

**Williamson County Justice  
Center Operating Plan  
Justices of the Peace  
Post June 1, 2020**

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### APPENDIX

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*Email from Dr. Palazzo After Final Review of JP Plan – June 19, 2020*

*Email from Shantelle Brannon After Review of the JP Plan – June 19, 2020*

*Judge Gravell was consulted and an email approving was requested but Judge Gravell not available.*

*Not attached but available is transcript of meeting between Judge Lambeth and the Justices of the Peace*

# **COVID-19 Operating Plan for the Williamson County Offices of the Justices of the Peace**

On May 4, 2020 at the direction of the Texas Supreme Court, the Office of Court Administration (OCA) directed Texas Courts to develop an operating plan for all court proceedings. The guidance directs the local administrative district judge (LADJ) in each county to attempt to confer with judges of all courts with courtrooms in county buildings, consult with the County Judge and the local health authority, and submit for approval the operating plan to the Regional Presiding Judge (RPJ). **Upon written acknowledgement from the RPJ, that the submitted operating plan meets the critical components required by the OCA and, the justice courts of Williamson County may then commence in-person proceedings as outlined in this operating plan. This plan covers the Offices of the Justices of the Peace of Williamson County, Precincts One, Two, Three and Four.**

Recognizing the need to ensure the health and safety of litigants, attorneys, visitors, court staff, judges, and other individuals entering the justice courts and offices, the justice courts of **Williamson County** will implement the following protective measures:

## **General**

1. All judges will comply with the Emergency Orders issued by the Supreme Court of Texas and Court of Criminal Appeals, including conducting in-person proceedings according to the guidance issued by the Office of Court Administration regarding social distancing, maximum group size, and other restrictions and precautions.
2. All judges will use all reasonable efforts to conduct proceedings remotely.
3. The local administrative district judge will maintain regular communication with the local health authority and county judge, and, adjust this operating plan as necessary based on conditions in the county.
4. Judges will begin setting non-essential in-person proceedings no sooner than the Williamson County Justice Courts have received written acknowledgment from the RPJ, that the submitted operating plan meets the critical components required by the Texas Supreme Court and the OCA.
5. A judge may not begin setting non-essential in-person proceedings until fully implementing the operating plan.
6. Every participant in a proceeding will be required to alert the court if the participant has, or knows of another participant who has: (i) COVID-19 or flu-like symptoms, or a fever, chills, repeated shaking with chills, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, muscle pain, headache, sore throat, loss of taste or smell, diarrhea; or (ii) been in close contact with a person who is confirmed to have COVID-19;

## **Judge and Court Staff Health**

1. Judges and court staff who can perform the essential functions of their job remotely will telework when possible.
2. Judge and Court Staff Monitoring Requirements:
  - Judge and staff shall monitor their temperature daily. Williamson County will designate an employee to take temperatures at the entrance of the Offices of the Justice of the Peace, and all Williamson County and State employees, including judges and their staff will be required to have a temperature screening daily.
  - Judge or court staff who feel feverish or have measured temperature equal to or greater than 99.6°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 will not be permitted to enter the building and should seek medical advice.
3. Court staff will monitor and self-report symptoms to their supervisor, or individual judge. Judges and court staff will not be permitted to enter county buildings who have self-reported symptoms.
4. Court staff will report exposure to COVID-19 to their supervisor or individual judge. Exposure is defined as having experienced longer than 15 minutes in close contact (less than 6 feet) with a Covid-19 positive individual. Judges and court staff will not be permitted to enter a county building for fourteen days following exposure. If a judge or court staff is still symptomatic after fourteen days, that person will not be permitted to enter county buildings presenting a note from their doctor or the Health Department allowing her/him to return to work.
5. Judges and court staff will be required to practice social distancing and practice appropriate hygiene recommendations at all times.
6. Appropriate social distancing will be expected and enforced in the Offices of the Justice of the Peace and signs reinforcing protective measures will be posted throughout the public areas of the offices and made available to each Court for posting in each Courtroom.
7. Access to the non-public (employee) areas of the court chambers will be restricted to court staff and essential personnel only.
8. Protective Measures:
  - Courts are required until further notice, to continue to use all reasonable efforts to conduct proceedings remotely.
  - Judges and court staff shall wear a Face Covering when:
    - Interacting in person with any member of the public.
    - Working in any space visited by members of the public, including but not limited to, courtrooms, reception areas, public restrooms, hallways, and other spaces used to interact with the public, at all times regardless of whether anyone from the public is present

- Working in or walking through common areas such as hallways, stairways, service desks, and elevators; or
- In any room or enclosed area when other people (except for members of the person's own household) are present.
- For clarity, a Face Covering is not required when a person is in a personal office (a single room) when others outside of that person's household are not present as long as the public does not regularly visit the room. A face covering shall be worn when coworkers are nearby.

