

COVID-19 Operating Plan for the Stephens County Judiciary

Recognizing the need to ensure the health and safety of litigants, attorneys, visitors, court staff, judges, and other individuals needing public services entering the buildings housing the courts, the courts of Stephens County, Texas will 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 Judge will maintain regular communication with the local health authority and the Court Judge to adjust this operating plan as necessary with conditions in the county.
4. Judges will begin setting non-essential in-person proceedings no sooner than June 1, 2020. After June 1, 2020 only under the following conditions;
 - a. If the hearing can be held remotely, then the Court should use all reasonable efforts to conduct the hearing remotely unless litigants or other court participants are unable to successfully participate in a remote hearing for reasons beyond the court's control.
 - b. If a hearing is held in the court, the participants and staff count cannot exceed the limits set for each courtroom;
 - c. The court must see that any witnesses awaiting testimony must maintain social distancing outside the courtroom; The court should encourage a witness schedule to prevent gathering witnesses awaiting testimony;
 - d. Settings should be far enough apart between cases to prevent multiple case witnesses from gathering in the hallways prior to the time set.

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. Judge and Court Staff Monitoring Requirements: Check with staff each day concerning health matters; see that they do not appear with any sickness symptoms. See that rules implemented are being enforced to assure the safety of staff and litigants.
3. Judges or court staff who feel feverish or have measured temperatures equal to or greater than 100.4°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.
4. Judges and court staff are encouraged to wear face coverings, practice social distancing, and practice appropriate hygiene recommendations at all time.

5. **Protective Measures: Continuing monitoring of all who enter the courtroom for business. See, to the best of the staff's ability that all rules and recommendations are implemented and being followed.**

Scheduling

1. **The following court schedules are established to reduce occupancy in the courthouse and courtrooms while administering justice and the public's business:**

Appearances dates in the various courts in the courthouse shall be staggered to control amounts of people entering the courthouse.

- A. **District Court schedules use Thursdays as primary appearance days;**
- B. **County Court use Tuesdays as primary appearance days;**
- C. **Justice Courts use any days but Thursdays for appearance days.**

These court schedule guidelines are implemented to prevent large groups of people appearing for court hearings in the courthouse on the same day. Nothing in this provision prevents individual settings and special appearances by the vulnerable population.

There will be no jury trials prior to August 1, 2020. When guidelines are provided on how jury trials are to be conducted, this order will be amended with those rules.

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. **Vulnerable populations who are scheduled for court will be accommodated by specific settings during a time when no other court is scheduled.**

Social Distancing, Groups and Occupancy

Stephens County Courthouse, using a 40 sqft per person, which is taking into account a 6ft x 6ft social distancing recommendation by the CDC, has a capacity of 140 people.

1. **All persons not from the same household who enter the courthouse will be required to maintain adequate social distancing of at least 6 feet.**
2. **Only one individual not from the same household will be permitted in an elevator.**
3. **If more than one individual from the same household is in an elevator, no other individuals will be permitted in the elevator.**

4. 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.
5. Public common areas, including breakrooms and snack rooms, have been closed to the public.

Gallery

1. 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.
2. The gallery of the courtroom has been marked to identify appropriate social distancing in the seating. Seating is limited to every other row.

Well

1. In each courtroom, where possible, 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.

Hygiene

1. Hand sanitizer dispensers have been placed at the entrances to the courthouse and at various locations on each level near the elevator, courtroom entries, stairwells and restrooms.
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. Individuals entering the courthouse or courtroom may be subject to screening for possible symptoms or exposure and may be asked 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 may be refused entry to the courthouse or courtroom.
2. Individuals entering the courthouse or courtroom, assigned staff may use an infrared thermometer to determine the temperature of the individual. Individuals whose temperature equals or exceeds 100.4°F will be refused admittance to the courthouse or courtroom.
3. Inmates being transported from the jail to the court 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 100.4°F will not be transported to the court.
4. Staff who are screening individuals entering the courthouse will be provided personal protective equipment, including mask and gloves.

Face Coverings

1. All individuals entering the courtrooms will be required to wear face coverings at all times and individuals will be encouraged to bring cloth face coverings with them, but if the individual does not have a cloth face covering, a disposable face mask will be provided if available.
2. Individuals who will be required to be in the premises of the court for over 1 hour will be provided a medical mask and required to wear them while in the courthouse if the supply is available.

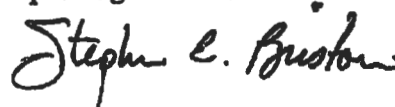
Cleaning

1. Courthouse cleaning staff will clean the common areas of the courthouse so that common spaces are cleaned at least every 8 hours.
2. Courtroom cleaning staff will, when possible, clean the courtrooms between every hearing, between morning and afternoon proceedings, and at the end of each day the courtroom is used.
3. Building maintenance and cleaning staff have been provided cleaning supplies shown, to the best of their knowledge, to be effective with this coronavirus.
4. All cleaning staff have been trained on proper cleaning techniques and provided appropriate personal protective equipment.

Other

There will be monthly meetings with the county judge and the local health authority to assure that all plans are complied with and adjustments made as necessary.

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



Date: 5/28/2020

District Judge Stephen E Bristow
Local Administrative District Judge

These Operating Plans and Procedures for the Courts and buildings housing the courts of Stephens County, Texas including the Courthouse and all Annexes that may house such courts have been reviewed and approved by the Stephens County Commissioners Court in a regular scheduled meeting properly posted in manner and time on the 1st of June, 2020.