAC”). Washington has adopted the [Insurance Fair Conduct Act \(IFCA\) laws and rules](#). The following are a few examples listed in WAC 284-30-330 Specific **Unfair claim settlement practices defined:**

The following are hereby defined as unfair methods of competition and unfair or deceptive acts or practices of the insurer in the business of insurance, specifically applicable to the settlement of claims:

1. Misrepresenting pertinent facts or insurance policy provisions.
2. Failing to acknowledge and act reasonably promptly upon communications with respect to claims arising under insurance policies.
3. Refusing to pay claims without conducting a reasonable investigation.
4. Failing to affirm or deny coverage of claims within a reasonable time after fully completed proof of loss documentation has been submitted.
5. Not attempting in good faith to effectuate prompt, fair and equitable settlements of claims in which liability has become reasonably clear. In particular, this includes an obligation to promptly pay property damage claims to innocent third parties in clear liability situations. If two or more insurers share liability, they should arrange to make appropriate payment, leaving to themselves the burden of apportioning liability.

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6. Making a claim payment to a first party claimant or beneficiary not accompanied by a statement setting forth the coverage under which the payment is made.
7. Failing to promptly settle claims, where liability has become reasonably clear, under one portion of the insurance policy coverage in order to influence settlements under other portions of the insurance policy coverage.
8. Failing to promptly provide a reasonable explanation of the basis in the insurance policy in relation to the facts or applicable law for denial of a claim or for the offer of a compromise settlement.
9. Unfairly discriminating against claimants because they are represented by a public adjuster.

Remedies: Filing an official complaint with your State Insurance Agency

The Office of the Insurance Commissioner of Washington State oversees how insurance companies operate in the state. They can impose penalties on your insurance company if they did not comply with the laws in your state that require insurers to handle claims fairly and in good faith.

Visit uphelp.org and Insurance Resources for Washington <https://uphelp.org/recovery/state-by-state-help/washington/> for resources and tips on the process and strategy of filing a formal complaint.

You can call the Office of the Insurance Commissioner consumer hotline with any questions or complaints toll-free at 800-562-6900, email insurance questions to CAP@oic.wa.gov, file a complaint online, by going to <https://www.insurance.wa.gov/file-complaint-or-check-your-complaint-status> select “File a Complaint” for an online form. Their mailing address is:

Office of the Insurance Commissioner
Consumer Complaints
P.O. Box 40255
Olympia, WA 98504-0255

Special rules that may be in place after a disaster

Check the Washington State Office of the Insurance Commissioner’s website regularly to find all rules,

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regulations or other updates they may have put out that are specific to the disaster.

<https://www.insurance.wa.gov/public-notices>

After past disasters, special rules have been put into place such as:

- Requirements that insurers advance funds for temporary expenses instead of requiring you to incur and submit receipts.
- Requirements that insurers extend deadlines for submitting proofs of loss and other documents.
- Agreements with insurers that they will accept less detailed contents inventories.

Hiring Professional Help

When you paid your premium, you paid for coverage *and* good claim service. In theory, you should not have to hire outside help to get what you already paid for. However, in reality, you may need to. You have the right to hire an attorney or public adjuster to help navigate your claim. However, we urge caution before agreeing to pay a portion of your insurance benefits to any professional, and before hiring anyone to speak for you or negotiate on your behalf with your insurance company. Only hire someone who has strong references and who is likely to add value to your claim and recover more funds more quickly than you'd be able to recover on your own.

Attorneys – If you hire an attorney to resolve an insurance claim dispute, try to hire them on a contingency (not hourly) fee basis and agree to advance litigation costs. Claim disputes are time-consuming, so it gets expensive fast when you pay by the hour. Ideally, arrange for one or two qualified attorneys to do an initial evaluation of your situation free of charge. Only hire one that has represented insurance consumers in claim disputes and is a member in good standing of the Washington Bar. Visit our Washington Professional Help Directory at: <https://uphelp.org/recovery/state-by-state-help/washington/> We strongly recommend reading our publication titled “Questions and Answers for Hiring an Attorney for an Insurance Claim” <https://www.uphelp.org/pubs/hiring-attorney-insurance-claim> before making this important decision.