## **Scheduling**

### **Section 1. Overview of Scheduling Plan**

The following Courtrooms of the Justices of the Peace of Williamson County scheduling plan has been developed pursuant to the Texas Supreme Court's Twelfth Emergency Order, issued on April 27, 2020, and the Office of Court Administration's ("OCA") Guidance for All Court Proceedings During COVID-19 Pandemic, issued on May 4, 2020. It applies to both essential and nonessential hearings and trials. The schedule was developed with the assistance of the Williamson County Local Health Authority.

The Justice of the Peace Courts of Williamson County will continue to conduct essential and non-essential hearings and trials virtually unless litigants or other court participants are unable to successfully participate in a remote hearing for reasons beyond the court's control. In-Person and Hearings will be held based on the procedures set forth below.

#### 1.1. Principles for In-Person and Hybrid Hearings

- (a) Courts will schedule no more than one In-Person or Hybrid Hearing at a time. There will be no large docket calls. All cases will have a specific beginning time. Participants for no more than one case at a time will be present in the courtroom.
- (b) In-Person Hearings will be limited to instances where parties are not able to participate using virtual courtroom technologies, including court-provided technology (i.e. child witnesses, highly complex hearings, or emergency matters requiring in-person hearings), and the Court is unable to provide an alternative virtual accommodation.
- (c) Hybrid Hearings will be utilized when a party to the matter is not able to participate virtually using their own technology, but all other parties (Judge, Court Staff, Counsel, other parties) will participate virtually.
- (d) When an In-Person or Hybrid Hearing takes place, a Court is limited to having no more than ten (10) individuals in the Courtroom at any one time. This number includes the judge, court staff, bailiff, counsel, parties, etc., as necessary to conduct the hearing. Any other individuals involved in a hearing who must be present at the Justice of the Peace Courtrooms and who are in excess of the number of individuals allowed in the Courtroom,

must wait in the hallway while observing appropriate social distancing and this should be monitored by a bailiff.

- (e) While court staff might not be present for a Hybrid Hearing, there should be a Bailiff for the purpose of courtroom security and to assist in operating the technology.
- (f) Courts will limit In-Person and Hybrid Hearings to 30-minute intervals. As explained by the guidance of the LHA, courtroom exposure of over 30 minutes significantly increases the risk of viral spread. If hearings are not able to be limited to 30 minutes, Courts will recess every 30 minutes to allow for a break and for the Courtroom to be cleaned prior to resuming the hearing.
- (g) For in-person hearings and trials, Courts will encourage as many participants as possible to appear virtually in order to further minimize the number of individuals present.
- (h) In order to ensure the Courts are able to limit the overall building load to 25% of capacity, at the end of each week each Court will report the daily number of in-person hearings, including the number participants that appeared in-person they had in their courtroom for that week. Reports will be provided to the Presiding Judge of Third Administrative Judicial Region.
- (i) Each Court is reminded and acknowledges, that the Presiding Judge of Third Administrative Judicial Region has been tasked with reporting any proceedings that are being conducted contrary to the Texas Supreme Court's Orders, which includes OCA guidelines.

#### 1.2. Hearing Schedules – Virtual Hearings

Virtual Hearings that do not bring any parties to the Offices of the Justices of the Peace of Williamson County may be scheduled at the pleasure of each individual Court, according to their scheduling needs.

#### **Vulnerable Populations**

1. 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.
2. Each judge will include information on orders setting hearings, dockets, notices, and in other communications notifying individuals who are in vulnerable populations of the ability to contact the court to identify themselves as a vulnerable individual and receive accommodations. A notice with this information will be posted on the courts' websites and in conspicuous locations around the court building (a copy of which is attached).
3. Vulnerable populations who are scheduled for court will be accommodated by as follows: If a judge or court staff receive notice that an individual in the vulnerable population has been scheduled for a court proceeding, the judge will accommodate the individual by (i) allowing

them to participate in the proceeding remotely, or (ii) if the individual must appear in-person, court staff will set up a separate room for the individual to participate in the hearing remotely.

### **Social Distancing**

1. All persons not from the same household who are permitted in the courtroom will be required to maintain adequate social distancing of at least 6 feet.
2. If there is not adequate space for standing or seating to ensure adequate social distancing, Court staff will ask parties for their cell phone number. The parties will return to their vehicles or a space outside until they are called to return to the courtroom.
3. The County will measure the hallways. The County will then apply markings at least 6 feet apart in each location indicating where individuals may sit or stand.
4. The County will measure each courtroom and forward those measurements to each judge. Each individual judge will then work with county staff to apply markings at least 6 feet apart in each location indicating where individuals may sit or stand.
5. The County will place signage, in English and Spanish, about the social distancing policy throughout the Courtrooms and offices of the Justices of the Peace of Williamson County. At a minimum, signage will be placed at the entrance, outside of restrooms, hallways, and common areas to inform individuals about appropriate social distancing.
6. Public common areas, including breakrooms and snackrooms under the control of the Justices of the Peace, have been closed to the public.

### *Gallery*

7. The maximum number of persons permitted in each courtroom is ten. This number includes the judge, court staff, bailiff, counsel, parties, etc. as necessary to conduct the hearing. The maximum capacity of the courtroom will be monitored and enforced by court security staff.
8. The gallery of the courtroom has been marked to identify appropriate social distancing in the seating area. Seating is limited to every other row and no seat will be within 6 feet of any other seat decal. Capacity will be limited utilizing floor decals and ropes.

### *Well*

9. In each courtroom, the counsel tables, witness stand, judge's bench, and clerk and all staff seating have been arranged in such a way, and signage has been posted so that there is social distancing of at least 6 feet between each space.

### **Hygiene**

1. Hand sanitizer dispensers have been placed outside of each courtroom.
2. The local bar associations will be requested to recommend that attorneys bring personal hand sanitizer dispensers and travel-sized tissue packs for personal use when at the Courtrooms of the Justices of the Peace of Williamson County.

3. The Department of State Health Service's "Stop the Spread of Germs Flyer" has been posted in multiple locations on each floor of the court building.

### **Screening**

1. When individuals attempt to enter the courtroom, they will be given a QR Code to access on their personal mobile device and answer the following questions: if they are feeling feverish; have a cough, shortness of breath, or difficulty breathing; or have been in close contact with a person who is confirmed to have COVID-19. Individuals who indicate yes to any of these questions will be refused admittance to the court building. Information concerning non-admittance will be shared with the appropriate judge and court staff.
2. In the alternative, in the event that an individual attempting to enter the courtroom does not have a mobile device, or chooses not to use their mobile device, the Constables or Court Security Officers will provide the individuals with an iPad to answer screening questions, which will ask the user to disclose the following: if they are feeling feverish; have a cough, shortness of breath, or difficulty breathing; or have been in close contact with a person who is confirmed to have COVID-19. Individuals who indicate yes to any of these questions will be refused admittance to the court building. The Constables or Court Security Officers handling the iPad will wear gloves and are required to clean the service of the iPad after each use with an approved sanitizing agent that will not harm the iPad.
3. When individuals attempt to enter the courtroom, Constables or Court Security Staff will use an infrared thermometer to determine the temperature of the individual. Individuals whose temperature equals or exceeds 99.6°F will be refused admittance to the courtroom. If the individual believes their temperature is elevated due to outside weather conditions, the individual may be retested after waiting for fifteen minutes to cool down.
4. Staff who are screening individuals entering the courtroom will be provided personal protective equipment, including disposable gloves, hand sanitizer, N95 masks, and Ranger Masks.
5. The Williamson County Public Information Office will publicize the screening policy through social media and press release to traditional media outlets with the intent of increasing public awareness.
6. The screening policy will be placed on the official county website.

### **Face Coverings**

1. Face Coverings will be required to be worn at all times by all individuals entering publicly accessible areas of the Offices of the Justices of the Peace of Williamson County but not limited to, courtrooms, reception areas, hallways, service counters, and other spaces used to interact with the public, at all times regardless of whether anyone from the public is present.
  - For clarity, a Face Covering is not required when a person is in a personal office (a single room) when others outside of that person's household are not present as long as the public does not regularly visit the room. By way of example and without limitation, a person working at the offices of the Justices of the Peace of Williamson County is not



required to wear a Face Covering if that individual is in a space not regularly visited by the public, but that individual must put on a Face Covering, when being visited by a member of the public, and anywhere members of the public are regularly present.

