

Tools for Effective Court Administration

1 Technology

1.1 We have a television in the lobby. This can be used to play announcements, or just to show television if people are waiting.

1.2 Smartboard in the courtroom--This has been extremely helpful in the courtroom for presenting evidence: videos, photographs, computer gps maps, etc. It also can be used to show TV channels while defendants wait to meet with the prosecutor.

1.3 Use Texas Legislature Online: It provides all of the codes and statutes at a click of the mouse.

1.4 Get on the TMCEC listserv

1.5 For credit card payments over the phone, we require them to fax a plea (signed and dated) with a copy of the DL before we accept a payment over the phone.

1.6 Instead of waiting for the judge to come in and sign papers, we scan and email to her to sign. She signs and returns it by email.

1.7 Accepting credit cards payments has increased revenue

1.8 Use Official Payments to process credit card and debit card payments online.

2 Workplace/Personnel

2.1 A. Morale: We have the court staff divided into four spirit teams assigned to each quarter of the year. Twice a month, the spirit team creates fun events to celebrate employee birthdays, holidays, etc. This has been a great boost for morale.

2.2 Be organized in the workplace. Make sure there is a designated place for everything.

2.3 Publish all standing orders and operating procedures detailing paper flow and processes to comply with legal duties. This is done with the prosecuting attorney, to include those cases where the state must move to dismiss. The concept is cradle to grave (docketing to judgment) in sufficient detail to cover most cases. In case of an exception, notify the judge.

2.4 Outsource phone services or automate phones to handle the majority of calls that are simply seeking information.

2.5 Publish court policies and procedures

2.6 Have a clerk that is dedicated to just municipal court

2.7 Never take out anger on defendants and berate them

2.8 Develop communication procedures between police, prosecutor, clerk, and judge.

2.9 Educate city council and city manager about court functions, and have judge communicate more with them.

2.10 Standing orders provide continuity in an office where there is high clerk turnover. They also provide excellent training for new personnel, and provide consistent, efficient work processes

2.11 Create a rule that prohibits MC personnel from posting comments on facebook and twitter during working hours.

3 Filing

3.1 Citations

3.2 Complaints

4 Warrant

4.1 We refuse to accept any citations or PC affidavits not properly filled out.

4.2 Have one person dedicated to coordinating warrants

4.3 Have a standing order that would allow a clerk to lift a warrant when someone comes in to try and handle it, but doesn't have enough to post full bond. The standing order allows this to be lifted if they have 75% (or another amount you decide).

4.4 Review the jail inmate list for outstanding defendants.

4.5 For old cases (7-15 years old) without complaints, it's a good idea to get the prosecutor to sign a state's motion to dismiss.

4.6 Participate in warrant round-up. Take violators to court, not jail, first.

5 Appearance

5.1 By Mail

5.2 In Person

5.2.1 Offer defendants a reduced fine if they come in and pay before their scheduled court appearance date. In addition to the standard fine, we have this reduced option. This is explained to them on the citation as well as on the website. This gives an added incentive to come in and take care of the citation ASAP. The reduction may be \$20-50, and most people are happy to get it.

5.2.2 Use written orders for defendants with signatures required by defendant and judge. Keep the original with the court and send the duplicate with the defendants. Do this with juveniles, as well.

5.2.3 If a defendant has no ID, check to see if they have been arrested. A mug shot can help along with checking DOB from arrest records.

5.2.4 If you have too many Failure to Attend School cases for the part-time judge to see, consider appointing an associate judge or hiring a juvenile case manager to help with those.

5.2.5 Issue standing order to reset juvenile case with parental summons when juvenile shows without a parent.

5.2.6 Follow court attire rules that you place on defendants.

5.2.7 Issue standing order allowing clerk to reset a case when the case is on first appearance docket.

5.2.8 Create a handout with clear instructions for the defendants.

5.3 Attorney

6 Plea

6.1 Not Guilty

6.2 Guilty

6.2.1 Hold a "Judge's hour" every week where the judge can hear from people who would like to plea no contest/guilty. The judge can spend less than five minutes per case to resolve minor issues, rather than have the defendants wait a month or more for an arraignment docket. For example: a young person having trouble finding a tobacco awareness course, a person who has lost their job and can't make the next installment on a payment plan

6.2.2 Schedule an arraignment docket for those that plead guilty up front, but want to ask for a fine reduction, etc. We used to have walk-in arraignments and this led to less control of the docket.

