As the Labor Day weekend approached, it was good to have some encouraging news. With improving public health conditions in Florida, many of our courts have been able to move to less restrictive operations. Trial courts in more than three-fourths of our counties and three of our district courts have entered phase 2 of pandemic operations, meaning limited in-person contact may be authorized with precautions. This gradual opening up can also be seen outside the courts. The academic year has started around the state, with many students attending schools and college in person, and the governor has taken steps to expand what’s opened and to what extent. While I know we must remain vigilant in our social distancing and other infection-prevention measures, I welcome this brighter outlook and certainly hope it continues.

Even so, this remains an extraordinary, anxiety-ridden, curious time. Each day seems both like a movie and all too real. Just about everything we do now, we do different from the way we used to, pre-pandemic. And none of these changes have made our lives or our jobs easier. COVID-19 has wrought unprecedented disruption in our lives and in court operations.

It has been inspiring to me, then, to see all the remarkable work being done by our judges and court staff across the state. Combining resourcefulness and a “can-do attitude,” we have figured out ways to “continue the work of justice,” as Chief Justice Canady phrased it. The stories in this newsletter memorialize some of the innovative ways we are getting the work of the branch done in these singular times.

Nothing ensured this effective transition, save for the commitment and efforts of the people in our justice system. Challenges remain, and our best plans may be upset by changes we can’t see yet. But I am confident we will be able to handle those shifting sands because of how well we have done so far.

A few weeks ago, I marked 30 years since the day I first walked in the back door of the Supreme Court Building to begin my career with OSCA. With this anniversary, I have been reflecting on the events of those three decades. Upheaval came to our doorstep during Bush v. Gore. We were all stunned by the 9/11 attacks and then, in the aftermath, the anthrax assaults. The Great Recession brought painful budget reductions and staff layoffs. But I also remember many successes from those years: implementing the Revision 7 funding transition, establishing the State Courts Revenue Trust Fund, creating our first emergency management plans, deploying e-filing, developing a weighted caseload methodology for determining the need for new judges, and presenting countless outstanding education programs, to name just a few.

All these events, both the trying and the gratifying ones, ultimately made us stronger as a branch. With that perspective from my many years in the judicial branch, I know we will also get through this pandemic—and the ensuing state budget shortfalls: our budget commissions and court staff are already gathering information, planning alternatives, and forming strategies to meet the fiscal challenge. During a crisis of any sort, we are dedicated to protecting the ability of our courts and court staff to fulfill our constitutional mission of providing justice to Florida’s citizens.

Please stay safe and stay well,
Lisa Kiel
Inspired Resourcefulness:
Florida’s Trial Courts Find Innovative Ways to “Keep the Courts Open” During the Pandemic

The 9/11 terrorist attacks spurred Florida’s judicial branch to develop branch-wide policies and procedures for preparing for and managing threats and emergencies that can disrupt court operations. Within two months of the attacks, then Chief Justice Charles Wells established the Workgroup on Emergency Preparedness, directing it to “develop a plan for the State Courts System to better respond to emergency situations.” He instructed the workgroup to be guided by two policy goals: protect the lives and health of everyone at the court and keep the courts open to ensure justice for the people. These same policy goals have shaped the judicial branch’s response to COVID-19.

After a public health emergency was declared in Florida and preparations for the pandemic became the immediate priority for the state courts system, Chief Justice Canady directed chief judges to take necessary measures to mitigate its impact on the courts and court participants while keeping the courts open to the fullest extent consistent with public safety (see AOSC20-12, issued 3/11/20). Two days later, he ordered the suspension of all grand jury proceedings, jury selection proceedings, and criminal and civil jury trials (see AOSC20-13, issued 3/13/20). And four days after that, he required circuit and county courts to fulfill their responsibility to conduct essential proceedings and proceedings critical to the state of emergency or the public health emergency, while suspending other proceedings as necessary to mitigate the potential effects of COVID-19 exposure—unless the chief judge determined that other proceedings or events could be effectively conducted remotely without the necessity of in-person court appearances (see AOSC20-15, issued 3/17/20). Given that state court operations have relied largely on in-person proceedings in the 175 years since Florida became a state, this move toward remote hearings introduced a seismic shift, both historically and operationally.

Nonetheless, forthwith, judges and court staff in every court across Florida put their heads together to figure out how, in the chief justice’s words, to “continue the work of justice” in the face of the pandemic. Their dedication, their industry, their resourcefulness, and their can-do attitude are truly inspiring. Below, in their own words, are the stories that our trial courts shared.

First Circuit
Fourth Circuit
Fifth Circuit
Sixth Circuit
Seventh Circuit
Eighth Circuit
Ninth Circuit
Tenth Circuit
Eleventh Circuit
Twelfth Circuit
Fourteenth Circuit
Fifteenth Circuit
Sixteenth Circuit
Seventeenth Circuit
Eighteenth Circuit
Nineteenth Circuit
Twentieth Circuit
First Judicial Circuit Quickly Creates New Remote Processes  
(Special thanks to Robin Wright, trial court administrator, and Craig Van Brussel, chief technology officer)

We are most proud of the speed with which we were able to transition the First Judicial Circuit to a remote model. Because our judges and court staff had already been through a large-scale digital transformation with the implementation of the court application processing system, better known as the CAPS judicial viewer, we had the court experience, technical skills, and innovative mindset to create new remote processes quickly.

In 2017, the First Judicial Circuit completed its CAPS judicial viewer installation for all judges and all case types. With the CAPS viewers, judges can access their electronic court files from anywhere and electronically sign, file, and serve court orders. With that, the circuit closed the electronic case loop with the Florida courts e-filing portal and the clerks’ case management systems (CMS), allowing attorneys and agencies to file case documents electronically via the portal and have signed orders returned to them via the portal and filed in the clerks’ CMS. The elimination of the paper case file opened the way for remote work.

Escambia County’s Remote County Arraignments is a good example of the circuit’s rapid response to quarantine measures. Partner agencies quickly agreed to create a Zoom court model that would maintain social distancing requirements and alleviate technical challenges for litigants. This model involved creating a Zoom room in the courthouse for the public to appear in person. A large monitor was placed at the front of the courtroom, and all partner agencies dial into the judge’s Zoom call. Litigants are separated and stand at the courtroom podium as normal, and the judge, clerk, state attorney, and public defender appear on the monitor from their respective offices. During the remote hearings, the judges have access to the electronic court files via their CAPS judicial viewer; the clerks have access to their case management systems; and the state attorneys and public defenders have access to their agencies’ systems.

Because we already had the CAPS viewers in place, we were able to move to the cloud, roll out the Zoom software, send out judicial instructions, and organize our partner agencies within days, which gave Chief Judge John Miller early options for meeting the Florida Supreme Court’s administrative order requirements. Since then, judges and court staff have successfully adapted to the new remote environment and have been able to keep our court system operational during these challenging times. Currently, circuit-wide, the First Judicial Circuit is doing 50 Zoom hearings per day with an average of 500 total participants in criminal, civil, juvenile delinquency, juvenile dependency, family, and drug court.

Fourth Judicial Circuit Implements New Procedures and Workarounds for Court Operations  
(Special thanks to Eve Janocko, chief deputy court administrator)

Many innovative adjustments have been made to operations in the Fourth Judicial Circuit to keep the court moving forward during these challenging times. Chief Judge Mark Mahon and Trial Court Administrator Joe Stelma have guided our transition from normal courthouse operations to our “new normal.” Significant input from our judges and various committees has guided the framework to implement new procedures and workarounds for court operations.
First and foremost, Court Technology Officer Mike Smith and his staff are credited with transforming court operations to meet the incredible demands presented. Mike and his team implemented technology solutions immediately to address the need for the courts to social distance while continuing to handle essential and critical proceedings as well as important, non-essential proceedings.

