



*DISTRICT COURTS TRYING CRIMINAL CASES
Harris County, Texas*

JOINT STATEMENT – COVID-19 COURT OPERATIONS

As we navigate the challenges posed by the global COVID-19 threat, the Judiciary must be mindful of public health and safety as well as the concepts of justice and the rule of law. In an effort to safeguard constitutionally protected due process rights during a public emergency, the Harris County Felony District Courts are resolved to maintain confidence in our legal system while balancing the well-being of the public. Therefore, the Harris County District Courts Trying Criminal cases issue this Joint Statement on Felony Court Operations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This Joint Statement is **effective March 18, 2020, through May 8, 2020**, and may be subject to revision as needed or requested.

I. DEFENDANTS ON BOND SCHEDULED TO APPEAR IN COURT BEFORE MAY 8, 2020

- Defendants who have not previously appeared in the assigned Court must contact the Court or their attorney to determine whether or not they must appear following release from custody or after posting bond. If a Defendant is sick or in an at-risk group, the Defendant should alert the Court immediately.
- Defendants who have previously appeared in the assigned Court will automatically be rescheduled. *Defendants and attorneys do not need to appear if automatically rescheduled.*
 - To receive the new Court date, Defendants must contact his/her attorney.
 - If a Defendant does not have an attorney, the Defendant may contact the bonding company, Harris County Pretrial Services at 832-927-3520, the Harris County District Clerk at 832-927-5800, or visit the individual Court's webpage www.justex.net.

II. DEFENDANTS IN CUSTODY

- Preliminary Assigned Court Appearance (PACA)
 - Defendants must appear before the Court (physically or remotely) unless quarantined, sick, or at risk.
 - This setting is to ensure the prompt appointment of counsel, as well as to review bail.
- Other Settings
 - Defendants and attorneys should only appear in Court if a matter is essential or time sensitive and has been docketed.
 - If the matter has been docketed as essential or time-sensitive, Defendants and attorneys may request to appear remotely.
 - Attorneys should request to docket a matter if the parties believe it will lead to the disposition of the case.


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III. ADMINISTRATION OF JUSTICE

- Attorneys must continue to work on all cases by communicating, negotiating, investigating, evaluating and identifying cases that can be docketed and disposed, whether in person or remotely.
- Attorneys must maintain communication with their clients. Alternatives to in-person visits include mail, email, telephone and videoconference.
- All efforts must be taken to limit court appearances. Anyone appearing before the Court in person must make the Court aware of whether he or she is sick or experiencing any symptoms that may risk their safety or the safety of others.
- Any person may contact the Court before an appearance to discuss other available options.

We are confident that these measures will assist in helping to keep our community as healthy and safe as possible without diminishing our oath to protect the Constitution.

Signed March 18th, 2020



Herb Ritchie
337th District Court
Administrative Judge, Criminal Division
Harris County, Texas