

Georgia Middle Bankruptcy Court
Facility Entry Protocols During COVID-19 Pandemic
Court Reopening Plan Phase 3
As of June 10, 2021

Intent: The intent of this revision to the July 2, 2020 protocols is to bring the Court's entry and in-person hearing protocols up to date since the issuance of new CDC guidance regarding mask usage and social distancing for fully vaccinated persons.

The Court is now in Phase 3 of the Reopening Plan. Under Phase 3, the staff has returned to work in the office environment and staff are teleworking at the pre-pandemic level. Staff are permitted to travel to Court locations for essential business travel and training events.

We have also resumed public-facing activities and site visits. Attorneys may request in-person hearings (or videoconference hearings) as needed. In-person mass calendars will not resume until further notice. When national authorities declare the pandemic over, we will move to Phase 4, which is a return to normal operations. At that time, the Judges will determine what activities will continue to remain telephonic and those which will revert back to mandatory in-person hearings.

The below items are common to all Court facilities in Albany, Athens, Columbus, Macon, and Valdosta.

1. Before any in-person hearing, courtroom deputies must assess, in advance, how many visitors are estimated to attend Court on a particular day. Attorneys will provide the Courtroom Deputy the number of people who will attend the hearing no later than 3:00 p.m. prior to the last business day before the hearing. Courtroom Deputies will provide this information to supervisors and Court Security Officers (CSO's). Supervisors will need the information from the Courtroom Deputy to appropriately handle any unusual situation. Parties should contact the Courtroom Deputy to request telephonic hearings when an in-person hearing is not necessary.

2. Also, before any in-person hearing, attorneys are encouraged to work out differences and stipulations with the trustee or other parties to reduce the necessity of a hearing and to reduce the number of people attending any hearing.

3. The following measures are being taken to accommodate in-person hearings and assumes parties have been fully vaccinated. For parties not fully vaccinated, they will be required to wear a mask and maintain appropriate social distancing in accordance with CDC guidance.

a. Social distancing markers are not required and thus will not be emplaced in Court facilities.

b. Signage will be placed on the doors stating the Court's mask usage policy for both fully vaccinated persons and not fully vaccinated persons.

c. Health screening questions that visitors will be asked to answer will be placed inside the Court facility but before the visitor passes through the CSO station.

d. A table will be placed near the screening questions location and a dispenser containing masks, tongs, and liquid sanitizer will be placed on the table for use by visitors. CSO's will ask visitors to use the hand sanitizer prior to approaching the CSO station.

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e. A temporary sanitization station will be placed inside each courtroom. This sanitizer is not intended for Court staff.

f. An “out of order” sign will be placed on the water fountains in all public areas. Visitors will be permitted to bring bottled water (only) into the courtroom for personal use.

g. At the attorney tables, the microphones will be placed such that attorneys are seated on opposite ends of the tables.

h. Surface sanitizer (or sanitizer wipes), paper towels, and hand sanitizer will be placed on the attorney’s tables for use by attorneys. A trash can will be collocated with the surface sanitizer.

i. Attorney-client meeting rooms may be used as normal if all parties are fully vaccinated. If all parties are not fully vaccinated, the attorney and client may be required to step back out of the Court facility in order to confer with their client and maintain social distancing standards.

j. In the Intake area, sneeze guards will be emplaced in Intake areas where practicable. If required, stanchions will be placed to channel visitors to a certain area of the Intake counter where the sneeze guard is located.

k. Evidence that must be entered during a hearing will be passed up in the usual (manual) way. Each participant in the exchange of documents will use hand sanitizer provided by the Court after handling any documents passed to them by another person.

4. In-Person Hearings Entry Protocol:

a. If a large number of parties (considered to be 10 or more) attend an in-person hearing at the Court, a Court staff may be tasked to perform “Gatekeeper” duties for in-person Court hearings. The Gatekeeper’s primary duty is for controlling the flow of visitors in and out of the Court facility and courtroom. The Gatekeeper is not responsible for performing CSO security duties. All Court staff are eligible to perform the Gatekeeper duties.

b. Prior to the hearing:

i. The CSO will direct visitors to signage which has COVID-19 related health screening questions the visitor must answer in the negative to gain entry. If the visitor answers in the affirmative, they will be asked to exit the Court facility and call the case manager (or whomever the Gatekeeper asks them to call) in order to receive additional instructions which will involve the scheduling of a teleconference or videoconference hearing (for those visitors attending hearings). CSO’s are not permitted to ask visitors their vaccination status. The visitor, if he or she is an attorney or an attorney’s client, should have a mask provided by the attorney if the visitor has not been fully vaccinated. If a visitor who is not fully vaccinated arrives without a mask, the CSO will direct the visitor to the table where the visitor can obtain a mask. All visitors will be asked to use hand sanitizer.

