



Council of Municipal Court Judges

Council of Municipal Court Judges Best Practices & Guidelines for Operating Municipal Courts During the COVID-19 Recovery

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With the gradual expansion of services offered by the Courts, certain guidelines will have to be followed in order to ensure the safety of both the Court staff and the public that come in contact with the Courts. Given the diversity of the Municipal Courts, it is impossible to create a one-size-fits-all policy that will suit big city and small city Courts alike. However, there are certain principles that apply across the board. These guidelines and best practices are presented by the Council of Municipal Court Judges in order to help each Court create its own individual policy conducting business during COVID-19 recovery.

We recognize that resources vary widely throughout the State and not all of these best practices will be available in every Court but they should be followed to the extent practicable.

PERSONNEL/STAFF

- Implement staggered shifts for all possible workers and /or implement teleworking for all possible workers;
- Discourage workers from using other workers' phones, desks, offices, or other work tools and equipment;
- Where possible, stagger workstations to avoid employees standing adjacent to one another or next to each other. Where six (6) feet of separation is not possible, consider spacing options that include other mitigation efforts with increased frequency of cleaning and sanitizing surfaces;
- Require all employees to wear face coverings at all times;
- Consider temperature checks of employees upon entering work each day; and
- Require workers who exhibit signs of illness to not report to work or to seek medical attention.

NOTIFICATION

The standard notification for hearings for defendants and other witnesses and necessary parties will need to be modified.

At a minimum, in addition to the standard information regarding date, time, and location of the hearing, include information about how to contact the Court to request an automatic 30-60 day continuance in the event that the noticed party:

- is a member of an immune-compromised population (or living in a household with someone who is immune-compromised);
- if they are over 65; and
- if they have small children and do not have child care.

You may want to include information about interpreters or other reasonable and necessary accommodations so that people know how to request an interpreter or other accommodations ahead of time to avoid an unnecessary trip to the building. Consider having a separate calendar for those who need interpreters to avoid additional trips to the Courthouse for the interpreter.

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Individuals who feel uncomfortable leaving their homes during the pendency of the Shelter-in-Place order should be allowed a courtesy reset upon request.

COURTROOM MANAGEMENT

Low-Density Population

Governor Kemp's Executive Order dated April 23, 2020 provides certain guidelines to ensure the safety of individuals required to be in proximity to one another for business purposes. The Executive Order does not allow for any municipal government to allow gatherings of persons outside their residence who do not reside together, with only limited exceptions.

In order to meet with those exceptions, the following is necessary:

- Maintain a six (6) foot distance between individuals who do not reside together.
- Do not schedule more individuals to arrive at the Courtroom (including staff) than the dimensions of the courtroom can accommodate to allow a six (6) foot distance between the individuals.
- Calculate this by measuring the square footage of the seating area of the room. There should be no more than one defendant for every six (6) square feet of space.
- Consider a maximum of 25 people total per session considering the allowance per the formula.

Staggered Scheduling

Although it is common practice in most Courtrooms under normal circumstances to have large calendar calls, under these unusual circumstances, stagger the arrival of defendants and other necessary individuals so that there are not a large number of individuals arriving at the same time. For example, if your Courtroom can accommodate twelve (12) people, do not schedule your normal fifty (50) person calendar for 8:30 a.m. Schedule the first 12 for 8:30, the second 12 for 10:00, and so on.

Screening

Consider having some sort of screening process for individuals before they enter your Courtroom.

- Have a series of questions you ask each individual upon entry to the building, such as:
 - whether or not they have traveled to or from any areas in which COVID-19 is particularly active;
 - if they or anyone in their household have experienced symptoms of COVID-19; or
 - if they have been tested for the virus.
- If possible, their temperature can be taken and anyone with a fever higher than 100.4 degrees should be refused admission and their case continued.

Staging

Do not allow patrons to congregate in waiting areas or common areas. Design a process to ensure patron separation while waiting to be seated that can include:

- Floor markings;
- Outdoor distancing;
- Waiting in cars; or
- Utilization of tenting.

