




OFFICE OF THE CIRCUIT COURT  
THIRD JUDICIAL CIRCUIT OF FLORIDA  
Columbia, Dixie, Hamilton, Lafayette, Madison, Suwannee, and Taylor Counties

MARK E. FEAGLE  
Circuit Judge

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TO: The Third Judicial Circuit Communities  
FROM: Mark E. Feagle, Chief Judge   
DATE: September 25, 2020  
RE: Update on Court Operations

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To the citizens of the Third Judicial Circuit communities, I hope you are staying safe and healthy as we approach the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of 2020.

I want to take this opportunity to provide an update on how your courts are operating here in the Third Judicial Circuit. Since the early stages of the pandemic, the courts have continued to operate using remote technology in a continued effort to ensure that justice is not compromised. While there are some cases and court proceedings more difficult to conduct than others, we are continuing to conduct court hearings and evidentiary trials by utilizing audio/video technology within our circuit.

Supreme Court Chief Justice Canady has issued several administrative orders outlining required measures for Florida courts to follow, including a four-phase operating procedure. It should be noted these phases are separate and distinct from the State of Florida phases put into place by Governor DeSantis. Currently, all seven counties within the Third Circuit have transitioned into Phase 2 operations in accordance with the administrative orders.

The four phases of the pandemic, as it pertains to courthouse operations, are as follows:

- *Phase 1:* In-person contact is inadvisable, court facilities are effectively closed to the public, and in-person proceedings are rare;
- *Phase 2:* Limited in-person contact is authorized for certain purposes and/or requires the use of protective measures;
- *Phase 3:* In-person contact is more broadly authorized and protective measures are relaxed; and
- *Phase 4:* COVID-19 no longer presents a significant risk to public health and safety.

As we continue to operate under Phase 2 conditions, we realize that each county is different, and each county has its own dynamics with respect to the makeup of the courthouse occupants. The judges presiding in and over each county's specific dockets will make the final decision as to when and how their cases will progress and only after conferring with the other participants involved. Although Phase 2 permits limited in-person court proceedings, all proceedings shall continue to occur remotely unless litigants or other court participants are unable to successfully participate in a remote hearing for reasons beyond the court's control.

The courts will follow social distancing guidelines: we are limiting entrance to court proceedings to only the parties of the case, and health screenings will be conducted as you enter the courthouse. Towards that goal, the use of personal protection equipment (PPE) is a priority and the court and county staff will be cleaning and disinfecting the courtrooms daily.

If you receive a notice for court or a jury summons, please follow the instructions in the notice. If you have questions, please contact your Clerk of Court or the judge's office, as necessary.

Most of all, please understand that the judicial branch has been innovative, flexible, and proactive in adapting court operations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We remain committed to protecting liberties and resolving disputes with a priority given to protecting the public health.