

COVID-19 OPERATING PLAN FOR THE HIDALGO COUNTY JUDICIARY

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 all courts housed in any Hidalgo County building, including District Courts, County Courts At Law, all Master Courts, Justices of the Peace, and the Thirteenth Court of Appeals.
5. Judges will begin setting non-essential in-person proceedings no sooner than June 15, 2020

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. Judges housed together in a building must coordinate scheduling of any in-person proceedings to reduce the number of people in the courthouse at one time.
2. Courts will adjust and schedule their dockets to ensure no more than a capacity of participants that is in accordance with this plan, are present in the courtroom at any given time. Courts will be cognizant of the social distancing measures in the halls outside of the courtrooms.
3. Judges in the main Hidalgo County Courthouse will follow the attached schedule or seek guidance from the Local Administrative Presiding Judge, when necessary, to deviate from said schedule.

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. Each judge 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: 6/4/2020



Judge Noé González
Local Administrative District Judge
Of Hidalgo County, 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.”

MAIN HIDALGO COUNTY COURTHOUSE JUDICIAL SCHEDULE

	MON	TUE	WED	THUR	FRI
92ND (2nd FL, South)	X		X		
93RD (2nd FL, North)		X		X	
139TH (2ndFL, South)		X		X	
206TH (2nd FL, Northeast)	X		X		
275TH (1st FL, North)	X		X		
332ND (2nd FL, Northeast)	X		X		
370TH (1st FL, North)		X		X	
389TH (2nd FL, South)	X		X		
398TH (2nd Floor, South)		X		X	
430TH (9th Street)	X	X	X	X	X
464TH (3rd FL)		X		X	
CC1 (3rd FL)	X		X		
CC2 (3rd FL)		X		X	
PROBATE (2nd FL, East)	X		X		
CC4 (3rd FL)	X		X		
CC5 (2nd FL, North)		X		X	
CC6 (2nd FL, East)		X		X	
CC7 (Annex, North)	X		X		
CC8 (Annex, North)		X		X	
MASTER CRT 1 (Annex, N)		X	X		
MASTER CRT 2 (Annex, N)	X			X	
CPS COURT (Annex, North)	X			X	

JUDGES IN THE MAIN HIDALGO COUNTY COURTHOUSE WILL FOLLOW THIS SCHEDULE OR SEEK GUIDANCE FROM THE LOCAL ADMINISTRATIVE PRESIDING JUDGE, WHEN NECESSARY, TO DEVIATE FROM SAID SCHEDULE



NOTICE

If you are an individual who is over the age of 65, or have serious underlying health conditions, such as:

- **high blood pressure**
- **chronic lung disease**
- **diabetes**
- **obesity**
- **asthma**
- **immune system that is compromised by chemotherapy for cancer or other conditions requiring such therapy**

Please contact court staff to identify yourself so that we may make additional arrangements for you to proceed with your case in a safe and healthy way.

What You Can do if You are at Higher Risk of Severe Illness from COVID-19

Are You at Higher Risk for Severe Illness?



Based on what we know now, those at high-risk for severe illness from COVID-19 are:

- People aged 65 years and older
- People who live in a nursing home or long-term care facility

People of all ages with underlying medical conditions, particularly if not well controlled, including:

- People with chronic lung disease or moderate to severe asthma
- People who have serious heart conditions
- People who are immunocompromised
 - Many conditions can cause a person to be immunocompromised, including cancer treatment, smoking, bone marrow or organ transplantation, immune deficiencies, poorly controlled HIV or AIDS, and prolonged use of corticosteroids and other immune weakening medications.
- People with severe obesity (body mass index [BMI] of 40 or higher)
- People with diabetes
- People with chronic kidney disease undergoing dialysis
- People with liver disease

Here's What You Can do to Help Protect Yourself



Stay home if possible.



Wash your hands often.



Avoid close contact and stay at least 6 feet (about 2 arms' length) from other people.



Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces.



Cover your mouth and nose with a cloth face cover when around others.



Cover coughs and sneezes.

IF YOU IDENTIFY WITH BEING AT HIGH RISK OR VULNERABLE, PLEASE CONTACT COURT STAFF TO IDENTIFY YOURSELF SO THAT WE MAY MAKE ADDITIONAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR YOU TO PROCEED WITH YOUR CASE



AVISO

Si usted es una persona mayor de 65 años, o tiene condiciones de salud serias, como:

- La alta presión
- La enfermedad pulmonar crónica
- El diabetes
- La obesidad
- El Asma
- Un sistema inmunitario comprometido por la quimioterapia para el cáncer u otras condiciones que requieren terapia

Favor de comunicarse con nuestro personal para identificarse para que podamos hacer arreglos adicionales para que pueda continuar con su caso de una manera segura y saludable.

