

IN THE SUPERIOR COURT OF JACKSON COUNTY
STATE OF GEORGIA

FILED
SUPERIOR COURT
JACKSON COUNTY GA

2020 JUL 22 PM 5:01

ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER

CAMIE W THOMAS, CLERK

WHEREAS On March 14, 2020, in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic, the Chief Justice of the Georgia Supreme Court issued an Order Declaring Statewide Judicial Emergency pursuant to O.C.G.A. § 38-3-6, which was extended on April 6, 2020, May 11, 2020, June 12, 2020, and July 10, 2020 is currently set to expire August 12, 2020 at 11:59 PM. The Court is aware of the uncertain trend of the virus and CDC guidelines, and accordingly the Court reasonably anticipates that this order may be further modified and/ or extended.

WHEREAS said emergency order as extended July 10, 2020 provides that “all Georgia courts must continue to conduct proceedings, remotely or in-person, in compliance with public health guidance, applicable statutes and court rules, and the requirements of the United States and Georgia Constitutions, including the public’s right of access to judicial proceedings and a criminal defendant’s rights to confrontation and an open courtroom. All courts should continue to use and increase the use of technology to conduct remote judicial proceedings as a safer alternative to in-person proceedings, unless required by law to be in person or unless it is not practicable for technical or other reasons for persons participating in the proceeding to participate remotely.”

WHEREAS said emergency order as extended July 10, 2020 further requires that “Each court shall develop and implement operating guidelines as to how in-court proceedings generally and particular types of proceedings will be conducted to protect the health of litigants, lawyers, judges, court personnel, and the public.”

WHEREAS said emergency order as extended May 11, 2020 required that the “Guidelines should specify who should be admitted to the courthouse and courtroom and how public health guidance will be followed regarding such matters as health screening of court personnel and visitors, social distancing (including by capping the occupancy of courthouses, interior areas, and courtrooms based on their size), availability and use of personal protective equipment (PPE) by court personnel and visitors, and sanitization practices. Guidelines should provide for accommodations for high-risk individuals.”

NOW, THEREFORE, in compliance with the foregoing directives, the Chief Judge of the Piedmont Judicial Circuit hereby enters this ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER.

1.

The following guidelines shall apply to all court proceedings and functions until further Order of the Court.

2.

All litigants, lawyers, or members of the public who are entering the courthouse for any purpose including those attending in-person court proceedings with the Superior Court of Jackson County shall be screened by Courthouse security personnel at the initial security checkpoint and prior to entering the interior courthouse facility to determine:

(a) Whether said individual currently has a temperature exceeding 100.4°F; and

(b) Whether said individual is experiencing (or has experienced) any typical symptoms of COVID-19 (as outlined by the CDC to include: fever, chills, coughing, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, muscle pain, sore throat, new loss of taste or smell) in the ten (10) day period prior to visiting the courthouse; and

(c) Whether said individual has been diagnosed with COVID-19 OR exposed to (meaning close contact within six (6) feet for a period of fifteen (15) minutes or longer) an individual diagnosed with COVID-19 within the last fourteen (14) days prior to visiting the courthouse.

Any individual who meets criteria set forth above shall not be admitted to the Jackson County Courthouse. Strict adherence to these guidelines shall be followed. If any individual who is refused admittance is scheduled for in-court proceedings that day, courthouse security personnel shall immediately inform the Judge's office, and should document the name, current address, email address, and current telephone number of the individual in question and provide that information to the Court at the conclusion of the day's calendar so that matter may be properly re-scheduled for a later date.

3.

To minimize the overall number of persons entering the courthouse facility, all children and non-essential persons shall be encouraged (but not required) to wait in their vehicles or outside the courthouse while litigants conduct their business. However, Superior Court proceedings are – and remain – open to the public and no members of the public should be denied access to the courthouse (or any Courtroom utilized by Superior Court) should they desire to be present during in-person proceedings, subject to the health screenings outlined above and capacity limitations set forth below.

4.

(a) The Court has considered the size, use, normal traffic patterns, and maximum capacities of each Courtroom and hearing room used by the Superior Court and until further order of this Court, the maximum number of persons at any given time during in-person proceedings, inclusive of court personnel, for each shall be as follows: **Courtrooms (1) and (2), twenty-five (25 persons); Courtroom (3), twenty (20) persons; hearing rooms (1) and (2), ten persons.** Other classes of courts are directed to carefully examine their courtroom environment with the preceding criteria, and limit the number of persons present for in-person hearings accordingly.

(b) Each office providing support services to Superior Court operations is ordered to streamline its in-person court procedures in order to minimize the number of persons who need to be present in the courtroom to the extent feasible.

