



THE PROVINCIAL COURT
OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Effective date: 28 April 2020

CRIM 12

PRACTICE DIRECTION

CRIMINAL PRE-TRIAL CONFERENCES DURING COVID-19

Background

In [*R. v. Jordan*](#), 2016 SCC 27, the Supreme Court of Canada told all participants in the criminal justice system they have “a role to play in changing courtroom culture and facilitating a more efficient criminal justice system” (at para. 45). Participants were directed to engage in “proactive, preventative problem solving” (*supra*, at para. 112) and encouraged to “eliminate or avoid inefficient practices” (*supra*, at para. 117).

Since these directions in *Jordan*, over three quarters of all criminal files set for trial in Provincial Court collapsed on the scheduled trial date because of guilty pleas, stays of proceedings, bench warrants or adjournments. In this same timeframe, only 4% of all criminal files actually proceeded to a hearing in the Provincial Court. These statistics reveal that too many criminal files are set for trial and do not proceed causing significant scheduling difficulties and inefficient use of court time.

These concerns are amplified in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Court’s consequential suspension of regular court operations. The Provincial Court is implementing this practice direction to help address these concerns by mandating pre-trial conferences for criminal files (adult and youth) at all Provincial Court locations in the Province. This practice direction also represents one of the steps the Court is taking to increase court operations during the COVID-19 pandemic while ensuring public health continues to be protected.

Purpose

There are two main purposes behind these pre-trial conferences. The first is to reduce the number of files being set for trial by helping to ensure that only those requiring a trial are actually set for hearing. The second purpose is to manage those files that are to be set for trial to ensure that accurate time estimates have been determined prior to dates being set and ensure hearings complete on time as scheduled.

The practice direction's overarching aim is to reduce these inefficiencies in the criminal justice system by employing pre-trial conferences as a tool for the participants to collaborate and conduct cases more efficiently for the overall benefit of the administration of justice. The Court is committed to ensuring the fair, efficient and timely resolution of criminal files and to upholding the accused's right to be tried within a reasonable time. Using pre-trial conferences to help reduce day of trial collapse rates and trial continuations is an important part of that commitment.

Application

This practice directive applies to all adult and youth criminal files in the Provincial Court except summary proceedings files. All files that have been set for trial or preliminary inquiry must have a pre-trial conference prior to the trial or preliminary inquiry proceeding. Files that have not been set but wish to be set for trial or preliminary inquiry must have a pre-trial conference before being scheduled for trial or preliminary inquiry. Pre-trial conferences will commence being held on May 4, 2020.

Directions

A. General

1. The pre-trial conference judge will not be the trial judge if the matter proceeds to trial. If the matter is resolved prior to trial, the disposition may be done by the pre-trial conference judge or assigned to another judge. Where multiple pre-trial conferences occur on a file, the pre-trial conferences will be conducted by the same judge unless that judge is unavailable.
2. Pre-trial conferences will take place during court sitting hours unless reasonable accommodation of counsel's schedule is required. Pre-trial conferences will be set in one hour intervals, although counsel may request additional time if they feel it will be required.
3. Unless otherwise ordered by the pre-trial conference judge:
 - a. If the accused is represented by counsel, pre-trial conferences will take place off the record;
 - b. If the accused is not represented by counsel, pre-trial conferences will take place on the record;
 - c. All pre-trial conferences will be held via videoconference or audioconference; and
 - d. If the accused is in custody and not represented by counsel, they will appear by videoconference.

4. Crown counsel with conduct of the file¹ (“Crown counsel”) and counsel for the accused, or the accused if not represented by counsel, must attend all pre-trial conferences, unless the pre-trial conference judge directs otherwise.

B. Before the pre-trial conference

5. Before a pre-trial conference, Crown counsel and counsel for the accused, and the accused if not represented, must have:
 - a. Thoroughly reviewed their files, and
 - b. Discussed with each other the issues set out in paragraph 8.
6. The parties may provide, and are encouraged to provide, the opposite party and the pre-trial conference judge with any materials that may assist with resolution discussions and trial management issues. Unless the parties agree otherwise, these materials are to be used only for pre-trial conference purposes; these materials will not be added to the court file and will be returned to the submitting party if requested or destroyed when no longer necessary for those purposes. At a minimum, Crown counsel must provide a Crown Synopsis in [Form 1 \(CRIM 12\)](#), a copy of the Information Crown counsel is proceeding on, and any criminal record of the accused. At least three business days prior to a scheduled pre-trial conference, the parties must exchange copies of all materials for the pre-trial conference and must deliver, electronically or otherwise, a copy of those materials to the Judicial Case Manager at the applicable court location for the attention of the pre-trial conference judge.
7. If Crown counsel or counsel for the accused requests a preliminary inquiry, that party shall file a Statement of Issues and Witnesses in [Form 2 \(CRIM 12\)](#) unless otherwise ordered by the Court. The statement is to be filed with the Court preferably at the arraignment hearing.

