

Dec 30, 2021

**Vicki Kinkade**  
Chief Deputy Clerk

**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
MIDDLE DISTRICT OF TENNESSEE**

**IN RE:** )  
 )  
**COURT OPERATIONS UNDER THE** ) **ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER NO. 209**  
**EXIGENT CIRCUMSTANCES CREATED** ) **(Fifteenth Amended)**  
**BY COVID-19** )

**ORDER**

On August 29, 2021, Fourteenth Amended Administrative Order No. 209 was entered addressing court operations in the Middle District of Tennessee and imposing restrictions through December 31, 2021, due to the exigent circumstances created by the spread of COVID-19.

The Court continues to monitor the COVID-19 pandemic, including updated guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (“CDC”), as well as federal, state, and local public health authorities. Following a drop in infection rates both nationally and locally in the months of September and October, there was an uptick in cases in November, followed by a significant increase in cases in December. Of particular concern is the emergence of the Omicron variant, which has increased transmissibility and has the ability to evade immunity. The CDC is expecting a national surge of infections in January with peak daily numbers of new infections that could exceed previous peaks. According to the CDC, the rate of community transmission is “high” in all counties in the Middle District of Tennessee.

Currently, 51.1% of Tennesseans are fully vaccinated (not including the booster), with the national average at 61.9%. In Nashville and Davidson County, the percentage is 60.8%. The percentage of people fully vaccinated who live in the counties comprising each of the three divisions in the Middle District of Tennessee is lower than the national average, as follows: Nashville Division - 45.07%; Columbia Division - 42.39%; and Northeastern Division - 39.04%.

Based on the recent significant increase in COVID-19 cases, both nationally and locally, the concerns regarding the Omicron variant, and the low vaccination rate in the Middle District of Tennessee, the Court finds that a public health emergency continues to exist in Tennessee and in the district. As such, the Court will continue to operate with COVID-19 as the new “normal” for the foreseeable future, and, in doing so, it will continue to follow its Plan for Phased Approach to Resume Court Operations During COVID-19 Pandemic (Administrative Order No. 209-2). At this time, the Court will remain in Phase 3 of its Plan. The established COVID-19 safety protocols will remain in place regardless of vaccination status, including medical screening of attorneys, jurors, and members of the public entering court space, the wearing of face masks, social distancing, hand hygiene, and cleaning and disinfecting surfaces.

Accordingly, for the reasons set forth herein, as well as the findings contained in the prior orders, the Court finds that exigent circumstances related to the COVID-19 pandemic still exist. Therefore, in order to protect the public safety in the courthouse and prevent the spread of COVID-19, the Court **ORDERS** as follows:

1. At the discretion of the presiding judge, criminal jury selections and jury trials scheduled to begin now through February 28, 2022, will proceed as scheduled and will not be automatically continued due to COVID-19. Absent an order from the presiding judge, the parties should prepare for criminal jury trials as scheduled. There, however, may be limited circumstances related to COVID-19 in a particular case where the presiding judge determines that a trial must be continued.
2. When continuing a criminal jury trial as contemplated in paragraph 1, the presiding judge may determine the following facts make a particular criminal jury trial impractical at the scheduled time:
  - (a) Based on the public health and safety circumstances caused by COVID-19, it is questionable that a jury can be empaneled in a criminal case without COVID-19 issues repeatedly arising during the trial that would complicate and delay the proceeding.
  - (b) Having polled the jurors summoned for jury service, the responses as to availability and willingness to serve due to concerns related to COVID-19 have fluctuated in that some jurors who have indicated a willingness to serve later report back stating an inability to serve because they have COVID-19 or a reluctance to serve due to safety, child care, and/or elderly parents. In addition, some jurors state their increased concerns due to the rapidly spreading Omicron variant and breakthrough cases. These

responses indicate that jurors are focused on health and safety concerns and a return to some form of normalcy in their lives.

