

# Jury Proceeding Addendum to COVID-19 Operating Plan for the Hopkins County Judiciary

*Effective on and after October 1, 2020*

Recognizing the need to ensure the health and safety of jurors, litigants, attorneys, visitors, court staff, judges, and other individuals entering the buildings housing the courts, the courts of Hopkins County will implement, in addition to the procedures and protocols in the previously submitted COVID-19 Operating Plan, the following protective measures for jury proceedings:

## General

1. All judges will comply with the Emergency Orders issued by the Supreme Court of Texas and Court of Criminal Appeals, including conducting in-person jury proceedings according to the guidance issued by the Office of Court Administration.
2. The justice courts will not conduct an in-person jury proceeding until the Supreme Court permits such proceedings.
3. Judges of the district courts, constitutional and statutory county courts, and statutory probate courts will conduct in-person jury proceedings in accordance with the previously approved Operating Plan and this addendum only after this jury proceeding addendum is submitted and accepted by the Regional Presiding Judge.
4. Not more than five days before an approved in-person jury proceeding is scheduled to occur, the local administrative district judge or designee will consult with the local public health authority to verify that local health conditions and plan precautions are appropriate for the jury proceeding to proceed.
5. Except for criminal cases where confinement in jail or prison is a potential punishment, judges may conduct remote jury proceedings if the court follows the requirements of the hearings on objections or motions section below and ensures that all potential and selected petit jurors have access to technology to participate remotely. Judges may conduct remote jury proceedings in a criminal case where confinement in jail or prison is a potential punishment only with appropriate waivers and consent obtained on the record from the defendant and the prosecutor.

## Jury Proceeding Approval Process

1. Judges wishing to conduct a jury proceeding will follow the procedure detailed below to obtain approval to proceed with the jury proceeding from the local administrative district judge and Regional Presiding Judge:

The judge of the constitutional county court, the statutory county court, or the 62<sup>nd</sup> Judicial District Court will contact the Local Administrative District Judge (Eddie Northcutt) to discuss their need for a jury trial and to arrange for dates to use the Hopkins County Civic Center for the trial. After the logistics have been arranged, Judge Northcutt will contact Judge Alfonso Charles, Presiding Judge of the 10<sup>th</sup> Administrative Judicial Region, to obtain approval for the jury trial.

2. The local administrative district judge will, not more than five days before the jury proceeding, consult with the local public health authority to verify that the local health conditions and plan precautions are appropriate for the jury proceeding to proceed with the following procedure: Judge Northcutt will, not earlier than five days before a scheduled trial, contact Dr. I.L. Balcom, IV, the Local Health Authority for Hopkins County, for the purpose of consulting with him regarding current local health conditions and plan precautions to determine the appropriateness of moving forward with the planned jury trial. Dr. Balcom is fully aware that he has the freedom and ability to contact Judge Northcutt (and has the judge's personal cell phone number) regarding any emerging concerns regarding local health conditions that would necessitate cancellation of the jury trial.

#### **Hearings on Objections or Motions Related to Proceeding**

1. Parties who are scheduled for a jury proceeding are encouraged to make any objections or motions related to proceedings at least 10 days prior to the trial setting.
2. Any objections or motions related to proceeding with a jury proceeding will be heard by the judge presiding over the case at least seven days prior to the jury proceeding or as soon as practicable if the objection or motion is made or filed within seven days of the jury proceeding.

#### **Communication Protocols**

1. Each judge with an approved in-person jury proceeding will require the parties to communicate with the court if any participant in the jury proceeding, including attorneys, parties, attorney support staff, or witnesses, has tested positive for COVID-19 within the previous 30 days prior to any portion of the jury proceeding, currently has symptoms of COVID-19, or has had recent known exposure to COVID-19.
2. If the approved in-person jury proceeding involves an incarcerated participant, the judge will require the sheriff to report any positive COVID-19 test of the incarcerated participant within the previous 30 days prior to any portion of the jury proceeding, any current symptoms of COVID-19, or any recent known exposure to COVID-19.

#### **Scheduling**

1. A judge who obtains approval for an in-person jury proceeding will schedule no more than ten cases for that jury trial setting, unless pre-approval for larger dockets is obtained from the Regional Presiding Judge.
2. Judges should attempt to alert parties who will not be proceeding prior to the day of trial to reduce attendance at the court facility.

#### **Summoning Jurors**

1. The jury clerk must include with in-person juror summonses information regarding precautions that have been taken to protect the health and safety of prospective jurors (see Attachment A) and COVID questionnaires (see Attachment B) that elicit from prospective jurors information about their exposure or vulnerability to COVID-19.

2. Judges will utilize juror questionnaires for voir dire to assist in shortening the length of voir dire or the number of venirepersons.
3. Excuses or requests to reschedule from in-person prospective jurors who have been potentially exposed, who are symptomatic, and who are vulnerable or live with someone vulnerable to COVID-19 will be liberally granted.

#### **Location for Jury Selection, Trial, and Deliberation**

1. The following locations have sufficient space to permit adequate social distancing and will be used for in-person jury proceedings:
  - a. Jury Qualification: [Hopkins County Civic Center](#)
  - b. Voir Dire: [Hopkins County Civic Center](#)
  - c. Trial: [Hopkins County Civic Center](#)
  - d. Jury Deliberation: [Hopkins County Civic Center](#)
2. Security protocols at the locations for jury proceedings have been reviewed with the appropriate courthouse security personnel and are adequate for the proceeding.