C. At the pre-trial conference

8. At a pre-trial conference, the parties are required to have authority and be prepared to make decisions about:
 - a. resolution of the matter;
 - b. disclosure;
 - c. applications, including ones pursuant to the *Charter*, that the parties will bring at or before trial;
 - d. the number and identity of witnesses the Crown counsel intends to call at the preliminary inquiry or at trial;

¹ For the purpose of this Practice Direction, “Crown counsel with conduct of the file” may include the applicable “Intake Crown” until the “Trial Crown” is assigned.

- e. any admissions the parties are willing to make;
- f. any legal issues that the parties anticipate may arise in the proceeding; and
- g. an estimate of the time needed to complete the proceeding.

Commentary: *In order to ensure they are able to make decisions on these issues, counsel for the accused must have communicated with their client to obtain instructions. For Crown counsel, they must have communicated with any civilian witnesses essential to the viability of the prosecution (for example, sex assault complainants) in order to assess their reliability and level of interest in the matter as well as obtain any resolution input where that may be appropriate.*

The pre-trial conference judge will proactively canvass resolution in order to avoid setting trial dates. If the accused or their counsel require some time before proceeding to disposition, they should not be setting trial dates to obtain that time but rather pleading guilty and obtaining that time by adjourning the disposition. For Crown counsel, they need to be reasonable and realistic in their sentencing positions and exercise “enhanced discretion for resolving individual cases” (Jordan, para. 138). The pre-trial conference judge will also proactively canvass the issues to reduce them to only those requiring adjudication, and then determining both how much time will be required and how the file is to be scheduled. The intention is to ensure that those files that actually proceed to trial complete as scheduled thereby avoiding continuation dates that generate further delays in completing criminal proceedings.

D. After the pre-trial conference

9. After hearing from the parties during a pre-trial conference, the pre-trial conference judge may take one or more of the following steps:
 - a. make any case management directions or orders;
 - b. confirm or amend the estimates of the time required to hear the proceeding;
 - c. set timelines for the exchange of materials on applications to be heard, or for the completion of disclosure;
 - d. set parameters for the hearing of applications;
 - e. confirm any admissions made on the record and have all parties sign off on the admissions in writing;
 - f. adjourn to the Judicial Case Manager to set a date for:
 - i. a subsequent pre-trial conference;
 - ii. disposition;
 - iii. preliminary inquiry; or
 - iv. trial.
 - g. take any further steps or provide any further directions consistent with the purpose of this Practice Direction.

10. Following the conclusion of a pre-trial conference, any directions or orders made by the pre-trial conference judge may be reduced to writing or otherwise recorded.
11. If the matter is confirmed or set for hearing, a pre-trial conference will be set prior to the first date of hearing to ensure the matter will still be proceeding on the scheduled dates. If following this pre-trial conference, the file remains set for hearing, the pre-trial conference judge will then complete a [Pre-Trial Conference Record](#), including any agreements or admissions, and have it placed in the court file.

Commentary: *The parties can again expect the pre-trial conference judge to proactively pursue resolution and trial manage the file at this pre-trial conference. The Pre-Trial Conference Record will record any admissions, trial scheduling directions, witness issues and other details the trial judge needs to know for conducting the trial.*

Duration

This practice direction is in effect commencing April 28, 2020 and remains in effect until further direction from the Chief Judge.

History of Practice Direction

- Original practice direction dated April 28, 2020.
- See also [NP 19 COVID-19: Commencing Recovery of Some Court Operations](#).
- The Supreme Court of British Columbia has issued [CPD-3, Criminal Practice Direction](#).

I make this practice direction pursuant to my authority under the *Provincial Court Act*, R.S.B.C. 1996, c. 379 and Rule 3 of the *Provincial Court of British Columbia Criminal Caseflow Management Rules*, SI/99-104.

Melissa Gillespie
Chief Judge
Provincial Court of British Columbia