

# **INTERIM PLAN**

**To Ensure**

## **JUDICIAL READINESS**

**In Times of Emergency**

**A REPORT FROM THE COMMITTEE TO DEVELOP AN  
INTERIM PLAN**

**TASK FORCE TO ENSURE JUDICIAL READINESS IN TIMES  
OF EMERGENCY**

## **1.0 Executive Summary**

On November 19, 2007 the Supreme Court of Texas in Misc. Docket No. 07-91 94 issued its “Order Creating Task Force to Ensure Judicial Readiness In Times of Emergency.” The Task Force has the responsibility of recommending to the Supreme Court of Texas a Judicial Continuity of Operations Plan (JCOOP) for all courts in Texas.

### **1.1 Introduction**

Disruptive events early in this millennium have alerted Texans to the need for the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government to establish coordinated, state-wide Continuity of Operations Plans (COOPs) to ensure that, even during times of disaster, state government can provide uninterrupted essential services to its citizens. Texas judges must be able to continue to provide essential juridical services during emergency situations, whether the crisis arises from natural disasters, terrorism, technical breakdowns, civil unrest, pandemic or other catastrophes. As highly visible symbols of government under the rule of law, judges have a duty to provide a stabilizing influence during periods of disorder and to help return society to a semblance of normality. This duty includes resuming normal governmental operations as quickly as possible.

This document is an interim plan; if a county wishes to make provisions for additional sites to conduct court within the county and does not need assistance from its neighbors, it is encouraged to do so. This interim plan is designed to assist local judicial officials to continue essential operations during emergencies until the Legislature passes future legislation addressing these issues and/or individual counties create their own COOPs.

### **1.2 Purpose**

The goal of the JCOOP is to ensure that essential juridical services are available to those who seek access to the court when a courthouse is unavailable or inoperable. Adjunct court services provided by executive branch personnel, including court clerks, court reporters, security personnel, etc. should be the subject of their respective COOPs.

### **1.3 Definitions**

**CJ** - The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Texas.

**CJA** - The Chief Justice of any intermediate Appellate Court.

**COOP** - The Continuity of Operations Plan is a plan for the executive, legislative and judicial branches of Texas state government to provide coordinated, state-wide essential services to its citizens in the event of an emergency.

**Disruption of court operations** – The ceasing of normal court business because of a large scale emergency.

**Emergency** – A disaster or unforeseen event that precludes a court from conducting business.

**Essential court personnel** – The minimum amount of staff needed for justice administration in the event of disaster or emergency.

**JCOOP** – The Judicial Continuity of Operations Plan is the plan for the state judicial branch of Texas government to provide essential court services to its citizens in the event of an emergency.

**LAJ** – The Local Administrative Judge as defined in section 74.091 of the Texas Government Code.

**M.O.U.** – Memorandum of Understanding between the Supreme Court of Texas and any county supporting the continuity of court operations of another county in the event of an emergency. (Appendix B - Form MOU attached)

**Necessary court proceedings** – Judicial proceedings, which may require court action or issuance of an order, and must take place within a specific time period to ensure due process of law for all citizens.

**PJ** – The Presiding Judge of an Administrative Region as described in Chapter 74 of the Texas Government Code.

**Supreme Court** – Shall mean the Supreme Court of Texas.

#### **1.4 Applicability and Scope**

This JCOOP, while voluntary in nature, applies to all members of the state judiciary – from trial to appellate courts. When a county LAJ or CJA determines that a disruptive event has occurred that will interfere with essential judicial services, the JCOOP shall be implemented immediately. At the CJA or the LAJ’s discretion, the MOU shall be activated to ensure that essential court operations in a designated county can continue with minimal delay and interruption. During the period of disruption, the CJ of the Supreme Court of Texas and/or the PJ of the affected Administrative Region has the discretion to implement such MOUs as necessary to provide essential services to the citizens of the State of Texas.

