

Throughout Texas, counties have been receiving guidance and direction on reopening their courthouses. Just about every county is doing something a little different. Our reopening should take place by June 15th but there are some requirements we must meet based on the guidance and direction we have received.

When we reopen, entry into the courthouse will be limited to the door on the north side of the building that enters the basement. This is the only entrance into the courthouse that has a ramp for handicapped access. All other doors will be secured to prevent entry but will have a “crash bar” installed to facilitate exit in case of emergency. Retrofitting these doors has been researched, quotes obtained, and installation of the equipment will be completed soon.

The primary reason that entry will be limited to one door is that we will be required to screen everyone who seeks access to the building. Hiring six screeners (one for each entrance) would be cost prohibitive, so the county will be hiring one screener who will be stationed at the single point of entry into the courthouse.

The screener will ask questions of each individual regarding any symptoms that may be related to COVID-19 and use an infrared thermometer to determine the temperature of each person. If a person answers yes to any of the screening questions or has a temperature of 100 degrees or more they will be refused entrance and directed to contact the office or court they needed to access. Unless there is some medical reason that precludes the wearing of a facemask, everyone will be expected to wear one. The screener will provide a disposable facemask to anyone who does not have one. The screener will, at least through December, 2020, be a grant funded position.

As far as we know, none of the county employees have been infected with COVID-19. We closed the courthouse and Justice of the Peace offices to walk-in traffic early in the process and have been diligent in cleaning the building. Nevertheless, we have had a professional company come in to disinfect all common areas in the courthouse. This included the hallways, stairways, restrooms, elevator, and courtrooms. The J.P. offices will be disinfecting as well. We anticipate that this will be done at least monthly through December 2020 with funding provided by the Coronavirus Relief Fund grant. We did this on Monday, June 1st.

During normal business hours, courthouse staff will clean these common areas every day. Courtrooms will be cleaned at the end of each day of use. The tables, witness stand, and any other places people may have touched will be cleaned between each hearing.

This will also require an additional staff person. The position will, at least through December, 2020, be a grant funded position.

The courthouse reopening plan will require that social distancing be maintained. Signs will be posted restricting the number of people who may use the elevator. Restroom and courtroom capacities have been established and signs posted restricting the number of participants in these spaces. Seating in courtrooms will be limited to every other row. Additional sanitation stations will be installed in the courthouse to provide access to hand sanitizer throughout the building.

Plexiglass “sneeze shields” have been installed in several offices and several more will be installed. Some of these will be custom designed because they have to be installed on historic cabinets in the offices or because of the unique layout of the office.

Access to some offices will be restricted due to social distancing requirements. The elected officials responsible for those offices will develop plans specific to their spaces. This has been a long-lived disaster and we expect it to continue for several more months. As we reopen, please understand that we are still in the mitigation and response phases of this disaster. We are trying to prevent new infections and to protect our staff members as well as the public from contracting this illness from any contact in the county facilities. Openings of individual offices may be phased in over time. That will be left to each elected official. The driver license office, normally open on the first and third Wednesday of each month, has a new process for setting appointments on-line. Details on those services will be provided by D.P.S.

We will be monitoring the reopening of the courthouse and make adjustments, if necessary, as we proceed through this process. During our closure, most people have accepted the necessary changes and adapted to the “new normal” and we appreciate that. Our confirmed cases, based on data from the state, have remained relatively low and we have had only one confirmed fatality.

Please continue to practice the distancing and disinfecting practices. Reopening businesses and increasing the number of people who can attend events increases the possibility of exposure to someone who has this disease.

Those who are in the vulnerable population should take precautions to protect themselves and their families. Persons who are considered vulnerable individuals include those over 65 and individuals with serious underlying health conditions. If you are attending a court proceeding and you a vulnerable individual, you may contact the District Court at 325-854-1800 or the County Court at 325-854-5805 for special accommodations.

While you are welcome at the courthouse, please remember that many of the functions that used to be handled only face-to-face can now be handled via the internet. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at 325-854-5805 or via email at scott.kniffen@callahancounty.org.