

# Georgia Court Reopening Guide



Judicial Council Strategic Plan  
Standing Committee

When the courts reopen, certain general practices will need to be followed to ensure the health and safety of both court employees and the public. Due to the wide variety of courts across the State, it is impossible to create a one-size-fits-all COVID-19 policy that will work for both small and larger localities. There are, however, certain general practices that could be applied to all courts and adjusted where necessary to meet the unique needs of each court. These practices are presented here to assist all Georgia courts meet the challenges of resuming operations in the wake of the public health emergency caused by COVID-19.

## Guiding Principles

- ✓ Reduce the transmission of COVID-19 among court employees and the public.
- ✓ Maintain healthy court operations and facilities for the public.
- ✓ Maintain a healthy work environment for court employees.

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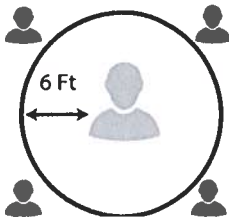
# 1



## General Infection Control Measures



**Require** all employees and the public to wear a mask or face covering when entering the court facility.



**Limit room capacity** throughout the court facility: Calculate room capacity using the area of a circle with a radius of six feet, which is equal to approximately 113 square feet per person.

### Maintain Safe Behavioral Practices

- ✓ Frequently wash hands or use alcohol-based (at least 60 percent alcohol) hand sanitizer when soap and water are not available.
- ✓ Wear a mask or other face covering.
- ✓ Avoid touching eyes, nose, and mouth.
- ✓ Stay home when sick.
- ✓ Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces, including countertops, public access computers, and seating throughout the facility.

- **Provide the public with access** to handwashing and multiple hand sanitizer stations throughout the facility.
- **Provide signage** to direct the public to bathrooms for handwashing and hand sanitizer stations.
- **Request that housekeeping personnel clean and sanitize bathrooms and other areas** more frequently and adequately to control the transmission of COVID-19.
- **Bathrooms should be well-stocked** with soap and paper towels at all times.
- **Consider physical barriers** like plexiglass to protect court employees and the public.
- **Permit employees and the public to wear their own protective equipment**, including a face covering.
- **Ventilation system:** work with public health to evaluate ventilation needs. The CDC recommends improving central air filtration to a MERV-13 filter or the highest compatible with the filter rack, as well as sealing the edges of the filter to limit bypass.
- **Locate additional space:** Identify other government facility space to provide more room, e.g., commission meeting rooms, jury assembly rooms, auditoriums, etc.
- **Coordinate your efforts** with the other tenants in your building to ensure uniform practices throughout the facility.

# 2



## Provide Notice to the Public of Increased Health and Safety Measures



**Modify the existing hearing notice** to include that the court has taken certain health and safety measures to limit the transmission of COVID-19.

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**Add information to the existing hearing notice** about how to contact the court to request a continuance in the event that the noticed party:

- ✓ Is currently infected with COVID-19 or in quarantine due to exposure to a person with COVID-19.
- ✓ Is a member of an immune-compromised population (or living in a household with someone who is immune-compromised).
- ✓ Is over age 65.
- ✓ Has small children but does not have child care due to COVID-19.

**Include information about how to request a reasonable and necessary accommodation** in advance of arriving to court, such as an interpreter.

**Post adequate signage** to provide the public with instructions on how to comply with health and safety measures.

Post signage and floor decals to direct the flow of foot traffic throughout the court facility.



# 3



## Provide Healthy and Safe Access to the Courtroom

### SCREENING



**Establish a process to screen individuals for COVID-19 before entering the court building and the courtroom.**

**Ask a series of questions** to each individual before or upon entry to the building, such as:

- ? Whether or not they have traveled to or from any areas in which COVID-19 is particularly active.
- ? If they or anyone in their household have experienced symptoms of COVID-19, including: cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fever, chills, muscle pain, sore throat, new loss of taste or smell.
- ? If they have been tested for the virus and the result of such test.
- ? If possible, take the temperature of each individual seeking to enter the building with a no-contact thermometer and deny entry to anyone with a fever of 100.4 degrees or higher.
- ? Any person denied entry for health reasons should have his or her case continued.

