

Dear Members of the County Bar Association:

A teleconference was held Wednesday morning with the Presiding Judge of the Family Division, Judge Johnson, the three chairs of the family law committees in the vicinage as well as Judges Smith and Morgan from Gloucester County. We wanted to test what is going to be a system used by the Courts to handle teleconferences for family law matters. While an e-mail will be forwarded in the future with more details from Judges Telsey and Johnson, I at least wanted to update those who practice in the family courts.

At this time, there will be no in person Court appearances. Whether with counsel or not, you cannot appear at the Courthouse to be heard. There will be exceptions for filing emergent matters and we will have more details on how they will be addressed, as well as there being a central address to forward e-mails with pleadings. The Court is working on all of this, but I am certain that you can all understand the logistics and how it's going to take time to perfect the many nuances. As with many other professions, we have to learn to adjust to the current situation in our practices. The Court is going to try to be able to handle all types of family matters through teleconferencing or by phone, but again, they are still working on this and there may be postponements of court proceedings until a system can get up and running. Until then, just be patient, and reach out to the Judge's secretaries or law clerks if you have questions about any cases you have scheduled in the family courts at this time.

Please be aware that the Courthouse will not accept any courier deliveries of pleadings at this time. Everything will need to be sent by regular mail. The Judges and their staff will be accommodating to try to assist with any facsimile or e-mail delivery of pleadings when there are time constraints, but please contact them first before sending any voluminous e-mails or facsimiles. Again, this is all in the infancy stages and we may have to address things on a case by case basis until a system can be up and running.

For the foreseeable future, hearings in all family case types are going to be held through a program called Zoom. Probationary staff, judicial secretaries and law clerks are going to organize and schedule hearings and you will be contacted as to the date scheduled. Very close to the time scheduled, probably the night before the hearing, you will receive an email notice of the hearing that will contain a link that you will click on to join the hearing at the time scheduled. If your client does not have electronic device capability, they can appear by telephone. If you would prefer, you can appear by telephone. Judges will choose whether they want to do one hearing at a time or if they want to schedule a number of hearings at the same time so there are a group of people in the "zoom room."

A zoom hearing is controlled by a host which in most cases will be the person chosen by the Judge to do that, and for now it is planned to usually be the secretary except in special case types, such as Children in Court, where team members of CIC will host the meetings. A zoom hearing allows people to be muted. So the court may do one hearing, while two other hearings wait, watch and hear the argument, but cannot speak or be heard. There is also a possibility in a zoom hearing to put everyone in a waiting room, so that a lawyer and litigant can talk privately, except the host would hear the call. I am told the more the Judges work with the program, the more interesting features they discover.

For now, the courts intend to do non-trial hearings, although Judges are discussing and exploring steps to prepare to attempt trials through zoom. Obviously, evidence issues and the exchange of documentation about the hearing is of great concern. They promise

there will be more information as to more complex cases in the near future. If you have questions, you can contact Judge Johnson or Kelly Johnston, the Family Division Manager.

You have already received from The Bar Association a noticed from the Chief Justice about relaxing certain Rules of Court, and Judge Johnson has indicated the Family Court Judges will also be relaxing certain time sensitive rules due to the difficulties currently being experienced. We must bare in mind that as much as the judiciary is doing what they can at this moment under difficult circumstances, we need to assist as members of the bar so they can assist us to have our client's cases addressed. It is going to require cooperation, considering the different types of cases and difficulties in handling some of those in the family courts. Patience will be very important and communication paramount. When I receive further information, I will forward it to Ms. Walker to disseminate to members of the Association.

Sincerely,

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