

# PERSONAL SAFETY TIPS for JUDGES and COURT STAFF

*Updated October 2023*

Recent tragic events have highlighted the vulnerability of judges and court staff — not only at work, but also at home. Judges and court staff are at risk and at all times should maintain awareness of their environment and take appropriate safety and security precautions. The safety tips included in this list are useful reminders for personal safety. They are organized into the following topics:

- **General Safety Tips**
- **In the Courtroom**
- **In Chambers**
- **Throughout the Courthouse**
- **In Parking Lots**
- **While Commuting**
- **At Home**
- **In Public**
- **Online**
- **In the Media**
- **While Campaigning**

## General Safety Tips

- Do not let your guard down either inside or outside of the courthouse. Practice good safety techniques at work, at home, and while traveling.
- Do not keep or carry a weapon unless it is in proper working condition and you have been trained in the correct use of it.
- Do not use your judiciary authority or title to perform peacekeeping functions when you are away from your court. Leave that to law enforcement. Be a good witness.
- Do not volunteer personal information to strangers or identify yourself as a judge. If asked, identify yourself as an attorney, government employee, etc.
- Do not forget to have a Personal and Family Information Sheet secured with the local law enforcement agency in your jurisdiction so that it can be used in an emergency situation.

## In the Courtroom

- Do not conduct court sessions or hearings in the absence of a court security officer.
- Take charge of your courtroom and demand that participants show proper decorum and respect. This applies to virtual hearings as well.
- Prominently display “Rules of Courtroom Decorum” at the courtroom entrance or in the waiting room of a virtual hearing.
- Do not sit on or behind a bench that is not elevated and protected.
- Make sure a duress button (“panic button”) is installed in a readily accessible location for the judge and clerk. Test duress alarms regularly.
- Do not allow law enforcement officers to enter your courtroom with a weapon if the officer is a party to a case pending in your court. This is especially important in domestic relations cases.
- Do not allow anyone to approach the bench without first asking for and receiving your permission.
- Do not ever let a party or criminal defendant think your decision was “personal” or that you have some personal dislike or animosity toward them.
- Do not allow disruptive persons to remain in your courtroom if you can have them legally removed. This applies to virtual hearings as well.
- Do not hesitate to request additional security for a high-risk trial or a high-risk person.
- Do not forget to wear your judicial robe in the courtroom. It will normally command respect, and like a police uniform, it will make you more difficult to recognize off of the bench when you have removed your robe (your ‘uniform’).
- Do not allow the courtroom to become overcrowded. Use video technology to allow overflow spectators to view proceedings from an alternate location.
- Do not drink from glasses or water pitchers that have been left unattended in the courtroom on the bench.
- Do not have heavy or sharp items on the bench or courtroom workstations where others can grab them.
- Use “jail pens” made with a soft rubbery material, which prevents the use of the pens as a weapon.
- Where applicable, make sure that window coverings are installed and properly positioned to prevent a view from the outside into your courtroom.
- Do not think that just because something bad has never happened that it will never happen in your court.
- If presiding over a virtual hearing from a home office, always use a virtual background with an official court seal (that also hides any personal artifacts or pictures in the background).

## In Chambers

- Make sure a duress button (“panic button”) is installed in a readily accessible location. Test duress alarms regularly.
- Do not hesitate to call a court security officer to your chambers at the first hint of a security problem.
- Make sure window coverings are installed and properly positioned to prevent a view from the outside into your chambers.
- Do not display family photographs in your chambers where visitors can see them. Turn them toward you. This applies to your background in a virtual meeting as well.
- Do not use the main public courthouse entrance, public hallways, or public elevators if you can avoid doing so.
- Do not allow persons in the custody of law enforcement to be brought to your residence or chambers. Meet them in the courtroom or police station.
- Do not allow anyone to be seated in your office or chambers in your absence without your prior consent.
- Do not leave valuables or sensitive papers in sight and unlocked when you leave your office. This is especially important if maintenance or cleaning persons will be entering during your absence.
- Do not discard sensitive materials or information in your home or office trash can in a legible form that could be read by scavengers.
- Do not allow chambers staff to tell strangers where you are or give out your schedule.