### STAGING

**Individuals should not congregate** in common areas while waiting to access the courtroom.

**Design a process to facilitate social distancing** while individuals wait to enter the courtroom, such as:

- ✓ Floor or sidewalk markings to keep individuals six feet apart.
- ✓ Outdoor distancing so individuals can spread out.
- ✓ Waiting in cars.
- ✓ Set up a tent where individuals can wait in compliance with social distancing measures.
- ✓ Send a text message when it's time to enter the building.

### FLOW

**Control the route** that people will take through your building to access the courtroom to encourage social distancing, such as:

- ✓ Roping or taping off certain seating areas or hallways.
- ✓ Placing arrows on the floors to direct foot traffic.
- ✓ Requiring people to enter through one door and exit through another.



## Maintain a Healthy and Safe Courtroom

**Maintain a six foot distance** in the courtroom between individuals who do not reside together to facilitate adequate social distancing.

### **Limit courtroom capacity**

Do not schedule more individuals to arrive at the Courtroom (including staff) than the square footage of the courtroom can accommodate to allow for social distancing.

One way to calculate room capacity is to use the area of a circle with a radius of six feet, which is equal to approximately 113 square feet per person.

**Continue to conduct virtual hearings** by video conference or teleconferencing whenever possible.

**Consider providing a live** YouTube, Facebook, Zoom or other link to individuals who want to see what is going on in the courtroom but cannot be present due to room capacity.

**Rotate individuals in and out** of the courtroom as quickly as possible to limit contact.

**Use microphones** capable of picking up audio from a safe distance or clean close proximity microphones after each use.

**Limit contact** with shared documents and exhibits as much as possible. Present documents and exhibits electronically if possible and appropriate.

**Conduct bench conferences in a room that provides for adequate social distancing** (defendant may need to waive his or her presence if necessary).

**Disinfect the courtroom** after each proceeding or as frequently as practicable.

### **Consider Staggered Scheduling**

Under normal circumstances, it is common to have large calendar calls in many courts where many people report at one time.

To maintain adequate social distancing, stagger the arrival of persons participating in proceedings to ensure that a large number of individuals do not arrive at the same time.

For example, if a courtroom can accommodate twelve people, do not schedule your normal fifty person calendar for 8:30 a.m. Rather, schedule the first group of 12 for 8:30 and the second group of 12 for 10:00.



## Healthy and Safe Court Employees

**Implement staggered shifts** for all court employees and implement teleworking for all possible court employees.

**Discourage employees from sharing** phones, desks, offices, surfaces, or other equipment.

**Provide for adequate spacing** between employee workstations to facilitate social distancing.

**If six feet of separation is not possible**, consider options like plexiglass barriers and frequently disinfecting shared surfaces, such as table tops, door knobs, elevator buttons, pens, security bins, etc.

**Require all employees to wear face coverings** at all times.

**Consider temperature checks** of employees when employees report to work each day with a no-contact thermometer.

**Require employees who exhibit signs of illness** to stay home or seek medical attention.

**Provide courtroom employees with adequate personal protective equipment**, including face coverings.

**Courtroom employees should be trained** on best practices to prevent infection, including frequent hand washing for at least 20 seconds with soap and water.

**Clean and disinfect offices daily** or as frequently as possible.



## Healthy and Safe Jurors and Potential Jurors

**The number of jurors and potential jurors should be limited to the amount a facility can accommodate** with social distancing and other infection control measures.

### **Potential jurors:**

- ✓ Likely to have more conflicts than prior to COVID-19 (e.g., childcare, looking for work, working in medical field).
- ✓ Will likely have health concerns about being around a group of strangers.

**Jury selection may take longer** due to social distancing and other infection control measures.

### **Jury deliberations:**

- ✓ Likely cannot take place in a typical jury room due to size.
- ✓ Use a larger room, such as the courtroom or another large meeting room to facilitate social distancing.
- ✓ Turn off video and audio recording in the room if the jury is deliberating there.



## Healthy and Safe Inmates and Detainees

- ✓ **Use video conferencing** for proceedings whenever possible.
- ✓ **Screen inmates and detainees** for COVID-19 symptoms before transport to court.
- ✓ **Provide for proper spacing** in transport vehicles.
- ✓ **Sanitize transport vehicles** after use.
- ✓ **Label holding areas** to provide for social distancing.
- ✓ **Sanitize holding areas**, restraints, and other commonly used items after each use.
- ✓ **Make hand sanitizer available** to inmates and detainees.