

News Advisory

From the Rhode Island Judiciary



Remote technology has kept the courts going as they prepare to expand in-person hearings

May 31, 2020: As Rhode Island state courts prepare to slowly return to in-person proceedings on Monday (June 1), they will continue to build on two months of hearings and conferences conducted remotely during the COVID-19 public health crisis.

Since March 17, when regular court calendars were suspended for all but emergency and essential matters, the courts have turned increasingly to teleconferencing and videoconferencing technology using telephone lines and the WebEx video application to facilitate hundreds of court hearings and conferences. That is in addition to the hearings that Superior Court and District Court judges and magistrates have continued to conduct using their longstanding closed-circuit videoconferencing connections to the Adult Correctional Institutions for hearings with inmates in criminal matters.

As COVID-19 is here to stay for the near future, the courts must continue to operate in a manner that limits crowds and encourages social distancing. Starting June 1, state courthouses will have renewed emphasis on social distancing measures with new hallway and floor signage and elevator capacity restrictions. Verbal health screenings will take place at courthouse entrances and cloth facial coverings will continue to be required in the buildings. The number of scheduled hearings has been reduced to minimize foot traffic. These steps are consistent with federal and state public health guidelines.

While two county courthouses remain closed in Newport and Wakefield, the court system itself never shut down. The state Supreme Court heard oral arguments in seven cases over May 13 and 14 using the WebEx video conferencing technology. Three of the five Supreme Court justices participated from separate rooms at the Licht Judicial Complex, while the other two participated from home.

In the Superior Court, judges and magistrates have held hundreds of telephone and video conferences and remote hearings, largely in business calendar proceedings and other civil matters. The Court has held 35 remote video hearings since May 4 and has scheduled another 73 over the next month.

Each Family Court judge has a YouTube channel in which audio and/or video have been available to the public in domestic relations cases. Child support cases are expected to be

heard remotely by mid-June. The remote technology has enabled hearings in many juvenile, custody, visitation and permanency cases that are confidential.

The District Court, one of the Judiciary's busiest, has heard more than 3,000 cases, most of them in-person criminal matters, since mid-March. Judges have also availed themselves of the remote technology for conferencing and some civil matters.

The Workers' Compensation Court has heard more than 2,500 cases remotely since March 17 and disposed of 1,268 cases during that period.

At the Rhode Island Traffic Tribunal, court officials have disposed of 1,500 cases since March 25, and collected a little over \$1 million in fines and fees during that time through online payments or those collected in the first-floor lobby, where court staff set up a temporary collection area. Those receipts are turned over to the state's General Fund.

More information on court protocols for the coming weeks may be found online at: <https://www.courts.ri.gov/Pages/ContinuityCourtBusinessOperations.aspx>

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