

DISTRICT COURT FOR HOWARD COUNTY



Phase III: COVID-19 Operating Plan Beginning July 20, 2020

Courts have a responsibility not only to take steps to ensure the health and safety of those entering a courthouse for court proceedings, but also to reassure visitors that the courts are working to ensure visitors' health and safety so that they feel safe returning to the courthouse. Because of the courts' unique ability to compel participants to attend versus other entities who may open for individuals to voluntarily visit, this responsibility is even more important.

Recognizing the need to ensure the health and safety of litigants, attorneys, visitors, court staff, judges, and other individuals entering the District Court for Howard County will implement the following protective measures effective as of July 20, 2020:

General

1. The District Court will be open to the public on July 20, 2020 at 8:30 a.m.
2. The Administrative Judge of this Court, or her designee, will maintain regular communication with the local health authority and other state and local agencies and adjust this operating plan as necessary with conditions in Howard County.

Safety Protocol

3. Individuals who show symptoms of COVID-19 or who have been exposed to someone with the symptoms of COVID-19 may not enter the Courthouse. These symptoms include individuals who feel feverish or have measured temperatures equal to or greater than 100.4°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.

When individuals attempt to enter the Courthouse, court bailiffs will use an infrared thermometer to determine the temperature of the individual. Individuals whose temperature equals or exceeds 100.4°F will be refused admittance to the court building. Inmates being transported from the jail to the Courthouse 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 100.4°F will not be transported to the Courthouse. Court bailiffs who are screening individuals entering the court building will be provided personal protective equipment, including face shields and/or masks and gloves.

Social Distancing will be enforced. Bailiffs have the right to delay or deny access to the building and/or courtroom if safe social distancing cannot be maintained. There is limited space in the hallway and strict 6' spacing will be enforced.

Face Coverings

All individuals entering the Courthouse will be required to wear face coverings at all times, unless excused by the Administrative Judge, or by a presiding judge or magistrate during a court proceeding.

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 by the court as supplies will allow.

Protective Measures. The following additional protective measures will be taken:

- i. Temperature scan devices will be placed at the entrances to the Courthouse.
- ii. Social Distancing will be practiced.
- iii. Use of masks will be required.

The Court and court staff will use good-faith efforts to ensure that:

- iv. Courtroom Access will be for all participants in the courtroom and they shall be separated consistent with social distancing and other precautions.

The Court will make efforts to provide reasonable accommodations to vulnerable populations who are required to come to court.

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. Contact the Clerk's Office with concerns at (410) 871-3500.

Visitors are encouraged not to bring children under the age of 16 into the Courthouse. As with adults, children with COVID-19 may only have mild symptoms, but they can still pass this virus onto others who may be at higher risk. If a visitor must bring children to the Courthouse, children 2 years and older should wear a cloth face mask that covers their nose and mouth.

Social Distancing

To the extent reasonably practicable, uniform social distancing of six feet will be instituted in all areas of the courthouse building, including but not limited to, public common areas, elevators, restrooms, courtrooms, and waiting areas.

All persons not from the same household who are permitted in the Courthouse will be required to maintain adequate social distancing of at least 6 feet.

Floor markings (tape or decals) will be placed at various locations for social distancing. The courtroom benches have been marked with blue tape and carpet will be marked where litigants may sit or stand while awaiting each case.

It is strongly suggested that only testifying witnesses, parties, and attorneys enter the courthouse. We will not restrict access, but please encourage litigants not to bring unnecessary persons to court.

It is expected that persons will limit their movement in the courthouse as much as possible. If communication is needed with personnel in another courtroom, please use your computer or cellphone while court is in recess.

Hygiene

Hand sanitizer dispensers have been placed at the entrance to the Courthouse.

The Maryland Department of Health's "Covid-19 Prevention Tips" Notice has been posted in multiple locations on each floor of the Courthouse.

Dockets

Criminal Traffic

- Dockets have been reduced in size to ten to 12 matters per hour for criminal and serious traffic. Bail reviews will continue to be held remotely from the Howard County Detention Center; however, counsel must be present in court. Drug Court has resumed in person operations and will continue with the July 20, 2020 reopening.

Civil/Tort and Contract Cases

- Pre-trial conferences are encouraged. Reduced docket sizes will not permit more than five contested matters per session.

Landlord/Tenant Cases

- Tenant Holding Over cases will be set after July 20, 2020.
- Failure to Pay Rent Cases will not be set until August 31, 2020, or when directed to do so by law.
- Landlords need to comply with the CARES ACT – noncompliant filings will be rejected by the clerk's office.

Beginning after August 19, 2020, hearings will be held on

- Rent Escrow
- Civil and Criminal Housing
- Illegal Lockout
- Denial of Essential Services
- Injunction and Receivership

Staffing in the clerk's office is limited for health and safety. Please be patient.

Attached to this Operating Plan is a copy of the COVID Questionnaire. Counsel and all parties are encouraged to fill out the questionnaire before entering the building. Please be mindful that the courtrooms are relatively small and do not easily allow for social distancing. Cases will be set on the hour and staggered to allow movement and a safe environment.

Date: 7/17/2020

Pamila J. Brown

Administrative Judge

INITIAL SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE

IMPORTANT: THE SCREENER SHOULD IMMEDIATELY STOP THE SCREENING AND DENY ACCESS TO ANY INDIVIDUAL WHO ANSWERS YES TO ANY SCREENING QUESTION.

For infection control purposes, I need to ask you a few questions:	
Have you had any of the following symptoms in the last seven days: fever or chills, cough, sore throat, shortness of breath, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea or any other flu-like symptoms, headache or unusual muscle pain, loss of taste or smell?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
In the past week, do you know if you have been in close (less than 6 feet), prolonged contact (more than 15 minutes) with someone with a fever, cough, shortness of breath, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, flu-like symptoms, or a diagnosis of COVID 19?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Have you had a positive test for COVID-19 infection within the past fourteen (14) days?.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No



Individuals who answer YES to ANY question on the Initial Screening Questionnaire OR refuse to participate in the screening process must be denied access to the facility.

Name of Individual Seeking Access _____ (please print)

Temperature of Individual Seeking Access _____

Access Determination _____ Approved _____ Denied

Name of staff completing form _____ Date _____ Time _____
(Please print)