

178TH CRIMINAL DISTRICT COURT
JURY TRIAL PROTOCOL DURING PANDEMIC
HARRIS COUNTY, TEXAS

I. **GENERAL:** The 178th Criminal District Court will take every precaution necessary to ensure the safety of its staff and the public during this pandemic.

A. **OPERATING PLAN:** The operating plan is filed with the Office of Court Administration's website: txcourts.gov

B. **JUDGE/COURT STAFF HEALTH:** The judge, court staff, and parties must be screened at the front door of the courthouse prior to entering and must pass ALL COVID-19 protocols.

C. **SCHEDULING:** Please contact Mary Leal, the court coordinator, via email mary_leal@justex.com or consult the 178th website justex.net.

D. **SOCIAL DISTANCING:** The Judge, court staff, parties and observing public must practice social distancing in the courtroom and wear a face covering.

E. **HYGIENE:** Hand sanitizers are available on all floors and can be requested as needed.

F. **SCREENING:** All individuals must be screened at the front door of the courthouse prior to entering and must pass ALL COVID-19 protocols.

G. **FACE COVERINGS:** Face coverings and face shields will be provided to jurors. Face coverings are required to be worn by all individuals present in the courtroom.

H. **CLEANING:** Courtroom will be sanitized each evening.

I. **PUBLIC ACCESS:** The jury box or extra gallery space will be for audience access only as space allows.

II. **VOIR DIRE** (See NRG Procedures and Guidelines at the website: www.harriscountyjuryservice.com)

A. **NUMBER OF JURORS:** At least two alternates will be chosen for each trial.

III. **TRIAL:**

A. **PRETRIAL:**

1. **Exhibits:** All trial exhibits must be pre-marked prior to trial.

2. Stipulations: All stipulations to evidence must be completed prior to trial.

B. PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE): PPE will be made available as needed to the jury, defendant and witnesses. Lawyers are responsible for their own PPE equipment; however, it must meet the Center for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines.

C. SIDEBARS: White noise will be used in the gallery where the jurors are seated to obscure sidebar conversations with the Court. Lawyers will wear headsets and remain seated to discuss sidebars with the Court. If a more in-depth discussion is needed, the judge may remove the jury and discuss sidebars outside the jurors' presence.

D. HANDLING THE EVIDENCE: Gloves will be provided upon request in the handling of the evidence.

E. LOCATION OF JURORS: Jurors will be seated in the gallery socially distanced from each other. Each juror will have an assigned seat.

F. WITNESSES: Prior to testimony, the witness will cover the microphone with a disposable cover. The witness will take the disposable microphone cover upon exiting. The court reporter will sanitize the area after each witness.

G. BREAKS: Breaks will be taken as needed and will be done in the same courtroom where the trial is being conducted; or in the alternative if available, they may occur in another courtroom. Sanitation steps will be taken as needed.

H. JURY DELIBERATION LOCATION: Jury deliberations will take place in the courtroom with consideration of social distancing protocols. All parties and public will leave the courtroom during deliberations.

I. EVIDENCE: Evidence will be made available to jurors, and gloves will be provided upon request. Parties are encouraged to put all evidence on media (example, flash drive, disc) for laptop usage in jury deliberation.

J. FOOD/DRINKS/CONDIMENTS: Meals will be provided in individual servings as needed.

K. CLEANING: Cleaning will be conducted on a nightly basis.