Zoom is the primary platform our judges and court staff are using to conduct court business. Judges are using Zoom to conduct hearings in all court divisions, first appearance hearings, adoptions, and staffing and court sessions for the 10 problem-solving court programs in our circuit. Magistrates and hearing officers are using Zoom to conduct family law hearings for pro se litigants and attorney cases, Department of Revenue cases, and Baker Act and Marchman Act hearings. And court staff are using Zoom to conduct mediations (family, civil, county, dependency, and pre-trial small claims), and one-on-one case management for problem-solving courts and teen court clients. Zoom has been used to coordinate meetings for judges, conduct employee interviews, coordinate managers and department staff meetings, and train employees.

Court employees are working remotely to continue operations in the new normal. Judicial assistants and court staff are scheduling cases on calendars for judges, magistrates, and hearing officers, sending out hearing notices and orders, e-filing documents, handling attorney and pro se litigant questions through phone calls and e-mails, handling budget matters, paying invoices, and ordering supplies.

Court operations have continued without missing a beat. Our trial court administrator has made the safety of our judges and court staff a priority by ensuring that our circuit has stringent safety procedures in place to protect court staff. In addition, our circuit is stocked with hand sanitizer, masks, gloves, and all necessary supplies to keep everyone safe while they are in the courthouse and when staff eventually return from working remotely. Although some positives have been realized from the new normal, it will be refreshing to return to regular court operations that include a human element, which has been missed with social distancing mandates.

Fifth Judicial Circuit Keeps All 22 Problem-Solving Courts Up and Running
(Special thanks to Alina Stoothoff, problem-solving court director)

The Fifth Circuit is proud of the successes of its problem-solving courts, which are specialized dockets within the criminal justice system that aim to address the underlying issues that bring people into the court system. The Fifth Circuit has a total of 22 problem-solving courts: 10 adult drug courts, one juvenile drug court, five veterans treatment courts, three mental health courts, two early childhood courts, and one DUI court. Although they are important court programs, problem-solving courts are not considered “essential proceedings.” So when the pandemic struck, and Chief Justice Canady advised chief judges to cancel court proceedings other than essential and critical proceedings unless the proceedings could be conducted remotely (AOSC20-15), the circuit was not sure if its problem-solving courts would be spared—especially because these dockets are highly labor- and people-intensive, involving close judicial monitoring and interaction, and dependent on the effective interaction of a multitude of moving parts and on the coordination of a good many professionals. But as Ms Alina Stoothoff, the circuit’s problem-solving court director, emphasized, “We weren’t to be deterred.” And, although adjustments had to be made, and hurdles had to be negotiated, all 22 problem-solving courts—and the more than 400 program participants—have been carrying on admirably through the pandemic.
Not surprisingly, videoconferencing technology has made this possible. “We already had the technology in place,” Ms Stoothoff stated; “We just needed virtual platform licenses that would make this work. So all the problem-solving court judges, and at least one supervisor per county, got Zoom licenses” (supervisors or other court staff take care of the administrative details so judges can focus exclusively on judicial matters). “Of the platforms available to us in the Fifth Circuit, Zoom was the better option for outside participants,” she explained, “as it’s easy to access; all they need is the link.”

Moving problem-solving courts to a remote environment certainly has had its challenges, though. Not all the participants have smart phones, for instance, so some are having to connect with their landlines, which means they can’t see the judge or other participants. In addition, some lost their jobs due to the pandemic—and participants are required to have jobs to participate in these programs—so the circuit is trying to make accommodations by being more flexible. Also, “Getting everyone from the courts on board was a bit of a challenge at first, as well”: the technology was unfamiliar, initially, and everyone had to become comfortable with the platform and its nuances. And the judges also had some legal concerns: for example, Zoom is “invitation only,” but problem-solving court hearings are supposed to be open to the public—a requirement the Fifth Circuit has been addressing by recording all the hearings, which can be made available to anyone who wants to see them. “Now, despite some hiccups, with the administrative orders out, we’ve got assurance that using Zoom is safe, correct, and assuring due process,” Ms. Stoothoff said.

The drug courts faced some unusual challenges, especially with conducting drug screens. Pre-pandemic, oral screens were done by court staff in the courthouses, but when that became impossible, “All five counties immediately started working on options, and within two to three weeks of all of us working from home, staff had options in place,” Ms Stoothoff recounted. Some counties have contracted with probation to do urine or oral screens; virtual oral screens have become another option (the participant receives the oral device by mail, “live videos” while doing the screen, and then “overnight mails” the device back to the lab); and a fourth option is the use of sweat patches (which stay attached to the arm for 10 days, after which they are sent to the lab to be checked for drug levels).

Despite the challenges, the process is clearly working. Participants have been contacting problem-solving court staff at least weekly, and staff have been reaching out to each participant almost every day. Some participants are actually doing better during the pandemic because they are getting far more contact and guidance from staff and judges generally. Most important, participants have been able to continue with their problem-solving court programs, and phase advancements and graduations have continued to take place—40 participants have graduated since mid-March. The circuit is so pleased with the results that when limited in-person contact is permissible again, Ms. Stoothoff speculates they might end up embracing a hybrid model that utilizes both virtual and in-person contact, both to cut down on crowds and to better accommodate those who have work, health, or transportation issues.

The problem-solving judges and court staff are also thrilled that they have been able to maintain their 22 problem-solving dockets. “Our judges and court staff—the case managers, coordinators, and supervisors who are the ‘boots on the ground’ for these programs—have a genuine commitment to our problem-solving court participants, many of whom are among the circuit’s most vulnerable populations. Many had been making such good progress, and we wanted to do everything we could to continue taking good care of them,” Ms. Stoothoff added.
Sixth Judicial Circuit Uses Its Homepage and Facebook to Inform and Update the Public
(Special thanks to Stephen Thompson, public information officer)

Well before the Florida Supreme Court began issuing administrative orders as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, our chief judge, Anthony Rondolino, and our trial court administrator, Gay Inskeep, thought it would be a good idea if the Sixth Judicial Circuit posted on the homepage of its website and on its Facebook page general information as to what preventative steps our employees, fellow stakeholders, and members of the public could take to avoid contracting the coronavirus. We used a graphic used by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Those posts were on March 4.

On March 13, our chief judge instructed the clerks in Pinellas and Pasco counties, the two the circuit comprises, not to call any jurors the following week, and his instruction came just hours before the Florida Supreme Court pretty much accomplished the same thing in one of the first administrative orders it issued to ensure no one involved with the judicial system was put at risk during the pandemic. Judge Rondolino’s email to all the judges and staff on March 13 was so informative and thorough that it was decided we should post it in its entirety on Facebook and on our website’s homepage.

On this date, we also began what would turn out to be a custom. Whenever the Florida Supreme Court issued an administrative order, we synopsisized it in laymen’s terms (as best we could, and usually on the same day the supreme court issued the order) and posted what we wrote on our website and Facebook page, providing a link to the orders themselves. Chief Judge Rondolino did not issue any circuit-wide administrative orders regarding COVID-19 except for one involving the arrest on a misdemeanor charge of anyone violating a coronavirus quarantine. Other than that, he opted to use the Florida Supreme Court administrative orders as the sole guide, and he has had the circuit follow those orders closely. We opted not to synopsisize and post some of the orders because they did not affect members of the public, but instead affected subgroups in the judicial system, such as members of The Florida Bar, mediators, and interpreters. What we wanted was to have the most up-to-date information affecting the public in a post at the top of our homepage and in one of the more recent posts on our Facebook page.

