



Fourth Re-Adoption of the COVID-19 Operating Plan for the Harris County Judiciary District Courts, County Courts at Law & Probate Courts

Dated: February 1, 2022

Under the current Forty-Seventh Order Regarding the COVID-19 State of Disaster issued by the Texas Supreme Court (Misc. Docket No, 22-9005), the local administrative district judge may re-adopt a local COVID-19 Operating Plan and minimum health standard protocols.

I have determined that the following minimum standard health protocols for court proceedings and the public attending court proceedings that will be employed in all courtrooms and throughout all public areas of the court buildings will be used in the setting of in-person proceedings. These protocols and the local COVID-19 Operating Plan shall remain in effect through April 1, 2022, subject to amendment and extension by a subsequent order.

General

1. All judges will continue to comply with the Emergency Orders issued by the Supreme Court of Texas and Court of Criminal Appeals.
2. All judges and court staff will continue to comply with the masking, social distancing and safety protocols set out in both the COVID-19 Operating Plan for the Harris County District Courts, County Courts at Law & Probate Courts and the Readopted Order of the Harris County Local Administrative Judge Concerning Additional Health and Safety Protocols.

3. All judges should continue to use reasonable efforts to conduct proceedings remotely, and to accommodate litigants, lawyers, witnesses, and other participants who request to appear remotely.
4. All judges and court staff should continue to comply with Supreme Court mandates concerning masking, social distancing, and health and safety protocols.
5. The local administrative district judge will continue to maintain regular communication with the local health authority to consider adjustments to this operating plan as necessary.

Judge and Court Staff Health

1. Judges or court staff who feel feverish or have measured temperatures equal to or greater than 99.6°F, or with new or worsening signs or symptoms of COVID-19 such as cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, chills, repeated shaking with chills, muscle pain, headache, sore throat, loss of taste or smell, diarrhea, or having known close contact with a person who is confirmed to have COVID-19 will not be permitted to enter the building and should seek medical advice.
2. Judges and court staff will continue to practice social distancing, and practice appropriate hygiene recommendations and masking in the public areas of the courthouse. Each judge may make a general exemption in his/her courtroom.
3. Protective Measures: The sneeze guards installed by the County will remain in place. The County will continue to strive to provide each court with masks and gloves for staff and participants who show for in-person matters. The County will, throughout the day, clean “touch points” and will, as able, perform a thorough cleaning of the complex at least once a week.

Scheduling

Each court will strive to reduce its number of in person hearings and will strive to schedule in person hearings in such a way as to maintain proper social distancing within the courtroom itself.

Social Distancing

1. All persons who enter the courthouse will be required to maintain adequate social distancing.
2. Elevators, restrooms, hallways and common area spaces will continue to follow the most recent social distancing recommendations.
3. In each courtroom, each judge will be responsible for determining and maintaining appropriate social distancing. Each judge may make exemption(s) in his/her courtroom as he/she deems appropriate generally or for a specific case.

Hygiene

1. Hand sanitizer dispensers have been placed at the entrances to the building, outside of elevators on each floor, outside of each courtroom, and outside of bathrooms.
2. Tissues have been placed near the door of the courtroom, at counsel tables, at the witness stand, on the judges' benches, and in the hallways.
3. The Department of State Health Service's "Stop the Spread of Germs Flyer" has been posted in multiple locations on each floor of the court building.

Screening

Screening will continue to ensure that no court participants have recently tested positive for COVID-19, have recently had symptoms of COVID-19, or have had recent known exposure to COVID-19. If a witness or participant has had recent exposure but has been fully vaccinated, is asymptomatic and tests negative for COVID-19, a court may allow the individual to appear in person. That individual must comply with all mask mandates at all times.

Masks

1. Masks will be required to enter the courthouse buildings. Masks will also be required in any courtroom unless exempted by the judge of that Court.
2. Courts will have the right to turn away an individual who declines to wear a mask, and individuals attempting to enter the building who are not wearing a mask and who refuse to wear a mask will be denied admission.

3. Individuals will be encouraged to bring a mask with them, but if the individual does not have a mask, a disposable mask will be provided, as long as supplies last.
4. Each court may choose to allow individuals to remove their mask in the courtroom, but masks must still be worn in the general court facilities (clerk's offices, restrooms, hallways, elevators, and the like).

Signed: February 1, 2022



The Honorable Latosha Lewis Payne
Harris County Local Administrative Judge