Qué puede hacer si tiene un mayor riesgo de enfermarse gravemente por el COVID-19

¿Tiene usted un mayor riesgo de enfermarse gravemente?



Según lo que sabemos ahora, quienes tienen un mayor riesgo de enfermarse gravemente por COVID-19 son:

- Las personas de 65 años o más
- Las personas que viven en hogares de ancianos o establecimientos de cuidados a largo plazo

Las personas de cualquier edad con afecciones subyacentes, especialmente si no están bien controladas, como:

- Personas con enfermedades pulmonares crónicas o asma, de moderada a grave
- Personas con afecciones cardíacas graves
- Personas inmunodeprimidas
 - Muchas situaciones pueden causar inmunosupresión, como recibir tratamiento para el cáncer, fumar, recibir un trasplante de órgano o médula ósea, tener deficiencias inmunitarias, tener la infección por el VIH o el sida mal controlados, y tomar a largo plazo corticosteroides u otros medicamentos que debilitan al sistema inmunitario.
- Personas con obesidad grave (índice de masa corporal [IMC] de 40 o más)
- Personas con diabetes
- Personas con enfermedad renal crónica que reciben tratamiento de diálisis
- Personas con enfermedad hepática

Esto es lo que puede hacer para ayudar a protegerse



Quédense en casa si es posible.



Lávese las manos a menudo.



Evite el contacto cercano y manténgase al menos a 6 pies (alrededor de 2 brazos de distancia) de otras personas.



Limpie y desinfecte las superficies que se tocan con frecuencia.



Cúbrase la nariz y la boca con una cubierta de tela para la cara cuando esté alrededor de otras personas.

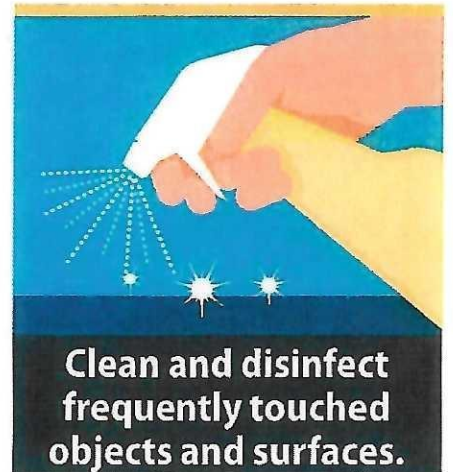
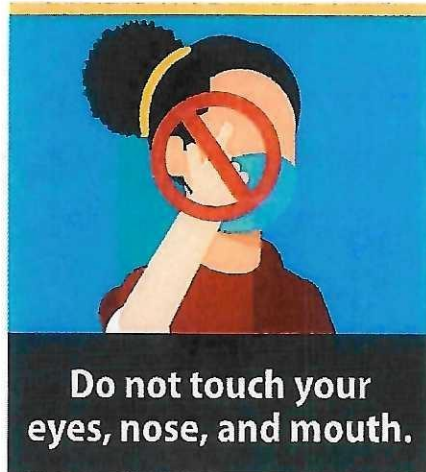
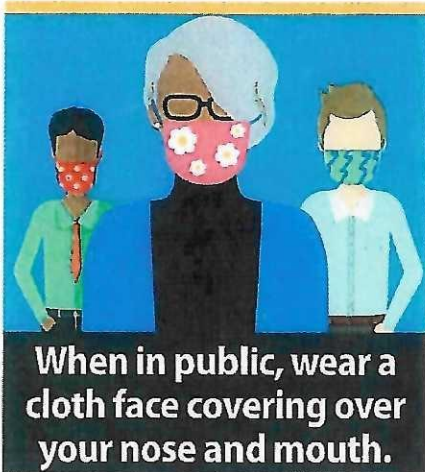
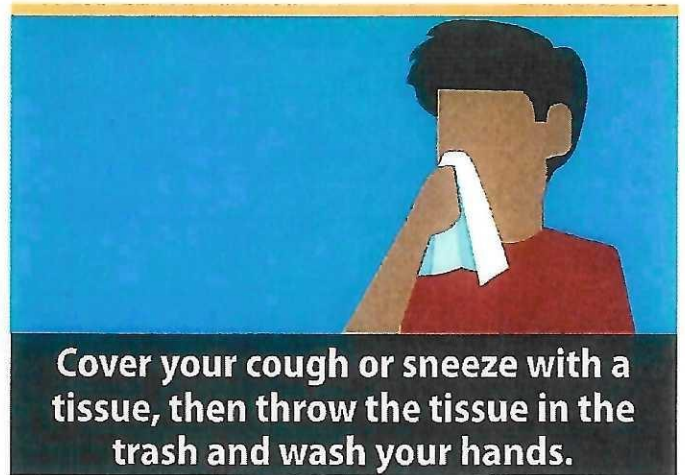


Cúbrase al toser y estornudar.