From mid-March on, we used our homepage and Facebook page to let the public know what changes we were making to administer justice while continuing to keep people safe. For instance, we let those involved in violence injunction proceedings in Pinellas County know that, as of April 6, all injunction hearings would be held in the largest courtroom in the county, at our County Justice Center in Clearwater, to make social distancing easier (previously, some had been held at other courthouses in the county). Another example was a Facebook post on our new use of the videoconferencing tool, Zoom.

But we also used our Facebook page for a different purpose, to let people know that, despite the belief by some that courthouses were completely closed, judges continued to preside over so-called mission-critical
hearings, such as those involving violence injunctions. One Facebook post addressed advisories, and another addressed bond reductions. For these two posts, we included several photographs of the proceedings. The prosecutors, defense attorneys, and judge were in the courtroom, with the defendant appearing via video monitor from the jail.

Once the circuit started shifting to remote proceedings, either through teleconferencing or Zoom, we had to change gears to capture the essence of what was occurring. A simple photograph of a judge sitting on the bench listening to a group of people taking turns talking on the phone would not do the trick. So we started videotaping brief segments of hearings and posting the video with some text on Facebook. Videos taken included a juvenile restitution hearing in Pasco County; a detention hearing in Pinellas County; and a risk protection order hearing in Pinellas County. And then, as other judges, ones involved in the so-called non-mission-critical divisions such as adult drug court and traffic court, resumed hearings, often remotely, we took video of those and posted them as well.

The circuit made many efforts to keep the number of people coming to our courthouses to a bare minimum, some of which go unmentioned here, and to give the public a chance to see that justice was being done during the pandemic. We continue working to keep the public informed and updated as quickly as we can.

**Seventh Judicial Circuit Appreciates the Dedication of Its Judges, Court Staff, and Community**
(Special thanks to Mark Weinberg, trial court administrator)

Like all the other circuits, when the pandemic started, we developed our laundry list of essential proceedings that had to continue through the health crisis. Most of the credit goes to Chief Judge Zambrano and the other judges of the circuit. The judges and their respective judicial assistants pitched in and did whatever was necessary to keep the wheels of justice turning, regardless of their particular divisional assignments.

While everyone in our organization has played a part in our response to the pandemic, I need to specifically mention the work of our IT team, Administrative Services unit, and Pretrial Services staff. We have a comparatively small IT department, but what they were able to accomplish in relative short order was noteworthy. Like a lot of circuits, we use Zoom as our primary vehicle for remote proceedings, and our IT staff assigned licenses, deployed the equipment, and helped everyone sign up and get started.

Since the middle of March, staff in our administrative services unit have scoured the marketplace to procure the necessary supplies and worked with the Office of the State Courts Administrator (OSCA) to ensure our circuit could get what it needed, all while continuing to perform their normally assigned duties.

One of the mission essential proceedings I mentioned earlier is First Appearances. Our Volusia County Pretrial Services department plays an important role in this process, and they have shown up every day to make sure the judges have the information they need to make informed decisions.
I also need to recognize the assistance we’ve received from OSCA. The folks in Budget Services, Financial Services, and General Services have really gone out of their way to help us.

Our circuit is also fortunate to be able to rely on local vendors to help us in times of need. For example, a local distillery retooled its operations and started producing hand sanitizer. A swimsuit manufacturer began making face masks. Halifax Health made arrangements for some of their nurses to come to the courthouse to take temperatures and conduct health screenings of courthouse visitors.

Our judges, our court staff, OSCA, our wider community—everyone has really pulled together to help us do the work of the branch under these exceptional circumstances.

Eighth Judicial Circuit Prioritizes Cases that Affect Children
(Special thanks to Christy Cain, communications coordinator)

The Eighth Judicial Circuit has made it a priority to hear cases that impact children during this emergency period, whether those cases are classified as essential or are considered non-essential. Our judiciary has moved forward in unfamiliar territory to prevent these cases from being delayed.

With the use of Zoom videoconferencing and the cooperation of attorneys and court partners, our circuit has not missed a juvenile dependency docket. While hearings do take a little longer than usual, participants are grateful that procedures have been put in place to allow their cases to move forward. Dependency General Magistrate Nancy Wilkov managed to successfully conduct one hearing that not only involved multiple participants, but also multiple interpreters speaking several different languages, all remotely.

All family court judges in the circuit have used Zoom videoconferencing to address pressing matters involving children. The availability of remote participation has had the unexpected benefit of allowing judges a glimpse into the home environment of parents and caregivers, as well as the ability to receive testimony from witnesses who may not have otherwise had the means to appear for court hearings. Circuit Judge Denise R. Ferrero continues to regularly conduct pro se hearings remotely, as well as adoption final hearings, one of which she navigated with 18 participants.

While none of us wanted to be in this situation, our judges, judicial assistants, and staff have risen to the challenge and come up with innovative solutions and creative processes so that the issues impacting children and families in our circuit can be addressed.
Part of a judge’s duties is to swear in attorneys who have recently passed the Bar exam. Because of the need to observe social distancing, many Ninth Circuit judges performed virtual swear-ins. Pictured here is Judge Alan Apte, performing the swearing-in ceremony of University of Miami School of Law graduate Daniel Horn.

**Ninth Judicial Circuit Makes Strides with Court Interpreting and Court Reporting**
(Special thanks to Julio Semino, court support manager)

Like other circuits, the Ninth Judicial Circuit has been utilizing technology to hold hearings remotely and to conduct meetings and town halls, for instance. But the Ninth is especially pleased with its resourcefulness in providing court interpreting and court reporting services—two due process elements that protect litigants’ fundamental constitutional and legal rights.

**Court Interpreting**

As in the past, the Ninth Circuit is leveraging a number of platforms to provide interpreting services. The platform utilized depends on a number of factors, such as the attorney’s ability to connect remotely, the judge’s preference, and the physical layout of the courtrooms.

Microsoft Teams is being utilized to cover Baker Act hearings and domestic violence hearings in Osceola (from Orange County). Interpreters can cover these hearings remotely either from their home or from their office.

Zoom is the preferred platform for some of our judges; as with Microsoft Teams, interpreters can connect from their home or their office.

Virtual Remote Interpreting is being utilized to cover initial appearances in Orange and Osceola counties and to cover violation of probation hearings or bond hearings. Virtual Remote Interpreting is the only platform that allows for simultaneous interpreting; the others allow only for consecutive interpreting. As with Microsoft Teams and Zoom, interpreters can work from their home or their office.

Conference calls are being utilized to cover some juvenile proceedings. These proceedings often involve multiple parties, and, at times, some of the parties are not able to connect remotely via video platforms. Interpreters can call in from their home or their office.

**Court Reporting**

Digital court reporting is being done through several platforms: Vericore and FTR (pilot) in conjunction with Cisco Meeting, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom. Because of the need for social distancing, most proceedings are being done over two courtrooms, with the attorney and client in one courtroom and the judge in another. The digital reporters annotate both courtrooms and create a composite record. Steno reporters prefer to appear in person when providing services. Steno reporters are utilized exclusively for death penalty hearings and, as needed, for felony proceedings.

Using Microsoft Teams, Judge Diego Madrigal, III, Ninth Circuit, was able to perform the adoption ceremony of little Galit Batya, who appeared remotely from Tampa. Family members were able to share in the joyous occasion from as far away as Michigan.
Tenth Judicial Circuit Embraces Video/Audio Court Proceedings and Online Mediations
(Special thanks to Nick Sudzina, trial court administrator; Stacey Hoskins, chief deputy court administrator; and Tracy Skeen, Julie Nelson, Brian Franz, court administration)

We have transitioned from “in-the-courtroom proceedings with lots of paperwork” to video/audio court proceedings with electronic forms, filing, and signatures. We have worked tirelessly with the clerks, public defenders office, state attorneys office, and other stakeholders to make some of these very important changes. Because many court staff are working remotely to keep the court functioning, we have been using both audio and video calls to conduct meetings with outside participants and have been offering virtual trainings to staff using Microsoft Teams. We have come a long way since mid-March. Many of these changes will carry on after COVID-19 and will improve our circuit in the future.

