



## THE COURT OF COMMON PLEAS OF STARK COUNTY

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The Judges of the General Division of the Stark County Court of Common Pleas are pleased to announce a relaxation of their pandemic policies and procedures enacted over the course of the past fourteen months. The relaxation is based on the encouraging national and state infection and vaccination rates.

The loosening of precautions is done with the realization that the pandemic has not yet fully abated. Stark County was at a Level 3 “Public Health Emergency” red status under the Ohio Department of Health Risk Advisory System before the system was recently discontinued. May and June data from our four local Health Departments identify Stark County’s current COVID-19 hospitalization and death rates as exceeding the state’s averages.

The cautious relaxation of pandemic procedures is proceeding in the context of the essential function of the courts in society and the special duty of the courts to protect all who participate in the justice system. As the Chief Justice of the Ohio Supreme Court stated:

“... courts are not like the stores, restaurants, or salons. When people come into our courthouses, they most often are not doing so by choice but instead, they are appearing because they have been summoned to appear either as a party to a case, as a witness, or as a juror. As such, we must be cautious in who we require to appear – even now, as restrictions begin to be relaxed... People summoned into court should not have to choose between compliance with a court order and the risk to their health or that of their families.”

With these considerations in mind, the Court is relaxing policies in the following manner.

**First**, jury selection will now occur on-site in the courthouse rather than at remote sites in the downtown area.

**Second**, courthouse mask requirements remain in place with an exemption for vaccinated persons. Summoned jurors, parties, spectators, and attorneys are encouraged to carry vaccination cards or a cell phone photo of their card in order to be exempt from the requirement.

**Third**, social distancing requirements will be relaxed based on Ohio Department of Health and CDC guidelines.

These are the initial steps in the ongoing relaxation of COVID-19 courthouse precautions. Certain policies will remain in effect and will be periodically reviewed based on CDC, ODH and Stark County data regarding infection and hospitalization rates.

Precautionary policies remaining in effect until further notice include:

- Enhanced sanitation protocols in the courthouse and Frank T. Bow building;
- Remote mediation on the Zoom platform;
- Remote civil proceedings on a case-by-case basis;
- Adjustments in processing of criminal cases; and
- Facility access restrictions for nonessential persons.

As an essential government entity, the Court did not close during the pandemic. And it was only able to pursue justice for our citizens with the patience, cooperation, and tolerance of multiple community partners. It is appropriate to recognize them and express the gratitude of the Court for their assistance during this difficult year.

- Arts in Stark and the staff of the Cultural Center as a remote site for jury selection;
- The City of Canton and the staff of the Civic Center as a remote site for jury selection;
- Stark County officials who facilitated use of federal CARES Act dollars for pandemic adjustments;
- The Sheriff Department for extraordinary support in providing security for off-site jury selection;
- The Prosecutor's Office for adjusting grand jury selection procedures;
- The Clerk of Court for adjustments and flexibility in filing procedures;
- All attorneys and parties for their accommodations and patience; and most importantly
- The Court staff in the courthouse and Frank T. Bow building.

The listed policy adjustments in this Press Release supersede all prior, publicly posted orders and policies.