2. 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 court security staff.
3. Notwithstanding anything herein to the contrary, pursuant to current Center for Disease Control (CDC) guidance, children under two years old, people with breathing problems and people who are incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance will not be requested or directed to wear a face covering regardless of the space of separation available between individuals.
4. In the event a person refuses to wear a face covering, admittance to the Offices of the Justices of the Peace of Williamson County (including but not limited to the courtrooms) will be denied in order to ensure compliance with the Emergency Orders issued by the Supreme Court of Texas and Court of Criminal Appeals, and with the guidance issued by the Office of Court Administration.
5. Individuals with conditions that may inhibit them from wearing a face covering safely, or who may not be able to effectively communicate through a face covering in a court setting may be excepted from wearing a face covering and will be treated as a member of the Vulnerable Population. Accommodations for people unable to wear masks must be made as stated in this Operating Plan. This may include, but is not limited to individuals who:
  - Cannot breathe safely with a mask.
  - Due to a behavioral health diagnosis, are unable wear a mask.
  - Rely on lip-reading to communicate with others.
  - Require supplemental oxygen to breathe.
6. As used in the Operating Plan, a “face covering” means a covering made of cloth, fabric, or other soft or permeable material, without holes, that covers only the nose and mouth and surrounding areas of the lower face. A covering that hides or obscures the wearer’s eyes or forehead is not a face covering. Examples of Face Coverings include a scarf or bandana; a neck gaiter, a homemade covering made from a t-shirt, sweatshirt, or towel, held on with rubber bands or otherwise; or a mask, which need not be medical grade. A face covering may be factory-made or may be handmade and improvised from ordinary household materials. The face covering should be comfortable, so that the wearer can breathe comfortably through the nose and does not have to adjust it frequently, so as to avoid touching the face.
7. The face coverings are considered an article of clothing. Individual judges at their discretion may exclude a participant from the courtroom for inappropriate messaging on the face covering.
8. Information about how to wear and clean face coverings may be found at the website of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/diy-cloth-face-coverings.html>.
9. Signs will be posted, reminding visitors to the Courtrooms and offices of the Justices of the Peace of Williamson County of the requirement that they wear a Face Covering while inside of or waiting in line to enter the courtrooms or offices of the Justices of the Peace of Williamson County.

10. The intent of these guidelines is to ensure that -- subject to certain specified and limited exceptions -- all people, who are visiting or working at the courtrooms or offices of the Justices of the Peace of Williamson County, wear a Face Covering to reduce the likelihood that they may transmit or receive the COVID-19 virus. The hope is that these guidelines will help reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus and mitigate the impact of the virus on members of the public and the justice system for those in need of efficient and fair justice.
11. The use of a mask does not replace important social distancing measures. All individuals must continue to maintain more than 6 feet of distance from other people; wash hands regularly with soap and water for at least 20 seconds; and stay home when sick.

### **Cleaning**

1. Court building cleaning staff will clean the public and non-public restrooms after each use.
2. Court building cleaning staff will clean the common areas of the Justice of the Peace Offices so that common spaces are cleaned at least four times per day or upon request. The common spaces include all surfaces touched by individuals, including push bars, door knobs, and chairs.
3. Courts will ensure the courtroom is cleaned between each hearing. Adequate supplies and time shall be provided in order to allow for cleaning to take place, at a minimum, at 30-minute intervals and between in-person hearings. In the event a hearing is scheduled for more than 30 minutes, the Court will break in order to ensure cleaning takes place.
4. Cleaning staff who clean the Offices and Courtrooms of the Justices of the Peace have been provided cleaning supplies shown to be effective with this coronavirus.
5. Cleaning staff have been trained on proper cleaning techniques and provided appropriate personal protective equipment.
6. The water fountains in the Offices and Courtrooms of the Justices of the Peace will be made inaccessible.