In a continued effort to assist our stakeholders in accessing justice in a safe and responsible way that adheres to current social distancing rules, our Mediation Department has been conducting online alternative dispute resolution sessions. They recognize that even in the midst of a pandemic, citizens still have disputes that need timely resolution, so our mediators are finding new and innovative ways to help citizens resolve their cases online.

We updated our website to include a detailed COVID-19 webpage that contains upcoming remote (telephonic and/or virtual) court dockets and/or calendars for most of our county and circuit court dockets for Polk, Highlands, and Hardee counties, and we include specific instructions on how to access and participate in each docket. To better enable the public to have all of the most up-to-date COVID-19 related information at their fingertips in our “one-stop shop,” our website features links to other informational websites such as the Florida Supreme Court, Florida Department of Health, and the Centers for Disease Control, as well as links to legal resources. We also provide a Spanish language COVID-19 link that includes all previously described information in Spanish.

Eleventh Judicial Circuit Implements Virtual Courtroom Technology, Online Case Resolution, and Text Message Hearing Alerts
(Special thanks to Eunice Sigler, director, Office of Government Liaison and Public Relations)

On Friday afternoon, March 13, 2020, Chief Judge Bertila Soto closed the Eleventh Circuit courts to in-person proceedings in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Immediately after, our circuit jumped headfirst into the world of remote appearance technology to explore how we could continue to provide justice to our community while keeping judges, court staff, and the public safe by not requiring them to appear in person.

Court Information Technology Services (CITeS), the Eleventh Circuit’s technology division, worked with judges, staff, and our justice partners to quickly implement video appearance solutions for juvenile and
domestic violence first appearance hearings and to expand video capability for adult first appearance hearings, which were already taking place remotely. At the same time, our technology division expanded our networking capabilities to allow judges and staff to telecommute.

A couple of weeks later, OSCA selected Zoom as the virtual courtroom platform for all Florida courts. In just a matter of weeks, judges and staff who were accustomed to in-person court operations quickly transitioned to the virtual courtroom and did so with great determination and newly learned skills. Webcams and Zoom licenses were distributed to judges and staff, and courtMAP, the circuit’s online case scheduling and management platform, was expanded to new divisions to support remote access for the public. Training pages and Zoom workshops were established to bring everyone up to speed. Within three weeks, courtMAP was modified to integrate the creation of Zoom meeting sessions as part of the calendaring of court cases. Upon setting a case for hearing, all parties in the case now receive an email that includes the Zoom session information and link.

While this is all easy to summarize in just a few paragraphs, it took a great deal of technical work and physical labor by essential staff, such as our techs, who tirelessly visited every facility to install and test the many components of our new virtual courtroom technology.

**Online Case Resolution—First in the State**
Meanwhile, we continued work on a Florida Supreme Court Online Dispute Resolution initiative and, on April 30, became the first circuit in Florida to implement Online Case Resolution (OCR), where drivers with civil traffic infractions can now resolve their cases without coming to court. With OCR, drivers who received civil traffic citations for proof of insurance, driver’s license, or auto registration can simply upload the required documents from their cell phone, tablet, or other internet-connected device. A traffic hearing officer will then review the documents and dismiss the case if the documents are found to be in compliance. No need to come to court. Following the lead of the Florida Supreme Court in its efforts to use technology to allow for easier—and now, during the COVID-19 pandemic—safer access to the courts, the Eleventh Circuit plans to expand OCR to other types of cases.

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Text Message Hearing Alerts for courtMAP

Just two weeks later, our circuit launched yet another technology solution meant to support the new virtual courts: text message hearing alerts on courtMAP for circuit civil, county civil, probate, and family cases. “Text messaging is a well-known means of communication for many people, so adding this feature to courtMAP was a logical next step,” said Chief Judge Soto.

The text messaging feature is available for free to anyone interested in keeping track of future hearings in a case—whether they are parties in the case, attorneys, relatives, or journalists following cases of public interest. Text message alerts for criminal cases are available separately through the state’s e-Notify system, which has been linked on the Miami-Dade courts’ Hearing Text Alerts page for convenience.

The Miami-Dade courts are committed to providing justice through the use of technology to protect the health of all who come to our courts. In the post-COVID-19 future for Miami-Dade’s courts, as new technologies reveal new efficiencies and convenience for all parties, those court operations will remain as part of our ongoing commitment to providing the public with greater access to the courts.

Twelfth Judicial Circuit is “Thinking Outside the Four Corners”
(Special thanks to Donna Rhodes, public information officer)

Following the Florida Supreme Court’s order, the Twelfth Judicial Circuit Court began limiting the number of in-person hearings at the courthouses on Monday, March 23, 2020, welcoming people to its virtual courtrooms instead. The world was fighting a virus, but the court found a way to “do justice” while keeping everyone safe and protecting the health of citizens.

As the novel coronavirus shuttered businesses and encouraged people to stay home, the Twelfth Circuit rolled out its emergency plan. Court managers and judges consulted with county government officials and public health experts, criminal justice partners, clerks of court, and the local bar associations to help define the new way of doing business.

We greatly reduced the number of people in our court buildings and created flexible schedules for essential court staff. Our technology department deployed a squadron of laptops, thumb drives, and assorted computer accessories to employees working from home.

Social-distancing requirements have some judges working in nearly empty courtrooms, accompanied by only a handful of attorneys, a court deputy, and the occasional court clerk. Incarcerated defendants appear one-by-one on a video monitor mounted to the wall. Attorneys not present in the courtroom appear by phone to advocate for their clients. Some judges have been working from home, conducting hearings over the internet and reviewing court files and documents submitted.

One judge held proceedings on the courthouse lawn, palm trees casting long shadows in the mid-morning sun. After his hearing, one defendant stepped off the grass and climbed onto a bus that had only a few minutes before pulled next to the curb, the smell of exhaust lingering in the air.
This is court in the time of COVID-19. Video monitors, telephones, the internet, and sunscreen are the go-to tools giving citizens access to justice.

Between March 23 and April 24, Twelfth Circuit judges conducted more than 2,500 hearings involving criminal, family, civil, juvenile, and probate matters using closed circuit TV, videoconferencing software, and the trusty telephone. That number does not include the numerous video or phone hearings held daily by judges assigned to circuit civil and county civil cases—the types of hearings that the court is not required to record at taxpayer expense.

The Twelfth Circuit has used video technology to conduct hearings for many years to minimize the risk to public safety involved in transporting inmates to and from the jail, so a quick tutorial on using video software was all it took before judges and magistrates were scheduling hearings and posting notices of them on the court’s website.

Video has not been limited to court hearings. The judges have hosted virtual town halls to communicate with attorneys about temporary changes in court procedures and to gain feedback, to connect with other judges throughout the state, and to remain current on their own continuing education.

Over the next several months, we will slowly begin to increase foot traffic into court buildings, but the proceedings will remain a combination of limited, in-person hearings and video and phone hearings as we continue to heed public health recommendations. As we turn our attention to the new “abnormal” way of conducting business, the court is diligently working with local county governments and sheriffs to plan for everyone’s safe and socially distant return to the court buildings.

**Fresh Air, Fresh Start for Community Care Court Participants**

Eight participants of the Twelfth Judicial Circuit’s Community Care Court assembled on the morning of May 6 at the Judge Lynn N. Silvertooth Judicial Center in Sarasota. Flanked by his court clerk, deputies, and Community Care Court partners, Judge David L. Denkin, Sarasota County, thoughtfully addressed each participant before signing an order dismissing their charges and wishing them well for their accomplishments since entering Community Care Court—a program dedicated to engaging North Sarasota County’s homeless men and women and providing them with services and opportunities to change and improve their lifestyle.