#### **Screening**

1. In addition to the requirements of the previously submitted in-person Operating Plan, all court participants and observers attending an in-person jury proceeding will be screened for elevated temperatures and will be questioned to determine if the individual has recently had symptoms of COVID-19 or been exposed to COVID-19.
2. All participants in a trial who are incarcerated will be screened by the jail/prison prior to transport to the courtroom and any known exposure, symptoms, or COVID-19 positive test results within the past 30 days will be reported to the judge presiding over the jury trial prior to the transport of the participant to the courtroom.

#### **Face Coverings**

1. In addition to the requirements of the previously submitted in-person Operating Plan, all persons entering the common areas of a courthouse, including a courtroom or any other location being used to conduct a jury trial, will be required to wear a face covering at all times unless the person is an individual that is not recommended to wear a mask by the Centers for Disease Control or the Texas Department of State Health Services. All persons entering the building who will be participating in the proceeding (i.e., not mere observers of the proceedings) will be provided a face shield. While the face shield is in use, the underlying mask is optional.
2. All court participants will be required to wear the face shield/face coverings from jury qualification through the end of trial.

#### **Social Distancing**

1. Social distancing of all court participants and observers will be maintained at all times during the jury proceeding, including during the trial and deliberation.

2. Special attention will be paid by courts to ensure adequate social distancing and managed exits of individuals during breaks, especially when dismissing large groups of people for a break.

### **Alternate Jurors**

1. Each judge with an approved in-person jury proceeding will be encouraged to consider selecting alternate jurors to permit the trial to continue in the event of a juror becoming ineligible to serve for a reason unrelated to that person's exposure to or contraction of COVID-19.

### **Arrangement of Courtroom**

1. The following description details how each of the courtrooms or facilities will be arranged during the jury proceeding:

The Hopkins County Civic Center has a large convention-like room comprised of high ceilings, is rectangular in shape, and is approximately 7500 square feet in size. The room has the capability of being divided into thirds. The entire room (i.e., undivided) will be used for jury qualification and selection, with chairs for the venire persons spread out to ensure social distance. The Court's bench will be a slightly elevated riser, where the judge and witnesses will sit. The court reporter will be situated in front of the witness, socially distanced. The parties' tables will be long tables allowing for social distance.

When the jury is selected, the back third of the room will be closed off and chairs for court observers will be situated to provide for social distance. Chairs for the jury during the trial will be situated to allow full view of the witness and will be arranged to permit proper distancing. During jury deliberations, the jury will have an entire third of the convention room (i.e., approximately 2500 square feet) to use and the chairs will be arranged in a circle with proper distancing between jurors.

There are multiple restrooms available for use by all who enter, as the building is designed to accommodate large crowds. Any necessary steps to ensure social distance in the restrooms will be taken.

Court staff (e.g., as clerk's office, attorneys, and court staff) will have use of a large board room for temporary office space. Specific instructions will be given regarding prohibiting large numbers of people gathering in the board room at the same time and this will be monitored by staff provided by the Sheriff's office.

The Sheriff is providing volunteer assistance from the Hopkins County Sheriff's Posse to assist with crowd control and to ensure compliance with necessary social distance throughout the facility, throughout the trial.

### **Microphone Protection Protocols**

1. Judges will limit, to the degree possible, the shared use of microphones during the jury proceeding.
2. If a microphone must be shared, judges will limit the passing of the microphone unless the microphone is cleaned between each user.

3. Disposable microphone covers will be placed on shared microphones and changed between each user.

### **Exhibit/Evidence Management**

1. Judges will limit, to the degree possible, the use of physical or paper exhibits/evidence where feasible or appropriate by converting the exhibit/evidence to a digital form.
2. When physical or paper exhibits/evidence is required, judges will reduce the exchange of that exhibit/evidence to the number of persons necessary and will limit passing the exhibit/evidence to the individual members of the jury.
3. If an exhibit/evidence is required to be transferred from person-to-person, single use gloves will be provided, worn, and discarded immediately after handling the exhibit/evidence.
4. During jury deliberations, judges will make efforts to provide the jury with access to digital exhibits/evidence that would normally be shared with the jury during deliberation. Where digital exhibits/evidence is not feasible, judges will consider limiting the transfer of the exhibits/evidence from juror-to-juror by spreading the exhibits/evidence on a table for inspection from the table in the jury deliberation room.

### **Witnesses**

1. Judges will inquire whether witnesses to the proceedings have COVID-related issues.
2. To the degree constitutionally permissible or with the consent of the parties, judges will permit witnesses to testify remotely via videoconference, especially if that witness has symptoms of or a recent positive test for COVID-19, has been recently exposed, or is vulnerable to contracting COVID-19.

### **Food Precautions**

1. Courts that provide food to jurors or other participants during a jury proceeding will ensure individual food portions, such as individually boxed meals, are provided.

### **Cleaning**

1. In addition to the requirements of the previously submitted in-person Operating Plan, frequent cleaning protocols in the courtrooms and facilities will be maintained throughout the jury proceeding as appropriate.
2. Shared spaces such as witness stands, seating in the gallery, and seating during qualification/voir dire will be cleaned during transitions of those spaces.
3. Seats for members of the jury panel and selected jurors will be assigned to reduce potential transmission and the need for more frequent cleaning.

I have attempted to confer with all judges of courts with courtrooms in the court building regarding the Jury Proceeding Addendum to the Operating Plan. In developing the plan, I consulted with the local health authority and county judge, documentation of which is attached to this plan. I will ensure

that the judges of courts with courtrooms in the court building covered by this Operating Plan conduct proceedings consistent with the plan.

Date: 9/22/2020

  
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Local Administrative District Judge