

# *News Advisory*

From the Rhode Island Judiciary



## **Family Court opens ‘virtual clerk’s office’ to further assist public during pandemic**

**September 1, 2020:** The Rhode Island Family Court today opened a virtual clerk’s office allowing the public to remotely conduct business traditionally conducted at counters in courthouses. The virtual clerk’s office can be reached from any electronic device having a microphone and audio-visual capabilities including a smart phone. By the mere touch of a button, a member of the public will be able to speak with a clerk face to face in real time and obtain assistance without having to enter a courthouse, take time off from work or contend with traffic, parking or child care.

The virtual clerk’s office, which is supported by the WebEx platform, is accessible at <http://www.courts.ri.gov> on the Family Court’s page by clicking on the “virtual clerk’s office” link. The link will take users to a “virtual clerk help desk” button. The virtual clerk’s office will be open from 8:45 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. during the days that court is open for business. The service will be live on Wednesday, September 2.

In compliance with the Covid-19 related directives of the Rhode Island Supreme Court and the Governor, Family Court has been working creatively to reduce the number of people in courtrooms, hallways and at counters while at the same time continuing to provide quality service to the public in a safe, efficient way. Since May, access to clerks in the courthouses has been by appointment only except in emergency situations, and remotely by telephone. The availability of a virtual clerk will add the important visual factor to remote interactions and is designed to improve the delivery of assistance to the public.

When approached with the concept of instituting a virtual clerk’s office, Family Court Chief Judge Michael B. Forte instructed his staff “to build the virtual office as quickly as possible.” Chief Judge Forte said: “This is yet another way to take advantage of the remote technology the court has been using since spring to augment the public’s ability to access justice in a convenient, safe way while providing for the public’s safety and that of the court staff.”

Last month, Chief Judge Forte presided over two night-court sessions during which 16 divorces were heard and decided remotely at times and in places more convenient for the

litigants and their attorneys. By all accounts, the pilot night-court program was a success and further evening sessions are being planned for the fall.

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