



March 13, 2020

Dear Members of the Bar,

The Williamson County Courts have been working with state and local leaders since January 2020 preparing our proactive response to COVID-19. The Williamson County Courts are prepared for this.

The Texas Department of State Health Services is the lead agency in collaboration with the Texas Department of Emergency Management. Since January 24, 2020 we have participated in daily conference calls with DSHS, state and local health authorities, elected officials across the state, school and university officials as well as weekly calls with local public health and elected officials. For more information on COVID-19 please visit the DSHS website at [dshs.texas.gov/coronavirus/](https://dshs.texas.gov/coronavirus/). Please also consult the CDC webpages.

Because of the ongoing concerns about the coronavirus, the Williamson County courts have made the following adjustments to life at the courthouse. There are two confirmed cases in Austin, one in Bell County and community spread has occurred in North Texas. While there is no confirmed case in Williamson county **the time to act is now**.

The Governor of Texas has recommended extensive *community mitigation activities* to support slowing the spread of virus infections. When a novel virus reaches pandemic level, "nonpharmaceutical interventions" such as COMMUNITY MITIGATION STRATEGIES often are the most readily available interventions to help slow transmission of the virus in communities. COMMUNITY MITIGATION is a set of actions that persons and communities can take to help **slow the spread** of respiratory virus infections. Community mitigation is especially important before a vaccine or drug becomes widely available. If we follow the recommendations of the health experts, they tell us the virus will be slowed. These approaches help to minimize morbidity and mortality cause by COVID-19 and minimize social and economic impacts of COVID-19.

The goals for using mitigation strategies for Williamson County at this time are to protect:

- Individuals at risk for severe illness, including persons of any age with underlying health conditions including immune suppression and especially seniors with underlying health conditions
- The healthcare workforce and critical emergency and infrastructure workforces

We have received instruction from Governor Abbott and the Texas Supreme Court regarding these actions. As these plans were drafted our goal was to:

- Keep the courthouse open;
- Continue the essential functions of the courthouse;
- Reduce mass gatherings at the courthouse

**Effective March 16, 2020 until April 1, 2020:**

- Non-essential, in-person proceedings may pose an unnecessary or unreasonable risk to participants, court staff, or the public and the courts will avoid that risk.
- Essential proceedings will continue. Those essential proceedings are criminal magistration, some criminal cases, CPS removal hearings, temporary restraining orders/ temporary injunctions, juvenile detention hearings, family violence protective orders and, certain mental health proceedings and public health proceedings.
- All jury trials are cancelled.
- The courts will limit activity in the courtroom to maintain no more than 20 people in the courtroom at a time.
- Attorneys are instructed to contact the court in advance if you have a client, witness or other person with COVID-19 or flu-like symptoms. The Court will make reasonable accommodations and reschedule appearances and hearings as needed.
- **FAMILY CASES:** If you have a hearing scheduled in family court between March 16 and April 1, 2020, expect to receive specific information regarding your case from the Court Administrator of the court. When possible, please file only emergent motions.
- **CRIMINAL CASES:** The courts hearing criminal cases will send information to the bar and publish information on the Williamson County and each Court website regarding the restructuring of the criminal dockets.
- **CPS Cases:** The courts will continue to hear removals and adversary hearings. The disaster declaration by the Governor will allow for statutory deadline allowances to be made.
- Judicial Bypass cases will continue to be heard.
- **Mental Health Commitments:** Specific information will be posted and sent out by Judge McMaster.
- **Specialty dockets:** Information will be sent and posted by the judge.
- **Settlement Week:** Settlement week as been cancelled at this time.

Please be judicious in your correspondence with the courts. Refer to this correspondence and correspondence from the specific courts before sending an email to the Court Administrators. They are inundated with requests. If no other official information source appropriately answers your questions, by all means, contact the court.

**By necessity, this plan is under constant review and flexible due to changing conditions. Stay tuned to your email and the county and court websites.**

If you are privileged enough to skip an event or work from home, you may save a life – even though the life you save may not be your own. It might be the life of your cousin with cancer, or your colleague's elderly mother. Americans have allowed ourselves to believe that the self, rather than the community, must do all the healing. COVID10 is a stark reminder that the community, rather than the self, may be the first line of protection. Our interconnectedness is part of the very meaning of life. We are community. Be safe.

Thank you for your patience and concern.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "J. McMaster", written over a horizontal line.

Hon. John McMaster, for the Williamson County  
Courts at Law

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "B. Lambeth", written over a horizontal line.

Hon. Betsy F. Lambeth, for the Williamson County  
District Courts