

**SUGAR LAND MUNICIPAL COURT**  
**MINIMUM STANDARD HEALTH PROTOCOLS**

**Remote Court Proceedings**

1. In order to improve access to justice, other than jury trials, this court will conduct all proceedings remotely using the Zoom videoconferencing platform. Jury trials will be conducted in person employing appropriate public health safeguards as described below.
  
2. In any case in which proceedings are conducted remotely, any defendant may appear at the courthouse at the time scheduled for an appearance and access the proceedings using technology provided by the court. This includes any defendant who does not have appropriate technology with which to make a remote appearance. A lack of appropriate technology shall not be grounds for not appearing as directed for a scheduled court proceeding and shall not be considered as a defense in response to any allegation alleging that defendant failed to appear before the court as required. All persons appearing at the court house under this provision shall observe at least the following minimum procedures:
  - a. Wearing a mask that covers the nose and mouth at all times while in the court building is strongly encouraged.
  - b. All persons attempting to enter the court building will undergo a non-invasive temperature check. Any person with a temperature check result of 100 degrees or more will not be able to enter the courthouse and may contact the court by phone to request a reset.
  - c. Any person who has a current diagnosis of COVID-19, a recent positive test for COVID-19, or who may have been recently exposed to COVID-19, should not enter the court building. Any scheduled appearance other than jury trials, may be attended remotely. If appropriate technology is not available to that individual, a case may be reset for up to 30 days in order to allow time for the person to recover to such point that contagion is no longer reasonably anticipated at which point the person may seek technology assistance from the court as described herein.
  - d. Any court technology equipment utilized by any person in making a remote court appearance while in the court building shall be sanitized between users.
  - e. Hand sanitizer and disposable masks will be available for any person entering the court building.

**Judge and Court Staff**

3. All judges and court staff shall follow the following minimum health procedures:
  - a. Wearing a mask that covers the nose and mouth at all times while in the court building is strongly encouraged.
  - b. All persons attempting to enter the court building will undergo a non-invasive temperature check. Any person with a temperature check result of 100 degrees or more will not be able to enter the courthouse and may contact the court by phone to request a reset.

- c. Any judge or member of court staff who has a current diagnosis of COVID-19, a recent positive test for COVID-19, or who may have been recently exposed to COVID-19, should not enter the court building but should contact their supervisor for instructions.

#### **Scheduling**

4. All scheduled remote proceedings will be held at the court building observing the minimum health procedures outlined above. All jury trials conducted in person shall be held at the auditorium of the City Hall Annex located at 10405 Corporate Drive, Sugar Land, Texas, in order that all participants in the jury trial process can maintain appropriate social distancing.
5. In order to limit the number of prospective jurors appearing at any one time and in order to limit the time necessary for fulfilling the obligations of jury service, separate jury panels shall be summoned for cases set on the morning docket and cases set on the afternoon docket. A juror or prospective juror should expect that the time required to complete their jury service obligation in a half day or less.

#### **Vulnerable Populations**

6. All notices of court settings sent by the court shall contain information about how unvaccinated individuals or those who live with or are caregivers for unvaccinated individuals can request reasonable accommodations to reduce the appearance of those individuals in the court building as set out in these minimum standard health protocols.

#### **Witnesses**

7. At the docket call for a case scheduled for jury trial, counsel for any party is required to inform the court if any witness expected to be called by that party have COVID-related issues. Upon being informed that a witness has symptoms or a recent positive test for COVID-19, has recently been exposed or indicates that he/she is a member of a vulnerable population, the judge presiding shall determine if that witness should be allowed to testify remotely via videoconference. Any objection to a witness appearing remotely via videoconference shall be heard and determined by the judge presiding at the docket call. If allowed, counsel for a party requesting that a witness be allowed to testify remotely via videoconference shall be responsible for ensuring that the witness has the technological capability of appearing remotely via videoconferencing.

#### **Screening**

8. All persons entering the court building will be required to stop and have their temperature checked at the kiosk in the lobby. Anyone with a temperature of greater than 100 degrees will not be allowed to enter or remain in the building.
9. Court participants and observers entering the court building may be asked if they have experienced new or worsening signs or symptoms of COVID-19 such as fever, chills, cough,

shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fatigue, muscle or body aches, sore throat, loss of taste or smell, congestion or runny nose, nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea. Persons who indicate that they have experienced such symptoms within the past 14 days will be asked to leave the building.

10. Court participants and observers entering the court building may be asked if they have been exposed to any individual who has tested positive COVID-19, been diagnosed with COVID-19 or experiencing any symptoms of COVID-19 within the past 14 days.

#### **Social Distancing**

11. The courtroom will be arranged so that all persons in the courtroom, including the jurors, attorneys, parties, and court staff can maintain an appropriate social distance of at least six feet.
12. The jury deliberation room is large enough and equipped so that all member of the jury will be able to maintain proper social distancing of at least six feet during deliberations.
13. Jurors waiting for the start of proceedings will be able to social distance in the jury holding room set aside for that purpose.
14. At all other times in all other areas of the building, unvaccinated persons are encouraged to socially distance themselves during breaks, in hallways, and restrooms.

#### **Face Covering and Masks**

15. All unvaccinated persons entering the building are strongly encouraged to wear face masks covering the nose and mouth. Face masks for all others are optional but encouraged.

#### **Jury Summons**

16. The summons sent to all prospective jurors to appear in municipal court for jury service will include a questionnaire intended to gather the information set out elsewhere in these guidelines. The questionnaires will be collected by the court by mail or upon arrival of a prospective juror for jury service. If the prospective juror has not completed and returned the questionnaire previously, completion of the questionnaire upon arrival at the court building will be required.

#### **General Provisions**

17. A copy of the current Minimum Standard Health Protocols will be posted on the court website.

18. All persons entering the court building are encouraged to be considerate of those around them and to take no action or engage in any behavior that might place other persons at risk of infection.
  
19. In any particular case or situation, the judge presiding over court proceedings at the time may exercise discretion in seeking to control the behavior of any group or individual by altering the protocols set forth herein. All courts may take reasonable actions to avoid exposing court proceedings to the threat of COVID-19. Judges possess broad inherent authority to control orderly proceedings in their courtrooms, and pursuant to that authority, can require individuals in the courtroom to wear facial coverings and may require any person entering the courthouse in which they preside to wear a facial covering while in the courthouse. Previously entered executive orders do not alter the ability of a judge to control his or her courtroom, or judicially imposed requirements entering a court building who will be attending a court proceeding. (Attorney General Opinion KP-0322)