#### **1.5 How to Use this Plan**

This JCOOP is organized so as to provide notice to judges and officers of the court who wish to provide essential judicial services during periods of disruption. The Supreme Court and specific counties will implement the appropriate MOUs.

#### **2.0 JCOOP Implementation**

To implement this JCOOP, judicial officers within an affected county who wish to provide essential judicial services during a period of disruption shall give such notice in writing. Once the CJ of the Texas Supreme Court or the PJ of the affected region receives such notice, the CJ or the PJ shall make a written designation that the assistance of a specific county is required to ensure the continued operation of the essential business of judges of a designated county.

Such written notice shall be by internet website and activated emergency e-mail addresses for the judges of the designated courts. Designation shall be made in accordance with the MOUs with the several specific counties. Once the MOU is implemented, the judges of the designated county shall conduct their essential operations in the specific county in accordance with the terms of the MOU. (See Appendix A for Communication Plan recommendations)

### **3.0 Planning Assumptions**

Regardless of the cause of the disruption, this JCOOP is designed to ensure that essential juridical services will be available to the citizens of the State of Texas as soon as possible.

#### **3.1 JCOOP Plan Phases**

**Phase I:** This JCOOP shall be executed by activation of one or more MOUs in accordance with the discretionary decision of the elected local judges, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Texas, the Chief Justice of any intermediate Appellate Court, and/or the Presiding Judge of an Administrative Region.

**Phase II:** Once activated, subsequent alternate sites for essential operations may be required and activated at the discretion of the elected local judges, the CJ, CJA, and/or the PJ of an affected region.

**Phase III:** Recovery and reconstitution of juridical services by the judge/judges of the designated county/counties shall proceed rapidly in accordance with recovery plans of the appropriate adjunct services which assist the judges in performance of juridical services.

### **4.0 JCOOP Elements**

#### **4.1 Alert and Notification**

Court officers shall receive notice by appropriate postings on the designated county's website. Notice should be sent to three e-mail addresses maintained for the subject judge/judges (e.g. hotmail, gmail, SBC, EarthLink, etc.) To avoid notification default because a service provider fails, judges should maintain three e-mail addresses. During periods of disruption, the subject judge may personally survey e-mail communications from parties seeking essential juridical services, or designate an adjunct service provider to maintain communication surveillance and report the needs of affected court officers to the judge.

#### **4.2 Essential Juridical Functions**

Upon receiving a request of a court officer for access to juridical services, the subject judge shall address the necessary essential juridical functions. The subject judge shall provide the requested resources in the priority established at the judge's discretion or in the order in which the judge is notified of the request for juridical services.

### **4.3 Order of Succession**

Each judge shall respond to the instructions of the Supreme Court of Texas or the Presiding Judge of an Administrative Region. Such instructions may modify the order of succession as needed to provide essential juridical services. The Supreme Court or the PJ of the affected region shall give appropriate notice to the subject officer of the court seeking essential juridical functions.

### **4.4 Delegations of Authority**

Unless delegated to another entity or judge, all administrative authority shall remain with the Supreme Court or the PJ of the affected region.

### **4.5 Alternate Sites**

As deemed necessary by the implementing authority and/or the local elected judge, alternate court sites shall be identified in accordance with the terms of MOUs.

### **4.6 Communications**

Communications with a judge shall be maintained through the e-mail addresses published on the subject county website.

### **4.7 Devolution**

Whenever requested, each judge's essential juridical services shall devolve as directed to the Supreme Court of Texas or the Presiding Judge of an Administrative Region.

### **4.8 Recovery/Reconstitution**

Transition from designation status to pre-disruptive event status shall be in accordance with the MOU. The implementing entity shall direct resumption of normal services as it deems appropriate.

## **5.0 Specific Procedure**

### **5.1 Delineations**

Within the framework of the plan, the necessity arises for specific instructions to be carried out in the event of an emergency. To simplify the process, emergency events have been categorized into with warning and without warning.

