

COVID-19 OPERATING PLAN FOR THE **HIDALGO COUNTY PROBATE COURT**

The Courts of Hidalgo County are doing everything within their power to help keep our justice system working. Through the help of The Texas Supreme Court, The Texas Office of Court Administration, Fifth Region, and many others within our State and local government, we are accomplishing this. All measures possible to reduce the likelihood of exposure in order to prevent or control the spread of disease are being taken.

Recognizing the need to ensure the health and safety of litigants, attorneys, visitors, court staff, judges, and other individuals entering the buildings housing our courts, the courts of Hidalgo County are ordered to implement the following protective measures:

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 proceedings according to the guidance issued by the Office of Court Administration regarding social distancing, maximum group size, and other restrictions and precautions.
2. **ALL JUDGES WILL USE ALL REASONABLE EFFORTS TO CONDUCT PROCEEDINGS REMOTELY.**
3. The local administrative district judge will maintain regular communications with the local health authority and county judge, and adjust this operating plan as necessary with conditions in the county of Hidalgo, specifically in the buildings housing the courts.
4. This order applies to Hidalgo County Probate Court.

Judge and Court Staff Health

1. Judges and court staff who can perform the essential functions of their job remotely will telework when possible.

2. 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.
3. Court personnel will monitor and self-report symptoms to their supervisor(s), including judge, or in accordance with their office's chain of command.
4. Court personnel will report exposure to COVID-19 to their supervisor(s), including judge, or in accordance with their office's chain of command. Judge and court personnel will not be permitted to enter county buildings for five (5) days following exposure to COVID-19. If a judge or court personnel is still symptomatic after five (5) days, they will not be permitted to enter county buildings.
5. Court personnel will follow Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for returning to work following any isolation or quarantine as a result of exposure to or infection with COVID-19.
6. Judges and court personnel will be required to wear face coverings, practice social distancing, and practice appropriate hygiene requirements. If judges or court personnel are working in their offices behind closed doors, or participating by computer only, they may remove face coverings until required to communicate in-person with other employees, attorneys, or the public.

Scheduling

1. The Hidalgo County Probate Court will coordinate scheduling of any in-person proceedings to reduce the number of people in the courthouse at one time.
2. The Hidalgo County Probate Court will adjust and schedule its dockets to ensure no more than a capacity of participants that are present in the courtroom at any given time that is in accordance with the plan for the Hidalgo County Judiciary. The Court will be cognizant of the social distancing measures in the halls outside of the courtrooms.

Vulnerable Populations

- 1. Individuals who are over age 65 and individuals with serious underlying health conditions, such as high blood pressure, chronic lung disease, diabetes, obesity, asthma, and those whose immune systems are compromised such as by chemotherapy for cancer or other conditions requiring such therapy are considered to be vulnerable populations.**
- 2. The Court will include information on orders setting hearings, dockets notices, and in other communications notifying individuals who are in vulnerable populations of the ability to contact the court to identify themselves as a vulnerable individual and receive accommodations. A notice with this information will be posted on the courts' websites and in conspicuous locations around the court building (a copy of which is attached).**
- 3. If court personnel receive notice that an individual in the vulnerable population has been scheduled for a court proceeding, court personnel will accommodate the individual by (1) allowing them to participate in the proceeding remotely via zoom, or, (2) If the individual must appear in-person, court personnel will set up a separate room for the individual to participate in the hearing remotely, via Zoom or other method of participation, to protect them and others.**

Social Distancing

- 1. All persons not from the same household who are permitted in the court building will be required to maintain adequate social distancing of at least 6 feet.**
- 2. No more than two individuals not from the same household will be permitted in an elevator. If more than one individual from the same household is in an elevator, no other individuals will be permitted in the elevator. Stairwells are to be monitored to adhere to social distancing of six (6) feet. IDs will be required of adults to verify household members.**
- 3. County personnel will measure the length of each bench in hallways with courtrooms. County personnel will then apply markings at least six (6) feet apart on each bench indicating where individuals in the halls may sit.**
- 4. County personnel will place signage, in English and Spanish, about the social distancing policy throughout the courthouse. At minimum, signage will be placed outside the doors of each courtroom and various benches inside and outside of the courtrooms.**
- 5. Each restroom has been evaluated to determine the appropriate capacity to ensure social distancing and the maximum capacity has been posted on each restroom door.**