Public Adjusters – A qualified public adjuster can value your losses, handle the day-to-day aspects of your claim and negotiate a settlement on your behalf. Generally speaking, if you hire a public adjuster, you agree to pay them a percentage of the insurance benefits they recover on your behalf – not an

hourly fee. Washington public adjusters can also be found by visiting:

<https://uphelp.org/recovery/state-by-state-help/washington/> We strongly recommend reading our publication titled “Questions to Ask Before Hiring a Public Adjuster” before making this important decision. <https://www.uphelp.org/pubs/questions-ask-hiring-public-adjuster>

Using the Legal System to get a Fair Settlement

If you haven’t been able to get a fair insurance claim settlement on your own or with help from a professional and/or your state’s insurance oversight agency, filing a lawsuit is your next option. If your lawsuit is successful, you can recover what the insurer owed and (ideally) also get compensation for the expenses you incurred chasing the policy benefits you were entitled to in the first place. Your success in using the legal system to get a fair settlement will depend on the quality of the lawyer(s) you hire, the laws in your state and the facts in your case.

It’s common to worry that a lawsuit will be too time consuming or expensive (or both), but if you get the right lawyer and your case is strong, suing an insurer is often the best and only way to recover what you’re owed. Finding a qualified lawyer is essential. Insurance matters require specialized expertise and you need a strong advocate who speaks the language and has previous experience litigating against an insurance company.

Start in our [“Find Help”](#) section and click on your state to find professionals who specialize in representing policyholders and support United Policyholders. You’ll find many lawyers on the Internet that advertise as insurance specialists, and many of their websites have a chat window that pops up as soon as you visit their site. Speak directly to the lawyer who’d be handling your case and interview them about their insurance and litigation experience. Get and check client references. A lawsuit is a major undertaking but is often the best way to get full compensation, so be an astute consumer and choose your attorney carefully.

The cost of hiring an attorney varies from firm to firm. The two main options are attorneys who charge by the hour and those who work on contingency. For most policyholders, hiring an attorney on a “contingency” fee basis is the only feasible way of doing battle with a well-funded insurance company. Hourly fees for lawyers vary according to firm size, experience of the attorney, and geographic location. While attorneys who work on contingency usually set their fee at 33% of the amount they recover on

your behalf, that may increase to 40% if your case goes to trial. Most cases settle before trial. In some states you may not have the option of hiring an attorney on a contingency fee basis.

Using the legal system gives you leverage to get a better settlement and a lawsuit is a valuable tool. For more guidance on what to consider before suing your insurance company, read [Hiring an Attorney for an Insurance Claim](#) on uphelp.org

Best Practices

Visit and use UP's Washington Wildfires Insurance Claim and Recovery Help Library to get information throughout the recovery process:

<https://uphelp.org/disaster-recovery-help/washington-wildfires-insurance-claim-and-recovery-help/>.

Follow these steps:

Inventory and document your losses. Take pictures of identifiable items before they're removed for disposal or repairs before your lot gets cleared. Create detailed lists of damaged property. If your home was seriously damaged or completely destroyed, get at least one, ideally two, independent repair/replacement cost estimates.

Cooperate with your insurer as best you can and keep a good paper trail. If you are not able to stay in your home, make sure the company has an address and phone number where it can reach you.

Be present for inspections. It's a good idea to be home when the adjuster and or others inspect your property. Feel free to ask your contractor to be there with you to explain his/her opinions and estimates to the insurance company's representatives.

Make only urgent/temporary repairs before filing a claim. Your insurance company may deny your claim if you make permanent repairs before it inspects. If you're not sure if your company considers a repair to be permanent, ask your company (in writing) before starting any repair work. The cost of these repairs and for storing personal belongings is likely covered by your policy.

Keep receipts. Your insurer will usually require you to provide receipts before they'll reimburse you for expenses due to losing the use of all or part of your property. This is also true for collecting full



replacement costs above depreciated/actual cash values. On our website you'll find a free expense spreadsheet to help you keep track.

Speak UP. Be politely assertive, communicate clearly, and set realistic goals during the claim process.

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