### **5.2 Immediate Actions**

This plan is designed to provide guidance in times of emergency; however, certain preparations must be made before an emergency exists. To fully maximize the potential of this interim plan parties should:

- 5.2.1 Review COOP for county and instruct staff to follow.

- 5.2.2 If no County COOP exists, provide leadership in creating COOP for County; or
- 5.2.3 Create JCOOP for court.
- 5.2.4 Discuss with staff regarding an offsite meeting place and obtain at least two contact numbers for each member of staff.
- 5.2.5 Get contact numbers for I.T. people to obtain access to court docket information.
- 5.2.6 Review MOU and determine best specific county if possible.
- 5.2.7 Become familiar with and bookmark the informational websites for Presiding Judge of the Administrative Region and the Supreme Court of Texas. (e.g. Obtain contact information for the PJ, including Blackberry numbers, etc.).
- 5.2.8 Provide PJ and Supreme Court with your contact numbers and websites.
- 5.2.9 Make sure that all judges in county have contact information for all other judges and essential staff. (e.g. telephone and e-mail).
- 5.2.10 Have contact numbers and alternate e-mails for all personnel both in designated county and several specific counties.
- 5.2.11 Review communication plan recommendations in Appendix A.

### **5.3 Procedure - Loss of Courthouse Without Warning**

- 5.3.1 Notify the Supreme Court and/or the PJ of the loss of courthouse facilities.
  - 5.3.1.1 Notification may be via personal contact, telephone, cell phone, pager, e-mail, radio and TV broadcasts, court emergency information line (e.g. 1-800-number) or any combination thereof.
- 5.3.2 Contact staff by any means listed above. (N.B. It is essential to have these numbers on and off site.)
- 5.3.3 Locate docket for the day and the week.
  - 5.3.3.1. Review docket for essential hearings. (Essential hearings are defined at the local judge's discretion.)
- 5.3.4 Contact the LAJ, who, in turn, contacts the PJ with a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) request.
  - 5.3.4.1 In the event the judge is unable to contact LAJ, the judge should contact the PJ directly.
  - 5.3.4.2 The judge should request activation of the MOU.

- 5.3.5 The judge should instruct staff to provide the parties notice of the time and place essential hearings will be held. In the event staff cannot be located, the judge may rely on the terms of the MOU to have the staff provided by the specific county to give notice to the parties, as well as canceling the remaining docket.
- 5.3.6 If possible, locate the clerk and request the essential files. If clerk cannot be reached, or file cannot be located, acknowledge the court can work from attorney's files and accept any new filings on behalf of the clerk in a previously opened file. Any new files must be opened by the clerk of specific county.
- 5.3.7 Determine if a Visiting Judge is needed for hearing. Judges may:
- (1) Hear their own cases.
  - (2) Request a Visiting Judge to hear cases. (N.B. An elected statutory county court judge cannot be assigned to hear an out of county case.)
  - (3) Request the Elected Judge from the specific county to hear cases. (i.e. exchange of bench)
  - (4) Determine if one Judge of designated county will hear all essential proceedings. (N.B. It is recommended one judge hear **all** essential cases.)
- 5.3.8 Review dockets as far out as expected recovery time. Provide necessary notice to insure due process and to disrupt cooperating county as little as possible.
- 5.4 **Procedure - Loss of Courthouse With Warning**
- 5.4.1 Notify the Supreme Court of Texas and/or the PJ of the anticipated loss of courthouse facilities.
- 5.4.3 Contact the LAJ about an MOU, determining which specific county the designated county is to use as an alternate site for court operations. If unable to contact LAJ, contact the PJ with request to activate the MOU. If unable to contact the PJ, contact the Supreme Court to request activation of the MOU.
- 5.4.4 The judge reviews the docket and cancels hearings except for essential hearings.
- 5.4.5 The judge contacts the specific county, confirms location of borrowed space as well as contact numbers for borrowed location.
- 5.4.6 Provide the parties with notice of new location and time by the most effective means available. (i.e. telephone, e-mail, hardcopy (mail) etc.)
- 5.4.7 Contact the clerk for files related to essential cases on docket. Notify where and when hearing is to be held. (N.B. The judge can accept filings in event of emergency.)

