

Protocols for In-Person
Court Proceedings in Taylor County

The Office of Court Administration's March 5th email requires that, after consultation with the Trial Courts, protocols be established for the operation of the courts during the pendency of the Governor's Emergency Declaration. Judge Rucker's March 6th email, the Thirty-Sixth Emergency Order issued by the Supreme Court on March 5th, along with the OCA's interpretation of that order are attached. We are, in large part, returning to the restrictions in place prior to OCA's most recent restriction on in-person proceedings.

1. In-person court proceedings may now be conducted as long as masking and social distancing requirements are enforced. However, you should continue to hold as many proceedings remotely as possible.

Judges and Court Staff Health

1. Judges and court staff will self-monitor and report concerns or symptoms as appropriate.
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 be instructed not to enter the building and directed to seek medical advice.
3. Judges and court staff will be required to wear face coverings when they are in close contact with the public. They will practice social distancing and practice appropriate hygiene recommendations while performing their professional duties.

Scheduling

1. Court schedules have been and will be established to reduce occupancy in the court building. Courts will continue to work together to stagger dockets and to limit in-person contact between staff, attorneys and litigants.

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. Accommodations will be made for persons included in the vulnerable population to allow their attendance at court proceedings remotely.
3. A notice to those persons identifying themselves as members of the vulnerable population will be posted in conspicuous locations around the courthouse, at entrances, on the courts' websites, and will be included with setting notices. Such notice will direct that such persons contact the court so appropriate accommodations can be made.

Social Distancing

1. All persons not from the same household who are permitted in the court building will be directed to maintain social distancing of at least 6 feet.

Gallery

2. 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.
3. The gallery of the courtroom has been marked to identify appropriate social distancing in the seating. Seating is limited to every other row.

Well

4. In each courtroom, to the extent possible, the location of 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. Plexiglass dividers have been installed between the judge, witness, and court reporter and will be maintained.

Hygiene

1. Hand sanitizer dispensers have been or will be 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 main court building, security personnel 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 and be directed to contact the court for remote attendance options.
2. When individuals attempt to enter the court building, security personnel will determine the temperature of the individual. Individuals whose temperature equals or exceeds 100.0°F will be refused admittance to the court building and be directed to contact the court for remote attendance options.
3. Inmates being transported from the jail to the court building will be screened for symptoms of COVID-19. 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 and will be directed to wear personal protective equipment.
5. Judges holding in-person court proceedings away from the Taylor County Courthouse must conduct a COVID screening prior to allowing entry into their court facilities.

Face Coverings

1. All individuals entering the court building will be directed to wear face coverings at all times. If the individual does not have a cloth face covering, a disposable facemask will be provided.

Cleaning

1. Court building cleaning staff have been provided cleaning supplies designed to be effective with this coronavirus.
2. Court staff will clean counsel table, the witness stand, and any other places where others were seated between hearings.

Inmates

1. Proceedings involving Taylor County inmates should be conducted remotely unless circumstances dictate otherwise.

Use of Expo/Fairgrounds

1. We will continue to use the Expo/Fairgrounds for jury qualifications at least through March 2021.

Drive-Through Arraignments

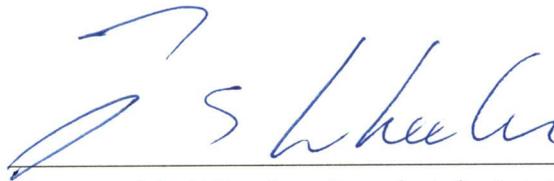
1. Drive-through arraignments will continue through March 2021.

General

1. Large in-person group dockets should be avoided. When scheduling dockets, please limit the number of individuals appearing in your court at any one time.
2. We should be responsive to COVID related concerns expressed by persons coming into the courthouse or facilities. If at all possible, accommodations should be made to address those concerns.

I have conferred with all trial court judges regarding these protocols. I have also consulted with the local health authority and county judge concerning these protocols. You should conduct in-person proceedings consistent with these protocols.

Date: March 12, 2021



Thomas M. Wheeler, Local Administrative District Judge