However, this was a graduation with a difference: restrictions on in-person proceedings meant that this gathering could not be held in a courtroom, where it normally would take place. Instead, these participants, who were ready to be recognized for completing a specialty court program that has given them a chance to make positive changes in their lives, were seated on the lawn under a cloudless, sunny sky.
Fourteenth Judicial Circuit Sustains Its Veterans Treatment Court: The Little Program that Could
(Special thanks to Robyn Gable, trial court administrator)

In 2018, the Fourteenth Judicial Circuit had high hopes for its new veterans treatment court program. Recognizing the need for such a program in the circuit, former Chief Judge Elijah Smiley began to meet with local stakeholders. After he secured funding for a coordinator, everything was in place to start.

On October 1, 2018, Shonta Covington began work as the coordinator of the veterans treatment court and continued to develop the program. Plans for the first veterans treatment court proceeding were slated for November of that year. However, Hurricane Michael, a category 5 hurricane, slammed into the Gulf Coast of Florida, directly impacting the Fourteenth Circuit. The hurricane devastated the area. Over 30 judges and staff in Bay County were displaced from their offices and have yet to return to their offices. The plans for veterans treatment court were derailed somewhat for several months, but Ms Covington continued to work behind the scenes coordinating resources as soon as they were able to come online.

Against all odds, veterans treatment court held its first court proceeding in March 2019 with one veteran. Chief Judge Christopher N. Patterson became the presiding judge for veterans treatment court, and the program continued to expand to all six counties of the circuit. As of January 2020, the program had 13 participants, including those with felony and misdemeanor charges.

Everything seemed to be going great until the COVID-19 pandemic hit. In mid-March of this year, in-person hearings at the courthouse were suspended. Like other circuits in the state, the Fourteenth Circuit had to come up with alternatives and turned to Zoom. Veterans treatment court held its first Zoom court proceeding in April 2020 and has been going strong ever since.

Unless they are ordered to probation for drug testing, veterans receive all counseling and medication management remotely. They are required to maintain weekly contact with Ms Covington, who assists them with accessing resources such as employment and housing and with other needs. The treatment team meets via Zoom routinely to determine the best course possible to ensure the success of each participant.

Despite the setbacks of the hurricane and the pandemic, veterans treatment court has continued to chug along, finding a way to develop and expand through trying times. As a result, our veterans treatment court had its first graduation on July 23, 2020, for two participants, and a second graduation in August for two more participants.
Fifteenth Judicial Circuit Keeps Essential and Non-Essential Hearings Moving Forward
(Special thanks to Barbara Dawicke, trial court administrator)

The Judges of the Fifteenth Circuit have embraced remote hearings as a method for meeting the mission of the courts and at the same time for helping to ensure the safety of our citizens by reducing in-person appearances. Below are a few examples of action taken by our judges.

Remote Lack of Prosecution Hearings
Early during the pandemic, all the judges were challenged to shift from in-person hearings to remote hearings so that the needs of the citizens could continue to be addressed. For the two newly appointed county civil court judges, Judges Melanie Surber and Sarah Shullman, the responsibility was even more demanding as they had been appointed four months earlier and had not yet presided over “lack of prosecution” hearings. Prior to the issuance of Zoom licenses, they had to quickly develop a plan for remote hearings. Faced with over 100 hearings on each docket, the judges, their judicial assistants, and case management staff worked collectively to ensure that all the parties were noticed to appear through Web-Ex.

On the day of the hearings, Judge Surber was in the courtroom with case management staff (socially distanced) to facilitate the hearings, record accurate rulings, and produce the orders. Judge Shullman’s hearings went forward with all parties appearing remotely. The judge, her judicial assistant, and the case managers all appeared remotely from their home offices. The hearings proceeded smoothly because of the diligence of the judges. In fact, despite the pandemic, because of the judges’ desire to keep the courts open, albeit remotely, both judicial offices recorded caseload declines for the month of April.

Senior Judges Take to Zoom
In an effort to keep the non-essential hearings moving forward, the senior judges resumed their regularly scheduled foreclosure caseload, remotely. Senior Judges Roger Colton and Susan Lubitz, with the help of case management, charted unknown territory presiding over summary judgment hearings, uncontested foreclosure non-jury trials, evidentiary hearings for attorney’s fees, and surplus funds via Zoom.

The hearings required much labor to prepare and serve the Zoom notices; receive and review the final judgment packets and locate the original notes and mortgages; and organize evidence for the judge’s review at the time of the hearing.

The senior judges, who admit that they are less familiar with technology than, perhaps, others, had case management staff available to help facilitate the hearings. The senior judges were relieved that justice could be served even via Zoom.

Dissolutions in the Time of Zoom
In Judge Jessica Ticktin’s family division, the family court manager reached out to litigants who had filed for a dissolution, to set their case for final hearing via Zoom. When contacted, the parties advised the case manager that they no longer wished to get divorced. However, they said they had no ability to go to the clerk’s office and file a dismissal because, at that time, the clerk’s
The office was closed. The family court manager set the parties for a hearing, and after hearing from the parties via Zoom, Judge Ticktin entered an order of dismissal. The happy couple reconciled and expressed their appreciation for Judge Ticktin’s assistance.

Also in Judge Jessica Ticktin’s family division, a dissolution was set for final hearing. Both parties needed to be present. However, due to travel restrictions, the husband was stuck in Germany on his way back to the United States. After considering the time difference, the family court manager scheduled a Zoom hearing and facilitated the husband’s appearance for the final hearing from Germany. Zooming across the time zones worked, and the dissolution was finalized.

**Juvenile Division**
The juvenile judges of the circuit are committed to making sure that, especially during this challenging time, the children and families of Palm Beach County are safe and have access to the services they need. Between March 16, when the pandemic first started affecting Palm Beach County, and early June, the juvenile judges heard over 1,917 hearings. From the start of the pandemic, the juvenile judges have created methods to keep their cases moving, first via conference calls and then by setting up Zoom hearings. The juvenile magistrate also successfully transitioned to videoconferencing to facilitate judicial reviews.

The juvenile judges continue to handle the vast majority of their dependency and delinquency dockets, including non-essential hearings, using remote technology. To assist the litigants, public phone stations were established so that those persons lacking the necessary technology (including a personal phone) could conference into Zoom hearings. The juvenile case managers have continued to diligently address their responsibilities, including, but not limited to, the preparation of orders and appearance at juvenile hearings using remote means.

**Sixteenth Judicial Circuit Ensures the Continuation of Its Criminal Court Services**
(Special thanks to Holly Elomina, trial court administrator)

The Sixteenth Circuit, which comprises Monroe County, is somewhat unique among Florida counties. The county has only about 80,000 residents, with 99 percent of them living in the Florida Keys, a 121-mile-long chain of islands. The Keys are very spread out, with three fully functioning courthouses that are distanced about 100 miles apart, down a single highway. The Sixteenth Circuit is also one of only a few circuits in Florida that operate and supervise the in-house treatment for all nine of its drug courts: we have an adult diversion, a family treatment, and a juvenile delinquency court in each of the three areas of the Keys. We are also responsible for supervising pre-trial services as well as misdemeanor probation, which includes felony pre-trial intervention. What I’m most proud of is that, despite the challenges introduced by the pandemic, we have figured out ways to keep these criminal court services up and running.
Despite the lockdown, for instance, we are still taking payments of fines and fees—but over the phone, now, rather than in person. And using remote technology, we are providing supervised check-ins with all our drug court clients as well as treatment sessions. In fact, from day one, our drug court counselors have been reaching out to their clients over Zoom, touching base with everyone regularly and letting them know that their continued treatment is important to us, that their recovery is important to us, and that, even though we are unable to have face-to-face meetings, we are going to continue this program—all of which has been really helpful to our clients, their parents, and their families. We have been able to maintain the continuity of our treatment programs because we operate them in-house.

