IN THE 395th, 425th
JUDICIAL DISTRICT COURTS

COUNTY COURT AT LAW NO. ONE

COUNTY OF WILLIAMSON

STATE OF TEXAS

THIRD GENERAL ORDER CHILD WELFARE COURTS

REGARDING VIRTUAL COURT HEARINGS IN A VIRTUAL COURTROOM ENVIRONMENT IN CHILD WELFARE CASES

DUE TO THE INACCESSABILITY OF THE COURTHOUSE CAUSED BY CIRCUMSTANCES RELATED TO COVID-19

The Courts of Williamson County remain open, and this order is entered with the intent of ensuring that CHILD WELFARE cases may be heard in the 395TH DISTRICT COURT, 425TH DISTRICT COURT AND COUNTY COURT AT LAW NO ONE of Williamson County, Texas.

In response to the Local State of Disaster that has been declared by the County Judge of Williamson County, as well as the declarations by the Governor of the State of Texas, and by the President of the United States, and in conformance with *First Emergency Order Regarding the COVID-19 State of Disaster* and any subsequent orders, issued by the Supreme Court of Texas and the Court of Criminal Appeals[1].

Due to the exigent circumstances the Courts require hearings to be scheduled via VIRTUAL COURTROOM TECHNOLOGIES. The CHILD WELFARE COURTS are utilizing Microsoft Teams to set Virtual Courtroom Hearings. Microsoft Teams is a cloud-based team collaboration software that is part of the Office 365 suite of applications. The core capabilities in Microsoft Teams include business messaging, calling, video meetings and file sharing.

Additionally, because of the public health risk associated with in-person gatherings as articulated in various executive orders issued by the President, Governor, and County Judge, the court ORDERS that EFFECTIVE MONDAY, MARCH 30, 2020, hearings in CHILD WELFARE cases shall be conducted exclusively on an electronic basis, and in conformance with the "Procedure for Setting and Conducting Electronic & Telephone Court Hearings in Child Welfare Cases" attached as Exhibit A.

As in previously adopted orders, the Courts remind counsel that we take seriously our obligation to balance the interest of justice and the health and safety of our courthouse community and the community at large.

IT IS THEREFORE ORDERED that the party scheduling the Virtual Courtroom Hearing serve notice of the hearing pursuant to the Texas Rules of Civil Procedure and the terms of this General Order.

FILED
at 5:00 o'clock P M
MAR 27 2020
Lisa David
District Clerk, Williamson Co., TX.

[1] Misc. Docket No. 20-9042 (Tex.) Misc. Docket No. 20-007 (Tex. Crim. App.), accessed at https://www.txcourts.gov/media/1446056/209042.pdf

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that the party scheduling the Virtual Courtroom Hearing include instructions sufficient for the opposing counsel and party to make an appearance at the hearing.

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that the party scheduling the Virtual Courtroom Hearing provide the Court Administrator with sufficient contact information for the attorneys and parties, so that the court administrator is able to calendar the hearing utilizing Microsoft Teams.

IT IS SO ORDERED THIS 27th DAY OF MARCH, 2020

Digitally signed by Hon. Betsy F. Lambeth
Date: 2020.03.27 16:32:00 -05'00'

Betsy F. Lambeth
Judge, 425th District Court

Digitally signed by Ryan D. Larson
Date: 2020.03.27 16:25:43 -05'00'

Ryan Larson
Judge, 395th District Court

Digitally signed by Brandy Hallford
Date: 2020.03.27 15:05:29 -05'00'

Brandy Hallford
Judge, County Court at Law No. 1

EXHIBIT A

PROCEDURE FOR SETTING AND CONDUCTING ELECTRONIC & TELEPHONE COURT HEARINGS IN CHILD WELFARE CASES

1. **PROCEDURE FOR SETTING A HEARING**
   To set a hearing, please contact the Court Administrator. The Court Administrator will set the hearing by sending the parties an email calendar invitation through Microsoft Teams with a specific day and time for the hearing.

2. **PROCEDURE PRIOR TO THE SCHEDULED HEARING**
   a. The County Attorney's Office will distribute to all parties the proposed order(s).
   b. Respondent attorneys/attorney ad litem for the children will schedule a time to meet with his/her client via phone call or other electronic means.
   c. The parties shall confer prior to the hearing and sign proposed orders when possible.

3. **PROCEDURE FOR JOINING A HEARING**
   a. **Devices:** A participant may access Microsoft Teams to join a meeting anytime, from any smart device, with or without a Microsoft Teams account.
   b. **Day of Hearing:** On the day of the hearing, the participant will receive an email from the Court with a link to "**Join Microsoft Teams Meeting.**" Click on this link. It will bring you to a webpage where you can choose to either 1) "Join on the Web" or 2) "Download the Teams App."
   c. **Participant to join as a guest:**
      i. If you are on a **desktop computer**, "Join on the Web" is easiest. *Note: You must use Google Chrome or Microsoft Edge as your web-browser to use Teams on the web.*
      ii. If you are using a **mobile device**, downloading the Teams App is easiest. It will ask you to allow Teams to use your Audio and Video from your computer (you must have a camera and a microphone), and it will ask you to type in your name and click "Join Now."
      iii. Please see the link for assistance https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/join-a-meeting-without-a-teams-account-c6efc38f-4e03-4e79-b28f-e65a4c039508
   d. **Participant to join with the Teams application:** You will receive an email from the Court with a link to "Join Microsoft Teams Meeting." Click on this link and the meeting will open automatically.

   e. **Once Participant has joined to the Hearing:**
      i. The participant will be placed in the "Lobby" for the Videoconference to begin.
      ii. The person coordinating the call will let you into the Videoconference once it begins.

   f. **Meeting Recorded**: Please be advised that the call may be recorded by the Court or Court Staff for record purposes.

4. **VISUAL/AUDIO CAPABILITY**
   a. **Visual capabilities:** To have visual capabilities, in addition to audio, you must have a computer, smartphone, or tablet with a webcam.
   b. **Participant experiencing technical difficulties:** If you are unable to use the Teams application or Teams on the web, you can join the meeting by calling the phone number and conference ID in the meeting invitation, just dial the number to join.

c. **Participants without visual/audio capability:** For Respondent parents who do not have visual/audio capability there will be a space provided at the courthouse with the appropriate equipment to participate in the hearing. Contact the Court Administrator for additional information.

d. **Visual Appearance**: The Court strongly recommends the parties and counsel appear using visual capabilities. If the parties fail to appear visually, the Court may determine it is more appropriate to reschedule the hearing for a date after the disaster declaration lifts.

5. **PROCEDURE FOR HEARINGS**

a. **There are several ways the hearing can be conducted:**

i. Counsel may have their client and witnesses physically present in their office.

ii. Counsel may also participate from one location, the client can participate from another location, and a witness can participate from a different location.

iii. If it becomes necessary for the Respondent's attorney and client to speak privately, the Court will allow time for a phone conversation, text or other electronic means communication.

b. **Witness Testimony and Exhibits**

i. Witness testimony will be taken by the Official Court Reporter.

ii. Exhibit Submission and Retention:

1. Parties will be required to electronically provide the court reporter and opposing counsel/party their pre-marked exhibits no later than **24-hours** prior to the hearing.

2. The Court Reporter will keep and file copies of exhibits per her normal procedure.

c. **Submission and Entry of Orders:**

i. Following submission, the Court will sign orders electronically.

ii. The County Attorney's Office will follow their current procedure and provide orders to opposing counsel/pro se Respondents.