

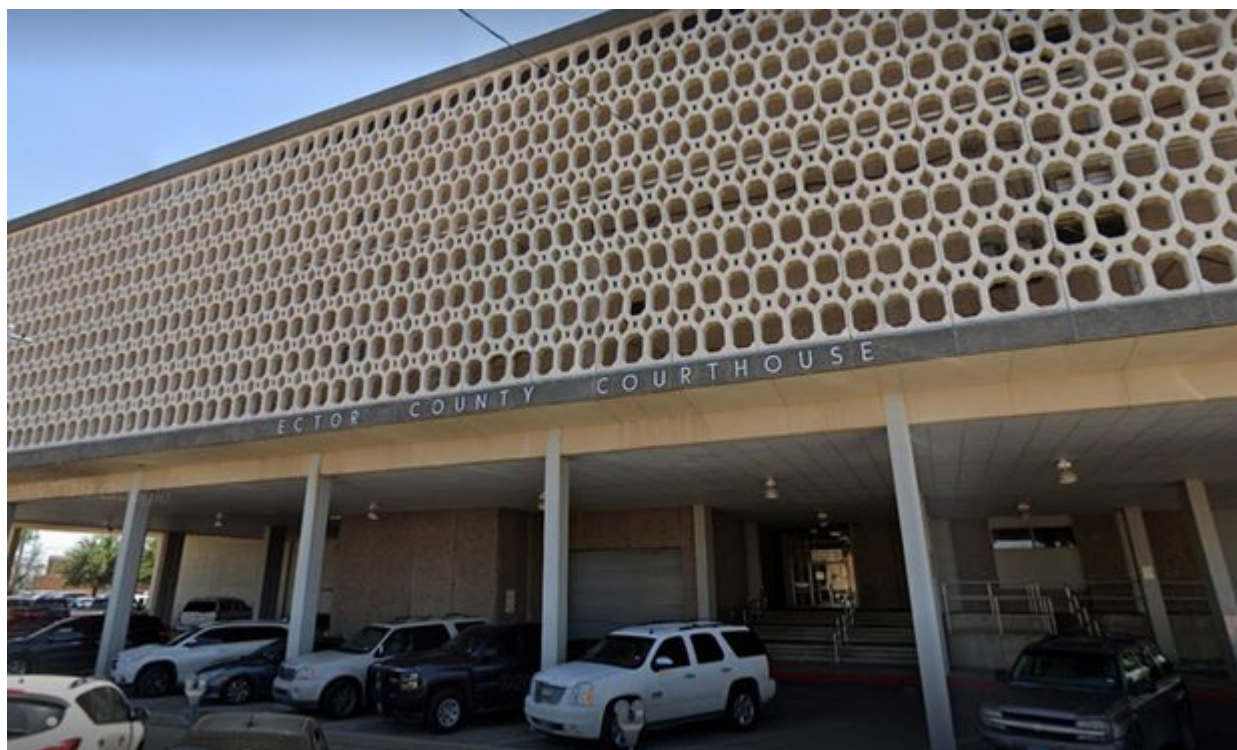
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'A Nightmare Out Here': Another Texas Lawyer Dies of COVID-19

Midland and Odessa attorneys say that judges in Ector County need better COVID-19 precautions, after an attorney caught the virus at a November pretrial hearing, and died from his infection.

By Angela Morris | December 14, 2020



Ector County Courthouse at 300 North Grant, Odessa, Texas. Photo: Google

Lawrence Barber, who practiced in Odessa for 58 years and developed a fierce reputation for battling hard for his clients in court, died Dec. 12 of COVID-19.

Barber likely contracted COVID-19 in early November from one of his criminal-defense clients, who was brought from the local jail to the Ector County Courthouse for a pretrial conference in the courtroom of 244th District Judge James Rush of Odessa. The client tested positive for the virus, and the next week, Barber was hospitalized. He died after about a month in the hospital.

Rush didn't return a call or email seeking comment before deadline.

Texas Judge Dies of COVID-19: 'I Lost a Good Friend' **(<https://www.law.com/texaslawyer/2020/12/14/texas-judge-dies-of-covid-19-i-lost-a-good-friend/>)**

Odessa criminal-defense solo practitioner Michael McLeaish said no one could prove with certainty that Barber contracted the virus at Rush's pretrial hearing. But McLeaish added that is what Barber believed had happened.

"Barber called me some day around that time, and suggested to me he had been with a prisoner who was believed to be negative," said McLeaish, who was good friends with Barber. "After his exposure to the prisoner, he was called and told the prisoner was positive. So he self-isolated. That was the last time I had any conversation with Larry Barber."

Ector County District Attorney Bobby Bland said that the pretrial hearing in Rush's courtroom was delving into the judge's plan to hold a jury trial in the case. Bland's office objected to the trial, and the hearing was delving into the coronavirus precautions that the court needed to implement.

"We had the health department testify as to what would be the proper way to hold a trial," said Bland. "Essentially, the court was working towards implementing the recommendations of the health department, which included the testing of the inmate, which resulted in the knowledge that Larry and maybe other people had been exposed."

The inmate's positive COVID-19 test ended the plans to hold the jury trial. Barber went into the hospital the week after the pretrial hearing, said Bland.

"It's horrific. Larry was really an adversary for me for a number of years, and I actually became good friends," Bland said. "I'm going to miss him. Obviously, this is horrible."

Bland said that judges need to take Barber's death seriously and realize that their actions during the pandemic can put people at risk.

"As we go forward, I think the courts—every court, and every judge—needs to be mindful of the dangers this pandemic poses," said Bland. "Every time you are around someone, it can be risky."

McLeaish, the friend that Barber called after his exposure, said there's a group of people in Odessa who refuse to wear face masks to protect against COVID-19 transmission—and Barber was one of them, he said.

"He just wouldn't do it," McLeaish said. "We are all exposed to that. If you are practicing law here, you just have to take your chances."

Midland criminal-defense lawyer Sara Spector said that Barber was one of her mentors when she was a young attorney. She said she is angry about his death and wants the judges in Ector County to make changes to keep attorneys safe. Spector said she has covered for colleagues by making appearances in the Ector County Courthouse, where many people do not wear face masks.

"It really is a nightmare out here," Spector said. "Maybe part of his legacy will be maybe the judges can wait. We have this vaccine coming out. Have a little patience, instead of forcing defense attorneys into hearing."

Woody Leverett, a Midland criminal-defense solo practitioner who knew Barber for 25 years, said that Barber's death highlights that trying cases during the pandemic is not the right thing to do.

Leverett said, "Especially when there is a vaccine on the horizon, I just don't think there is any reason for argument to be made that we should be going to trial right now, and putting people at risk, especially with the uptick in the number of cases and the number of deaths."

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