

News Advisory

From the Rhode Island Judiciary



Night court dawns in Rhode Island

August 4, 2020: The Rhode Island Family Court this Thursday evening will introduce its own version of “night court” to the judicial system in response to some of the procedural ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In what is to be a two-night pilot program, Chief Judge Michael B. Forte will preside over nine uncontested divorces this Thursday evening, August 6, and another nine on the evening of August 20. The sessions will be conducted remotely, with Chief Judge Forte presiding from home and other participants from their homes or offices, and they will be live-streamed on YouTube.

As the pandemic began to spread in Rhode Island, divorce hearings were temporarily suspended in mid-March along with other proceedings deemed nonessential in all state courthouses. By mid-April, the Family Court had pivoted to conducting hearings remotely using the WebEx videoconferencing platform for uncontested divorces. Because remote hearings are scheduled into appointed time slots, it decreases the number of matters that can be reached on a given day, creating a backlog for the resolution of divorces.

“When I learned in early July that the earliest a couple could get a hearing on an uncontested divorce was November, that was unacceptable,” Chief Judge Forte said. “We want to address the backlog, but we also want to take advantage of the remote hearing technology we have been using since this past spring and provide hearings during evening or non-working hours that are more convenient for many people.”

Chief Judge Forte plans to assess the pilot’s effectiveness after the second session.

State Court Administrator J. Joseph Baxter Jr. has said that the technology applications the courts have turned to in recent months have produced efficiencies and processes that are likely to continue beyond the pandemic.

Expected to participate in the uncontested divorce hearings this Thursday are Chief Judge Forte, court staff, the divorcing parties, and their attorneys. Uncontested – or nominal – divorces are those in which the parties have worked out a property settlement, child custody and other issues without the need for a trial. The court’s role is to ensure that the agreements are fair and that the parties are satisfied, as well as to formally grant the divorce.

The public may view the proceedings live, starting at 6:30 p.m. and expected to last three hours on Thursday, on Chief Judge Forte's YouTube channel at:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCUxD4waR6CBYE0WuZaJbx9Q/live>

Public access to other remote court proceedings may be found at the Judiciary's web page at:

<https://www.courts.ri.gov/Pages/PublicAccessCourtHearings.aspx>

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