



Overview of Initial Responses to COVID-19 by the Administrative Office of U.S. Courts and by Select Courts Within the Federal Judiciary

March 18, 2020

This CRS Insight provides information related to initial responses to [Coronavirus disease 2019](#), or COVID-19, by the Administrative Office of U.S. Courts and select courts within the federal judiciary. Consequently, this Insight is not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the policies and practices adopted by each federal court or judicial entity. Additionally, given the rapidly changing situation surrounding COVID-19, the information provided in this Insight may be superseded by new information from that which is described in the text below. If there are any questions regarding whether such changes have occurred, congressional staff may contact the author of this Insight. Congressional staff may also contact the author for information related to responses to COVID-19 by other federal judicial entities or courts not specifically addressed below.

Administrative Office of U.S. Courts

The [Administrative Office of U.S. Courts](#) (AO) is the agency within the federal judiciary that provides, in part, administrative services and program support to federal courts. On March 12, 2020, the AO issued a [statement](#) indicating that federal courts were “individually coordinating with state and local health officials to obtain local information about the coronavirus (COVID-19).” The flexibility provided to federal courts to adapt to local conditions is reflective of past practices during other recent emergencies (see, for example, the [response by some courts to Hurricane Sandy in 2012](#)).

The AO also created a task force to serve “as a single point of contact to share information and guidance related to the coronavirus outbreak as it relates to the Judiciary.” The taskforce includes, in part, representatives from the General Services Administration (GSA), the U.S. Marshals Service, and Federal Occupational Health (FOH).

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United States Supreme Court

On March 16, 2020, the Supreme Court [announced](#) that it is postponing all oral arguments scheduled for its March session (March 23-25 and March 30-April 1). The Court also announced that the building itself will continue to be open for official business but that it is “expanding remote working capabilities” to reduce the number of on-site Court employees. Previously, on March 12, 2020, the Court announced that its building was closed to the public until further notice.

U.S. District Courts in Washington State

The first case of COVID-19 in the United States was identified in Washington State on January 21, 2020. At present, the state has the [second-highest number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the United States, as well as the most deaths attributable to the virus](#). The Western District of Washington—with courthouses in Seattle and Tacoma—[announced on March 6, 2020](#), that most in-court civil and criminal proceedings, including jury trials, are postponed until further court order. The Eastern District of Washington (with its headquarters in Spokane) [announced](#) on March 16, 2020, that it is cancelling naturalization ceremonies through April 30, 2020.

U.S. District Courts in the Five Most Populous Judicial Districts

According to data compiled by CRS, the five most populous federal judicial districts are, in ascending order, the Central District of California, the Middle District of Florida, the Southern District of Texas, the Northern District of Illinois, and the District of New Jersey. These five judicial districts have a combined population of approximately 59.9 million, representing approximately 18.3% of the U.S. population (based on 2018 estimates by the Census Bureau).

Some of the initial responses by these five courts are highlighted below (the [hypertext link](#) for a particular court provides additional information regarding the court’s response). The actions taken by these courts are presented as illustrative examples, and may not be representative of actions taken by other courts.

- **Central District of California** (Los Angeles, Riverside, Santa Ana): The court has restricted entry to courthouses in the district, as well as access to its probation and pretrial services offices, for any individuals who have travelled to certain countries within the past 14 days. Additionally, the court has also [issued an order](#) that no jurors would be called for criminal or civil trials until April 13, 2020.
- **Middle District of Florida** (Orlando, Tampa, Jacksonville, Fort Myers, Ocala): The court has [restricted entry](#) to courthouses in the district for certain individuals, including those who have traveled within 14 days to or from certain countries. The bankruptcy court (a unit of the district court) has [announced](#) several changes, including that all non-evidentiary hearings will be conducted by telephone.
- **Southern District of Texas** (Houston, Galveston, Laredo, Corpus Christi, Brownsville, Victoria, McAllen): The court [announced](#) that civil and criminal jury trials in two of its seven divisions (covering the Houston and Galveston areas) are deferred through May 1, 2020. The court has otherwise emphasized that “other deadlines and settings remain in place pending further order by each judge in specific cases or by standing order.”

- **Northern District of Illinois** (Chicago, Rockford): The court has [postponed all civil jury trials](#) that were scheduled to begin before April 3, 2020, and extended deadlines in all federal civil cases in the district by 21 days from their current deadline. Additionally, criminal case proceedings that cannot be postponed will be conducted in Chicago only (not Rockford) by emergency district judges. Grand juries will continue to meet during the week of March 16, 2020, but “reasonable limits” will be placed on future meetings.
- **District of New Jersey** (entire state): On March 16, 2020, the court [announced](#) visitor restrictions covering individuals who have been diagnosed with COVID-19, asked to self-quarantine, or who have had close contact with someone who has been asked to self-quarantine. Additionally, on the same date, the court [announced](#) that all civil and criminal jury selections and jury trials scheduled to begin before April 30, 2020, are postponed pending further notice. The court has also encouraged all judicial officers to conduct proceedings by telephone or videoconferencing where practicable and permitted by law.

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