

6th Judicial Circuit Update

May 14, 2020

The Arkansas Supreme Court has announced that the courts shall resume conducting hearings with certain restrictions as of May 18, 2020. I want to report that the courts in Pulaski and Perry Counties have continued to be open for business since the beginning of the pandemic, although modifications have been made to ensure the safety of not only our staff but also the public.

The courts have had to rely on Zoom, telephonic hearings and pleadings to resolve many of the issues presented. In-person hearings have been restricted by order of the Supreme Court except for emergency hearings such as Orders of Protections, emergency guardianships and custody matters. The judges hearing criminal matters have utilized Zoom and Justice Bridge, which is a secure line to the jail, the public defender and prosecutors. The judges hearing juvenile matters have continued to hear detentions and other matters that are either emergencies or cases that require time-sensitive hearings. Civil matters, to the extent that judges were able, have been resolved using primarily Zoom.

There is no question that many cases had to be continued because of the restrictions on in-person hearings. The primary reason obviously is to make sure that the courts do not become a conduit for the spreading of the coronavirus. Each judge acknowledges that the continuances have inconvenienced many litigants and attorneys, and for that, we hope to begin in-person hearings as soon as possible.

Some of the steps we are taking to prepare for in-person hearings are with the cooperation of Judge Barry Hyde and the support of the Administrative Office of the Courts. Even though our main courthouse in downtown Little Rock was renovated in 1995, it lacks the necessary wiring to support Zoom conferences from each of the courtrooms and support the work of the Pulaski Circuit Clerk's office at the same time. Judge Hyde has authorized, which will be completed within days, the necessary rewiring to provide each division of court at the courthouse and at the Juvenile Center on Roosevelt Road, its own wi-fi. Further, the courts have ordered 22 laptops, still on order, to accommodate zoom hearings by all judges.

In addition, we are very sensitive to the safety of all who come into the courthouse and the Juvenile Center. Judge Hyde has implemented safety requirements such as requiring masks to be worn by all court personnel and those that enter the courthouses, temperature readings will be taken at the entrances and each person will be screened with a few brief questions. This process will delay entrance to the courthouses, but hopefully, not to anyone's detriment.

The courthouses are being sanitized by an outside company each weekend. In addition, I understand that the common areas are being sanitized during the week. The county is purchasing commercial hand sanitizers which will be placed throughout the courthouses. Each court will also have sanitizing material to use after each hearing.

In Perry County, similar steps are being taken to sanitize the courtroom. Each person entering the courthouse will be screened and their temperature taken.

We are also sensitive to attorneys, litigants and witnesses who are required to appear in court. Many have health issues that put them at risk. Please notify the court's Trial Court Assistant if you, your client or witnesses have health concerns and we will make the appropriate accommodations.

We also are obtaining information from the Arkansas Health Department regarding the increase/decrease of the coronavirus in Pulaski and Perry Counties. This information will be utilized in determining how fast we have in-person hearings and jury trials.

Lastly, we appreciate your cooperation throughout this pandemic experience. Hopefully, we will be back to normal soon.

Thank you.

Vann Smith
Administrative Judge 6th Judicial Circuit