

Metro East Courts Meet the Challenges of the Pandemic

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ST. LOUIS - Court system throughout the world are meeting the challenges resulting from the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Metro East courts are no exception.

The Illinois Supreme Court, which exercises supervisory authority over all courts in Illinois, issued an order in March, mandating the state's lower courts establish temporary procedures to minimize the negative impacts of the virus, but also continue in providing citizens with access to justice.

The Courthouses in southwest Illinois have all altered their operations postponing some cases but hearing all emergency-related matters and employing technology that enable court operations to continue without physical proximity.

“We are dealing with the challenges posed by the pandemic fairly well, and we hope that everyone stays safe and healthy through these difficult times,” noted Chief Judge Bill Mudge of the Third Circuit, which consists of Madison and Bond counties.

Essential matters such as Emergency Orders of Protection, juvenile shelter care and detention hearings, and other emergent situations are being addressed on an as-needed basis while strictly adhering to social distancing and other health department protocols. Judges are also using teleconferences and video conference platforms to communicate and conduct hearings.

Closed-circuit video and audio access between the jail and the Criminal Justice Center enables judges to hold hearings remotely with the State, public defenders and the judge appearing from different offices.

In the Twentieth Circuit, which includes [Monroe](#), [Perry](#), [Randolph](#), [St. Clair](#), and [Washington](#) counties, Chief Judge Andrew J. Gleeson has continued jury trials and emergency matters are being heard, using technology when necessary.

“Necessity is the ‘Mother of Invention’ and the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic illustrate that,” he said. “As the Twentieth Judicial Circuit was challenged by the ever-changing demands of the pandemic, the true character of those entrusted with the judicial system came to the fore. The cooperation and willingness of judges, attorneys, court staff and personnel, court reporters, bailiffs and more to go the extra mile has enabled our courts to balance the health concerns of all involved with the need for the essential Constitutional and legal functions to continue.”

Courts there have employed Zoom and remote conference call technology with nearly all criminal matters and are being held by closed circuit television.

“Some of these new-fangled processes are certain to survive into the future and form a framework for the use of technology in our courtrooms,” Gleeson added. “As the Court continues to navigate through these uncharted waters, I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to all of my judges and the court personnel who support us day in and day out. Together we will meet the challenge to dispense justice in these uncertain times.”

Courts have dealt with emergencies before. When the Spanish flu struck in 1918, the United States Supreme Court curtailed its operations, meeting only to issue necessary orders and continue oral arguments until the crisis had eased. The American justice system cannot just shut down when a virus threatens it – and it has not.

“Despite the unprecedented disruption presented by the coronavirus, Illinois courts and judges have worked nimbly not only to minimize risk, but to keep the system running and ensure the rights of individuals remain upheld,” said Illinois Judges Association President Margaret Mullen. “Illinoisans should be proud.”