## Throughout the Courthouse

- Make sure public service counters are equipped with duress alarms, protective barriers, and security cameras.
- Do not assume that duress alarms are in working condition. Test them regularly.
- Take part in active shooter (e.g., “Run, Hide, Fight”) and other emergency response trainings so that you are aware of what to do in various emergency event scenarios.
- Do not allow the public to access sensitive areas and make sure proper access control systems are in place for both keyed and electronically locked doors.
- Do not allow intoxicated persons to enter or remain in the courthouse.
- Note and report any upcoming proceedings that may involve a potentially violent or unstable person.
- Conduct thorough background checks on all court security officers, staff, and contractors upon hiring and periodically thereafter.
- Do not get onto an elevator with persons you do not know or are not comfortable with.
- Do not become physically involved in subduing, chasing, or apprehending disorderly persons or escapees.
- Do not forget to teach your staff and your family what you have learned about judicial safety and security.

## In Parking Lots

- Do not reserve your parking space at the courthouse with a sign that says “Judge” or your name.
- Do not have a personalized license plate that says “JUDGE” on it.
- When leaving the courthouse, do not go to your vehicle if you perceive someone is watching you that had business within your court. Either wait or request an escort from a court security officer.
- Stay away from isolated or poorly lit areas. Avoid walking near shrubbery, which can hide attackers.
- Always lock your car doors and keep windows up both when driving and parked. Never leave your keys in your car.
- Limit the amount of time you spend idle in the car.
- Always carefully note where you parked so you do not spend unnecessary time walking around a parking lot.
- Walk purposefully to your car and look confident. Assertive body language can help prevent an attack.
- Try not to carry a lot of packages at once, as this makes you an easy target.
- If you carry a purse, keep it close to your body, preferably in front.
- When possible, wear shoes and clothing that will not hinder an escape.
- Always be alert and aware. Have your car keys in your hand and be ready to unlock the door without delay.
- As you approach your car, look under and around it. Before getting in, look in the back seat and on the floor.

## While Commuting

- Do not always drive the same route to and from your home and office.
- Do not arrive at or leave the courthouse at the same time every day, including at lunch.
- Do not leave the courthouse during the day without confidentially letting someone know where you are going, what you will be doing, and when you should be expected to return to the building.
- Do not be paranoid, but be aware if someone is staring at you or following you.
- Do not drive to your street of residence if you perceive someone might be following you. Gas is cheaper than your life, so drive another block or two before deciding whether or not to go home.
- Do not enter or leave the courthouse in darkness if you can avoid it, and do not hesitate to request a court security officer escort when in doubt.
- Do not transport your judicial robe in your vehicle by hanging it up unless it is covered up. If not concealed, lay it on the seat or in the trunk to hide it.
- Always travel with your cell phone and make sure the battery is charged. Keep an extra power bank for charging mobile devices.
- Maintain an emergency supply kit in your vehicle. Examples of suggested items include a spare tire and repair tools, jumper cables, flashlight, and extra batteries, first aid kit, nonperishable foods, and drinking water.
- Set up emergency contact and medical information on your cell phone that can be accessed by first responders in the event of an emergency. Keep a paper copy of emergency contacts and information in your glove box.
- Maintain at least a half tank of gas in your car at all times.

