

Message from Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon - The Singapore Judiciary's response to COVID-19



Dear Practitioners and Court Users,

The Singapore Judiciary has been actively monitoring the rapidly evolving COVID-19 situation. I write to update you on the various precautionary measures that we have put in place to ensure the continuity of court operations and services, while safeguarding the health and safety of practitioners, court users and our officers.

Business Continuity Measures

The Judges, Judicial Officers and staff of the Supreme Court, Family Justice Courts and State Courts have been physically segregated into two teams. We have also implemented measures such as telecommuting, staggered working and lunch hours, safe distancing at the workplace, and regular temperature taking. All of these measures are in accordance with the advisories and directives of the Ministry of Health and the Public Service Division.

In the Supreme Court, where a matter is heard by Judges from both teams (for instance, in certain Court of Appeal hearings), the Judges from one team will join the hearing by video conference.

Increased Cleaning of Court Premises

To reduce the risk of transmission, we have increased the cleaning frequency of common areas in the court buildings such as lobbies, registration counters, restrooms and lifts. Frequent points of contact such as lift buttons are disinfected on an hourly basis.

Declaration Before Entry

Since 3 February 2020, all practitioners, court users and visitors are required to complete a declaration form before they are permitted to enter the court building. An individual will not be allowed into the court building if he or she:

- a) is serving a Quarantine Order;
- b) is serving a Stay-Home Notice;
- c) is serving a Leave of Absence;
- d) has been in contact within the last 14 days with a person who is confirmed or suspected to be infected with COVID-19;
- e) has travelled overseas within the last 14 days;
- f) has been in close contact with a person who has been overseas within the last 14 days (for instance, by sharing the same residence or workplace) and has not implemented measures to ensure safe distancing from that person; and/or
- g) is feeling unwell and has a fever and/or flu-like symptoms (however mild).

Practitioners and court users who are not permitted to enter the court building to attend scheduled hearings may be able to attend hearings by video conference or otherwise seek an adjournment of the hearing using eLitigation, ICMS, CJTS, iFAMS or other online case management systems (whichever is applicable). Should additional assistance be required, the Courts' Registry officers may be contacted by email or telephone:

Supreme Court:

Email: SUPCOURT_Registry@supcourt.gov.sg

Telephone: 6557 7495

Family Justice Courts:

Email: FJCOURTS_Family_Registry@fjcourts.gov.sg

Telephone: 6435 5398

State Courts

Email: contact@statecourts.gov.sg

Telephone: 6587 8423

These contact details can also be found on signs in each Court and on the respective Courts' websites.

Visitor Restrictions

Given the need to control the spread of COVID-19, we have implemented measures to minimise the number of visitors to the Courts. We have temporarily closed the Learning Court and the Judicial Heritage Gallery at the Supreme Court and the Heritage Gallery at the State Courts. All guided tours have also been suspended.

As a further precautionary measure, the libraries in the Supreme Court and State Courts will be closed until further notice.

Safe Distancing

To ensure safe distancing, we will control the number of representatives per party allowed into courtrooms and chambers for hearings.

With effect from **1 April 2020**, no more than two lawyers/litigants per party may appear at a hearing. If a party requires more attendees, it should make a request for exemption to the Court.

To further promote safe distancing, we have marked out spacing in queue lines, spaced out frontline counters and seats at waiting areas and viewing galleries, and limited the number of passengers allowed in each public lift.

Staggered Hearings

In order to minimise the number of persons in the courtroom at any one time, hearings before Judges and registrars in the Supreme Court have been assigned staggered timings whenever necessary to avoid congregation of court attendees. The State Courts have staggered the commencement times for court hearings involving numerous attendees. This includes, in particular, the Night Courts.

Remote Hearings

Over the next few weeks, the Judiciary will implement measures to allow more matters to be heard by teleconference, video conference, written submissions and email. We have been exploring these solutions with the Attorney-General's Chambers, the Law Society of Singapore, and the Singapore Prison Service, and are grateful for their support and cooperation.

