



Marilyn Burgess

HARRIS COUNTY DISTRICT CLERK

201 Caroline | P.O. Box 4651 | Houston, Texas 77210-4651 | 832-927-5800 |

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Joint partnership between Harris County District Clerk Marilyn Burgess, District Attorney's Office and other justice agencies pioneers electronic solution to process pleas outside of the courtroom

E-Plea supports virtual hearings piloted by Judge Ramona Franklin and is useful in the current environment that requires avoiding large gatherings due to COVID-19

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Contact: Alvaro 'Al' Ortiz – Public Information Officer
Phone: 832-927-5764/63 (Office) / 832-367-4823 (Cell)
Email 1: alvaro.ortiz@hcdistrictclerk.com
Email 2: media@hcdistrictclerk.com

Houston, April 20, 2020 – Harris County District Clerk Marilyn Burgess has rolled out a pioneering electronic solution to process pleas in non-court settings. By establishing a virtual courtroom the judge, the prosecutor, the defense attorney, and the defendant are coordinating through electronic means to complete a judicial plea signed by all parties remotely. Ms. Burgess' IT team developed the system, called e-Plea, in collaboration with the District Attorney's Office. E-Plea allows digital case documents to be sent through the District Clerk's Office (DCO) electronic document management system so that attorneys and others involved in the case can review the documents and add their signatures, all of it while never leaving our website.

E-Plea was first utilized on April 1 and was custom built for Harris County as one of the first digital plea processes from end to end in Texas to take place in a completely non-court setting.

This tool works in support of the virtual hearing process piloted by the Honorable Judge Ramona Franklin, of the 338th Harris County District Court. One of the main goals of the virtual hearing is to help preserve social distancing during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

"My administration is committed to delivering robust digital solutions for those we serve. E-Plea will help keep the wheels of justice moving during this crisis. The virtual hearing allows all parties to work remotely and safely. Together, these tools mean that the legal system can continue even in dire times. Instead of pressing pause on justice, we're pushing forward and allowing all parties in a case to come together in a way that is safe, socially distant, and efficient," says Ms. Burgess.

"Virtual remote jail e-pleas play a significant role in preserving the continuity of justice because it provides a safe way for jail pleas to be taken without subjecting defendants, attorneys, court staff and judges to come into contact with one another and possibly spreading COVID-19. Thank you to all of the participating agencies and departments that were instrumental in making Harris County a leader in the State of Texas in implementing this process," says Judge Ramona Franklin.

DCO Information Technology Administrator Tracy Hopper notes that many courts are coming up with ad-hoc solutions during these times, but e-Plea is unique. "It is custom built, streamlined, and directly available to the Sheriff and all parties to the case through our documents management system.

The entire process is digital, so at no point is anything faxed or hand delivered, saving all users the hassle of keeping up with physical paperwork. We built custom roles to allow the Sheriff to capture signatures and thumb prints while working within our document management system,” says Hopper.

She also commended the judges and our justice partners for their initiative in using e-Plea and having virtual hearings. “The Sheriff, Universal Services, Defense Attorneys, District Attorney, Judges, District Courts, Adult Probation, and the District Clerk took on the initiative for virtual hearings, and our offices all worked together to create and deploy the tools that can support this process to keep everyone safe during the coronavirus situation,” Hopper says.

The sequence for a virtual courtroom using the e-Plea process is as follows:

1. Prior to the hearing, the defense attorney can request a remote virtual “Defense Visit” with their client by setting an appointment with the Harris County Sheriff’s Office.
2. The DA prepares the documents electronically and files them with the District Clerk’s Office (DCO).
3. The DCO places the pleas on the Attorney Kiosk for Defense Attorney review with the defendant.
4. From a designated area in the jail, the defendant will see and read the electronically prepared plea papers and sign with a tablet computer provided by the bailiff.
5. The deputy district clerk will prepare the judgment for signature by the judge.
6. The day of the virtual hearing, the Sheriff will secure the fingerprint for the judgment.

When it is time for the hearing and judgment, the judge, prosecutor, defense attorney, and court staff meet safely and remotely via video conference. The defendant does not leave the jail.

Hopper notes that, beyond its use during the current crisis, “e-Plea will allow pleas to continue digitally and remotely if needed during future emergencies or under other special circumstances.” She added that the integration of data from e-Plea directly to the judgment will be a future enhancement of the e-Plea process. The integration will minimize data discrepancies and streamline our judgment process.

The DCO has also worked to extend the use of e-Plea to misdemeanor courts.

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