

IN THE SUPREME COURT OF TEXAS

Misc. Docket No. 21-9026

THIRTY-SIXTH EMERGENCY ORDER REGARDING THE COVID-19 STATE OF DISASTER

ORDERED that:

1. Governor Abbott has declared a state of disaster in all 254 counties in the State of Texas in response to the imminent threat of the COVID-19 pandemic. This Order is issued pursuant to Section 22.0035(b) of the Texas Government Code.

2. The Thirty-Third Emergency Order (Misc. Dkt. No. 21-9004) is renewed as amended.

3. Subject only to constitutional limitations, all courts in Texas may in any case, civil or criminal—and must to avoid risk to court staff, parties, attorneys, jurors, and the public—without a participant’s consent:

a. except as provided in paragraph (b), modify or suspend any and all deadlines and procedures, whether prescribed by statute, rule, or order, for a stated period ending no later than June 1, 2021;

b. in all proceedings under Subtitle E, Title 5 of the Family Code:

(i) extend the initial dismissal date as calculated under Section 263.401(a) only as provided by Section 263.401(b) or (b-1);

(ii) for any case previously retained on the court’s docket pursuant to Section 263.401(b) or (b-1), or for any case whose dismissal date was previously modified under an Emergency Order of this Court related to COVID-19, extend the dismissal for an additional period not to exceed 180 days from the date of this Order;

c. except as this Order provides otherwise, allow or require anyone involved in any hearing, deposition, or other proceeding of any kind—including but not limited to a party, attorney, witness, court reporter, grand juror, or petit juror—to participate remotely, such as by teleconferencing, videoconferencing, or other means;

d. consider as evidence sworn statements made out of court or sworn testimony given remotely, out of court, such as by teleconferencing, videoconferencing, or other means;

e. conduct proceedings away from the court's usual location with reasonable notice and access to the participants and the public;

f. require every participant in a proceeding to alert the court if the participant has, or knows of another participant who has: (i) COVID-19 or a fever, chills, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, sore throat, loss of taste or smell, congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting, or diarrhea; or (ii) recently been in close contact with a person who is confirmed to have COVID-19 or exhibiting the symptoms described above;

g. take any other reasonable action to avoid exposing court proceedings to the threat of COVID-19, including requiring compliance with social distancing protocols and face coverings worn over the nose and mouth.

4. Courts should continue to use reasonable efforts to conduct proceedings remotely.

5. Upon request and good cause shown by a court participant other than a juror—including but not limited to a party, an attorney, a witness, or a court reporter—a court must permit the participant to participate remotely in any proceeding, subject to constitutional limitations.

6. A court of appeals may conduct in-person proceedings if the chief justice of the court of appeals adopts minimum standard health protocols for court participants and the public attending court proceedings that will be employed in the courtroom and in public areas of the court building.

7. A district court, statutory or constitutional county court, statutory probate court, justice court, or municipal court may conduct in-person proceedings, including both jury and non-jury proceedings, if the local administrative district judge or presiding judge of a municipal court, as applicable, adopts, in consultation with the judges in the county or municipal court buildings:

a. minimum standard health protocols for court proceedings and the public attending court proceedings that will be employed in all courtrooms and throughout all public areas of the court buildings, including masking, social distancing, or both; and

b. an in-person proceeding schedule for all judges in the county or municipal court buildings, as applicable.

8. A court may conduct an in-person jury proceeding if:

a. to assist with coordination of local resources and to manage capacity issues, the court has obtained prior approval, including a prior approved schedule, for the jury proceeding from the local administrative district judge or presiding judge of the municipal courts, as applicable;

b. the court has considered on the record any objection or motion related to proceeding with the jury proceeding at least seven days before the jury proceeding or as soon as practicable if the objection or motion is made or filed within seven days of the jury proceeding;

c. the court has established communication protocols to ensure that no court participants have tested positive for COVID-19 within the previous 10 days, have had symptoms of COVID-19 within the previous 10 days, or have had recent known exposure to COVID-19 within the previous 14 days;

d. the court has included with the jury summons information on the precautions that have been taken to protect the health and safety of prospective jurors and a COVID-19 questionnaire to be submitted in advance of the jury selection that elicits from prospective jurors information about their exposure or particular vulnerability to COVID-19; and

e. the court has excused or rescheduled prospective jurors who provide information confirming their COVID-19 infection or exposure, or their particular vulnerability to COVID-19 and request to be excused or rescheduled.

