

COVID-19 Operating Plan for the City of La Porte

Municipal Court of Record Judiciary

Recognizing the need to ensure the health and safety of litigants, attorneys, visitors, court staff, judges, and other individuals entering the buildings housing the courts, the La Porte Municipal Court of Record 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 presiding judge of the municipal court will maintain regular communication with the La Porte Health Authority and mayor; and, adjust this operating plan as necessary with conditions existing in the city and surrounding area.
4. Judges will begin setting non-essential in-person proceedings no sooner than June 1, 2020

Judge and Court Staff Health

1. Judges and court staff who can perform the essential functions of their job remotely will telework when possible. The court will continue to employ teleconferencing and other alternate measures to in-person meetings when possible. As the court moves forward it will focus on improving the ability to work remotely.
2. Judge and Court Staff Monitoring Requirements: The presiding judge and court administrator will hold regular meetings with court staff regarding the implementation of this Operating Plan. The court will also stay current on all recommendations and updates published by the Office of Court Administration, the city's Emergency Operations Center, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and, the Texas Department of Health Services.
3. Judges or court staff who feel feverish or have measured temperatures 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.
4. Judges and court staff will be required to wear face coverings, practice social distancing, and practice appropriate hygiene recommendations at all time.
5. Protective Measures: Face coverings, hand sanitizer, and disinfectant have been distributed to the staff and placed in the staff work areas. All work stations have been moved to meet the recommended social distancing guidelines. Maximum capacity signage has been placed throughout the staff area. The staff regularly receives all COVID-19 related health and safety updates from the city's Emergency Operations Center and Human Resources Department.

Scheduling

1. The following court schedules are established to reduce occupancy in the court building:
The court will increase the number of dockets, minimize the number of defendants on each docket, and stagger the docket times to reduce the courthouse occupancy to the lowest degree possible at any given time. The court staff is also reaching out to defendants by telephone, in writing and electronically to assist remotely when possible.

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 has already been posted on the court's website 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 contacting the Court Administrator and setting up a suitable alternative such as a telephone conference or set to a private docket.

Social Distancing

1. All persons not from the same household who are permitted in the court building will be required to maintain adequate social distancing of at least 6 feet. The courthouse lobby has been marked with social distancing markers on the floor for guidance.
2. Each restroom has been evaluated to determine the appropriate capacity to ensure social distancing and the maximum capacity has been posted on each restroom door.
3. The court does not have any public common areas other than the lobby.
4. The front window in the courthouse lobby is already equipped with bulletproof glass that separates the court staff from the public area.
5. Chairs in the lobby are marked and modified to require social distancing.

Gallery

6. The maximum number of persons permitted in the gallery of the courtroom has been determined and posted. The maximum capacity of the courtroom will be monitored and enforced by court staff.
7. The gallery of the courtroom has been clearly marked to identify appropriate social distancing in the seating. Seating is limited to a minimum of 6 feet in all directions between persons.

Well

8. In the courtroom, the counsel tables, witness stand, judge's bench, and clerk, court reporter, and bailiff seating have been arranged in such a way so that there is social distancing of at least 6 feet between each space.
9. A lectern has been added and positioned for the defendants to use when addressing the court. The lectern is a minimum of 6 feet from the bench. The court is in the process of purchasing a plexi-glass panel as an option to further separate the judge from a defendant at the bench.

Hygiene

1. Hand sanitizer dispensers have been placed at the entrances to the building, outside of the courtroom, and outside of bathrooms.
2. Tissues have been placed near the door of the courtroom, at counsel tables, at the witness stand, on the judges' bench, and in the hallway.
3. The Department of State Health Service's "Stop the Spread of Germs Flyer" has been posted in multiple locations in the courthouse.
4. The public water fountains have been disabled.

Screening

1. When individuals attempt to enter the courtroom, the bailiff, a security guard or a court staff member will ask the individuals 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.
2. All individuals entering the courthouse shall be subject to a temperature check with a thermal thermometer to determine the temperature of the individual. Individuals whose temperature equals or exceeds 100.0°F will be refused admittance to the court building.
3. Staff who are screening individuals entering the court building and/or courtroom will be provided personal protective equipment, including masks, face protection, gloves, hand sanitizer, disinfectant and any other equipment deemed necessary or appropriate for the safety of the staff member and the visitor.

Face Coverings

1. All individuals entering the courtroom will be required to wear a face covering at all times.
2. All individuals entering the courthouse lobby will be encouraged to wear a face covering.
3. Individuals will be encouraged to bring cloth face coverings with them, but if the individual does not have a cloth face covering, or, if they will be in the courthouse for a lengthy period of time, a non-medical grade face mask will be provided.

Cleaning

1. Court building cleaning staff will clean the common areas of the court building so that common spaces are cleaned at least every day.
2. Court staff will clean the courtroom between hearings and between dockets.

3. Court building cleaning staff have been provided cleaning supplies shown to be effective with this coronavirus.
4. Court building cleaning staff have been trained on proper cleaning techniques and provided appropriate personal protective equipment.

I have attempted to confer with all judges of courts with courtrooms in the court building regarding this Operating Plan. In developing the plan, I consulted with the La Porte Health Authority and mayor, 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: ~~5/14/2020~~
MAY 15, 2020



Presiding Judge,
La Porte Municipal Court of Record

(COVID Operating Plan (003))

VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

If you are:

Over age 65, or

Have a serious underlying health condition, such as high blood pressure, chronic lung disease, diabetes, obesity, or

Have an immune system compromised by chemotherapy for cancer, or

Have another condition requiring therapy,

Please contact Court Administrator, Cathy Haney, at 281/842-0401 to discuss alternate accommodations.