

KING COUNTY PROSECUTING ATTORNEY'S OFFICE



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JUSTICE
COMPASSION
PROFESSIONALISM
INTEGRITY
LEADERSHIP

COVID-19 - Lessons Learned So Far

For the past several weeks, the Seattle/King County area has been under siege by a pandemic that is sweeping the State and nation. In response, we have taken steps to help address the issues. The goal is to identify some “best practices” that may assist another prosecutor’s offices. These are presented in no particular order and some may not be applicable to other jurisdictions.

Emptying the Courthouse

- We immediately stopped filing out-of-custody cases to prevent new defendants from showing up to court. We are monitoring the appropriate time to begin filing those cases with an extended continuance of the arraignment date.
- We developed orders to quickly continue any pending out-of-custody matters for 5 weeks. These orders were done with cooperation of the public defenders and the court. We then asked defense to notify their clients of the new dates. The court accepted “agreed” orders even when the signatures of the lawyers were only provided by verbal or email consent. No defendant signatures were required.
- We posted signs on courthouse doors in multiple languages advising defendants that matters were continued and to call the public defenders with questions. We updated websites with the same information.
- We changed the physical layout of the courtrooms to encourage more social distancing – only bringing incarcerated defendants into the entryway of the courtroom and moving counsel away from the bench and each other.
- We worked with the court to consolidate and limit calendars so only a few essential lawyers and staff needed to appear each day.
- We transitioned employees (staff and lawyers) to work from home. Many needed to take work equipment home to conduct their work. We loaned laptops to those who didn’t have them and worked with IT to ensure people knew how to log on remotely. For those employees where working at home has been difficult to fill their hours due to their positions (reception, etc.), there are online approved classes that are available and other tasks beyond their typical loads.
- We closed the front desk and posted phone numbers that we forward to reception employees working from home. A mail drop-off slot has been utilized to accept mail.
- We worked with the court and defense to allow for telephonic and video court appearances when possible. In many instances, the court is completing forms, or accepting online submittal of court forms and orders.

Administration during Pandemic

- We developed practice notes for each of the calendars and consolidated those notes in one central shared folder so attorneys and staff would know the latest practices, orders and FAQ for each hearing type in our post COVID-19 system.
- We created an online sign-up system so prosecutors can sign up to cover certain calendars.
- We wrote one daily email summarizing the latest information for the Criminal Division. We were able to address updates, quell rumors, and provide some support for staff and lawyers working from home and feeling disconnected.

Reducing the Jail Population

- In order to maintain the jail as a safe place for jail officers and violent inmates, we needed to assist in reducing the daily population to allow for proper social distancing. We worked with the jail to identify each inmate by name, crime type, case number etc. We distributed that list to each criminal division unit chair to see if any inmates might be a candidate for a less-restrictive alternative. Some were eligible for Electronic Home Monitoring and others for pre-trial release programs or release with conditions. We also looked to see if any were serving sentences that could be shortened by the sentencing judge. Some other inmates received a Temporary Release to return to jail in June, 2020. In all, we were able to help reduce the daily population to safer levels. By doing this, we were in a better position to argue against release of our most dangerous offenders.
- The court set up additional bond hearings and allowed the lawyers to appear telephonically to quickly address the surge of release motions.
- The LEAD Program run by The Public Defender Association has partnered with local motels to find additional bed space for 200 individuals who might otherwise be incarcerated. The goal is to reduce/maintain jail population by diverting potential inmates into these beds with access to a 16 person outreach team that can help provide support to keep people out of custody. We will assist in identifying candidates for the program and monitor participation.
- The County Executive restricted booking in the jail on most misdemeanor charges (with the exception of misdemeanor assaults, violations of no contact or protection orders, DUIs, sex crimes or other charges which present a serious public safety concern.)

Victim Services

- Our Domestic Violence Advocates have been able to transition to telephonic advocacy for their clients.
- Our Protection Order practice has shifted to partnering with a vendor that has created an online fillable form (like Turbo-Tax) to allow petitioners to complete and file electronically. Our office is still able to assist petitioners with online advocacy.

Questions:

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