

IN THE 368TH, 395TH AND 425TH DISTRICT COURT

WILLIAMSON COUNTY

AND

IN COUNTY COURTS AT LAW NUMBERS
ONE, THREE AND FOUR

STATE OF TEXAS

**GENERAL ORDER:
COURT OPERATIONS IN WILLIAMSON COUNTY
FAMILY COURTS UNDER THE 2020 STATE OF DISASTER
COVID-19 AND RELATED CORONAVIRUS**

This General Order is issued in response to the Local State of Disaster that has been declared by the County Judge of Williamson County, as well as the declarations by the Governor of the State of Texas, and by the President of the United States, and in conformance with *Emergency Orders Regarding the COVID-19 State of Disaster* issued by the Supreme Court of Texas and the Court of Criminal Appeals¹.

The Courts of Williamson County are open, “and every person...shall have remedy by due course of law.” (Tx. Const. Art. I Sec. 13). The Courts now have the ability to handle all essential and an increasing number of non-essential matters. The intent of this order is to set forth instructions for the administration of justice in ALL MATTERS heard by the Family Courts of Williamson County, Texas.

The Court finds that the State of Disaster requires certain steps to be taken in order to mitigate risk to the health and safety of the public, parties, and employees of the Court, and so it is therefore ORDERED that, effective immediately and continuing until further order the following rules will be in place:

1. **JURY TRIALS:** Due to the limitations on mass gatherings limiting the Courts’ ability to impanel juries, all JURY TRIALS in ALL FAMILY COURT matters scheduled through June 30, 2020 are CONTINUED without prejudice to either party and, consistent with the directive of the Supreme Court of Texas and the Court of Criminal Appeals, this Court finds that the ends of justice are served by this continuance.
2. **SETTLEMENT ENCOURAGED:** During this period, the parties are strongly encouraged to continue to conference or attend mediation, in order to resolve cases, where appropriate.
3. **In the best interest of the community and in the interest of public health please do not attempt to visit the Williamson County Courthouse in person for any family court matter without prior, direct communication with the court.**
4. **SUBMISSION.** Motions to be heard on submission are:
 - a. Agreed matters

¹ Misc. Docket No. 20-9042 (Tex.) Misc. Docket No. 20-007 (Tex. Crim. App.), accessed at <https://www.txcourts.gov/media/1446056/209042.pdf>

- b. Agreed Uncontested Divorces: Please complete the attached Statement of Evidence along with the Agree Final Decree of Divorce and submit through e-file.
- c. Matters agreed to be heard on submission by the parties with permission of the court.

5. **VIRTUAL COURTROOMS.** Due to exigent circumstances the Court requires hearings to be scheduled via VIRTUAL COURTROOM TECHNOLOGIES. All Family Courts in Williamson County are utilizing Microsoft Teams to set its Virtual Courtroom Hearings. Microsoft Teams is a cloud-based team collaboration software that is part of the Office 365 Suit of applications. The core capabilities in Microsoft Teams include business messaging, calling, video meetings and file sharing. The following procedures are in place for obtaining a hearing date in the Family Courts of Williamson County, Texas.

STEP ONE: Contact the Court Administrator to schedule a chambers conference with the judge. The Court Administrator will set the conference on Teams and the Court will initiate the Teams conference call. Ensure that your computer has: a) internet access; b) video camera; and c) microphone. If you can only participate by telephone, please notify the court at the time of scheduling the Teams Chamber Conference.

- a. For all requested CHAMBERS CONFERENCES, the party requesting the conference shall contact, via electronic mail, the Court Administrator of the court where the case is assigned and provide the following information:
 - 1) Cause number and name of parties;
 - 2) The email address of the attorneys;
 - 3) Need for an interpreter or other accommodation
- b. The Court Administrator will set the CHAMBERS CONFERENCE by sending the attorneys an email calendar invitation through Microsoft Teams with a specific day and time for the hearing. On the day of the hearing, select “JOIN MICROSOFT TEAMS MEETING” in your calendar on the Teams app.