TYPES OF HEARINGS

Initial hearings, preliminary hearings, and bond hearings, have long been authorized by statute to be done by video conference. See O.C.G.A. 17-4-47. Consistent with Chief Justice Harold Melton's April 6, 2020 "Order Extending Declaration of Statewide Judicial Emergency," the use of video and teleconferencing is

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encouraged “to reduce backlogs when the judicial emergency ends.” Municipal Court Rule 15.2 also allows for the expanded use of video conferencing to take pleas in criminal cases, conduct probation revocation hearings, and other cases.

Use of conference calls, computer programs such as WebEx, Zoom, Skype, Google, and others are relatively low-technological solutions that are widely available and inexpensive and can be used creatively for all sorts of hearings with the active and informed consent of all parties involved. When doing so, ensure compliance with the recordation required in Municipal Court Rule 26.

If your Court does not already have one, consider instituting a policy which would allow defendants to waive arraignment. When allowing defendants to do so, make sure that the policy ensures the preservation of all constitutional rights protected by the arraignment process.

COURTROOM MANAGEMENT

Protective Equipment

All courtroom staff should be properly equipped with masks and should be educated on and given the opportunity to wash their hands frequently. Equipment such as telephones and computer keyboards should not be shared.

If possible, handwashing or hand sanitizing stations should be available to both staff and the public. Suggestions include:

- Directing individuals to the sinks in the bathroom
- Separate sanitation stations,
- Frequently placed hand sanitizer dispensers, or
- Providing sanitizing wipes for people to disinfect surfaces they must touch, such as door handles, chair arms, and pens.

Enact policies and procedures to encourage Social Distancing for patrons and employees. Measures may include:

- Protective Plexiglass screens at service counters and at payment windows;
- Decals on the floor or aisles with messaging on Social Distancing;
- Signs throughout the Court giving visuals and information on Social Distancing;
- Allowing anyone who brings their own protective equipment to wear it;
- Providing masks for individuals who do not have their own;
- Allowing each individual who signs a document to retain the pen he or she uses to avoid cross-contamination.
- Disallowing the gathering of large groups in common areas like lobbies and parking lots.

Flow

Consider the route that people will take through your building and/or Courtroom. Enact policies and procedures that encourage Social Distancing, such as:

- Roping or taping off certain seating areas or hallways;
- Placing arrows on the floors to direct foot traffic; or
- Require people to enter through one door and exit through another.
- Coordinate with other stakeholders located in your building to maximize efficiency of effort.

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Open Courtroom Concerns

Many individuals bring support persons when they come to Court. While this is normally encouraged in Georgia's open Courtrooms, this may prove difficult when ensuring the low-density population in the Courtroom to provide the necessary social distance safety requires. When possible, allow anyone in the Courtroom who wishes to be there, so long as the low-density population rules and Social Distancing rules are followed. When this is not possible, have a policy in place that limits the constrictions on an open courtroom. Consider having a live YouTube or Facebook or Zoom or other link that you can provide for individuals who want to see what is going on in the Courtroom. Consider rotating individuals in and out as quickly as possible.

SIGNAGE

Place a sign near the entry of the building/Courtroom and in other prominent places that states that individuals who have a fever or other symptoms of COVID-19 shall not enter the Courthouse.

Place a sign in prominent places reminding individuals to wash their hands frequently and to cover their mouths and noses when they cough and sneeze.

Use arrows and tape to direct the flow of foot traffic through the building.

SANITATION

Do your best to keep the Courtroom and the Courthouse sanitized at all times. Use disinfectant wipes and sprays on chairs, benches, tables, and other shared furniture and equipment between uses, including between each Court session.

Request that the bathrooms and other shared facilities be cleaned and sanitized regularly. Check to see that bathrooms are cleaned and well-stocked with soap and paper towels at all times.

Be sure to coordinate with the stakeholder located in the building with your Court to combine efforts.

GRANTS

Many of these measures cost money, which can be hard to come by. There are some grants available, notably some through the [Georgia Emergency Management](#) (email request) and the [Department of Justice](#).

CONCLUSION

This is uncharted territory for all of us, and we are trying our best to come up with reasonable policies that take into account the needs of the Courts and the public while keeping everyone's safety in mind. If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact the Council or your local district representative.

Sincerely,

*Judge Dale "Bubba" Samuels, President
Council of Municipal Court Judges*