Having the right technology has also been beneficial. As soon as it became evident that in-person contact was going to be out of the question for an unknown period of time, our drug court counselors began trying to figure out how they could provide treatment services to our clients—they knew they didn’t want to be limited to telephone calls alone. Before the Office of the State Courts Administrator procured Zoom licenses for the circuits, our clinical supervisor treatment manager had investigated using the free Zoom technology. We started to Zoom very early on. At this time, we’re using videoconferencing just for individual sessions. Although we’ve not done group Zoom sessions yet, we’re contemplating going in this direction because our clients, especially the juveniles, get a lot out of the group sessions.

A majority of our workforce are employed in the service industry. Monroe County enacted a checkpoint at the county line on March 27, 2020, closing the county to all non-residents. This checkpoint remained in place until June 1, 2020. With hotels, restaurants and bars shuttered, many employees lost their income source and were forced to leave the Keys. Many local businesses have still not recovered and were forced to permanently close their doors. Many of these same employees who left the area are some of our drug court, probation, or pretrial clients. Not only did we have to figure out how to handle their cases remotely, but we have to work with them from another county and/or state. We have been successful in keeping track of all our clients during the pandemic, but because of the nature of how problem-solving courts operate, it has not been without its challenges.

In our efforts to continue providing criminal court services, one of the biggest challenges we faced was figuring out how to reinstate providing urinalysis services. When we first had to forgo in-person contact, we suspended our urinalyses. Because random urinalysis is an important component of a client’s recovery and treatment plan, it was critical to enact procedures enabling our lab to provide them in an appropriate manner. Our lab manager and lab technicians developed an extensive plan, for approval by the chief judge, that followed CDC guidelines and reintroduced the testing in a phased approach. In mid-May, we slowly began reintroducing in-person urinalysis services. Because we operate our own laboratory, we had contracts already in place for many of the personal protective needs that were in high demand. This allowed us to already have many of the supplies we require, as well as the ability to get other things in a short period of time.
Altogether, the Sixteenth Circuit has 35 drug court clients, 383 pre-trial services clients, and 674 misdemeanor probation/felony pre-trial intervention clients. That’s 1,092 people who rely on the support provided by our criminal court services division. Our criminal court services employees are tasked with keeping track of these clients and ensuring that they are following through with their court-ordered responsibilities, even during a pandemic. As I mentioned previously, many of our clients work in the service industry, but many also work in our local grocery stores or as carpenters or day-laborers. These are our community members who have committed a low-level violation who need to successfully complete their case so they can return to their lives. I am proud that we have been able to continue to provide these services during the pandemic, not only for the individual clients, but for our community at large.

Seventeenth Judicial Circuit Facilitates a Multitude of Court Processes Via Zoom
(Special thanks to Meredith Bush, communications coordinator)

Court Interpreting
The Interpreters Office quickly and seamlessly transitioned to interpreting via Zoom during COVID-19 operations. Since the closure of the courthouse buildings, daily participation in hearings for Spanish and Haitian Creole speakers have occurred, and special requests requiring other foreign languages such as Russian, Portuguese, and Bengali have been fulfilled. By May 1, staff had completed more than 200 cases. They are also assisting with translations: the Interpreters Department translated the COVID-19 operations administrative orders into Spanish and Creole. They are regularly participating in hearings for first appearance, domestic violence injunctions, bond court, dependency, drug court, child support, delinquency, and guardianship and quickly connect staff interpreters for emergency hearings, too.

Staff Attorneys
Under the direction of Judge Phillips, a mock jury trial was conducted using Zoom, with the staff attorneys playing the parts of the attorneys, witnesses, and clients, and our judges acting as jurors. The purpose was to work out the practical aspects of moving forward with remote jury proceedings, in case it comes to that. A trial script was created, rehearsed, and finally acted out over Zoom. The trial was recorded and is available to all judges. Also, a new hire in the probate division is being trained over Zoom and telephone by our probate staff (staff even had a Zoom meet and greet for the new employee). Moreover, in response to some of the legal issues arising due to the pandemic, our criminal staff has been assisting in creating new and alternative administrative procedures.

Mediation and Arbitration and Teen Court
Mediation services continue by phone or Zoom in small claims, county, family, and dependency mediation as well as intakes by phone and email packets. Five staff mediators and the director are mediating via Zoom. The contract mediators are mediating by phone, Zoom, or Skype. By the end of April, the program had processed/mediated/received over 270 orders/sessions. In that same timespan, the Teen Court Office processed over 30 intakes, and it continues to monitor the juveniles’ successful completion for civil citation, criminal juvenile cases, and traffic court cases.

Court Reporting
All the court reporters have been able to work remotely by using the latest technologies available to them, with many court proceedings taking place via Zoom. Court reporters
continue to work in tandem with judicial assistants and case managers to ensure that the recordings and appropriate notes of proceedings are maintained.

Case Management
Unified family court case management is fully operational, reviewing and setting cases, conducting docket research, and attending hearings via Zoom. In addition, staff training continues through email, phone, and Zoom, as do staffing and team meetings. A case management email was developed upon closure of the courthouses, and it allows for the public to ask questions and receive answers or direction regarding their cases. The inbox has received hundreds of emails.

Judicial Information Systems/Information Technology
On March 16, 2020, the Judicial Information Systems (JIS) network support team reimaged, tested, and deployed 86 laptops to court admin employees, making the laptops ready before they were requested. Each user received a customized laptop and training on the spot about working remotely. The JIS team tripled the number of VPN licenses and applied network security policies to all user systems, making it safer to work remotely. Help Desk staff are either working from home or still coming in person to the courthouse every day, after hours when necessary.

Following the creation of all the Zoom accounts for the judiciary, JIS created a unique Zoom meeting for each judge, magistrate, and hearing officer. The first two weeks in April, we held twice daily group Zoom training sessions to ensure everyone was up to speed with this technology and was capable of hosting meetings. By April 29, we conducted over 2,000 hearings and had more than 36,000 attendees over Zoom. Our first appearance court is streaming live on YouTube.

Facilitating the migration of the court reporting operations to a telecommute model was particularly challenging due to the nature of their work and the need for real-time access to audiences, but transcriptions are still being made with the use of a lot of ingenuity and new applications like Zoom. A Court COVID-19 Updates webpage was created for the public to stay up-to-date, and a Court Drug Resource webpage was created to help assist drug court parties. JIS staff are also assisting in the mock jury Zoom trial.

Eighteenth Judicial Circuit Held Its First Arthur Hearing via Remote Technology
(Special thanks to Michelle Kennedy, administrative services manager, and Lori Todd, judicial assistant)

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began to unfold in mid-March, in addition to keeping two courtrooms running with the help of a skeleton crew in court administration, the Eighteenth Circuit has been conducting the now-usual array of virtual proceedings. But in June—in a first for Brevard County since the pandemic struck—Judge Robin Lemonidis used remote technology to conduct an Arthur Hearing.
An Arthur Hearing—an evidentiary hearing that is a sort of mini-trial—often includes testimony, transcripts, and introduction of evidence. It is held when a person charged with a non-bondable offense is requesting a bond (set by Florida law, a non-bondable offense is a capital offense or one punishable by life in prison). At the Arthur Hearing, the judge must determine whether the state has met the standard known as “proof evident, presumption great,” the highest burden of proof in criminal law. To prove the case, the state brings in witnesses, or witness affidavits, alleging the facts of the case. The court has the discretion to grant or deny the request for a bond. An Arthur Hearing is a complex, multifaceted proceeding under normal circumstances—but it is especially challenging under our current circumstances.