(c) Courthouse security inside the courtroom shall enforce appropriate social distancing requirements in the gallery, including that individuals should remain seated at least six (6) feet apart from one another. Each courtroom shall have tape (or some other mechanism) affixed to the gallery benches designating where individuals may sit. The Court notes that courthouse security

should consider an exception to these seating requirements for those individuals who live together.

(d) To promote the orderly and efficient handling of cases, the Court is hopeful that these procedures will allow approximately 8-10 witness and party participants and attorneys to be present inside the courtroom at any given time, while maintaining appropriate social distancing. Additional participants shall be summoned to the courtroom as other participants complete their business and leave. However, the Court is mindful that real world adjustments must be made, depending on the number of non-essential spectators who wish to be present for the proceedings. For example, if members of the public who are not parties wish to be present and view the proceedings, additional spectators necessarily will reduce the number of other individuals present in the courtroom.

(e) Although not commonly an issue, to the extent that any one case would bring a large number of spectators that would, in and of itself, exceed the courtroom capacities set forth herein, courthouse security shall notify the Court of the situation and the Court shall deal with those matters on a case-by-case basis.

5.

The Court shall require the use of masks and shall have masks available for any litigants, lawyers, court personnel, or members of the public who are entering the courthouse, which shall be paid from the Court's budget. Each member of the public requesting a mask shall be allowed no more than one (1) mask per day.

6.

To minimize contact between and among persons during in-court proceedings, all persons shall be permitted to address the court from where they are located in the gallery and shall not be required to enter into the well of the Court. While it is customary for counsel and unrepresented parties to request permission to approach the bench for a conference or to request permission to approach a witness for examination, the Court orders counsel and parties to minimize the number of bench conferences requested and to examine witnesses from a safe distance.

7.

To further minimize the possibility of cross-contamination by the exchange of papers and writing utensils, the Court orders the parties to minimize the exchange of papers to the extent possible. Parties shall make use of a drop box, email, or other electronic means to exchange documents such as exhibits. Documents should be provided to the Court and opposing party twenty-four hours prior to the scheduled hearing.

8.

(a) Courthouse maintenance staff shall thoroughly clean and disinfect all courtroom surfaces including, without limitation, benches, tables, railings, and other areas that would be commonly touched by courthouse staff and litigants the day before and immediately after each in-person court session. Additionally, all restrooms servicing the public should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected the day before and immediately after each in-person court session.

(b) Courthouse security shall sanitize the benches, podiums, tables, railings, and other commonly touched surfaces within the courtroom after each hearing, and shall sanitize the witness stand after each witness testifies.

(c) Elevator capacity shall be limited to two (2) individuals. Courthouse security shall monitor the elevators to ensure that no more than two (2) persons are permitted on an elevator at a time and shall encourage the use of the stairs in order to avoid repeated use of a small, confined space. Signs shall be posted designating the elevator capacity limitations and the locations of stairwells. Courthouse security shall frequently sanitize the elevator and stairwell railings. The use of water fountains shall be prohibited, and signage shall be posted indicating same. Bathroom signage will limit the capacity to two (2) individuals at a time, and the Court shall request courthouse maintenance staff to clean and sanitize the bathrooms and other common areas more frequently to control the transmission of COVID-19. Additional hand sanitizing stations shall be installed throughout the courthouse.

9.

Provided that noise can be kept to a minimum, the doors to the courtroom may be propped open while court is in session to avoid persons having to touch door handles to enter and leave the courtroom. This procedure provides the additional benefit of expanding the Courtroom so that individuals may sit outside the traditional courtroom walls and still view Courtroom proceedings in the event the Courtroom reaches maximum capacity. When required or deemed appropriate, hearings shall be made available via video-conferencing capability such as Zoom, Webex, or possibly live-streaming.

10.

In addition to the guidelines noted above, the following guidelines shall apply to scheduling in-person hearings:

(a) As used herein, the term "Large Calendars" shall mean any single calendar having more than thirty (30) individual cases, which are generally criminal calendar days. Whenever possible, the Court encourages the scheduling of calendars smaller than this threshold. Moreover, the Court is adopting the procedure of scheduling staggered, and thus smaller proceedings as outlined below.

(b) With respect to Large Calendars, in the interest of keeping the Courtroom operating within the outlined capacities, the Court may find it necessary to adopt a procedure whereby the day's calendar is broken into staggered portions. For example, one quarter (1/4) of the cases may be scheduled for 9:00 am, the next quarter (1/4) of the cases may be scheduled for 10:30 am, the third quarter (1/4) scheduled for 1:30 pm, and the last quarter (1/4) scheduled for 3:30 pm. Participants awaiting their scheduled time may be encouraged to wait outside the Courthouse in their cars or in the Courthouse's atrium waiting area in order to comply with the capacity requirements outlined above.

