



**THIRD AMENDED JOINT STATEMENT – COVID-19 COURT OPERATIONS
EXTENDED THROUGH OCTOBER 31, 2020**

As we navigate the challenges posed by the global COVID-19 threat, the Judiciary must be mindful of public health and safety as well as the concepts of justice and the rule of law. In an effort to safeguard constitutionally protected due process rights during a public emergency, the Harris County Felony District Courts are resolved to maintain confidence in our legal system while balancing the well-being of the public. Therefore, the Harris County District Courts Trying Criminal cases issue this Joint Statement on Felony Court Operations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This Joint Statement, originally effective March 18, 2020, through May 8, 2020, and extended through May 31, 2020, then extended through July 31, 2020, is hereby extended through October 31, 2020, and may be subject to revision as needed or requested.

The Harris County Felony District Courts shall conduct proceedings consistent with the COVID-19 Operating Plan for the Harris County Judiciary District Courts, County Courts at Law & Probate Courts that has been approved by Judge Susan Brown, the Presiding Judge of the Eleventh Administrative Judicial Region of Texas. The Felony 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 (OCA) regarding social distancing, maximum group size, and other restrictions and precautions.

The Harris County Felony Court will review dockets and determine cases that can be handled remotely or partially remotely, and which cases need to have in-person hearings. The Felony Courts will endeavor to reduce in-person hearings. Social distancing and maximum group size limits will be observed in the Felony courtrooms, including in the gallery of each courtroom, at counsel tables, the witness stand, Judge’s bench, and court staff areas.

**EVERY PERSON ENTERING A HARRIS COUNTY DISTRICT FELONY COURT WILL BE
REQUIRED TO WEAR FACE COVERINGS AT ALL TIMES.**

Individuals attending in-person court appearance are encouraged to bring face coverings with them.

I. DEFENDANTS ON BOND SCHEDULED TO APPEAR IN COURT

- Defendants who have not previously appeared in the assigned Court must contact the Court or their attorney to determine whether or not they must appear following release from custody or after posting bond. If a Defendant is sick, in an at-risk group, or a member of a vulnerable population, the Defendant should alert the Court immediately. The Court may require a remote appearance or may reschedule the matter.
- Defendants must contact their attorneys to verify Court settings and dates.
- If a Defendant does not have an attorney, the Defendant may contact the bonding company, Harris County Pretrial Services at 832-927-3520, the Harris County District Clerk at 832-927-5800, or

FILED use the individual Court’s webpage www.justex.net.

Marilyn Burgess
District Clerk

JUL 29 2020

Time: _____
Harris County, Texas

By _____
Deputy

II. DEFENDANTS IN CUSTODY

- Preliminary Assigned Court Appearance (PACA)
 - Defendants must appear before the Court (physically or remotely) unless quarantined, sick, at risk, or considered to be in a vulnerable population.
 - This setting is to ensure the prompt appointment of counsel, as well as to review bail.
 - Individuals who are quarantined, sick, at risk, or who are in a vulnerable population, may contact the home Court for instructions on appearing remotely or obtaining a continuance, if appropriate.
- Other Settings
 - If a matter has been docketed, Defendants and attorneys may request to appear remotely.
 - Attorneys should request to docket a matter if the parties believe it will lead to the disposition of the case.

III. SCHEDULING

- The Harris County Felony Courts have staggered dockets to reduce the flow of litigants, witnesses and general public entering the courthouse.
- The Felony Courts will give priority to the most pressing cases, such as the oldest jail cases.

IV. ADMINISTRATION OF JUSTICE

- Attorneys must continue to work on all cases by communicating, negotiating, investigating, evaluating and identifying cases that can be docketed and disposed, whether in person or remotely.
- **Attorneys must maintain communication with their clients.** Alternatives to in-person visits include mail, email, telephone and videoconference.
- Anyone appearing before the Court in person must make the Court aware of whether he or she is sick or experiencing any symptoms that may risk their safety or the safety of others.
- Any person may contact the Court before an appearance to discuss other available options.

We are confident that these measures will assist in helping to keep our community as healthy and safe as possible without diminishing our oath to protect the Constitution.

Signed July 29th, 2020



Herb Ritchie
337th District Court
Administrative Judge, Criminal Division
Harris County, Texas