



DCBA Town Hall Virtual Meeting
With Dauphin County Court
4-8-2020
Summary

1. Welcome by Lisa Benzie at 12 noon via Zoom.
2. Brief introduction to Zoom and Meeting Protocols by Patrice Merzanis
3. COVID updates from the Court: President Judge John F. Cherry; Judge Jeanine Turgeon; Judge William T. Tully; Judge Edward M. Marsico, Jr.; District Court Administrator Deborah S. Freeman
 - The court has been working with the Commissioners to ensure the court is able to function. Judge Cherry highlighted the special efforts of Chad Saylor, Chief Clerk/Chief of Staff, Dauphin County Commissioners.
 - The County prison began releasing non-violent and work release individuals who were just weeks away from their release date. Those recently released are electronically monitored with ankle bracelets. This has been very successful.
 - There have been several hundred employees of the County furloughed, mainly those who could not work from home such as probation officers, work release staff, and domestic relations staff. There may be a second wave of layoffs or reductions in hours involving staff working two weeks on, two weeks off or something similar.
 - Magistrate District Judges will continue holding preliminary hearings, setting bail, and other emergency actions.
 - Most proceedings are being handled by phone or video conferencing thanks to the IT department staff.
 - Judge Cherry recognized Court Administrator Deb Freeman for her leadership in this difficult time and also commended the hard work of public defenders and the district attorney's office on their continued operations.
 - Most people have remained calm and patient despite this difficult time.

- Civil status conferences and discovery conferences are being held by phone, often resulting in resolving a number of issues.
- Attorneys are filing documents in court and the court is responding and issuing orders smoothly.
- Custody conferences are being held via phone.
- Emergency custody filings are continuing. Custody attorneys can contact the court and the original filing can then be mailed to the court.
- Criminal court is using video conferencing to conduct business.
 - Courtroom #8 is available with social distancing, for those cases needing to be in person.
 - Criminal court is giving priority to incarcerated individuals.
 - They are doing pre-trial conferencing.
 - No jury trials are planned for now.
- The court is actively planning for increased capacity after the crisis is over. For example, since no jury trials are being held, plans are being made to expand capacity in that area after the ban is lifted.
- Veteran court is continuing uninterrupted.
- The domestic relations office is continuing with their conferences. However, appeals have not yet been heard. Judge Turgeon explained that the court hopes to be able to do support appeals by phone next week.
- Due to the virus, support related contempt of court hearings have not been held yet. The court is in the process of drafting an administrative order to suspend enforcement orders on support matters.
- There are custody exchange issues. These exchanges should continue to take place between parents as usual, unless of course there are specific known health and safety issues.
- Ex parte Protection From Abuse hearings are being done via telephone. Victim-witness is continuing to assist with PFA filings.
- PFA final hearings are not taking place at this time. Judges are keeping their schedules open to schedule PFA hearings for when they are permitted. The court plans to schedule individual PFA Hearing times in the future.

- Drug court is also continuing by phone or by video.
- Juvenile court is being conducted by phone once per week on Thursdays.
- Children and Youth hearings are currently held by phone and may begin using video by the end of next week.
- Orphan court emergency guardianships are being done.

Questions & Answers

QU: Are we able to file petitions with the orphans' court by mail?

A. Proceed with Regular / Non-emergency / Non-essential civil case filings by mail to the Prothonotary or Register of Wills. Those filings will be docketed and will be assigned to a judge. If you're a lawyer who filed anything, and have not heard anything in three weeks, contact Deb Freeman, Court Administrator.

QU: Do any of the Judges have any insight as to whether the Supreme Court will once again extend its order of court closures beyond May 1?

A. No further information at this time.

QU: Thank you to the Court and the County for all they are doing to continue to provide access to law and justice - civil, criminal and other public services.

QU: Are 586 criminal matters on hold until May?

A. 586 Criminal matters on hold. Those scheduled will proceed as scheduled after May

QU: What processes / procedures will the Court be following for newly filed civil matters not deemed "essential" under the Court's Administrative Orders (e.g., are they immediately docketed, are hearings being scheduled via phone or videoconference, etc.)?

A. Hearings are held by phone or video conference. Everything is docketed and sent to court for review. Schedule conference set up right away.

QU: Can short certificates be obtained from the Register of Wills office?

A. Yes, but call Register of Wills to confirm.

QU: Where non-emergency/non-essential Petitions are filed with the Orphans' Court by mail, will those matters be processed by the Court in the normal course, including the scheduling of any hearings and court conferences? Will the court schedule in-court hearings?

A. In court hearings for non-emergency matters are not being scheduled at this time.

QU: Will the Court schedule in-court hearings for non-jury matters?

A. Court proceedings are moving forward by video. Prison cases and pleas hearings are being conducted by video, if parties are agreeable.