



State of Illinois
Circuit Court of Cook County

Chambers of
Timothy C. Evans
Chief Judge

50 West Washington Street
Suite 2600
Richard J. Daley Center
Chicago, Illinois 60602
(312) 603-6000

July 16, 2021
PRESS RELEASE
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT:

Mary Wisniewski
Director of Communications
Office of the Chief Judge
Circuit Court of Cook County
(office) 312-603-5160
(mobile) 312-257-4549
Mary.Wisniewski@cookcountyil.gov

Chief Judge Evans orders more courtrooms used for trials, which will speed up case resolutions

CHICAGO (July 16, 2021) – The Circuit Court of Cook County is making dozens of courtrooms available for jury and bench trials, which will speed up resolution of cases that have been delayed due to pandemic-related restrictions, Chief Judge Timothy C. Evans announced today. The expanded reopening of the criminal courts has been made possible by new health guidance regarding the pandemic.

Precautions taken due to the pandemic have required six feet of social distancing in court facilities, which meant that the number of trials that could be held was limited. Jury trials required the use of at least two courtrooms – one for the trial itself, one for jury deliberations, and a third space for public viewing. Beginning

with the first jury trials in March, the courts had the capacity to hold 8 jury trials a week.

But Dr. Rachel Rubin, Senior Medical Officer, Cook County Department of Public Health, has advised the court that the six-foot requirement can be reduced to three feet in courtrooms, so more rooms can be used for trials, Judge Evans said. Judge Evans signed an order on Friday allowing use of 86 courtrooms for bench trials, 76 of which can also be used for jury trials, as well as other changes to increase court capacity. The order will take effect on Friday, July 23.

As of this week, approximately 159 criminal cases are ready for trial, and the courts should be able to “comfortably” accommodate all these requests before October 1, Judge Evans said. On that date, speedy trial requirements under Illinois law, which the Supreme Court had temporarily suspended due to the coronavirus pandemic, will again be in effect.

“We should be able to accommodate anybody who answers ready for trial,” said Judge Evans. “We are preparing for the end of the tolling of the speedy trial statutes so that the constitutional and statutory rights of defendants can be protected. By ensuring the safe and efficient reopening of the courts, we also are protecting the rights of victims of crime.”

Under the Illinois Speedy Trial Act, a defendant who has been taken into custody must be tried within 120 days. If a defendant is released on bail, he or she must be tried within 160 days after filing a written demand for a trial.

In order to handle demands for criminal trials in the coming months, the court will both use judges ordinarily assigned to criminal matters in the city and suburbs and “emergency judges.” These are judges who used to be criminal court judges, but now serve in other divisions, such as the Law Division, Judge Evans said.

Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, the courts have not been idle, but operated using both Zoom videoconference technology and in-person proceedings that were guided by such safety precautions as social distancing, mandatory masking and temperature and wellness checks at courthouse entrances.

Between the beginning of April 2020 and the end of May 2021, about 128,000 criminal cases have been disposed in the Cook County Circuit Court, which has included nearly 13,000 guilty pleas and more than 1,000 bench trials. Juries have been seated in 39 trials, including 29 criminal trials and 10 civil trials, since jury trials resumed on March 22.

Judges, lawyers and defendants have found that videoconferencing is both effective and practical for certain proceedings, and it will continue to be used now that the pandemic is receding. Under the order, judges can continue to use videoconference technology in certain situations, including status hearings, requests for continuances, prosecution of alleged local ordinance violations, agreed orders, and initial bail hearings.

To determine best practices in expanding the capacity for bench and jury trials and accelerate the opening of criminal court in-person proceedings, Judge Evans last month formed a committee of criminal justice stakeholders and other related groups.

These criminal justice stakeholders include the Cook County State's Attorney, the Cook County Public Defender, the Clerk of the Circuit Court of Cook County, the Cook County Sheriff, and all the presiding judges who handle criminal matters, along with members of the private bar.

Judge Evans thanked these groups for their guidance, advice, and continuing support during this challenging time.

###

Follow the court on Twitter@CookCntyCourt