- (c) Given the reported disparate effects of COVID-19 on different categories of persons, jurors who do appear for service may present a jury pool skewed in terms of age and life experiences. As such, the Court continues to be concerned that its ability to offer a jury comprised of a fair cross-section of the community may be jeopardized.
- (d) In light of the pandemic, it may be difficult to conduct a criminal jury trial limiting participants based on health directives and maintaining social 6-foot distancing, even if physical barriers such as plexiglass are in place. As such, depending on the circumstances of the case and the number of people required to be present in the courtroom for a criminal jury trial, the public health and safety of counsel, witnesses, jurors, court staff, and members of the public can be seriously jeopardized.
- (e) The Court has limited capacity regarding facilities and personnel based on current public health and safety circumstances caused by COVID-19, and it must proceed cautiously to protect the public safety and prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the courthouse. The Court cannot currently accommodate multiple simultaneous criminal trials in the Nashville courthouse. Pursuant to Local Criminal Rule 18.01, “all criminal cases in the District will be tried in the Nashville Division unless the Trial Judge transfers the case to another division.” As set forth in United States v. Erwin, 155 F.3d 818, 824 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1998)(en banc), there is no constitutional or statutory requirement that a defendant’s trial take place in a specific courtroom or division within a federal judicial district. If there are multiple simultaneous criminal trials scheduled in Nashville and circumstances do not allow for a criminal trial to be moved to another division, i.e., Cookeville or Columbia, the presiding judge may determine that a continuance of the trial is necessary.

Due to the foregoing, the Court finds that the time period of any continuance pursuant to this Administrative Order shall be excluded under the Speedy Trial Act, as the presiding judge may specifically find that the ends of justice served by ordering the continuance outweighs the best interests of the public and each defendant’s right to a more speedy trial, pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 3161(h)(7)(A). Therefore, in continuation of Administrative Order No. 209 entered March 16, 2020, and all amendments thereto, the period of exclusion shall be from March 17, 2020 to February 28, 2022. The district judge assigned to the matter may extend this period if circumstances warrant.

The Court recognizes the right of criminal defendants to a speedy and public trial under the Sixth Amendment to the United States Constitution and the particular application of that right in cases involving defendants who are detained pending trial. Therefore, in the event any affected party disagrees with the Court’s analysis regarding the time excluded under the Speedy Trial Act, he or she may move for reconsideration in the individual cases. Likewise, the government may seek reconsideration. Any motion for reconsideration shall be directed to the presiding judge assigned to the matter.

3. Civil jury selections and jury trials will proceed as scheduled, absent an order from the presiding judge. Civil jury trials require fewer jurors and less security, which allows

participants to maintain social distancing more easily. There, however, may be limited circumstances related to COVID-19 in a particular case where the presiding judge determines that a trial must be continued.