ii. Assuming the visitor gives all negative answers to the COVID-19 related health screening questions, the CSO will direct the visitor to the security screening area in order to conduct normal security screening operations. The CSO will then direct the visitor towards the appropriate courtroom.

c. Sanitization and Mask Usage:

i. Prior to hearings: The local cleaning contractor will continue to sanitize courtrooms as normal. "Deep" sanitization may be required if we gain knowledge after a hearing that a visitor is COVID positive. The Courtroom Deputy is responsible for sanitizing their own workspace and the Judge's workspace (unless the Judge wishes to sanitize his own space). The ECRO is responsible for sanitizing their own workspace and the microphones. The law clerk, if present, is responsible for sanitizing their own workspace.

ii. During hearings: We will make available solid surface sanitizer and hand sanitizer for attorney tables that attorneys may use during the hearing to sanitize their table. Court staff will sanitize as necessary. Disposable microphone covers will be available until further notice. Masks are not required for fully vaccinated parties. All persons not fully vaccinated and not actively participating in their hearing or are awaiting their hearing, are required to wear a mask.

iii. After each hearing: The local cleaning contractor will sanitize courtrooms as normal.

5. Intake Access and Exit Protocol: Initial entry procedures for visitors wishing to go to the Intake counter to conduct business with the Court will be similar as stated above for visitors attending hearings.

Protocols that are pertinent to a specific courtroom.

1. Macon:

a. For visitors going to the Intake area in Macon, elevator occupancy will no longer be restricted to one person at a time. However, individuals should be cognizant of their own vaccination status and act accordingly. Signage will be placed on the elevator that states, "If you are unvaccinated and want to ride the elevator alone, please ask a CSO or Court staff for assistance."

b. A sneeze guard will be placed between the closest Court staff and the witness chair because the distance is only 5 feet.

c. In Courtroom B (Judge Carter), under the current configuration, the Law Clerk, Courtroom Deputy, and ECRO all sit at work areas adjacent to each other. The Law Clerk will be moved to a temporary table to the side and the Courtroom Deputy will move to the vacant workstation. This will provide more than sufficient social distancing for all three individuals.

2. Columbus: A sneeze guard will be placed between the Courtroom Deputy and the ECRO because the distance is only 5 feet.

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3. Albany:

a. For attorneys who need to coordinate with the Courtroom Deputy, they will be allowed entry to the Clerk's office area and be seated in a chair outside of the Courtroom Deputy's office but within easy and private conversation distance (about 16 feet).

b. A chair will be placed outside the Clerk's office door for the next attorney waiting to speak with the Courtroom Deputy.

c. The chair currently in the outer waiting area of the Clerk's office area will be placed in the rotunda area for others waiting to see the Courtroom Deputy.

d. The attorney tables in the courtroom in Albany are configured one in front of the other but there is sufficient distance to allow two attorneys per table.

e. There are three attorney conference rooms in the anteroom outside the Court where attorneys/clients or other visitors can wait. Maximum occupancy of the attorney conference rooms is 2.

f. Because distances between people in the Albany courtroom, under the occupancy plan, are in no cases less than 6 feet, a sneeze guard is not required for any situation. However, we have purchased a sneeze guard for Albany and the sneeze guard will be stored in the Courtroom Deputy's office.

4. Athens:

a. For attorneys who need to coordinate with the Courtroom Deputy, they will be allowed entry to the Clerk's office area and be seated in a chair outside of the Courtroom Deputy's office but within easy and private conversation distance (about 15 feet).

b. A chair will be placed outside the Clerk's office door for the next attorney waiting to speak with the Courtroom Deputy.

c. At the attorney table closest to the lectern, the chair closest to the lectern will be removed because there is not sufficient social distancing space between the chair and the lectern.

5. Valdosta:

a. For attorneys who need to coordinate with the Courtroom Deputy, there is no dedicated Clerk's Office space and attorneys will continue to coordinate with the Courtroom Deputy in the courtroom either before or after hearings. However, attorneys will utilize the unused extra lectern at the counter nearest the Courtroom Deputy.

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b. There is no conference room available for attorneys in Valdosta unless special arrangements are made by Court Staff. Attorneys typically confer with their clients in the hallway adjacent to the courtroom.

c. The attorney tables in the courtroom in Valdosta are configured one in front of the other but there is sufficient distance to allow two attorneys per table.

d. In the event we are required to conduct hearings in the small Valdosta courtroom, we need to be prepared to have chairs available in the hallway adjacent to the small courtroom.