6.3 No Contest

6.3.1 Before a "plea docket," take a few moments to outline all of the available options for the defendant. Use a laminated handout to help defendants review all of the options. This takes about five minutes before calling cases, but avoids lots of questions at the bench, and speeds up the process.

6.3.2 Use a video to educate defendants before each arraignment docket. Outline the arraignment and trial process, what pleas are available, etc.

7 Deferred Options

7.1 Deferred Disposition

7.1.1 Use a standing order to permit the clerk to process a deferred disposition.

7.2 DSC

7.2.1 Use a standing order to permit the clerk to process a DSC.

8 Pre-Trial

8.1 Pre-Trial Hearing: Provides opportunity to hear motions, clarify complaint issues, and facilitates plea

8.2 Remember that the judge is ultimately responsible that defendants have their cases heard efficiently and fairly. This includes "pretrial conferences" with the prosecutor. Even though the judge and court staff may not be present during plea negotiations, the judge is responsible to make sure that defendants are not waiting for hours to meet with the prosecutor.

8.3 Have all defendants set on a pre-trial (arraignment type docket) to get more folks to court.

8.4 If someone enters a not guilty plea, have them fill out a form with all of their information (address, phone #'s, DL#, etc)

8.5 Subtopic

9 Trial

9.1 Jury Trial

9.1.1 Use a "multiple jury trial" process. It can be done with one courtroom and one judge. Once a month, call enough jurors for that day for at least five trials (but you can have as many as eight on the docket). Due to continuances, defendants who fail to appear, and other reasons, you probably will end up with one to four jury trials for that day. Go through the jury selection process for all of the trials, selecting all of the panels for that day at the beginning of the day, starting with the panel for the oldest case first. As each panel is selected, get a time estimate from parties/counsel, and assign a time for the panel to return (get a cell number for each juror)

9.1.2 Use searches on the court software to see how old all cases set for jury trial are. This helps find any cases that are old and to find out why it is still active.

9.1.3 Require pre-trial before any trial

9.2 Bench Trial

9.2.1 Require pre-trial before any trial

10 Judgment

10.1 Fine

10.1.1 A good community service for both young and old is grandparenting for a day. An elderly defendant can go read to kids at the library or school. A younger defendant can be paired with the elder defendant, and can pick them up, stay with them during the story time, and return them home.

10.2 Court Costs

10.3 Juveniles

10.3.1 To ensure that the parents are aware of the orders in a juvenile judgment, create a checklist signed by both parent and child.

11 Collections

11.1 We require signed pleas with proof of identification prior to payment (over the phone or through a third party payer).

11.2 We changed from using a credit card machine to traffic payments online. Because of the fees, more people are paying with cash.

11.3 Our payment plans are limited to 30 days. The defendant must appear before the judge within those 30 days with a payment to get another 30 day extension.

11.4 Have a specific standing order detailing the flow of ticket intake/disposition procedure and steps to take prior to Omni or 3rd party collections.

11.5 We started an inhouse collection program. We send out postcards and make phone calls before anything goes to warrant.

11.6 To get warrants and capias pro fines served and collected, we have a contract with a collection agency to help. We also participate in the state warrant roundup.

11.7 Require the filling out of finance forms for time payments.

11.8 Consider ordering fine collection manager not to take any prejudgment payments.

12 Capias Pro Fine

12.1 We make calls to defendants before issuing a capias pro fine.

13 Miscellaneous

13.1 Judges - make sure you are the only one signing judgments, and make sure you are aware of all the paperwork your clerk handles.

13.2 Stay current on the law as it applies to your court.