

NORTH CAROLINA
9th Judicial District
11th Prosecutorial District

IN THE GENERAL COURT OF JUSTICE
DISTRICT COURT DIVISION
Criminal Section

VANCE COUNTY

ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER REGARDING EXPANDING OPERATIONS FOR
VANCE COUNTY CRIMINAL DISTRICT COURTS

Acknowledging that social distancing and other safety measures will likely remain in effect at least in the short term after our Court System Criminal Operations begin expanding, the undersigned hereby Orders the following protocols and procedures to be followed during the planned expansion of Vance County Criminal District Courts and the actual expansion of the same:

I. COUNTY HEALTH DIRECTOR/COUNTY MANAGER/SHERIFF

During both the planning of the Vance County Criminal Court's expansion and the actual expansion, the undersigned will regularly contact and consult with the Vance County Health Director, the Vance County Manager, the Vance County Clerk of Superior Court and the Vance County Sheriff. The purposes of said consultations include: setting appropriate safety protocols, ensuring compliance with safety protocols, reviewing said safety protocols for effectiveness/ease of implementation, and ensuring all persons are knowledgeable of their responsibilities under the terms of this Order.

II. CAPACITY AND SOCIAL DISTANCING:

Courtroom audience seating shall be determined in accordance with social distancing guidelines requiring six feet of separation in all directions. Socially distanced audience seating shall be marked with numbered placards placed in numerical sequence. The placards or other type of signage used for seat marking should be approved by the County Manager and should be provided by the County. Audience members shall fill the seats in order beginning with seat 1 and continuing numerically through the last numbered seat.

Social distancing requirements shall also be enforced in the areas where persons are waiting to enter the Courthouse Annex and the District Courtroom. Floor line-up markings located at least six feet away from other such markings shall be placed in hallways, entrance

ways and other common areas where persons stand awaiting entry to the Courtroom. Additionally, markings on floors or sidewalks should be made in at least six feet intervals outside and along the edge of the sidewalk up to the point of entry of the Courthouse. The total number of line-up marks both inside and outside the Courthouse should equal the number of audience seats available in the Courtroom

Additionally, and if not already existing, County Maintenance staff shall have appropriate signage made that informs the public that entry in the Courthouse and the Courtroom is prohibited to persons having any of the current symptoms of the COVID-19 virus. Said signs shall include that all persons must wear protective masks or face coverings inside the Courthouse and Courtroom if the same are available. The signs shall contain a current list of all known COVID-19 symptoms and shall be prominently placed at the public entrance to the Courthouse Annex and at the public entrance to the Criminal District Courtroom.

III. COURT SESSIONS AND PROCEDURES:

Each daily session of Vance County Criminal District Court shall consist of 4 periods, the first three of which are Administrative Periods and during which **only Defendants** will be allowed into the Courtroom's audience area. The number of Defendants allowed into Courtrooms during each administrative period shall match the number of seats marked in the audience area of the Courtroom. In each Administrative Period, the first Defendant entering the Courtroom shall be directed by security to seat 1, the second to seat 2, the third to seat 3 and so on until the numbered seats are full.

A. Administrative Periods:

On Criminal District Court days, Courthouse Security will begin allowing Defendants to enter the Courtroom at 9:15 a.m. The First Administrative Period shall begin promptly at 9:30 a.m. Once the Courtroom's audience seats are filled, Courthouse Security shall require everyone else in the entry line and elsewhere in the Courthouse to exit the Courthouse and the premises until 15 minutes prior to the next Administrative Period's projected starting time, at which time persons can begin lining up to enter the next period of the session. Except as noted below in Section VI. G., once the seats in the Courtroom are filled for any period, no one else shall enter the Courtroom until allowed by Security when seating is begun for the next Period. During any Administrative Period, the Court shall address Defendants individually in numerical order beginning with seat 1. The Court shall address all preliminary matters involved with Defendants including, but not limited to, the right to court appointed counsel and/or private counsel, first time continuance requests, and guilty/responsible pleas to cases in which there are no victims. After addressing each Defendant's preliminary issues, if a further trial or hearing is necessary, the Court shall determine and announce if the additional hearing will be held on that day of Court during the 4th period or on a later Court date. After each individual Defendant's cases are addressed, the Defendant shall immediately leave the Courtroom and Courthouse until the return

time set on that day or the new continuance Court date. The Second and Third Administrative Periods shall be dealt with in the same manner as the First Period.