## At Home

- Conduct a Home Security Audit. NCSC has a [Guide to Home Security Audits](#) which describes in detail a number of recommendations for the improvement of home security.
- Install a home security system to include items such as intrusion alarms, video cameras, doorbell cameras, and garage door sensors.
- Make sure exterior lighting is adequate and remove overgrown landscaping.
- Install proper door locks and replace exterior door hinges and screws.
- Do not answer your door (or any door) without knowing who is on the other side. Make sure you have a webcam, doorbell camera or peephole.
- Do not announce your name and phone number on voice mail greeting messages and do not provide anonymous callers with any personally identifiable information.
- Do not return office telephone calls from your personal phone.
- Have the ability to record telephone conversations in both your office and home.
- Do not use your street address as your personal mail return address. Use a work address or a post office box.
- Do not take magazines to the courthouse until you remove mailing labels containing your name and address.
- Do not open any envelopes or parcels that look suspicious or have no return address, especially if you were not expecting such.
- Do not throw away “hate mail.” Instead, report it to court security and local law enforcement. Such mail may be helpful to detectives down the road.

## In Public

- Make restaurant reservations and food orders using a nickname or a name you will remember and recognize when called but is not so unusual as to attract attention.
- Do not use public restrooms unless unavoidable.
- Do not sit near front windows in restaurants.
- Do not use the title “Judge” on personal checks, credit cards, airline tickets, etc.
- Do not wear shirts or caps in public that identify you as a judge.
- Do not become intoxicated in public, thereby becoming vulnerable.
- Do not ride in parades unless there are provisions made for security and crowd control.

### Online

- Be aware of laws or statutes regarding the protection of personally identifiable information for judges. If at all possible, do not have a publicly listed or published home address.
- Use caution when posting to social media, particularly when it comes to personally identifiable information. Remember that once information has been posted to a social networking site, that information can no longer be considered private.
- Do not publicly announce that you are going out of town for work or vacation.
- Take advantage of privacy settings when using social media.
- Do not engage online or in social media with persons who have done business with your court.
- Change online passwords often. Use different passwords for each online account.
- Use two-factor authentication (TFA) for logging into accounts when possible.
- Do not log into bank accounts, e-mail, or social media accounts while on a public Wi-Fi hotspot. When possible, use a reliable personal virtual private network (VPN) service provider.
- Backup personal data and important records to a virtual, cloud environment or store hard copies of digital data at a physical location elsewhere. This will make you less vulnerable to ransomware.
- Protect your computer by keeping your firewall turned on and making sure your operating system and antivirus software are up to date.
- Beware of social media and email scams.
- Have Internet “safe words” that only family and close colleagues know to prevent malicious actors from impersonating you or family members to extract information.

### In the Media

- Maintain a news article file so you will know what information the public has received about you.
- Do not be quoted in the news in such a manner as to make the public think that you fear violence or that you think you are not at risk. Such comments can be taken as an invitation or a challenge.
- Do not tell the media (or publish reports) about the kind of security you have in place or what weaknesses your court has that need to be improved.
- Do not update photographs on file with the news media or the government if you can avoid it.
- Do not allow the media to show photographs of your family or your residence.
- Do not allow the media to learn the names, ages, or schools of your children.

## While Campaigning

- Do not place your residence address on campaign materials.
- Do not appear at campaign fundraising events unless you have arranged for security. Consider control of admission by invitations or limit ticket sales or distribution.
- Do not personally post or remove your campaign signs.
- Do not campaign door-to-door alone.
- Do not overdo it with your campaign signs at your residence or bumper stickers on your personal vehicles.

## NATIONAL CENTER FOR STATE COURTS

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NOTE: Review this list periodically to refresh your memory. Awareness of these tips for your personal safety and security will improve your chances for survival in an incident.

This list of recommendations was revised from [Taking Precautions: 101 Personal Safety Tips for Judges and Court Staff](#), published by NCSC in 2009. Additional [cybersecurity resources](#) and [tip sheets](#) are available from the National Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA). Additional court centric personal safety resources are also available from the [Judicial Family Institute \(JFI\)](#).

For further information and additional court security resources, contact the National Center for State Courts at [knowledge@ncsc.org](mailto:knowledge@ncsc.org).