- 5.4.8 Determine if clerk will go to the specified county. Instruct coordinator and court reporter relative to hearing. (N.B. The form MOU **does** provide that the specified county will provide essential staff in addition to location and facilities.)
- 5.4.9 Determine if a Visiting Judge is needed for hearing. Judges may:
- (1) Hear their own cases.
  - (2) Request a Visiting Judge to hear cases. (N.B. An elected statutory county court judge cannot be assigned to hear an out of county case.)
  - (3) Request the Elected Judge from the specified county to hear essential proceedings (exchange of bench).
  - (4) Determine if one Judge of designated county will hear all essential cases.  
Note: It is recommended one judge hear **all** essential cases.
- 5.4.10 Review dockets as far out as expected recovery time. Provide notice to ensure due process and to disrupt specified county operations as little as possible.



## **APPENDIX A**

### **Communication Plan Recommendations**

During the last few major incidents that have affected the area, there have been some valuable lessons learned with regards to communications and the ability to effectively disseminate critical information to key management personnel. During these times the normal “land line” voice communication is often not available or is over utilized and not reliable, therefore a need exists for a secondary and possibly a tertiary method of communication. One of the more reliable methods is the use of mobile handheld data devices with voice capability. These devices allow the user many different communication options with the same device such as voice, e-mail, and text messaging.

Our recommendation is the use of a Blackberry mobile device. Using Blackberry mobile devices can maintain communications in several different ways. First, you can use the handheld device to send and receive e-mails using the corporate messaging system. Second, you can send a standard text messages using the cellular service provider, possibly with an additional charge by the cellular service provider per text message sent and received. And finally, you can send text messages called PIN Messages using Research in Motion’s (RIM) network at no additional fees from RIM or your cellular service provider.

The Blackberry handheld can be utilized for e-mail messaging in one of two ways. You can utilize Blackberry Enterprise Server (BES), or you can use the Blackberry Desktop Manager. To use the Blackberry handheld devices to the fullest capability requires a BES server. When using the BES server you get the functionality of security and manageability, also when using the BES server you can maintain secured communications because all communications between the handheld device and the messaging server are encrypted. Additionally, you have the ability to encrypt the handheld’s file system to prevent users from gaining access to locally stored data in the event of theft or loss. You have the ability to manage the handhelds individually or in groups through the BES server as well. You can wirelessly load software updates to the handhelds, change settings, and even completely wipe the file system in the event of theft or loss. To implement the BES server several things are needed; an IT professional with the ability to oversee and manage the BES application, a dedicated server, as well as additional licensing from Blackberry. If you do not have the resources to dedicate to the BES server you can use the Blackberry Desktop Manager software. This is software that the user will install on their workstation PC that will allow users to still be able to send and receive e-mail messages to and from their handheld devices. There is no additional licensing or hardware requirements when using the Blackberry Desktop Manager software.

In the event that corporate e-mail systems are unavailable you can still maintain communication between users using text messaging provided by your cellular service provider. Again, keep in mind that the cellular service provider sometimes charges per text message sent and received. The ability to text message using your cellular provider could possibly be limited in the event of disaster. When a large percentage of users try to connect to their cellular service at the same time, the cellular service can be overwhelmed and a large number of subscribers will be unable to communicate using voice or text messaging.

The final way of communication is exclusive to Blackberry handheld users and is one of the biggest advantages of using the Blackberry handhelds. Each Blackberry handheld that is produced is assigned a unique number called a Personal Identification Number (PIN). All Blackberry users can communicate with any other Blackberry user using this unique PIN. The messages that are sent to a PIN are routed only on Research in Motion's network and the cellular service provider is never needed during this type of communication. So, in the event of a disaster when the cellular provider's service is overwhelmed you can maintain contact using the Blackberry PIN messaging system. Also, there are no charges for any PIN messages sent or received.

