

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
JULY 13, 2020

DELAWARE JUDICIARY UNVEILS CHANGES AT LEONARD L. WILLIAMS JUSTICE CENTER TO PROTECT PUBLIC AND STAFF DURING THE PANDEMIC

Members of the media were offered an opportunity on Thursday July 9, 2020 to see a number of changes that have been made at the Leonard L. Williams Justice Center in Wilmington in response to the COVID-19 pandemic on Thursday. Similar changes have been made at other court facilities across the state.

Among other safety measures, the media were shown the new temperature-check station at the entrance to the courthouse, new signs indicating that facemasks must be worn while inside the facility and social distancing signs and markers throughout the courthouse reminding visitors to stay at least six feet apart when possible. Plastic shields have also been installed at a number of locations around the courthouse including at information desks and in courtrooms.

In courtrooms, plastic shields have been placed on the bench, by the judge, and by court clerks and, in some cases, at counsel tables to allow an attorney and his or her client to sit side by side.

Signs and social distancing markers also have been installed at court elevators to limit the number of passengers per elevator car. Hand sanitizer stations are available throughout the building and in courtrooms.

In addition, members of the Judicial Information Center demonstrated a “cart” that has been created with audio and video conferencing equipment. The cart can be moved from courtroom to courtroom to allow greater remote participation by witnesses, attorneys and others in legal proceedings.

While Delaware Courts facilities were largely closed to the public from March 15 to June 15, 2020, the courts never stopped working. Many employees and judicial officers continued working from home and the courts – along with our justice system partners in the Attorney General’s Office, the Office of Public Defender, the Department of Correction, law enforcement and the Bar – turned to audio and video technology to keep important and essential court operations and proceedings moving forward. The Court of Chancery, in particular, was able to utilize video conferencing technology to keep on top of its dockets and largely carried on as usual during that period with the exception of trials. From March 15 to June 15, 2020, the Chancellor and Vice Chancellors held 279 audio or video hearings and issued 402 rulings. Masters in Chancery held an additional 56 remote hearings and issued 100 rulings.

During that same period, the Superior Court held 308 remote motion hearings and conferences in civil matters and 541 criminal proceedings including bail matters, capias returns, violations of probation, and sentencings. The Superior Court also issued 162 opinions or orders. The Delaware Supreme Court issued 108 final orders and 10 opinions.

Currently the Delaware Judiciary remains in Phase Two of a four-phase reopening plan. Phase two allows Court of Chancery trials and bench trials in other courts to resume. No date has yet been set for the move to Phase Three and Chief Justice Collins J. Seitz said the timing for Phase Three will largely be dictated by the successful efforts to control and roll back the spread of COVID-19. If efforts to contain the virus are not successful or there is a “second wave” of infections and hospitalizations in Delaware, the Chief Justice may decide to hold or even roll back the phased reopening process. In addition to consulting with state public health officials, the

Delaware Courts are also working with an infectious diseases expert, Dr. Alfred Bacon, to help guide reopening plans.

A key feature of Phase Three is the resumption of jury trials and a committee led by Superior Court Judge William C. Carpenter Jr. is currently looking into the best ways to safely do that. His committee is set to make a final report and recommendations to the Chief Justice in mid-August, which may require additional modifications and changes at Delaware courthouses.

And while some measures that are currently being put in place due to the pandemic may end up being temporary, others, like the increased use of video and audio teleconferencing, may become permanent. The use of teleconferencing not only helps prevent the potential transmission of the COVID-19 virus, it also has proven to be easier and more efficient for all involved.

The Delaware Courts continue to provide the public and members of the Bar with regular updates on changes to court operations on the Court's COVID-19 response page <https://courts.delaware.gov/aoc/covid-19>.

For the latest information on COVID-19 please visit the State of Delaware's informational website on COVID-19 at: de.gov/coronavirus. If you have any questions you can contact the State's Department of Public Health Coronavirus call center by phone at 1-866-408-1899 or by email at DPHCall@delaware.gov.