9. In criminal cases where confinement in jail or prison is a potential punishment, remote jury proceedings must not be conducted without appropriate waivers and consent obtained on the record from the defendant and prosecutor. In all other cases, remote jury proceedings must not be conducted unless the court has complied with paragraph 8(b).

10. Except for non-binding proceedings, a court may not permit or require a petit juror to appear remotely unless the court ensures that all potential and selected petit jurors have access to technology to participate remotely.

11. The Office of Court Administration should issue, and update from time to time, best practices to assist courts with safely and effectively conducting in-person and remote court proceedings under this Order.

12. In determining a person's right to possession of and access to a child under a court-ordered possession schedule in a Suit Affecting the Parent-Child Relationship, the existing trial court order shall control in all instances. Possession of and access to a child shall not be affected by any shelter-in-place order or other order restricting movement issued by a governmental entity that arises from the pandemic. The original published school schedule shall also control, and possession and access shall not be affected by the school's closure that arises from the pandemic. Nothing herein prevents parties from altering a possession schedule by agreement if allowed by their court order(s), or courts from modifying their orders on an emergency basis or otherwise.

13. An evidentiary panel in an attorney professional disciplinary or disability proceeding may—and must to avoid risk to panel members, parties, attorneys, and the public—without a participant's consent:

- a. conduct the proceeding remotely, such as by teleconferencing, videoconferencing, or other means;
- b. allow or require anyone involved in the proceeding—including but not limited to a party, attorney, witness, court reporter—to participate remotely, such as by teleconferencing, videoconferencing, or other means; and
- c. consider as evidence sworn statements or sworn testimony given remotely, such as by teleconferencing, videoconferencing, or other means.

14. This Order is effective immediately and expires June 1, 2021, except as otherwise stated herein, unless extended by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

15. The Clerk of the Supreme Court is directed to:

- a. post a copy of this Order on www.txcourts.gov;

- b. file a copy of this Order with the Secretary of State; and
- c. send a copy of this Order to the Governor, the Attorney General, and each member of the Legislature.

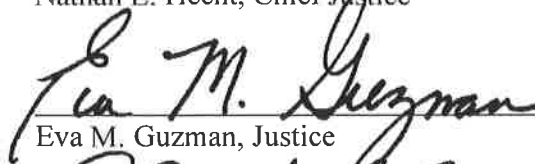
16. The State Bar of Texas is directed to take all reasonable steps to notify members of the Texas bar of this Order.

Dated: March 5, 2021

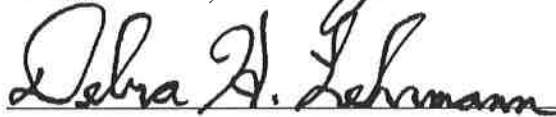
JUSTICE BOYD, JUSTICE DEVINE, and JUSTICE BLACKLOCK dissent.



Nathan L. Hecht, Chief Justice



Eva M. Guzman, Justice

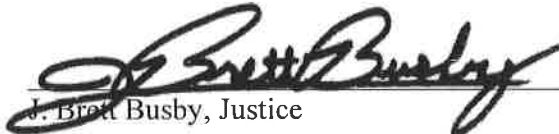


Debra H. Lehrmann, Justice

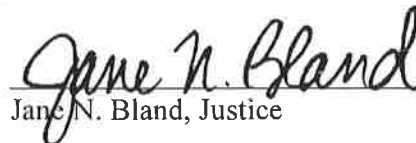
Jeffrey S. Boyd, Justice

John P. Devine, Justice

James D. Blacklock, Justice



J. Brett Busby, Justice



Jane N. Bland, Justice



Rebeca A. Huddle, Justice