

Local Business Licensing in Massachusetts

To start a business in one of Massachusetts' 351 cities and towns, the first step is contacting the city or town or town clerk, who licenses all local businesses. But the local licensing process doesn't stop there. The clerk may direct you to other municipal departments to apply for any additional licenses that may be necessary, depending on your business or industry.

Want to get in touch with your city or town hall?

Visit the [Massachusetts Municipal Association's](#) listing of links to official city and town Web sites, or its searchable database to locate key local government phone numbers and addresses. Or, visit [Commonwealth Communities](#), a state Web site with information about every Massachusetts city and town.

General local requirements

Remember, requirements discussed below are local requirements; state and federal licenses may also be required in addition to these.

Set Up Shop

Generally, you may not obtain a business certificate until you have established your place of business. The local Board of Building Regulation must be contacted in order to construct a new building. If you are building from scratch in a business-zoned area or taking over an existing building, you will be required to obtain a zoning permit. This is handled by an inspectional services department or a building code enforcement department. If you are working out of your home, you may be required to file a home occupation permit. This is often handled by the town clerk. Before you choose a locale, it is important to realize that many small towns in Massachusetts are zoned strictly residential/agricultural. This means they have no business-zoned district, so businesses must operate out of the home. There may also be restrictions on the type of businesses which may operate out of the home. In general, if you plan on sending or receiving large amounts of material at your home address, expect to encounter more licensing requirements or zoning restrictions. Some towns do not allow home businesses at all due to the traffic problems they may cause.

File with your clerk

Your clerk's office will require you to file a business certificate, which generally lasts for 4 years, at which point it must be renewed in order for business to continue. This is sometimes called a "dba" (doing business as) license. If the business name which appears on your business certificate includes your full name (for example, "Jane Doe Restaurant"), you are not required to file a dba. The same is true if your business is a corporation. If the business name does not include your name, the proprietor, partner, or officer of the business must apply for the business certificate in person. If this is impossible, the application may be completed through an attorney as long as the signature is notarized. An additional license and fee or a background check might be required by some towns, but such procedures are rare.