



Supreme Court of Appeals State of West Virginia

News

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West Virginia Courts Conduct Thousands of Virtual Hearings

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. – West Virginia Courts have continued to serve the public during the COVID-19 emergency by conducting thousands of hearings using virtual technology.

Since March 23, more than 28,000 people have participated in about 12,500 court hearings using Skype For Business. That is in addition to the hearings Circuit Judges and Magistrates conducted using the closed circuit courthouse to regional jail video system that has been used for many years to reduce the need to transport prisoners to and from courthouses.

West Virginia courts began the first steps of a gradual, phased-in return to normal operations on May 18, but local courts retain the discretion to impose additional restrictions, or to continue to hear matters via video or remote technology. The Court's Protocols are designed to mitigate risks associated with a gradual return to normal, in-person court functions, and are consistent with federal and state public health guidelines.

Juvenile Drug Court graduations are among the hearings being held via Skype. Twenty-Third Judicial Circuit (Berkeley, Jefferson, and Morgan Counties) Judge Bridget Cohee has held two Juvenile Drug Court graduations using virtual technology and Thirteenth Judicial Circuit (Kanawha County) Judge Joanna Tabit plans to hold a virtual Juvenile Drug Court graduation on May 26.

"The two graduating participants worked hard since August and September 2019, respectively, and completed all of the requirements, so the treatment team wanted to give them the option to mark their graduation by videoconferencing or to delay it for an appearance in court," Judge Cohee said.

"We still try to make the virtual celebration special. We prepare a program, have presentations, and destroy the petition that initiated court proceedings. After the graduation ceremony, dinner is delivered to their home along with the incentives they have worked to earn during the program and their certificate of completion," Judge Cohee said.

During the most recent graduation, Judge Cohee was careful to identify everyone participating in the call to ensure confidentiality. Juvenile hearings are closed online as they are in a courtroom.

Adults also have completed drug court programs throughout West Virginia during the pandemic, but in lieu of graduation they requested they just receive a certificate, said Nick Leftwich, West Virginia's Drug Court Coordinator.

The Supreme Court also has held arguments using virtual technology. Arguments were held via Webex on April 14 and 21 and May 19 and 20. New lawyers were admitted to the Bar on May 20 in virtual ceremonies for the first time ever.

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