

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF ALABAMA**

IN RE:)	
PROCEDURES FOR REQUESTING,)	GENERAL ORDER
FILING, AND MANAGEMENT OF)	24-mc-1000-JB
HIGHLY SENSITIVE DOCUMENTS)	
)	

WHEREAS federal courts are updating their security procedures to uniformly protect highly sensitive documents (HSDs), a narrow subset of sealed documents that must, for their protection, be stored outside the court’s electronic systems;

THE COURT FINDS that good cause exists to permit nonelectronic filing under [Civil Rule 5\(d\)\(3\)\(A\)](#) and [Criminal Rule 49\(b\)\(3\)\(A\)](#), and to adopt the revised HSD guidelines, which includes a standard definition of HSDs, a dedicated procedure for filing, serving, and maintaining HSDs, and factors to be considered by judicial officers in determining if a document is an HSD.

THEREFORE, IT IS HEREBY ORDERED that, effective as of the date of this Order and until such time as the court orders otherwise, HSDs will be filed and served in paper form (or, if digital media, on a secure electronic device, such as a flash drive), in accordance with this Order, and will be maintained by the clerk’s office in a secure paper filing system or secure standalone computer system that is not connected to any network.¹ This Order supersedes any and all prior court orders and inconsistent local rules concerning HSDs, including the General Order found at doc. 1 in Miscellaneous Action 21-1000-KD and issued on January 11, 2021.

1. Documents and Materials Subject to this Order

- a. **Definition:** A **Highly Sensitive Document (HSD)** is a document or other material that contains sensitive, but unclassified, information that warrants exceptional handling and storage procedures to prevent significant consequences that could result if such information were obtained or disclosed in an unauthorized manner. Although frequently related to law enforcement materials, especially sensitive information in a civil case could also qualify for HSD treatment.

¹ This guidance does not apply to classified information, which should be handled according to the Classified Information Procedures Act (CIPA) and the Chief Justice’s Security Procedures related thereto, 18 U.S.C. app 3 §§ 1, 9. The Chief Justice’s Security Procedures (criminal prosecutions) and the Department of Justice (DOJ) regulation [28 C.F.R. § 17.17\(c\)](#) (civil actions) govern classified information in any form in the custody of a court.

- i. **Examples of HSDs:** Examples include *ex parte* sealed filings relating to: national security investigations, cyber investigations, and especially sensitive public corruption investigations; and documents containing a highly exploitable trade secret, financial information, or computer source code belonging to a private entity, the disclosure of which could have significant national or international repercussions.
 - ii. **Exclusions:** Most materials currently filed under seal do not meet the definition of an HSD and do not merit the heightened protections afforded to HSDs. The form or nature of the document, by itself, does not determine whether HSD treatment is warranted. Instead, the focus is on the severity of the consequences for the parties or the public should the document be accessed without authorization. Most presentence reports, pretrial release reports, pleadings related to cooperation in criminal cases, social security records, administrative immigration records, applications for search warrants, interception of wire, oral, or electronic communications under 18 U.S.C. § 2518, and applications for pen registers, trap and trace devices would not meet the HSD definition.
- b. HSDs vary in their physical form and characteristics. They may be paper, electronic, audiovisual, microform, or other media. The term “document” includes all recorded information, regardless of its physical form or characteristics.
- c. Any dispute as to whether a document is an HSD shall be resolved by the presiding Judge, or when no presiding Judge is assigned, by the Chief Judge or his/her designee.

2. Requesting HSD Designation

- a. Any party seeking to file an HSD must, before such filing, seek leave of court for such filing in the manner provided in paragraph 2(b).
 - i. A request for HSD designation must be accompanied by a certification of the movant’s good-faith belief that the material meets the HSD definition.
 - ii. The requesting party must articulate why HSD treatment is warranted, including, as appropriate: the contents of the document; the nature of the investigation or litigation; and the potential consequences to the parties, the public, or national interests, in the event the information contained in the document is accessed or disseminated without authorization.
 - iii. The requesting party must include a proposed order that provides the information stated in paragraph 3 below.

- iv. The requesting party shall serve the proposed HSD on the other parties as follows:
 - Civil cases - by any manner specified in [Civil Rule 5\(b\)\(2\)](#), except for service by electronic means; or
 - Criminal cases - by any manner specified in [Criminal Rule 49\(a\)](#), except for service by electronic means.

- b. The request and the proposed HSD material shall be submitted to the clerk's office, in the form of either two paper copies or an electronic copy on a secure electronic device (as described below in Paragraph 6 below), of each of the following items: the proposed HSD, the certificate of service, and, if applicable, a copy of the Order designating the document as an HSD. All paper documents must be submitted in a sealed envelope marked "HIGHLY SENSITIVE DOCUMENT." The outside of the envelope shall be affixed with a copy of the HSD's caption page (with confidential information redacted).

3. Order Granting HSD Designation

An order granting a motion seeking HSD designation, or directing the filing of a document as an HSD on the court's own motion, must:

- a. State the identity of the persons who are to have access to the documents without further order of court; and

- b. Set forth instructions for the duration of HSD treatment. HSDs are stored temporarily or permanently offline as the situation requires. When designating a document as an HSD, courts should indicate when the designation will automatically lapse or when the designation should be revisited by the judicial officer. HSDs should be migrated as sealed documents to the court's electronic docketing system and unsealed, as appropriate, as soon as the situation allows.

4. Filing An HSD

- a. A copy of the order granting HSD designation must be included with any document filed as an HSD.

- b. The clerk will maintain the HSD in a secure paper filing system or a secure standalone computer system that is not connected to any network. Any copies served on the parties will be done via mail.

- c. The clerk's office will make an informational docket entry in the court's electronic filing system indicating that the HSD was filed with the court. The

docket entry shall not include personal or other identifying details related to or contained with the HSD. For example:

5/25/23 [no link] SYSTEM ENTRY-Docket Entry 92
Restricted until further notice (Entered 5/25/23).

- d. An opinion or order entered by the court related to an HSD may itself constitute an HSD if it reveals sensitive information in the HSD. If the court determines that a court order qualifies as an HSD, the clerk's office will file and maintain the order as an HSD and will serve paper copies of any filing issued by the court via mail.
- e. An HSD in the lower court's record will ordinarily be also regarded by an appellate court as an HSD.

5. Safeguarding Internal Communication

Care should also be taken in internal court communications regarding HSDs, including notes and pre-decisional materials, not to include the protected substance of HSDs in any communication using the internet or a computer connected to a network.

6. Secure Electronic Device

A secure device includes any device approved by this Court, including a USB flash drive commonly referred to as a thumb drive.

7. Questions about HSD Filing Procedures

Any questions about how an HSD should be filed with the court pursuant to this General Order should be directed to the Clerk of Court or the Chief Deputy.

IT IS SO ORDERED, this 28th day of August, 2024.



CHIEF UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE