



Harris County Criminal District Court Trial Division

EMERGENCY RELIEF DOCKETS

In January 2021, the Judges of the Harris County Criminal District Courts Trial Division (Felony Courts) created the Emergency Relief Docket, and added the Emergency Relief Trial Docket in September. These dockets were created to directly address case backlogs in the felony courts. The Harris County Criminal Justice Center (CJC) suffered catastrophic damage during Hurricane Harvey in August 2017, displacing the criminal courts for almost three full years. During this time, the Felony Courts held court in the Harris County Jail, the Family Law Center and doubled up in courtrooms in the Civil Courthouse. Conducting court in ad hoc spaces, when available, did not allow for efficient case management. While displaced, the Felony Courts could hold dockets only every other week for defendants in custody at the Harris County Jail Courts. The Felony Courts have been occupying their own courtrooms since June 2020, but social distancing requirements caused by the COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2021 have further restricted the capacity to hold court. Jury trial settings during the first seven months of the COVID-19 pandemic were not possible, and jury trials currently continue to be limited by space constrictions from the pandemic and post-Harvey construction. In an effort to help reduce the backlog while each Felony Judge continued to manage dockets and trials in their respective courts, the Felony Judges created these emergency dockets.

The purpose of the Emergency Relief Docket (ERD) is to move the cases toward disposition or trial. The Emergency Relief Trial Docket (ERTD) allows the felony courts to have a venue to conduct additional trials with the help of visiting judges. Three dockets run simultaneously, staffed with visiting judges. Each of the 23 Felony Courts decide what cases to send based on capacity. Any felony case may be referred to these dockets. The ERD/ERTD coordinator sends notifications to the courts updating the number of cases that may be sent at a certain time. Currently there are two jail dockets and one bond docket. Cases on these dockets are typically older, more complex cases, and on average are disposed within just 30 days from the time they are referred by the home court. If the case does not reach a disposition, it will go to trial. If the case referred already has a trial date, it is set on the ERTD, keeping that trial date but adding a pretrial conference date before the visiting judge. The ERD/ERTD staff notify the Harris County District Attorney's office and the lawyer for the defendant to alert that a case is now on either the ERD or ERTD docket and informs them of the next setting date.

The ERD and ERTD currently are held in courtrooms on the 20th floor of the Harris County Criminal Justice Center.