To conduct this hearing, Judicial Assistant Lori Todd had to reserve all available video hearing time to accommodate a full day’s hearing (which proved not to be enough time; once the hearing began, the parties realized more time would be needed). The hearing ended up being broken up into several days and timeslots. Counsel worked together to waive any irregularities created because of COVID.

Microsoft Teams was set up to include the jail as well as state witnesses who were appearing remotely from the state attorney’s office in Titusville. Over many long hours before the hearing, the state attorneys worked closely with our court tech staff and their technology staff to make sure we had all the connections and everyone had become proficient in using the technology. The defense attorney took the time to prepare with his client prior to the hearing so the hearing would run smoothly when it came time to present a video for evidence.

The state made sure they had copies of all the exhibits in all locations for witnesses to review and refer to while maintaining the integrity of the originals in court for the clerks to mark.

Everyone did a fine job preparing, and the preparedness of and the professional courtesies extended among the attorneys were exemplary.

Conducting an Arthur Hearing under pandemic restrictions was not a simple task, but according to Judge Lemonidis, everyone rose to the challenge. “All parties worked hard, not only to preserve the defendant’s constitutional rights, but also the rights of the victims and survivors. We managed all this while also maintaining a healthy and safe work environment for hearing participants.”

**Nineteenth Judicial Circuit Benefits from Some Outside-the-Box Thinking**
(Special thanks to Patty Harris, trial court administrator)

One of our early successes occurred in the family division due to their ability to adapt quickly to conducting hearings via Zoom. Without missing a beat, the family judges, magistrates, and hearing officers in the
Nineteenth Circuit started training on Zoom in early March and have been handling their hearings remotely since March 18th to keep things moving. Because our circuit IT department was so responsive, family judges were able to hold remote hearings almost immediately. Therefore, other than a few hearings and trials, the Nineteenth Circuit’s domestic relations division will be in good shape to clear up any backlog very quickly upon reopening.

Other judges and staff have shown great dedication especially in the areas of problem-solving courts. Judges were quick to adapt to Zoom, and judges and case managers also transitioned seamlessly to teleworking. Case managers continued to contact clients via telephone as many “staffings” and status review meetings were delayed due to the postponement of several non-essential proceedings. In particular, because we did not have court-issued cell phones available, one case manager used her personal cell phone, and because she lacked an unlimited service plan, she graciously incurred a $40 phone charge.

I would be remiss not to include a note about our tent. This was a very early idea that was unsuccessful largely due to connectivity issues, but it showed great initiative and “outside the box thinking” on the behalf of Circuit Judge Robert Meadows. At the time of this idea, we had just learned about the pandemic and were frantically scrambling to obtain laptops, Zoom licenses, amped up procedures for cleaning facilities, etc. Judge Meadows took it upon himself to utilize his own personal tent and laptop to conduct a test experiment. The test aimed to learn whether a videoconferencing station could be used outside in open air to reduce contamination issues. The tent model eventually evolved, however, to a kiosk that participants could opt to use within unused hearing rooms or overflow courtrooms located on the first floor. This evolved idea enabled social distancing via avoidance of heavy foot traffic areas in the upper courthouse floors and, most importantly, avoidance of having to use elevators.

All in all, the judges and staff of the Nineteenth Circuit have shown great flexibility in adapting to new ways of using technology.

Twentieth Judicial Circuit Conducts Dependency Court Hearings Remotely
(Special thanks to Sara Miles, public information officer, and to Judges Shannon McFee and Carolyn Swift)

In the Twentieth Circuit, we have been especially pleased with our ability to conduct remote electronic hearings in dependency court, providing the community with the court services necessary to try to protect our children and to help our families. This story highlights the efforts of two of our dependency court judges, Judge Carolyn Swift in Lee County and Judge Shannon McFee in Collier County.

In Lee County, two judges preside over the dependency docket. When the pandemic first began, Judge Swift said that she and Judge Geoffrey Gentile immediately held a Zoom conference with the dependency attorneys to get a group consensus on what dependency court business was appropriate for remote proceedings. Judge Gentile drafted an order with directives on how they would proceed remotely. They set up meeting codes, provided them to attorneys, parents, and parties, and then they were off. Judge Swift
said that not being able to conduct trials has been a challenge, but in late June, she conducted Lee County’s first in-person termination of parental rights trial since COVID, with limited people in the courtroom.

Given the volume of the Lee County caseload, the judges had to get creative and brainstorm to figure out what would work. Judge Swift says she and Judge Gentile were fortunate to benefit from email lists describing what other dependency judges are doing around the state (soon after remote proceedings became the new norm, a group of dependency judges, as well as OSCA’s Office of Court Improvement, began emailing all of Florida’s dependency judges to share information and resources). Along the way, they quickly discovered that the process goes more efficiently when the attorneys communicate with one another prior to the hearings.

In Collier County, Judge McFee handles all the dependency hearings. He took the bench in February, so, at this point, he’s technically been a Zoom judge longer than an “in-person” judge. He said it was easy for him to adjust to this “new normal” because, when the pandemic struck, he hadn’t had on the bench long enough to develop any customs or habits.

Judge McFee said that all the stakeholders have been fully on-board with giving Zoom a chance to work. From the case manager to the clerk to the attorneys involved, everyone has had a great attitude in recognizing that we need to keep the court open and care for these kids and families. The IT staff set up a camera in the courtroom, and dependency court has been moving forward ever since. As of June 23, 2020, Judge McFee conducted 466 dependency court hearings via Zoom remote teleconferencing and served 690 kids in those hearings.

Judge McFee said he feels the biggest challenge with dependency court and the COVID-19 restrictions is the difficulty in allowing the children to consistently and continually have in-person contact with their parents while the parents work through the dependency court system. Finding the balance between protecting the out-of-home placement caregivers and encouraging meaningful contact between parent and child has been a huge challenge.

Judge Swift and Judge McFee both noted that it has taken the significant contributions and collaborations of a great many people to enable the success of the circuit’s dependency court hearings through the pandemic. In addition to the case managers, court technology staff, clerks, and attorneys, the Collier County and Lee County sheriff’s departments also play an instrumental role, for they work with the court to ensure that inmates are available for proceedings via the polycom system. Moreover, the bailiffs and judicial assistants continue to show great patience and technical expertise, where necessary, in dealing with the remote teleconferencing hearings. The dependency judges also rely on the important input of Children’s Legal Services, the Guardian ad Litem Program, and the parents’ bar. Getting all the necessary technology into the courtrooms was also critical. IT folks throughout the circuit have been working tirelessly to ensure due process and access to justice while keeping everyone (judges, staff, and the public) safe.
Even so, Judge McFee recognizes limits to the effectiveness of remote technology in dependency hearings. He said, "While I feel that the Zoom remote teleconferencing has been the best that we could do under the circumstances, there is no doubt in my mind that this is NOT a viable long-term solution. The importance of being able to actually see the children in the courtroom, when necessary, and to have parents stand before the court to fully appreciate the gravity of the situation facing their family, cannot be overstated, and it cannot be meaningfully accomplished by a teleconference. While I am thankful for the technology during these unchartered times, that technology cannot replace the necessity of returning in-person to the courtroom."

However, Judge Swift believes that, in responding to the pandemic, the courts have learned some critical lessons that could transform the administration of justice in the future: "I do believe as we move forward some matters may be more efficiently conducted using technology. I am hopeful we can streamline some of the procedures in the future as the silver lining," she said.