SI USTED ES UNA DE ESTAS PERSONAS, FAVOR DE COMUNICARSE CON NUESTRO PERSONAL PARA HACER ARREGLOS ADICIONALES PARA QUE PUEDA CONTINUAR CON SU CASO.

Stop the Spread of Germs

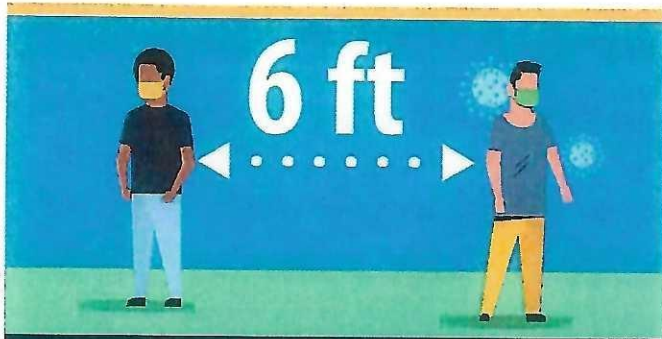
Help prevent the spread of respiratory diseases like COVID-19.



[cdc.gov/coronavirus](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus)

Detenga la propagación de gérmenes

Ayude a prevenir la transmisión de enfermedades respiratorias como el COVID-19.



Mantenga al menos 6 pies (aproximadamente la longitud de 2 brazos) de distancia de otras personas.



Cúbrase con un pañuelo desechable la nariz y la boca al toser o estornudar, luego bótelos en la basura y lávese las manos.



Cuando esté en un lugar público, use una cubierta de tela para la cara sobre su nariz y boca.



Evite tocarse los ojos, la nariz y la boca.



Limpie y desinfecte los objetos y superficies que se tocan con frecuencia.



Quédese en casa cuando esté enfermo, excepto para recibir atención médica.



Lávese las manos frecuentemente con agua y jabón por al menos 20 segundos.



[cdc.gov/coronavirus-es](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus-es)

Please wear a cloth face covering.



**Maintain a distance of 6 feet
whenever possible.**



[cdc.gov/coronavirus](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus)

Por favor use una cubierta de tela para la cara.



Mantenga una distancia de 6 pies cuando sea posible.



cdc.gov/coronavirus-es



Hidalgo County Health and Human Services Department

1304 S. 25th Street • Edinburg, Texas 78539
Tel: (956) 383-6221 • Fax: (956) 383-8864

Iván Meléndez, M.D., M.B.A.
Health Authority / Chief Physician

Eduardo Olivarez
Chief Administrative Officer

June 5, 2020

Honorable Judge Noe Gonzalez
370th District Court
100 North Closner Blvd.
Edinburg, Texas 78539

Honorable Judge Gonzalez,

Please accept this letter that Hidalgo County Health & Human Services has received the CoVID19 prevention plan which has been submitted by your Court. In having consulted with you on various occasions, the primary focus is to adhere to the CDC guidelines on hygiene, social distancing, monitoring for symptoms, physical barriers and protecting the most vulnerable populations. Additionally, the availability of technology, tele-methods or video linking to assist those who may not be able to attend your court is essential in our current pandemic situation.

I feel confident that working hand in hand with the County Building Grounds Staff will assure the proper sanitation and structural enhancements needed to promote the public health safety and security of your Court are implemented.

Respectfully,

Eduardo Olivarez
Chief Administrator Officer
Hidalgo County Health & Human Service



OFFICE OF THE COUNTY JUDGE
County of Hidalgo

RICHARD F. CORTEZ

County Judge

June 5, 2020

The Honorable Judge Noe Gonzalez
Administrative Local Presiding Judge
Hidalgo County Courthouse
100 N. Closner Blvd., 3rd Floor
Edinburg, Texas 78539

Dear Judge Gonzalez:

I thank you for consulting and confirming your plans for continued operations within the current Hidalgo County Courthouse with my office and our Hidalgo County health officials. Thank you for your diligent work as these difficult times call for difficult decisions.

We have reviewed your plan and trust your experience and decision making in ensuring the health and safety of courthouse visitors and employees alike.

If I can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Respectfully,

Richard F. Cortez
County Judge
Hidalgo County, Texas