The First Administrative period shall last from 9:30 a.m. until the later occurring of 10:30 a.m. or until such time as all First Period Defendants have been dealt with preliminarily. The Second Administrative Period shall begin at the later occurring of 10:45 a.m. or 15 minutes subsequent to the first period's end and shall end one hour after it began. The Third Administrative Period shall begin 15 minutes after the end of the Second Administrative Period and shall last until that period's last Defendant's matters have been handled per these guidelines.

B. Breaks--Administrative Periods, Lunch and Cleanings:

At the end of each of the first two Administrative Periods, there shall be a 15-minute break during which each Courthouse Maintenance Staff shall conduct a disinfectant "wipe down" cleaning of the Courtroom substantial enough to meet safety protocols. After the Third Administrative Period, there shall be an hour lunch break during which Maintenance shall perform an appropriate Courtroom cleaning considering the number of persons attending the three Administrative Periods on that Court date. During all breaks, the **only** persons allowed in the Courtroom are Courthouse Maintenance Staff.

Maintenance Staff shall also ensure that hand-sanitizing stations are located at or near the entrance of the Courthouse and before the entry into the Courtroom. Said stations should be checked frequently to confirm they are working and contain enough sanitizer.

C. Fourth Period--Trials and Pleas:

The Fourth Period is designated to handle and conduct guilty plea hearings and trials for Defendants pleading not guilty to charged offenses. The Fourth Period will begin promptly at 2:30 p.m. At 2:15 p.m., Courthouse Security will allow Courtroom entry to Defendants, alleged Victims, and Witnesses necessary for trials. Courthouse Security shall direct Defendants and Defense Witnesses to sit in the audience area on the side of the Courtroom behind the Defense Attorneys' table. Victims and State's Witnesses shall be directed to sit in the audience area located behind the District Attorney's table. During this Period, the Court should first address any plea agreements, including cases involving victims. The order of these cases called for plea shall be determined by the District Attorney. Thereafter, the Court shall conduct trials for Defendants pleading not guilty/responsible. The order of the cases called for trial shall be determined by the District Attorney.

D. Jail Cases:

In-custody Defendants needing 96-hour hearings, 72-hour hearings, 48-hour hearings or who have not been advised of the charges against them and their right to counsel shall be

addressed at 9:00 a.m. using CourtCall, WebEx or another AOC approved remote platform to access jail cases.

ALL OTHER JAIL CASES (i.e. all Defendants on the docket having an attorney or who have waived their right to an attorney and are representing themselves) shall be addressed during the 4th session of court.

E. Courthouse Security Guards (sometimes noted as Courthouse Security or “Security”):

Courthouse Security is an essential part of the adequate functioning and operation of the Vance County District Criminal Courts. Security will provide information about the Court’s operation and will control the inflow and outflow of persons into the Courthouse and the Courtroom. Judges should extensively consult with Courthouse Security regarding the protocols and procedures herein set forth. In addition to their pre-existing work duties, Security will be responsible under these guidelines for the following:

1. maintaining social distancing requirements for persons lined up to enter the Courthouse and the Courtroom;
2. measuring temperatures of persons and inquiring about COVID-19 symptoms exhibited by any persons seeking entry into the Courthouse and Courtroom (NOTE: taking temperature readings should occur only if Security has appropriate devices such as non-contact “gun” thermometers **and** Security deems it safe to do so);
3. preventing persons exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms from entering the Courthouse and Courtroom;
4. requiring persons who have protective masks or protective face coverings available to wear them at all times while in the Courthouse;
5. ensuring only Defendants enter the Courtroom during the Administrative Periods, telling persons how to be seated once inside the Courtroom, and ensuring only allowed persons enter the Courtroom during the Fourth Period;
6. efficiently dispersing persons from the Courthouse when the Courtroom is full for any Period so as to minimize the number of persons in the Courthouse, and routinely providing information as to when to begin lining up for the next Period of Court, if there is to be a next period;
7. clearing the Courtroom after each period expires;
8. except as set out below, ensuring that only Defendants who attended an Administrative Period on a Court date and were told to return later that day enter the Courtroom during the Fourth Period of that Court day;

9. repeatedly relaying to the public clear instructions as to the operation of these requirements including who is allowed to be in Court during any Period contemplated, repeatedly explaining how persons should line-up, lining persons up when awaiting entry into the Courtroom and Courthouse, and informing victims, witnesses and other necessary persons when they should return to the Courthouse to line-up for entry into Court for the Fourth Hearing Period; and

10. explaining that notices of new court dates and/or subpoenas will be sent by the Clerk's Office to Defendants, Victims and Witnesses who did not make it inside the Courtroom during any period of a Court session.

IV. CLERKS:

Clerks remain indispensable to the Vance County District Criminal Courts' operation under these guidelines. As the record keepers, Clerks are tasked with many duties. The provisions of this Order likely substantially increase our Clerk's responsibilities. Judges should regularly confer with the Clerks before and during the effective period of this Order so as to make them aware of their new responsibilities that may be in addition to responsibilities they are already expected to handle.

During each session of Court, the Clerks shall note in their records which Defendants appeared in Court during the First, Second and Third Periods of the session and shall note the result of their appearance (i.e.-continuance date, plea, trial, etcetera). **Except as noted below, only Defendants who appeared in one of the three Administrative Periods of a day of Court can have their cases handled during the Fourth Period of that specific day of Court.** For Defendants that do not reach the Courtroom on their court date, the Clerk, at the end of the Fourth Period, shall inform the Court of their cases, and along with the District Attorney and Defendant's Counsel (if applicable), the Judge shall set continuance dates for said cases. The Clerk shall send out notice of new court dates assigned to Defendants not appearing in Court. For Defendant's not appearing in Court during the three Administrative Periods, the Court shall not issue Failures to Appear and/or Orders for Arrest. For Defendants who appeared in an Administrative Period who are told to return for the Fourth Trial/Plea Period, and who fail to appear in the Fourth Period, the Presiding Judge has the discretion to issue FTAs and Orders for Arrest.

At the end of the Administrative Period held immediately prior to the lunch break, the Clerks shall provide a copy of the calendar with Clerk's notations as to which Defendants are to return to the Fourth Period. Courthouse Security should use said calendar to determine which Defendants, Victims and Witnesses should be allowed into the Fourth Period. Security shall require all persons not associated with one of the Fourth Period Defendants' cases to leave the premises and said persons shall be told that they will be notified via mail, subpoena or otherwise of the next scheduled court date to appear.

V. ATTORNEYS:

Attorneys will be representing many persons in Vance County Criminal District Court during the period of expanding operations. Attorneys often have to travel between several counties to meet their clients' needs. As a result, the time-lines set out herein are likely to be burdensome for Attorneys needing to be in more than one place at a time. Accordingly, **and during any period of any session**, the Court and the District Attorney shall try to resolve Defense Attorney cases on the docket with pleas on non-waivable and waivable offenses if such can be done in a timely manner and without undue delay .

Regarding waivable offenses, Defendants should be encouraged by Counsel not to attend Court. For non-waivable offenses, if the Attorney's client is in the Courtroom when the Attorney appears, the Court shall handle the case as soon as practical. If the Defendant was not able to make it into the Court session, Defense Counsel shall let the Court know immediately and have the client on standby near the Courthouse (i.e.-in Courthouse parking lot or other close area). Upon receiving Court approval, Defense Counsel shall promptly notify Security to allow the Defendant client into the Courtroom when he/she enters the building. Upon entering the Courtroom, the represented Defendant shall take any available numbered seat and the Court shall hear the Attorney's case as soon as is practical.