Please note, that in times of emergency this service could be disrupted if you are a Nextel user and their system is down. All major providers except Nextel provide for cell service roaming. Because of this limitation, Nextel users could experience interruptions in their service that others may not experience. This becomes critical in PIN messaging during a disaster scenario.

**Appendix B**

**MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING  
BETWEEN  
\_\_\_\_\_ COUNTY AND THE SUPREME COURT OF TEXAS  
FOR  
SUPPORT OF CONTINUITY OF COURT OPERATIONS  
IN THE EVENT OF AN EMERGENCY**

This memorandum of understanding (MOU) is between \_\_\_\_\_ County and the Supreme Court of Texas.

**I. PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF MOU**

The purpose of this MOU is to define the assistance and cooperation that \_\_\_\_\_ County will provide to a county that is designated by the Supreme Court, the presiding judge of the \_\_\_\_\_ Administrative Judicial Region, the Chief Justice of any Appellate Court or a Local Administrative Judge (“designated county”) as requiring \_\_\_\_\_ County’s assistance in order to continue the operation of the courts of the designated county.

The Supreme Court’s intent in executing this MOU is to provide a framework for the continuity of court operations in any Texas county that has experienced a disaster or unforeseen event that precludes a court from conducting business. This MOU is not limited to assistance to first tier or second tier coastal counties as defined by Sec. 2210.003, Texas Insurance Code.

All counties agreeing to provide assistance under this agreement shall be entitled to receive assistance as described herein from all participating counties

**II. PROCEDURE AND ASSISTANCE**

In the event that the Supreme Court or the presiding judge of the \_\_\_\_\_ Administrative Judicial Region designate in writing that the assistance of \_\_\_\_\_ County is required to ensure the continued operation of the courts in a designated county, or assistance is requested by any Local Administrative Judge \_\_\_\_\_ County agrees to provide the following to enable the Appellate, District, Statutory, and Constitutional County Courts of designated county to continue court operations:

- A. adequate facilities for court sessions;
- B. adequate office space for judges and essential administrative staff, including essential county and district clerk staff; and
- C. adequate telecommunication and information management tools necessary for the judges and essential administrative staff to conduct court business.

\_\_\_\_\_ County agrees to provide assistance within 24 hours of notice of a designated county requiring its assistance. \_\_\_\_\_ County agrees to provide assistance under this MOU without any further contractual requirements for a period of up to seven working days. If it is anticipated that assistance will be required beyond seven working days, \_\_\_\_\_ County and designated county will negotiate an interlocal agreement for the additional support.

**III. REIMBURSEMENT OF COSTS**

Designated county will be responsible for reimbursing \_\_\_\_\_ County for reasonable costs associated with the assistance provided. Costs will be limited to extraordinary expenses for County, such as supplies, equipment, personnel costs above normal salaries and benefits, security, and utilities.

**IV. TERM**

This contract is to begin upon the date of execution and shall terminate on \_\_\_\_\_, or until rescinded in writing, upon 15 days written notice, by either party.

**Supreme Court of Texas** \_\_\_\_\_ **County**

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Wallace B. Jefferson  
 Chief Justice

By: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix C

**SAMPLE PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT**

**TO:** All Interested Parties

**FROM:** Judge \_\_\_\_\_ ( Name and Court Number)

**DATE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**SUBJECT:** Public Access to Court Information and Operations

**Please use the following resources to obtain information during this emergency:**

**Supreme Court Information:**

Website: [www.supreme.courts.state.tx.us](http://www.supreme.courts.state.tx.us)  
Clerk's Office: 512-463-1312

**Regional Presiding Judge:**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Court Number (if applicable): \_\_\_\_\_  
Website and/or General Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

**Local Administrative Judge:**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Court Number: \_\_\_\_\_  
Website and/or General Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

**County Clerk:**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
Website and/or General Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

**District Clerk:**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
Website and/or General Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_