

GRAND JURIES TO RESUME IN THE APPALACHIAN JUDICIAL CIRCUIT

Our communities have been hit hard by the global pandemic. As the COVID-19 outbreak in Georgia continues, the Appalachian Judicial Circuit is continually working to balance legitimate public health considerations with the necessity to maintain fair and effective administration of justice for citizens and communities within our circuit.

Since the Monday following the first Judicial Emergency Order, put in place by Chief Justice Melton of the Georgia Supreme Court in March of this year, our circuit has been addressing cases. At first, pursuant to the Supreme Court's Judicial Emergency Order, our courts were confined to hearing only emergency civil cases and handling non-jury criminal cases involving incarcerated defendants. However, within weeks, our circuit had the ability to conduct full hearings in person, with appropriate health precautions, or virtually using videoconferencing for the safety of all parties. Since that time, hundreds of cases and matters have been addressed within our circuit, which have involved both emergency and non-emergency issues.

All types of cases are being heard and addressed on a daily basis in all of our counties, following the rules and procedures that are set forth in our circuit's own Judicial Emergency Orders.

Deputy Sheriffs are screening persons as they enter the courthouse for temperatures. Hand sanitization stations are positioned throughout the courthouse, and masks are provided to those entering the courtrooms. In all three counties in our circuit, technology has been installed that allows hearings to be conducted virtually between our court system and the Department of Corrections, as well as many of the local jails throughout the State. This technology has allowed many criminal cases to move forward and be concluded even while in-person proceedings have been limited.

As of September 10, 2020, the Supreme Court has authorized the empaneling of grand juries. Gilmer County shall convene on October 19, 2020, Fannin County shall convene on November 9, 2020 and Pickens County shall convene on November 16, 2020. To keep everyone safe, the

following safety practices will be implemented, based upon guidelines from the Georgia Department of Health and “Guidance for Resuming In-Person Grand Jury Proceedings,” developed by the state Judicial COVID-19 Task Force, and approved by the Judicial Council. Our courts will work diligently to keep all individuals who enter our courthouses and courtrooms safe for the public and all court personnel.

- Strict social distancing guidelines will be required (6 feet or greater).
- Large rooms will be used for all proceedings.
- Temperature checks at the door of the courthouse will be performed, with those registering 100.4 or higher being excluded from entering the courthouse.
- All individuals who enter courtrooms, grand jury rooms or jury assembly rooms must wear masks, and witnesses must wear face shields when testifying before grand jurors or before trial jurors in jury trials.
- Arrival times for witnesses and groups of potential jurors will be staggered to prevent large numbers of people entering or gathering at once in the courthouse.
- Technology will be used whenever possible to minimize contact between persons.
- Use of hand sanitizer is strictly enforced and will be provided when entering courthouse and again when entering courtrooms, grand jury rooms or jury assembly rooms. Hand sanitizer shall be provided at various locations within the courthouse for frequent usage, especially after handling documents.
- Cleaning and disinfection of tabletop surfaces, chairs, witness stand, lectern/podium, and any other common surface area in frequent use shall be performed regularly.

- Jurors who are selected to serve as members of the grand jury shall notify the District Attorney if they show any symptoms of illness, even mild symptoms, during their grand jury service or have been exposed to a COVID-19 positive individual.
- Food and drink, if provided, will be individually packaged.
- Questionnaires will be mailed with the summons to potential jurors in order to screen for vulnerable persons and those with known COVID-19 risks. The questionnaires should be completed promptly and returned to the office of the Clerk of the Superior Court in each county.
- All potential jurors who have not been excused shall call in 48 hours before the date you have been directed to report in order to confirm that you or a family member are not experiencing any current COVID-19 symptoms and/or to confirm the date and time that you are to report has not been changed.

If you would like to review the Judicial Emergency Orders, see a court calendar, read about the types of courts in our circuit, or review a list of family resources in our community, please visit our circuit website at www.appalachiancourts.com. On our website, you will also find our court Twitter feed updates, which you can follow on Twitter @AppalachianCt for up-to-date information about our court system.