If the Defense Attorney's case is one involving a Victim who wishes to attend and is entitled to attend the plea hearing, then, in advance as far as possible, and so as to allow for notice to the Victim, the Defense Attorney shall let the District Attorney know of such and of the time the Attorney will appear in Court. Under said circumstances, the District Attorney should coordinate with Security to allow the Victim into the Courtroom when a marked seat is available during the appropriate Period of Court. When a Victim wishes to attend a hearing but cannot attend due to short notice, then, if appropriate under the circumstances, the case shall be continued to a date set by the Court.

When Defense Counsel has cases on a docket for trial, the Defense Counsel shall notify the District Attorney as soon as practical of learning of the necessity of a trial. On the trial date, the Defense Counsel shall notify his client and the Client's witnesses, and the District Attorney shall notify the Victim and the State's witnesses to arrive at the Courthouse during the time for entry into the Fourth Period of any session. In any such case, if parties or necessary witnesses do not make it into the Courtroom, the District Attorney and Defense Counsel shall coordinate with Security about allowing entry for such persons into the Courtroom when numbered seats become available.

VI. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS AND REQUIREMENTS:

A. No guideline, protocol or directive in this plan is designed to infringe upon, interfere with, or supersede the provisions of the Crime Victim's Rights Act. In the event that

circumstances possibly violative of said Act arise during sessions conducted under these guidelines, then the Court should follow the Act's provisions and alter proceedings to allow compliance with the same.

B. Nothing herein prevents the Court from taking a plea to an offense involving a Victim without said Victim's presence during any Court Period so long as the District Attorney has determined through due diligence it is appropriate to go forward with the plea in the Victim's absence and the proceeding will comply with the provisions of the Crime Victim's Rights Act.

C. All Judges, District Attorneys, Defense Attorneys, Clerks, Security, Law Enforcement, Courthouse Maintenance Staff and others involved in the Criminal Court sessions designed by these guidelines should communicate freely and regularly, both prior to and during sessions, to help the processes outlined herein move smoothly, efficiently and safely.

D. The time frames herein for beginning and ending Periods within any session of Court are provided for guidance. As no two Court dates are ever the same, on the day of any session conducted pursuant to these guidelines, the trial Judge has the discretion to modify said time frames, alter the number of Administrative Periods and/or plea/trial periods held, decrease the number of persons allowed in the Courtroom for any Period held, and take other safety measures the Judge deems appropriate for any session.

E. Any person seeking entry to the Courtroom who presents with a fever or any other symptom associated with COVID-19 shall be required to immediately leave the Courthouse premises and shall not return to the Courthouse for at least 72 hours.

F. Safety of all persons involved in the Court System is the of the utmost concern. The goal of these guidelines to conduct effective and efficient Court sessions that completely dispose of as many cases as possible while maintaining the highest state of safety possible.

G. As seats become available in the Courtroom during any Administrative Periods as Defendants leave and as seats become available as persons leave any Plea/Trial Period(s), Courthouse security, upon request, shall allow members of the general public to enter the Courtroom and fill up to five seats; said members of the general public shall sit in numbered seats designated for the audience.

H. The undersigned reserves the right to modify the provisions herein as deemed necessary and appropriate for the efficient and safe administration of Justice.

This Order being signed the ___ day of May, 2020 and being effective as of the beginning date for expansion of the Vance County Criminal District Court's operations for the 9th Judicial District and the 11th Prosecutorial District.

John W. Davis, Chief District Court Judge
9th Judicial District

Adam S. Keith, District Court Judge
9th Judicial District

Caroline S. Burnette, District Court Judge
9th Judicial District