(c) With respect to scheduling, all Judges and Staff shall be mindful of other divisions of Superior Court and classes of Courts (State, Probate, Magistrate, and Juvenile Courts) when conducting business and scheduling hearings, so as not to schedule multiple Large Calendars on

the same day.

(d) With respect to scheduling contested civil matters, in order to minimize the number of individuals in the Courtroom at a time, the Court's customary practice of scheduling multiple cases for the same time slot shall be suspended, and only one hearing shall be scheduled at a certain time.

(e) Although parties may request an in person hearing, the Court reserves the right to allow parties and witnesses to appear via videoconferencing.

(f) Accommodations for high-risk individuals shall be made on a case-by-case basis. Such accommodations may include (but are not limited to) allowing participation via videoconferencing or taking a case "out of order." Any individual who needs such an accommodation shall inform the appropriate Judge's judicial assistant at least twenty-four (24) hours before the matter is scheduled to begin. Contact information can be found at the Court's website, www.piedmontsuperiorcourt.org.

(g) Hearing notices and rules nisi shall include information about how to contact the Court in order to request an accommodation or continuance for individuals who: are infected with COVID-19 or in quarantine due to exposure to a person with COVID-19, a member of an immune-compromised or medically fragile population (or living in a household with someone who is immune-compromised or medically fragile), over age 65, or have small children and without child care due to COVID-19.

11.

The following guidelines, as reflected in the Department of Public Health's Seventh Amended Administrative order (dated June 16, 2020 and attached hereto), which shall be incorporated by reference and made a part of this order, shall apply to any individual who works in the Courthouse facility:

(a) Courthouse employees shall be required to wear a face covering at all times when in the Courthouse facility. Employees who have their own office will not be required to wear said face covering when they are alone in their own office.

(b) To the extent possible, the Court shall implement staggered shifts and teleworking for employees.

(c) Any individual with *known* (via information from a medical professional or laboratory-confirmed positive test) *or suspected COVID-19* (due to exhibiting symptoms consistent with COVID-19) who works in the Courthouse shall isolate. An isolated individual shall remain in isolation until such time as he or she no longer presents a risk of infection to the public, meaning:

- (1) The individual's fever has been gone for at least seventy-two (72) hours – without taking fever-reducing medicine, AND
- (2) The individual's other symptoms have shown progressive improvement, AND

(3) At least ten (10) days have elapsed from the date the individual's COVID-19 symptoms began

OR

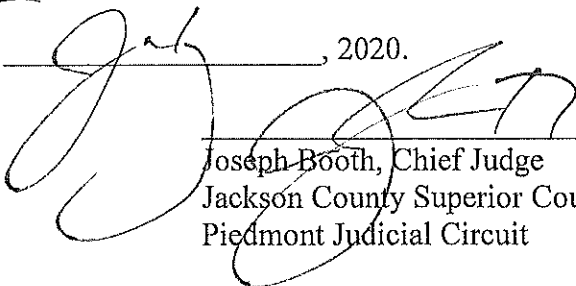
For an individual who was placed under home isolation due to a laboratory-confirmed positive result, but who has experienced no symptoms of COVID-19, until at least ten (10) days have elapsed since the date of the individual's first positive diagnostic test.

(d) Any individual with *exposure likely to result in infection* (meaning an individual notified by a medical professional, public health official, or isolated person that the individual has been exposed to COVID-19 based upon close contact – within six feet for fifteen minutes or more – with a person who must be isolated as defined above) the individual exposed shall immediately quarantine at home or another location approved by the Public Health Department.

- (1) Each quarantined individual shall remain at home or the approved quarantine location for a period of fourteen (14) days from the person's last known exposure to COVID-19.
- (2) During the period of quarantine, the quarantined individual shall take his or her temperature twice daily and shall monitor any symptoms of respiratory illness. If at any time, the quarantined individual experiences symptoms of COVID-19, including cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fever (a measured temperature over 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit or a feeling of feverishness), chills, muscle pain, sore throat, or new loss of taste or smell, the quarantined individual shall be considered a person with suspected COVID-19, and shall follow the requirements for isolation as outlined above.

The Court reserves the right to further modify this order as needed.

SO ORDERED this 22nd day of July, 2020.



Joseph Booth, Chief Judge
Jackson County Superior Court
Piedmont Judicial Circuit