

Hamilton Municipal Court

Statement Regarding COVID-19 RESPONSE

COVID-19 has impacted our lives already, in very significant ways. And the response to it by governments, businesses and individuals has been equally impactful, to say the least. It has been hard to accurately assess whether we are experiencing the storm of consequences to this virus right now, or whether we will look back at this time as being the calm before the storm. Communications from the Ohio Judicial Conference have made it clear that what courts do in response to the virus will be based on local decisions made by each individual court. We have been told not to expect top down directives from the Supreme Court to address the issues presented by the virus except that the Supreme Court has indicated that it expects courts to remain open. In that regard I have put together a COVID-19 Response Team consisting of myself, Michelle Deaton, Sharon Couch and Becky French. We have been meeting and compiling information to help understand the situation as best we can and to make the best decision that we can. I want to thank each team member for your thoughtful consideration and actions concerning our meetings regarding Hamilton Municipal Court's response to the virus. At this time, due to the scientific uncertainties surrounding the virus, I believe we have more planning to do, more contingencies to consider, and more possible consequences to be cognizant of. However, I also believe that it is time to implement steps to protect the safety of our employees and consumers now, to help slow the spread of the virus, and to assure all that we are aware of the concerns of everyone regarding this unusual situation. These steps are taken to further the clear goal of our Continuity of Operations Plan, which reminds all that the essential function of our court, even in these times, is to fairly dispense justice, to defendants, to victims and to all who use our courts to resolve the conflicts of our community. The safety of the Hamilton Municipal Court staff is an integral aspect of achieving this goal.

SOCIAL DISTANCING

Social distancing refers to measures that lessen direct interaction between and among our staff and that lessens interaction between the general public and court personnel. In that regard we take the following measures:

1. We will implement an expanded online and telephone payment protocol for payments to HMC.
2. We will utilize an external payment drop box, behind the city offices on Court Street, which will additionally allow payments to be made without requiring people to come into the court area.

3. We will allow for continuances to be requested over the phone, in a procedure using forms that will allow certain cases to be continued perfunctorily and other to be continued after review and with a return phone call to the requesting party. This will allow those with symptoms to avoid contact with court personnel and with others and will allow the quarantining associated with this virus to take place appropriately.
4. We will use video conferencing and skype technology to conduct arraignments and non trial court appearances for jail Defendants.
5. Continuance of jury trials will be considered for all non jail Defendants, subject to appropriate time guidelines.
6. Fine Review procedures will be amended to allow for less frequent court appearances while maintaining the requirement of regular current payments.
7. Eviction proceedings will be reviewed to implement changes consistent with social distancing goals, while honoring the rights of landlords and tenants.
8. Probation guidelines will be temporarily amended to allow for less frequent in person reporting and expanded use of phone and other technology to achieve reporting goals.

EMPLOYEE PROTECTION MEASURES

1. Gloves and cleaning supplies will be available to encourage all to frequently wash hands and clean work areas to reduce the chance of exposure.
2. Regular updates and memos from the COVID Response Team and City and County Health Departments will be provided to employees of the court.
3. Employees will be encouraged to become educated about COVID-19 and to take the steps recommended by the City and the Health Departments when symptoms occur to employees or family members.
4. Additional cleaning and disinfecting of common areas will be instituted in areas of high general public traffic, like courtroom podium areas, door knobs, pay window areas etc.
5. Becky French will be the court point person for issues concerning the COVID-19 virus, to facilitate communication to and from employees and to help the Response Team to inform all of important developments.

As we find ourselves in the throes of determining how to maintain essential court functions and prioritize the safety of court employees, in this unusual situation, I suggest that we remain respectful of each other and of the general public that looks to us to resolve their conflicts. I ask each of you to communicate your concerns and to take the guidance suggested concerning social distancing to heart. The Response Team will continue to monitor all avenues to identify best practices for all areas of our Court's response to COVID-19. Thanks to all, in advance, for your anticipated cooperation and understanding.

COVID-19 Response Team

Daniel J. Gattermeyer
Judge

Michelle Deaton
Court Administrator

Sharon Couch
Dpty Court Administrator

Becky French
CRT Point Person