

Amended Alternative Jury Plan

Circuit Court for Dorchester County

In accordance with the Amended Administrative Order “Expanding Statewide Judiciary Operations In Light of the COVID-19 Emergency,” filed in The Court of Appeals of Maryland on February 16, 2021, the Circuit Court for Dorchester County will resume full operations, including jury trials, on Monday, April 26, 2021. Given the continued public health emergency presented by COVID-19, jury selection and jury service will be altered from the past in order to maintain adequate social distancing. The following outlines the Circuit Court for Dorchester County’s plans to protect the public and court staff, while fulfilling the Judiciary’s mission of fair, efficient, and effective justice for all.

To maximize health and safety, everyone will be required to wear a mask at all times and maintain at least 6 feet of social distancing. All individuals will pass through both security and health screenings prior to admission. The areas will be cleaned before and after each day and during the day if circumstances require.

For cases that involve more serious charges, and which call for more preemptory challenges, jury selection will be held offsite to accommodate the large group size needed to select a fair and impartial jury. Court staff and security have made multiple visits to Minnette Mills Dick Memorial Hall in Cambridge to evaluate space, test computer equipment and functions and evaluate feasibility. The location allows a Zoom meeting through the secure private network, which can incorporate the Polycom system in a courtroom at the courthouse. This arrangement permits the recording, through CourtSmart, of the remote proceedings. This location allows for more space, free parking and is in close proximity to the courthouse.

When jurors are summoned for a trial that requires more than four (4) preemptory challenges for each party, the court will have them report to Minnette Mills Dick Memorial Hall, 2000 Hambrooks Blvd., Cambridge, MD 21613 for juror selection. When they enter, jurors will have health and security screenings. The jury commissioner will complete the check-in process and jurors will be provided a clear mask for use. Voir dire will be conducted as usual. Follow up questions, as required, will be asked of individual jurors stepping behind a curtained area to meet with counsel and the judge. A court clerk and security will be present. Tables will be arranged, along with movable plexiglass shields, to separate the masked participants and social distancing will be maintained. “White noise” will be created to allow confidential responses. Jurors who are excused for cause will be allowed to leave immediately and discreetly.

In cases where jury selection extends substantially through lunch, box lunches will be provided to the jurors which will be consumed in their assigned and separated seats.

Once a jury is selected, those jurors will be given a time to report to the Circuit Court for Dorchester County. The remaining jurors who were not selected will be allowed to leave. Once the jurors arrive at the Court, they will go through security and a temperature check screening again. The jury box area in Courtroom 1 has been expanded to include a portion of the gallery to allow appropriate social distance. Remaining gallery spaces will be available for witnesses

and members of the public. Seating in the gallery will be clearly marked to enforce social distancing. Witnesses will be provided a clear mask for use while testifying. This mask must be worn while testifying unless the presiding judge finds good cause otherwise.

In jury trials where only four (4) preemptory challenges are afforded to each party, the jury check-in and selection process will take place in the Dorchester County Circuit Courthouse. The Court intends to seat prospective jurors in both Courtrooms 1 and 2 and tie the two courtrooms together for voir dire questions and responses by using Polycom. Chairs and benches reserved for seating will be clearly marked to maintain social distancing.

While at the courthouse, jurors will have breaks and deliberation in the Jury Assembly Room. Jurors will be escorted between the Juror Assembly Room (now the deliberation room) by sheriff's deputies/bailiffs. By using the Jury Assembly Room for breaks and deliberations, the Court is able to adapt a room with a normal capacity of more than sixty (60) people to one with no more than sixteen (16) people, and therefore maintain social distancing. Masks will continue to be worn and cleaning will take place as hereinbefore stated. There will be no electronic devices permitted so jurors can deliberate confidentially and absent outside influence. Separately packaged snacks and drinks will be available for jurors in the deliberation room. Upon reaching a verdict, the jury will return to Courtroom 1 to deliver the verdict.

The Court extends its sincere thanks all of those who have cooperated to allow the safe resumption of jury trials in Dorchester County.

Brett W. Wilson

Administrative Judge

April 20, 2021