

STATE OF ILLINOIS
CIRCUIT COURT
SEVENTEENTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT

JOHN S. LOWRY
Chief Judge



WINNEBAGO COUNTY COURTHOUSE
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ROCKFORD, ILLINOIS 61101
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For Immediate Release

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PRESS RELEASE

**17th Judicial Circuit Court
Encourages Virtual Attendance for Court Hearings**

ROCKFORD, IL – Chief Judge John Lowry reiterated the ongoing necessity of the Court’s public health precautions, and consistent with Administrative Order 2021-15, urged all attorneys and court patrons to use available online services and virtual court hearing options as permitted in their individual cases. Virtual attendance is generally permissible for attorneys and litigants for most court hearings unless a judge has specifically instructed an attorney or party to attend a proceeding in person. Represented litigants should check with their attorney for direction on whether their presence is needed in person for particular court hearings. Visit the Court’s website at <http://tinyurl.com/virtualcourt17> for more information about participating in virtual court proceedings.

“The Court is carefully monitoring its operations in light of the surge in Covid-19 cases caused by the omicron variant,” said Chief Judge Lowry. “We have invested in the necessary technology to offer virtual court options in all of our courtrooms, and as warranted, can easily transition to place greater reliance on virtual court hearings in response to this ongoing pandemic. I strongly urge attorneys and litigants to attend court hearings virtually whenever permissible and possible. This supports public health objectives by reducing the potential for Covid-19 case transmission in our community.”

All persons are required to wear a mask or face covering within public areas of all court facilities. Masks are to be well fit and worn properly covering both the mouth and nose. If visiting any court facility, please remember to bring a mask or face covering with you.

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STATE OF ILLINOIS
IN THE CIRCUIT COURT OF THE 17TH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT
COUNTY OF BOONE
COUNTY OF WINNEBAGO

ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER 2021-15
TEMPORARY ORDER - COVID-19 PROCEDURE

This order supersedes Administrative Order 2021-12 entered on July 28, 2021. This order is effective August 30, 2021.

Whereas the Circuit Court, pursuant to the Supreme Court's order of March 17, 2020, in M.R. 30370, previously reduced its operations to essential activities;

Whereas, the Supreme Court's order of May 20, 2020, in M.R. 30370, allows circuits to adopt their own plans for a resumption of court activity, and this Circuit did so effective June 1, 2020, as provided in Administrative Order 2020-21 entered on May 21, 2020;

Whereas, the Supreme Court's order of May 20, 2020, in M.R. 30370, implicitly allows circuits to step back from their reopening plans as dictated by local conditions;

Whereas, the Supreme Court's order of May 27, 2021, in M.R. 30370, allows circuits to operate following masking policies consistent with recent guidance from the Center for Disease Control (CDC); and

Whereas, the Supreme Court's order of June 30, 2021, in M.R. 30370, allows circuits to relax or eliminate social distancing requirements.

It is therefore ORDERED that, effective immediately, the following procedures are in effect in the 17th Judicial Circuit:

1. **Masks / Face Coverings.** Pursuant to General Order 1.03, all persons, including attorneys, must wear a mask or face covering in public areas of the courthouse. This provision does not apply to any person who is: under age 2; incapacitated; having trouble breathing; or unable to remove the mask or face covering without assistance. Persons required to speak in the course of a court proceeding may be directed to remove a mask or face covering when speaking if necessary to make a record.
2. **Reduced Call Size.** In order to reduce the number of people in the building(s), the Court will, to the extent possible, reduce the number of cases slotted for each court call. This will in many instances require staggered court times. Attorneys are reminded that it is essential that they appear at the designated time in order to make this process work.
3. **Represented Parties Excused.** Unless ordered by the judge or directed by their attorney, parties in civil and family cases are strongly encouraged not to attend routine court hearings. Attorneys should advise their clients not to attend court unless their attendance is strictly necessary given the nature of the hearing at issue. In criminal cases, judges should discuss with the attorneys whether the defendant's presence might be excused.

4. **Additional Persons Discouraged.** Litigants are strongly discouraged from bringing any other person with them to the courthouse.
5. **Virtual Proceedings.** The Court will operate with increased reliance on virtual proceedings and hearings pursuant to Supreme Court Rules 45 and 241. Attorneys and parties who are offered the opportunity to appear virtually are strongly encouraged to do so, especially if unvaccinated. Those participating in a virtual hearing should plan to timely appear as scheduled and should become familiar with the evolving protocols at <https://tinyurl.com/virtualcourt17>.

While encouraging remote attendance when possible, the Circuit is capable in most courtrooms of a hybrid/blended mode of hearing. In other words, while remote attendance is still encouraged, litigants or lawyers may choose to attend court either remotely or in person. Note that judges may specify in individual cases or settings that proceedings will be conducted only in person, or they may require a particular party or attorney to attend a proceeding in person.

6. **Criminal Jury Trials.** Pursuant to the Supreme Court's order, in criminal trials the period of delay attributable due to facilities limitations to safely try cases shall not be attributable to either the State or the defendant for purpose of 725 ILCS 5/103-5; by its terms, this provision expires October 1, 2021.

Criminal jury trials shall be subject to the following terms:

- a. Jurors will be asked whether they wish to be seated in a manner which ensures a degree of social distancing; such requests will be granted if the court is able to do so.
- b. Jurors will wear masks or face coverings, except when answering questions during voir dire.
- c. Attorneys will wear masks or face coverings, except when addressing the court/jury.

7. **Civil Jury Trials.** Civil jury trials shall be subject to the following terms:

- a. Jurors will be asked whether they wish to be seated in a manner which ensures a degree of social distancing; such requests will be granted if the court is able to do so.
- b. Jurors will wear masks or face coverings, except when answering questions during voir dire.
- c. Attorneys will wear masks or face coverings, except when addressing the court/jury.
- d. Throughout the end of 2021, Courtrooms 412 and 426 will have one jury week per month. Jury weeks in those courtrooms will begin on Wednesday (instead of Monday) to avoid congestion in the jury assembly room on days when there are jurors summoned for criminal trials. Juries will be comprised of up to 12 jurors, with a maximum of one alternate in addition. Stipulations to six-person juries are encouraged.

e. Courtroom 209's jury weeks will remain the same, but jury trials in that courtroom will be limited to six person juries to permit appropriate social distancing given the size of that courtroom. Cases with a 12-person jury demand may be reassigned for trial. Civil jury trials in 209 will be on a backup basis to criminal trials scheduled to commence the same day. If an insufficient number of jurors are available after the criminal juries are seated, the trial in 209 will be continued.

8. **Individual Judge/Division Order.** Attorneys and parties should be aware that individual judges and/or divisions may issue their own guidance on practices in certain courtrooms in general conformity with this order.

ENTER: 
Eugene G. Doherty, Chief Judge

DATED: 8/27/21