Courthouse public hours reduced in response to the ongoing COVID-19 public health emergency

Date: 12/21/2020

Today, the Maine Judicial Branch released this statement on changes to courthouse hours made in response to the reported surge in COVID-19 cases throughout the state:

The circumstances presented by the COVID-19 pandemic emergency are unprecedented. Balancing the health and safety of the public and the Branch's employees with the need to provide access to justice has been the Judicial Branchs focus since the beginning of this public health crisis. Most courtrooms are small and other public space within the courthouses is minimal. Given these spatial limitations and because much of our business is still conducted in person and by paper, the Judicial Branch has had to rethink almost everything we do in order to ensure public safety. Judicial Branch employees have met these challenges with unmatched dedication. Through determination, creativity and grit, we have provided access to justice to Maine citizens by inventing new processes and initiating technology solutions in a few short months. With guidance from the Maine CDC, we have maintained our facilities and implemented precautionary measures so that we might ensure the safety of our employees and the people who enter the States courthouses.

Nine months into this public health emergency the hope of an effective vaccine is on the horizon, but not before winter arrives and conditions worsen. The daily case count is increasing exponentially and the virus is spreading statewide. The deteriorating situation has led the Judicial Branch to revisit the Phased Management Plan (Plan) first adopted at the beginning of the pandemic. Although the Plan, when written, focused on expanding operations through a phased approach, we also acknowledged that a resurgence of COVID-19 might necessitate: (1) adjustments to the phase attributes; (2) a halt to phase progression, and/or (3) a return to the safeguards of an earlier phase.

Now, based on the scientific data from the Maine CDC and the likelihood that pandemic conditions will worsen before they improve, the Judicial Branch has determined that, until pandemic conditions begin to improve, it is prudent to limit public hours at courthouses to those hours when in-person proceedings are scheduled.

A schedule of reduced hours through the end of January by county and individual court may be found at: Reduced Public Hours at Courthouses during COVID-19. Please visit the Judicial Branch website at https://www.courts.maine.gov/ (https://www.courts.maine.gov/) for clerk of court contact information and updates regarding court schedules. The schedule is subject to change depending upon pandemic conditions and will be revisited after the New Year. All persons are advised to call the clerks office or check the website before coming to a courthouse.

Despite this reduction in the hours of public access, all courthouse offices will remain available for assistance by telephone during normal business hours, and remote proceedings will continue as scheduled. We are grateful to

the many dedicated employees who have developed and implemented new technology solutions and procedures that allow the court to manage many cases remotely.

Access to Remote Proceedings. PMO-SJC-7(E) outlines the process for public access to remote court proceedings that are not otherwise closed or confidential. Anyone who wishes to observe or listen to remote court proceedings should contact the clerk of the court where the hearing is being held. Please review PMO-SJC-7(E) for more information.

Email filings of certain documents in civil, criminal, juvenile, family matter, and appellate cases, are being accepted. (See PMO-SJC-3 for more information). That includes certain pleadings and complaints in protection from abuse cases, which may be submitted by email in accordance with PMO-SJC-3A.

Please note: eFiling in the eFileMaine system, now required in most civil matters in Bangor District Court, Penobscot Superior Court, and the Business and Consumer Docket, is distinct from filing documents by email.

We understand that limiting public hours at courthouses is not ideal. But the health and welfare of the people who enter our courthouses and our employees who work within them must take precedence at this time. We appreciate your patience and maintain our commitment to providing access to justice to all citizens.

To check active court alerts about these and other closings (including inclement weather), go to the Court Alerts page on the Judicial Branch website.

Contact: Julia Finn, Esq.
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Supporting documents

Press Release (PDF) (https://www.maine.gov/tools/whatsnew/attach.php?id=3811727&an=1)

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