STEP TWO: At the conclusion of the Teams Chamber Conference, the court will instruct the parties whether the court will: require mediation, set a Teams Virtual Courtroom hearing or further action.

STEP THREE: If the court orders the parties to schedule a Teams Virtual Courtroom hearing, the parties will contact the Court Administrator to schedule the Teams Virtual Courtroom hearing.

- a. All parties appearing must have internet access, video camera, microphone and the Microsoft Teams Application downloaded.
- b. For all requested VIRTUAL COURTROOM HEARINGS, the party requesting the hearing **shall contact, via electronic mail, the Court Administrator of the court where the case is assigned and provide the following information:**
 - 1) Cause number and name of the parties;
 - 2) The email address of the attorneys, parties and witnesses;
 - 3) Need for an interpreter or other accommodation
- c. The Court Administrator will set the VIRTUAL COURTROOM HEARING by sending the attorneys an email calendar invitation through Microsoft Teams with a specific day and time for the hearing. On the day of the hearing, select “JOIN MICROSOFT TEAMS MEETING” in your calendar on the Teams app. **It is the responsibility of the attorneys to properly notify the witnesses and the parties of the hearing and the procedure for joining the hearing.**

- d. There are several methods the hearing can be conducted. Counsel may have their client and witnesses physically present in their office. Counsel may also call in from one location, the client can call in from another location, and a witness can call in from a different location. To have visual capabilities, in addition to audio, you must have a computer, smartphone, or tablet with a webcam. The Court strongly recommends the parties and counsel appear using visual capabilities. If the parties fail to appear visually, the Court may determine it is more appropriate to reschedule the hearing for a date after the disaster declaration lifts.
- e. Witness testimony will be taken by the Official Court Reporter. Additionally, the Court may choose to conduct an audio-visual recording of the proceeding.
- f. **EXHIBITS:** Parties will be required to electronically provide the court reporter and opposing counsel/party their pre-marked exhibits no later than 24 hours prior to the hearing. The Official Court Reporter will keep and file copies of exhibits per normal procedure. Following the hearing, the Court will sign orders electronically.
- g. **Please be patient as we refine the process of conducting virtual courtroom hearings.**

IT IS THEREFORE ORDERED that the party scheduling the Virtual Courtroom Hearing serve notice of the hearing pursuant to the Texas Rules of Civil Procedure and the terms of this General Order.

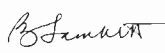
IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that the party scheduling the Virtual Courtroom Hearing include instructions sufficient for the opposing counsel and party to make an appearance at the hearing.

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that the party scheduling the Virtual Courtroom Hearing provide the COURT ADMINISTRATORS with sufficient contact information for the attorneys and parties, so that the court administrator can calendar the hearing utilizing Microsoft Teams. This will require a valid email address for all parties and attorneys.

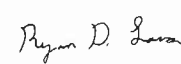
The Court reminds counsel and the public that all necessary steps will be taken to ensure that the Family Courts of Williamson County function effectively and efficiently during this disaster period. As this situation continues to evolve, this order may be modified or extended. We take seriously our obligation to balance the interest of justice and the health and safety of our courthouse community and the community at large. All are requested to exercise patience in this unprecedented situation.

This order shall be filed with the Williamson County District Clerk and shall be published on both the "All District Courts" webpage and the "All County Courts at Law" webpage.


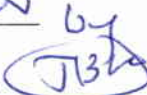
IT IS SO ORDERED THIS 30th DAY OF MARCH 2020


Digitally signed by Hon.
Betsy F. Lambeth
Date: 2020.03.30
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Betsy F. Lambeth
Judge, 425th District Court


Digitally signed by
Ryan D. Larson
Date: 2020.03.31
14:43:13 -05'00'

Ryan Larson
Judge, 395th District Court


Rick Kennon
Judge, 368th District Court 


John McMaster
Judge, County Court at Law No. 4


Digitally signed by Doug
Arnold
Date: 2020.03.31 14:47:33
-05'00'

Doug Arnold
Judge, County Court at Law No. 3


Digitally signed by Brandy
Hallford
Date: 2020.03.31 13:22:54
-05'00'

Brandy Hallford
County Court at Law No. 1