4. Criminal matters scheduled before magistrate judges, such as initial appearances, arraignments, detention hearings, and the issuance of warrants, shall continue to take place in the ordinary course of business. At the discretion of the Magistrate Judge, such proceedings may be conducted remotely by video conference where practicable, or telephonically if video conferencing is not reasonably available. Conducting such proceedings remotely is encouraged due to the limited space in magistrate judge courtrooms, which prevents the required social distancing and increases the risk for participants to contract COVID-19. Administrative Order 209-1 and the CARES Act authorize conduct of certain hearings in criminal case proceedings by video conferencing, or by telephone if video conferencing is not reasonably available.
5. Pleas and sentencings scheduled before a district judge will proceed as scheduled. Such proceedings may be conducted in person or by video conferencing, or by telephone conferencing if video conferencing is not reasonably available. Although the presiding district judge, who has a larger courtroom, may determine that an in-person hearing is most appropriate in a particular case, especially when there are very few people in the courtroom, video conferencing or telephone conferencing may be appropriate on a limited basis because it minimizes the number of people in the courtroom and the courthouse and helps to ensure the safety of counsel, witnesses, court staff, and members of the public. Conducting such proceedings remotely is authorized pursuant to First Amended Administrative Order No. 209-1 and the CARES Act.
6. Individual judges may hold hearings, conferences, and bench trials in the exercise of their discretion, subject to intervening orders of the judge assigned to the matter. Such court proceedings may be conducted by telephone or video conference where practicable and consistent with the law. The Court has implemented safety precautions for the public and members of the bar and parties, such that small in-person hearings are available.
7. Any matter involving an attorney or party who is ill or in a high-risk category may be rescheduled by the presiding judge. However, counsel shall be responsible for advising the presiding judge of such illness or high-risk by filing an appropriate notice or motion containing sufficient information to allow the presiding judge to make an informed decision regarding any cancellation or continuance. The Court will not permit indefinite extensions, and if such is needed, substitute counsel should be considered.
8. Grand jury proceedings will proceed as currently scheduled, subject to further order by the Chief Judge. Having previously polled grand jurors as to their willingness and availability to serve due to issues related to COVID-19 and the Delta and Omicron variants, the Court remains concerned that grand jurors are still more focused on health and safety concerns and a return to some form of normalcy in their lives, which creates a distraction on their work as grand jurors. As such, the ability to meet a quorum is jeopardized. As COVID-19 issues continue to arise, the Court will respond appropriately to ensure the health and safety of the grand jurors and others involved in the process. Accordingly, all related deadlines are suspended and tolled for all purposes, including the statute of limitations, through February 28, 2022.

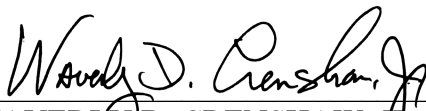
9. All attorney admissions ceremonies will take place as directed by Judge William L. Campbell, Jr. Attorneys who must be admitted on an emergency basis may contact the Clerk's office for assistance.
10. The Court will not conduct public naturalization ceremonies between now and February 28, 2022, but it may conduct virtual ceremonies, as necessary.
11. Petty offense dockets will be scheduled at the discretion of the presiding magistrate judge.
12. The Office of the Clerk of Court remains open for business. As determined by management, employees who telework productively may continue to do so on a rotating basis, as this reduces the number of people in the courthouse and the risk for exposure to COVID-19. The Clerk's Office intake window will be open daily from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. During hours when the intake window is not open, all manual filings and criminal debt payments may be deposited in the Clerk's Office drop box located on the first floor at the Ninth Avenue entrance. All such filings will be stamped filed as of the day they are placed in the drop box. Alternatively, such filings can be mailed to the court. A public notice with specific instructions is posted at the Clerk's Office intake window, at the drop box at the Ninth Avenue entrance, and on the Court's website at <https://www.tnmd.uscourts.gov>.
13. The United States Probation and Pretrial Services Office remains open for business. As determined by management, employees who telework productively may continue to do so on a rotating basis, as this reduces the number of people in the courthouse and the risk for exposure to COVID-19.
14. Announcements regarding restrictions to Court services are posted on the District Court's website at <https://www.tnmd.uscourts.gov>.
15. Except as set forth herein, court business will proceed as usual to the extent possible consistent with public health guidelines. The Court emphasizes that all deadlines established in both civil and criminal cases remain in full force and effect, absent further order by the presiding judge in the matter. The Judges unanimously expect that counsel for all parties will continue to diligently work on cases to comply with established deadlines. If the parties cannot comply with an established deadline, normal procedures must be followed, and a motion must be filed.

As the Court considers its planned phased approach of operating during COVID-19, it will continue to closely monitor the COVID-19 outbreak and vaccination data, as well as guidance offered by the CDC and local public health officials, and make necessary adjustments consistent with its plan in the interest of public health and the administration of justice. In light of the CDC's predictions that

the rate of new infections may reach unprecedented levels, the Court will adjust this Order to maintain the safety of the public and court staff.

This Order gives the presiding judicial officers flexibility to conduct judicial business in the normal course while implementing necessary safeguards and may be extended or modified, as necessary.

FOR THE COURT

  
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WAVERLY D. CRENSHAW, JR.  
Chief United States District Judge