

COVID-19 Operating Plan for the Bell County Judiciary

In this COVID-19 Operating Plan, the Courts of Bell County include the District Courts, the County Courts as Law, and the Justices of the Peace Courts. The Bell County District Courts also include the Child Abuse and Neglect Courts and the IV-D Child Support Court.

Recognizing the need to ensure the health and safety of litigants, attorneys, visitors, court staff, judges, and other individuals entering the buildings housing the courts, the courts of **Bell County** 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 district judge will maintain regular communication with the local health authority and county judge and 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.

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: Judges and court staff will self-monitor in accordance with the guidelines of the CDC, DSHS and the Bell County Public Health District. By entering the building, the Judges and court staff are affirming that they have self-screened and are symptom free. The Judges and court staff are also affirming that they have not knowingly been in contact with a person diagnosed or suspected to have COVID-19 within the prior 14-days.
3. 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.
4. Judges and court staff will be required to wear face coverings, practice social distancing, and practice appropriate hygiene recommendations at all time, with the following exception: Judges

and court staff may be permitted to remove their face masks while in their individual offices or individual work spaces that allow for social distancing.

5. Protective Measures: Judges and court staff will adhere to the guidelines set by the CDC, DSHS and the Bell County Public Health District for social distancing and personal hygiene.

Scheduling

1. The following court schedules are established to reduce occupancy in the court building:
Large docket calls will be discouraged, and 2 or more large docket calls at the same time will not be allowed in the same court building. Individual hearings will be scheduled at set times and will allow enough time between each hearing to allow the parties to exit the courthouse before the next scheduled hearing. To the extent possible, the courts will continue to conduct hearings remotely to bring as few individuals into the courthouse as possible.

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: remote video conference hearings or any other means available.

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 6 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.
3. 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.
4. Public common areas, including breakrooms and snackrooms, have been closed to the public.

Gallery

5. 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.
6. The gallery of the courtroom has been marked to identify appropriate social distancing in the seating. Seating is limited to every other row.

Well

7. 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 6 feet between each space.

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.
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 any court building they will be asked to acknowledge, and verify, in writing or orally, as determined by court security, that they have none of the following health conditions: fever, cough, shortness of breath, difficulty in breathing, or close contact with a person who is confirmed to have COVID-19. Any individual that cannot acknowledge the absence of these conditions will be refused admittance to the court building.
2. When individuals attempt to enter the Bell County Justice Center, security staff will use an infrared thermometer to determine the temperature of the individual. Individuals whose temperature equals or exceeds 99.6°F will be refused admittance to the court building. The use of infrared thermometers to determine the temperature of individuals entering the other court buildings will be determined by the security staff for each of the respective courts.
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 gloves and face coverings.

Face Coverings

1. All individuals entering the court building will be required to wear face coverings at all times.
2. 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 supplies are available to the county.

Cleaning

1. Court building cleaning staff will clean the common areas of the court building so that common spaces are cleaned at least every 4 hours.

2. Court building security staff will clean the courtrooms between every hearing, between morning and afternoon proceedings, and at the end of each day the courtroom is used.
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.

I have attempted to confer with all judges of courts with courtrooms in the various court buildings 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 district judges of the district courts with courtrooms in the Bell County Justice Center covered by this Operating Plan conduct proceedings consistent with the plan. I will request that the other judges covered by this Operating Plan also conduct proceedings consistent with the plan.

Date: May 21, 2020



Gordon G. Adams
Local Administrative District Judge
Judge, 169th District Court

STATE OF TEXAS

169TH DISTRICT COURT

COUNTY OF BELL

BELL COUNTY, TEXAS

CERTIFICATE

I, Gordon G. Adams, do hereby certify that I have consulted with the Bell County Judge, David Blackburn, and the Director of the Bell County Health Department, Amanda Robison-Chadwell, regarding the COVID-19 Operating Plan for the Bell County Judiciary. These consultations were conducted pursuant to the guidelines of the Supreme Court of Texas and the Office of Court Administration

Signed this the 21st day of May, 2020.



Gordon G. Adams
Local Administrative Judge
Judge, 169th District Court
Bell County, Texas

VULNERABLE POPULATION

If you feel that you are part of the vulnerable population, please contact the Court to arrange for appropriate accommodations.

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.

Explanations

The following is a list of modifications and changes to the COVID-19 Operating Plan Template:

- Two sentences were added to the beginning of the Plan to confirm which courts in Bell County are covered by this Operating Plan. Our Plan attempts to cover 5 District Courts, 3 County Courts at Law, 6 Justices of the Peace Courts, 2 CPS Courts, and 1 IV-D Child Support Court. The Courts covered by the Operating Plan are contained in 6 different buildings in Bell County.
- Page 1, paragraph 2, under Judge and Court Staff Health - has been modified to include a self-screening process for all judges and court staff.
- Page 1, paragraph 2, under Judge and Court Staff Health – has been modified to include an exception for judges and court staff to remove their facemasks at appropriate times.
- Page 2, paragraph 5, under Judge and Court Staff Health Protective Measures - We have made reference to adhere to the guidelines set by the CDC, DSHS and the Bell County Public Health District because those guidelines change from time to time.
- Page 2, paragraph 1, under Scheduling - We have added various scheduling techniques to bring as few people to the courthouse as possible and to encourage the use of remote hearings.
- Page 3, paragraphs 1 and 2, under Screening – We have set up a process to have the Bell County Sheriff's Office take the temperature of all individuals entering the Bell County Justice Center, which contains all District Courts, all County Courts at Law, and 1 Justice of the Peace Court. In the other 5 buildings we have given the Bell County Sheriff's Office the option of taking temperatures or just doing the COVID-19 screening as set out in paragraph 1.
- Page 3, paragraph 2, under Face Coverings – We have added the language “if supplies are available to the county” because the county has committed to providing disposable face masks for as long as they can obtain the supplies.
- Page 3, paragraph 1, under Cleaning – Bell County has committed to providing custodial staff to clean the common areas of all court buildings at least every 4 hours. The security staff will clean the courtrooms between each hearing to the extent possible, i.e. tables, chairs, bench, witness stand, etc.
- Page 4, the last paragraph has been modified to reflect that other than district judges, I will only request the compliance of the other judges with this plan and not ensure their compliance.