### **Statement of Compliance**

I conferred with all judges of courts with courtrooms in the court building regarding this Operating Plan. In developing the plan, I consulted with Dr. Lori Palazzo, the Williamson County and Cities Local Public Health Authority, County Judge Bill Gravell, Dale Butler, Director of Facilities-Williamson County and Shantelle Brannon, Deputy Director Williamson County Office of Emergency Management - documentation of which is attached to this plan. I will ensure that the judges of courts with courtrooms in the court building covered by this Operating Plan conduct proceedings consistent with the plan.

Date: 6/19/2020



Hon. Betsy F. Lambeth

Local Administrative Judge of Williamson County Texas

# APPENDIX

EMAIL FROM  
DR. PALAZZO AFTER FINAL  
REVIEW OF THE PLAN  
JUNE 19TH

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**From:** Lori Palazzo <[lori.palazzo@wilco.org](mailto:lori.palazzo@wilco.org)>  
**Sent:** Friday, June 19, 2020 2:10 PM  
**To:** Betsy Lambeth <[blambeth@wilco.org](mailto:blambeth@wilco.org)>  
**Cc:** Bill Gravell <[bgravell@wilco.org](mailto:bgravell@wilco.org)>  
**Subject:** RE: COVID Operating Plan.Justices of the Peace.Draft.Jun 19.FINAL

Thank you Judge – I approve.

**Lori L Palazzo MD**  
**Medical Director, Local Health Authority WCCHD**  
**355 Texas Ave**  
**Round Rock, Texas 78664**  
**512-248-3250/Phone**  
**512-248-3255/Fax**

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**From:** Betsy Lambeth <[blambeth@wilco.org](mailto:blambeth@wilco.org)>  
**Sent:** Friday, June 19, 2020 2:09 PM  
**To:** Lori Palazzo <[lori.palazzo@wilco.org](mailto:lori.palazzo@wilco.org)>  
**Cc:** Bill Gravell <[bgravell@wilco.org](mailto:bgravell@wilco.org)>  
**Subject:** COVID Operating Plan.Justices of the Peace.Draft.Jun 19.FINAL

Dr. P,

I have made the changes as requested. The track changes is included so that you can easily identify the changes.

HON. BETSY F. LAMBETH  
Judge, 425<sup>th</sup> Judicial District Court  
Williamson County, Texas  
512-943-3380



*Board Certified – Family Law*  
*Board Certified – Child Welfare Law*  
*Member – Texas Academy of Family Law Specialists*  
*Member – The College of the State Bar of Texas*



EMAIL FROM  
SHANTELE BRANNON  
AFTER FINAL  
REVIEW OF THE PLAN  
JUNE 19TH

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**From:** Shantelle Brannon <[shantelle.brannon@wilco.org](mailto:shantelle.brannon@wilco.org)>  
**Sent:** Friday, June 19, 2020 2:29 PM  
**To:** Betsy Lambeth <[blambeth@wilco.org](mailto:blambeth@wilco.org)>  
**Cc:** Bill Gravell <[bgravell@wilco.org](mailto:bgravell@wilco.org)>  
**Subject:** RE: COVID Operating Plan.Justices of the Peace.JUN 19.FINAL APPROVED

Judge Lambeth—

I approve.

Shantelle

Better & Better,  
Shantelle Dunn Brannon, Deputy Director, WCOEM  
[Shantelle.Brannon@wilco.org](mailto:Shantelle.Brannon@wilco.org)  
[512-968-7653](tel:512-968-7653) mobile

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**From:** Betsy Lambeth <[blambeth@wilco.org](mailto:blambeth@wilco.org)>  
**Sent:** Friday, June 19, 2020 2:18 PM  
**To:** Shantelle Brannon <[shantelle.brannon@wilco.org](mailto:shantelle.brannon@wilco.org)>  
**Cc:** Bill Gravell <[bgravell@wilco.org](mailto:bgravell@wilco.org)>  
**Subject:** COVID Operating Plan.Justices of the Peace.JUN 19.FINAL APPROVED

Shantelle,

Attached please find the operating plan covering the justice of the peace offices. Dr. Palazzo has approved this plan. Please review and respond with questions or your approval. Thank you.

HON. BETSY F. LAMBETH  
Judge, 425<sup>th</sup> Judicial District Court  
Williamson County, Texas  
[512-943-3380](tel:512-943-3380)



*Board Certified – Family Law*  
*Board Certified – Child Welfare Law*  
*Member – Texas Academy of Family Law Specialists*  
*Member – The College of the State Bar of Texas*

