

## **Circuit Court Update for the Baltimore County Bar Association**

I recognize that the bench, the bar, and our courthouse staff are all hoping for greater certainty about when and how we will re-open. With that in mind, I am providing a brief update on the Circuit Court “re-start” planning process that is ongoing. I anticipate further Administrative Orders from Chief Judge Barbera that will confirm a re-opening date and provide some general guidance on how courts should address ongoing health and safety considerations within the courthouse, while also addressing our backlog. There are planning committees of administrative judges throughout the State, for both the District Courts and the Circuit Courts, that are brainstorming on start-up considerations, and providing input to the Chief. But ultimately, each Circuit Court is different and needs to have a local plan.

Our first concern is to prioritize health and safety as we move forward. When we re-open, we need to minimize, to the extent possible, the number of people who are required to be present in the building each day. We also need to schedule in ways that spread attendance out throughout the day to allow for proper social distancing.

The Circuit Court has planning committees addressing criminal, family, juvenile, civil and child support case types. The Bench-Bar Committee identified practitioners to consult with each of those groups as we look at re-scheduling our backlog. More detailed information will be circulated as we get closer to our re-opening date. Some general guidelines are as follows:

- General Security Considerations
  - Masks are and will continue to be required in all public areas
  - Screening at the entry will include temperature checks, assuming there is available equipment
  - Hand sanitizer stations are being placed in areas throughout the building
  - Social distancing markers will be placed in areas where larger groups tend to gather, e.g. the front entrance, the clerk’s office window areas, the licensing areas, and outside the Register of Wills office
  - No juries will be summonsed for at least 6 weeks after we re-open, with the eventual resumption of jury trials tied to other guidance in the state limiting large crowds
  - The jury assembly and grand jury areas will be used as waiting areas for courtrooms or dockets that may be over-crowded
- Staff Considerations
  - Telework and flexible hours will continue to be supported
  - Certain services within the building will be modified until social distancing recommendations change, to include in person mediation, family case screening, and self-help services
- Remote Hearing Use

- Remote hearing platforms will continue to be utilized, particularly for uncontested matters and matters that do not require live testimony
- Criminal Case Matters
  - A new criminal case postponement policy will permit requests to be processed in writing in many circumstances
  - Docket times will be spread throughout the day to reduce cases scheduled at the same time
  - Plea dockets will be increased, with cases singly set in half hour intervals
- Family Law Case Matters
  - Uncontested matters and scheduling conferences will continue to be scheduled remotely
  - Cases will be spread throughout the day at different intervals
  - Remote mediations will be scheduled when possible
- Juvenile Case Matters
  - CINA magistrate dockets will be split, with a juvenile judge assigned daily to assist
  - Uncontested CINA matters and proffer dockets will continue to be held on remote platforms
- Civil Case Matters
  - Settlement conferences utilizing remote platforms will continue, with renewed conferences set in jury trials that must be postponed
  - Motions and administrative appeals requiring hearings will be held on remote platforms when possible
- Child Support Case Matter
  - Routine contempt dockets will be suspended on a temporary basis
  - Child support establishment dockets will be spread to decrease docket size

On a positive note, I am incredibly thankful we are on MDEC. We have remained current in many areas within the courthouse, which would not be possible if we were still dealing with paper files. This closure to the public has pushed many of us into new technology frontiers, which isn't a bad thing.

Thank you for your patience as we move forward. And in the meantime, be safe and stay healthy.