6. Public common areas, including breakrooms and snackrooms, have been closed to the public.
7. The maximum number of persons permitted in the gallery of each courtroom has been determined and posted. The maximum capacity of the courtroom will be monitored and enforced by court staff.
8. The gallery of the courtroom has been marked to identify appropriate social distancing in the seating. Seating is limited to every other row. Provided courtroom security and safety is not at risk, deputies who do not sit during court proceedings will stand in a location that ensures social distancing.
9. In each courtroom, the counsel tables, witness stand, judge's bench, and clerk, court reporter, and bailiff seating have been arranged in such a way so that there is social distancing of at least 6 feet between each space.
10. If there is not adequate space for seating or standing to ensure adequate social distancing, Court personnel will ask parties for their cell phone number and then ask them to return to their vehicles until their case is ready to be heard. Court personnel may also direct parties to other areas of the courthouse where adequate social distancing exists, or access to Zoom can be set up.

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

1. When individuals attempt to enter the court building, Health Department personnel or designee will ask the individuals if they are feeling feverish; have a cough, shortness of breath, or difficulty breathing; or have been in close contact with a person who is confirmed to have COVID-19. Individuals who indicate yes to any of these questions will be refused admittance to the court building. The names and case numbers for individuals who were refused admittance to the court building will be logged, and that information will be forwarded to the appropriate court

immediately. Contact information will be acquired to make appropriate arrangements for their appearance remotely.

2. When individuals attempt to enter the court building, Health Department personnel or designees will use an infrared thermometer to determine the temperature of the individual. Individuals whose temperature equals or exceeds 100.0°F will be refused admittance to the court building.
3. Inmates being transported from the jail to the court building will be screened for symptoms of COVID-19 and have their temperature taken prior to transport. Inmates with symptoms or a temperature equal to or above 99.6°F will not be transported to the court building.
4. Staff who are screening individuals entering the court building will be provided personal protective equipment, including face coverings or face shields, gloves, and necessary sanitizer and wipes.

Face Coverings

1. **ALL INDIVIDUALS ENTERING THE COURT BUILDING WILL BE REQUIRED TO WEAR FACE COVERINGS AT ALL TIMES.**
2. Individuals will be encouraged to bring face coverings with them, but if the individual does not have a face covering, a disposable face mask will be provided.

Cleaning

1. Court building cleaning staff will clean the common areas of the court building so that common spaces are cleaned at least every two (2) hours.
2. Court building cleaning staff will clean the courtrooms between every hearing, between morning and afternoon proceedings, and at the end of each day the courtroom is used.
3. Court building cleaning staff have been provided cleaning supplies shown to be effective with this coronavirus.
4. Court building cleaning staff have been trained on proper cleaning techniques and provided appropriate personal protective equipment.
5. All Court personnel should be trained or will be trained on proper cleaning techniques in order to assist in the cleaning, when necessary.

I have attempted to confer with all judges of courts with courtrooms in the County buildings regarding this 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 County buildings covered by this Operating Plan conduct proceedings consistent with the plan.

Date: 6/12/2020



Judge JoAnne Garcia
Local Administrative District Judge
Of Hidalgo County Probate Court, Texas

The judges, staff, and attorneys are to serve as examples for the public every day. We must follow the rules in an effort to protect all our citizens. The population we serve must get, from our example and the management of our courts, a sense of confidence in our legal system. The health and safety of all is of utmost importance, therefore, we will continue to look to our county for any additional equipment and staffing that becomes necessary to protect our community.

“OUR COMMUNITY IS STRONG. WE ARE MADE UP OF PROUD, HARD-WORKING PEOPLE – PEOPLE THAT BELIEVE IN FAMILY AND UNITY. THIS IS THE TIME TO USE THAT STRENGTH TO HELP EACH OTHER GET THROUGH THESE UNCERTAIN TIMES.”