

News Release



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‘A Monumental Task’ How New Jersey Courts Balanced Public Safety and Access to Justice During a Worldwide Pandemic

As the coronavirus started to take a firm grip on the state in early March, the New Jersey Judiciary immediately started planning its new mission of keeping the business of the courts running while protecting the health of its employees and the public.

That meant transforming an entire branch of government into a virtual operation.

“We needed to protect the safety of judges and court staff, as well as the safety of court users, in the face of an unprecedented health emergency,” said Judge Glenn A. Grant, acting administrative director of the courts. “At the same time, we had to assure access to justice and continue to provide critical services to the public.”

To accomplish that goal, the Judiciary had two major challenges: switching all court functions handled by the Judiciary’s nearly 10,000 employees in 600 facilities to remote operations and expanding the number of virtual courtrooms to continue as many court matters and proceedings as possible.

Before the pandemic, about 3,200 Judiciary employees had the ability to work remotely. In just two weeks, ITO staff expanded the Judiciary’s infrastructure to push that number up to 7,700.

In one week, the Judiciary went from having 21 pre-COVID virtual courtrooms, which supported weekend first appearance hearings under Criminal Justice Reform, to 230 virtual courtrooms for routine court matters that can be streamed live to the public simultaneously. That may expand to 300.

Justices, judges and staff now handle all types of motions, conferences, and hearings by telephone and with Zoom, Scopia, and Teams virtual platforms.

“It was a monumental task to accomplish within a such a short amount of time,” said Jack McCarthy III, chief information officer for the Judiciary’s Information Technology Office (ITO). “We had to suddenly expand our technological infrastructure to support triple the number of people working remotely and ‘build’ nearly 10 times the number of existing virtual courtrooms – all within two weeks.”

IT staff also trained hundreds of judges across the state on how to operate their new virtual courtroom.

From the start of virtual hearings on March 16 to April 12, New Jersey courts held nearly 7,300 virtual proceedings involving more than 38,000 participants.

Adoptions, weddings, drug court hearings and a host of other proceedings are all continuing from the safe confines of home during the COVID-19 health crisis.

In the Supreme Court, the seven justices ‘convene’ from their separate chambers as attorneys argue their cases remotely. Just as before the pandemic, the events are streamed live over the Judiciary’s website, njcourts.gov.

Attorneys argue appellate matters telephonically before judges who, instead of sitting on the bench, are also working remotely.

While jury trials remain suspended, Superior Court judges in the criminal and law divisions still handle full calendars.

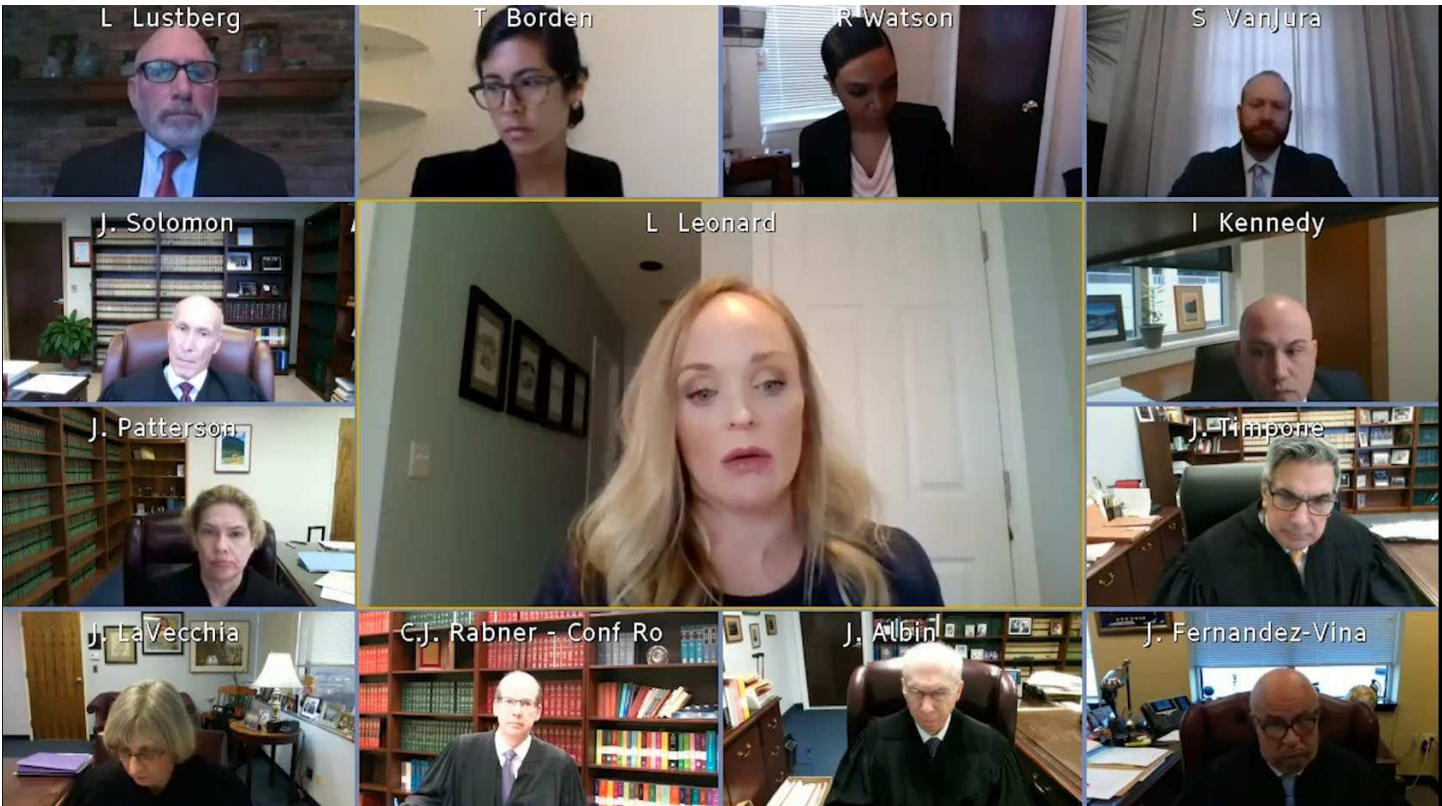
Superior Court Judge Jeffrey Jablonski, presiding judge of chancery in the Hudson Vicinage, has already held three trials virtually in addition to a host of other matters.

While the proceedings have taken on a different feeling outside of the courtroom, they still have the common thread of continuing the court’s business and protecting the litigants’ constitutional rights and entitlements to having their matters heard quickly, Judge Jablonski said.

Jablonski said parties appearing before the court were skeptical at first but have now come to see the virtual hearings as “another chapter in the evolving technological vanguard” championed by the Judiciary.

“Their apprehension evolved into confidence that this is not going to be bad, that this is going to be something that is actually good and will allow the business of the judiciary to go on uninterrupted,” he said.

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New Jersey Supreme Court hearing oral arguments on March 30, 2020. (New Jersey Judiciary)



Superior Court Judge Stephen Taylor presides over a motion to reopen detention in Morris County on April 13, 2020.