Turning Points

Awards and Honors

Judge Susan L. Barber, Polk County, was awarded the Polk County Veterans Counsel Superior Service Award, the Vietnam Veterans of America Special Recognition Award, and the Military Order of the Purple Heart Special Recognition Award. She received these awards for her leadership, service, stewardship, and support of the veterans treatment court for the Tenth Judicial Circuit from 2018-2020.

Ms. Dawn M. Burlison, Second Circuit, received the Dispute Resolution Center Award of Appreciation for her 30 years of professional and dedicated service to the Office of the State Courts Administrator, 27 of those years with the Dispute Resolution Center.

Collier County Drug Court was named a Mentor Court by the National Drug Court Institute; as a result of this national award, which is shared by only seven other jurisdictions in the nation, other drug court program leaders from around the US will visit Collier County’s specialty program to observe and gain insight.

Judge Lisa Davidson, Eighteenth Circuit, received the Distinguished Judicial Service Pro Bono Award; presented by the chief justice, this award honors outstanding and sustained service to the public, especially as it relates to support of pro bono legal services.

Judge Josephine Gagliardi, Lee County, was awarded Jurist of the Year by the Florida Association for Women Lawyers; this award recognizes state and federal jurists for distinguished careers on the bench as well as contributions to the community and the practice of law. In addition, because of her exceptional service to the youth of her community, Judge Gagliardi was honored with the Boy Scouts of America’s Silver Beaver Award.
Ms Julie K. Hilton, Fourteenth Circuit, received the Dispute Resolution Center Award of Appreciation for her service to the Mediator Qualifications Discipline and Review Board and her support of alternative dispute resolution endeavors over her 29-year career as a certified mediator.

Judge Steve Jewett, Orange County, was presented with the Harvey Ford Award from the Florida Conference of County Court Judges; specifically, he was recognized for his work in the community, his mentorship of lawyers and judges, and his years of service to the conference.

Retired Judge T. Patterson Maney, Okaloosa County, was honored as a 2019 Outstanding Alumni of the Army War College. He was singled out for his extensive community service involvements following his retirement from the Army; among them, he established the Okaloosa County Mental Health Court and the Okaloosa County Veterans Treatment Court, and he launched the annual homeless veterans stand-down in his county.

Judge Orlando A. Prescott, Eleventh Circuit, was presented with the Florida Judicial College Award for Teaching Excellence; this award recognizes his exceptional skill as a judicial educator and his meritorious service to the college during his 16 years as a faculty member.

Ms Courtney Pringle, family court manager for Volusia County, was recognized with the Justice for Children and Families Award.

Retired Justice Peggy A. Quince, who served on the bench of the Florida Supreme Court from 1998 – 2019, was inducted into the National Center for State Courts’ Warren E. Burger Society. The Burger Society honors individuals who have used their time and talent to support the National Center for State Courts in exceptional ways.

Judge Morgan Laur Reinman, Eighteenth Circuit, was presented with a Distinguished Service Award from the Florida Council on Crime & Delinquency for her “impressive resume and her various leadership roles within the court system.” The Brevard County probation professionals also honored her, saying, “Judge Reinman has earned the respect of probation officers for her adherence to the law and her professional, courteous demeanor.”

Judge Elizabeth Rice, Thirteenth Circuit, was honored with the 2020 Outstanding Woman Lawyer of Achievement Award by the Young Lawyers Division of the Florida Bar; this award recognizes and celebrates the achievements of a woman lawyer or judge who excels in her field, possesses an excellent reputation for integrity, exhibits dedication to her community and her profession through bar-related or similar activities, and demonstrates a commitment to the success and advancement of young women lawyers.

The Seventeenth Circuit received a 2019 Outstanding Achievement Award given by the Florida Supreme Court Steering Committee on Families and Children in the Court; the honor specifically recognizes the circuit’s shared mediation calendar and its expanded self-help center.

Mr. Christopher M. Shulman, Thirteenth Circuit, received the Dispute Resolution Center Award of Appreciation for his service to the Mediator Ethics Advisory Committee, Committee on Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Rules and Policy, and the Mediator Qualifications Discipline and Review Board and for his support of ADR endeavors over his 22-year career as an ADR neutral.

Mr. Mike Smith, court technology officer for the Fourth Circuit, was honored with a Jacksonville Bar Association award for his department’s efficient transitioning of court functions from in-person to online during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Mr. Walt Smith, former trial court administrator in the Twelfth Circuit, was awarded the Kenneth R. Palmer Award of Distinguished Excellence in Judicial Administration, an award jointly conferred by the Florida Conference of Circuit Judges and the Trial Court Budget Commission.

Judge William F. Stone, First Circuit, received the Sharon Press Excellence in Alternative Dispute Resolution Award for his visionary leadership, professional integrity, and unwavering devotion to the field of alternative dispute resolution.

Judge Caroline Tesche Arkin, Thirteenth Circuit, is the recipient of the 2019 Robert W. Patton Outstanding Jurist Award. Named for the late Circuit Judge Patton, the award recognizes an outstanding jurist who has a reputation for sound judicial decisions and an unblemished record of integrity as a lawyer and judge.

Judge Marisa Tinkler Mendez, Eleventh Circuit, was honored with the Veterans Justice Award. Presented by the Academy of United States Veterans, the Veterans Justice Award recognizes organizations, programs, or individuals that have demonstrated success in combating the unnecessary criminalization of mental illness and the extended incarceration among veterans.

Judge Martha Warner, Fourth District Court of Appeal, was selected by the Florida Association of Women Lawyers to receive its highest honor, the Rosemary Barkett Outstanding Achievement Award, for 2020.

In Memoriam

Deputy State Courts Administrator Mignon “Dee” Beranek worked at the Florida Office of the State Courts Administrator from 1983 to 2002; after directing judicial education, she served in the dual roles of deputy state courts administrator and general counsel for the Florida State Courts System.


Retired Judge Trach Sheehan served on the bench in Hillsborough County from 2006 – 2017.


Retired Judge Billy G. Ward served as a justice of the peace in Escambia County from 1957 – 1971, when the Justice of the Peace Court was abolished; he then served on the bench in Escambia County until 1988.
**September**

10  Litigating in the Florida Courts: The Florida Rules of Judicial Administration, via Zoom
11  Ehrhardt on Civil Evidence, via Zoom
15  Quarterly Chief Judges Meeting, via Zoom
22  Introduction to Supported Decision-Making & the Importance of Self-Determination, via Zoom
24  General Information Session on the Court Continuity Workgroup, via Zoom
25  E-Discovery, via Zoom
25  New Appellate Judges Education Program, via Zoom
30  First Appearance Online—Nuts & Bolts, via Zoom

**October**

2    Steering Committee on Families & Children in the Court Meeting, via Zoom
2    New Appellate Judges Education Program, via Zoom
5    Committee on Alternative Dispute Resolution Rules & Policy Meeting, Orlando
7    Judicial Officer Q&A Session on the Court Continuity Workgroup, via Zoom
8    Teen Court Course, via Zoom
9    Wellness with Justice Lawson, via Zoom
9    New Appellate Judges Education Program, via Zoom
16   Florida Commission on Access to Civil Justice Meeting, via Zoom
16   New Appellate Judges Education Program, via Zoom
20   Using Supported Decision-Making in Your Courtroom: Promoting Self-Determination & Complying with Florida Guardianship Law, via Zoom
23   New Appellate Judges Education Program, via Zoom
28   Ehrhardt on Civil Evidence, via Zoom (repeat of 9/11/20 course)
30   Circuit Civil Law Update, via Zoom
30   New Appellate Judges Education Program, via Zoom

Follow this link to learn about other [upcoming court education programs](mailto:OSCAPublications@flcourts.org)

Under the direction of
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