

HIDALGO COUNTY
COVID-19 MINIMUM STANDARD
HEALTH PROTOCOLS FOR COURT
PROCEEDINGS

General

1. A district court, statutory or constitutional county court, statutory probate court, justice court, or master courts may conduct in-person proceedings, including both jury and non-jury proceedings, if they follows these HIDALGO COUNTY MINIMUM STANDARD HEATH PROTOCOLS FOR COURT PROCEEDINGS.
2. All judges will comply with the Emergency Orders issued by the Supreme Court of Texas and Court of Criminal Appeals.
3. **ALL JUDGES WILL USE ALL REASONABLE EFFORTS TO CONDUCT PROCEEDINGS REMOTELY.**
4. This order applies to all courts housed in any Hidalgo County building, including District Courts, County Courts At Law, all Master Courts, Auxiliary Courts, and Justices of the Peace.
5. Subject only to constitutional limitations, all courts in Hidalgo County must avoid risk to court staff, parties, attorneys, jurors, and the public.
6. Except as the Emergency Order issued by the Supreme Court provide otherwise, courts must allow or require anyone involved in any hearing, deposition, or other proceeding of any kind—including but not limited to a party, attorney, witness, court reporter, grand juror, or petit juror—to participate remotely, such as by teleconferencing, videoconferencing, or other means.
7. Upon request and good cause shown by a court participant other than a juror—including but not limited to a party, an attorney, a witness, or a court reporter—a court must permit the participant to participate remotely in any proceeding, subject to constitutional limitations.
8. Please note these are minimum standard health protocols. Judges may implement additional safety protocols for their courtrooms.

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. Judges and court personnel will be required to wear face coverings over the nose and mouth, 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, or are fully vaccinated, they may remove face coverings until required to communicate in-person with other employees, attorneys, or the public that may not be vaccinated.

Scheduling

1. Judges housed together in any one building must coordinate scheduling with the Local Administrative Presiding Judge of any in-person proceedings to reduce the number of people in said building 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.

4. All courts are to take any other reasonable action to avoid exposing court proceedings and participants to the threat of COVID-19.

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. 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 three (3) 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 three (3) feet. IDs will be required of adults to verify household members.
3. 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.
4. The maximum number of persons permitted in the gallery of each courtroom shall be determined by each court. The maximum capacity of the courtroom will be monitored and enforced by court staff.
5. 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 three (3) feet between each space.

6. 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 when 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.

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 OVER THE NOSE AND MOUTH AT ALL TIMES.**

Cleaning

1. Court building cleaning staff will clean the common areas of the court building so that common spaces are cleaned at least three (3) times a day.
2. Court building cleaning staff will clean the courtrooms between morning and afternoon proceedings, and at the end of each day.
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.

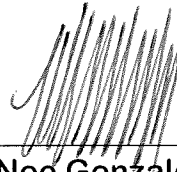
Jury Proceedings

1. A court may conduct an in-person jury proceedings if:
 - a. to assist with coordination of local resources and to manage capacity issues, the court has obtained prior approval, including a prior approved schedule, for the jury proceeding from the local administrative district judge;
 - b. the court has considered on the record any objection or motion related to proceeding with the jury proceeding at least seven days before the jury proceeding or as soon as practicable if the objection or motion is made or filed within seven days of the jury proceeding;
 - c. the court has established communication protocols to ensure that no court participants have tested positive for COVID-19 within the previous 10 days, have had symptoms of COVID-19 within the previous 10 days, or have had recent known exposure to COVID-19 within the previous 14 days;

- d. the court has included with the jury summons information on the precautions that have been taken to protect the health and safety of prospective jurors and a COVID-19 questionnaire to be submitted in advance of the jury selection that elicits from prospective jurors information about their exposure or particular vulnerability to COVID-19; and
- e. the court has excused or rescheduled prospective jurors who provide information confirming their COVID-19 infection or exposure, or their particular vulnerability to COVID-19 and request to be excused or rescheduled.

THESE PROTOCOLS ARE SUBJECT TO BEING AMENDED AS NEEDED FOR THE PROTECTION OF ALL PARTICIPANTS WITHIN THE COURT SYSTEM.

Date: 6/10/2021



Judge Noe Gonzalez
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 MOVE FORWARD IN A SAFE AND HEALTHY MANNER.”