We have implemented or will soon be implementing the following measures to enable remote hearings:

Supreme Court

1	As part of the segregation measures, Judges from different teams have been hearing Court of Appeal matters from different courtrooms, with some Judges joining by way of video-conference.
2	Video-conference hearings for selected matters before the Court of Appeal and High Court have been piloted, and will be increased incrementally to include trials in the High Court, where appropriate.
3	Video-conference hearings for case management conferences ("CMCs"), pre-trial conferences ("PTCs"), chamber hearings (including applications on bulk lists) and other matters before Supreme Court registrars, have been piloted and will be progressively extended.

4	Video-conference hearings are commonly conducted in the SICC and will be extended to trials in suitable cases.
5	Tele-conference may also be considered instead of video-conference where appropriate.
6	Currently, prosecutors participate in a PTC or criminal case disclosure conference (“CCDC”) by video-conference. An accused person who is in custody will, if unrepresented, participate in a PTC or CCDC by video-conference. Where the accused person is represented by counsel, his/her attendance at such hearings will continue to be dispensed with, unless otherwise directed by the Court. Defence counsel can participate in PTCs and CCDCs by video-conference instead of attending personally.
7	Where appropriate, a hearing before a Judge or registrar may, to the extent suitable, be conducted with some parties attending physically and others participating by way of video-conference.
8	Bulk list hearings before Judges and registrars have also been split into smaller lists to be heard by different Judges and registrars. Within every list, cases may, where appropriate, be conducted by way of video-conference with hearing times staggered with those of cases to be conducted physically. This serves to further minimise congregation of court attendees.
9	Directions have been given by way of correspondence or electronic means, dispensing with the attendance of counsel whenever appropriate.

Family Justice Courts

1	Remote hearings for case conferences and pre-trial conferences for parties represented by counsel have been piloted.
2	From 30 Mar , all hearings in chambers will be conducted by video-conference using Zoom or by way of written submissions for Counsel. Litigants-in-person (LIP) may opt to participate in hearings by Zoom.
3	From 30 Mar , Counsel will attend before the Duty Judge by video-conference using Zoom while applications involving LIP

	will also be dealt with by video-conference where the users have been trained.
4	From 30 Mar , counselling will be done by video-conferencing where appropriate.
5	Mediation for cases where the parties are represented by lawyers will be done by video conference using Zoom progressively from 30 Mar
6	From 25 Mar , all mentions in Youth Court will be done by video-conference from Boys/Girls Home. The taking of guilty pleas and sentencing for such offenders will proceed by way of Zoom from 30 Mar .
7	Where the Court directs, all High Court non-trial cases where the parties are represented by lawyers will be heard by video-conference or proceed by written submissions.

State Courts

1	<p>For criminal cases:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Accused persons who are represented by lawyers need not attend pre-trial conferences or mentions. - Video-conferencing will be implemented for accused persons in remand. - Applications for adjournments and matters that are not contested will be managed online without the need for parties to attend court.
2	<p>For civil cases:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - All case management hearings and related pre-trial applications will be conducted either by video-conferencing or by email. - In cases where the Court does not require the attendance of parties, directions for the conduct of the case will be given through electronic filing or email. - The majority of applications filed by parties in civil cases will be heard using video-conferencing. - Short trials and assessment of damages will be conducted using video-conferencing, where appropriate.

3	Video-conferencing will be used in selected cases for pre-trial proceedings in: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- small claims,- employment claims,- neighbour disputes and- harassment cases.
4	Court mediations will be conducted using video conferencing unless there are special reasons.

We will continue to explore further methods to minimise the need for the physical attendance of practitioners and court users in the court buildings. We will keep you informed of further developments.

COVID-19 has caused unprecedented disruptions to the daily routines of institutions and individuals, both in Singapore and around the world. This collective challenge demands a collective response, which must begin with our willingness to adapt to change and pursue new solutions. The challenge for the Judiciary is to sustain our justice system while protecting court users, as far as possible, from the risk of transmission. We ask for your patience but also your readiness to access the justice system in new and perhaps unfamiliar ways.

Yours sincerely,

Sundaresh Menon
Chief Justice