

Court Information Release



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Chief Judge Pallmeyer delivers annual “State of the Court” Address

CHICAGO, Ill. – In her first in-person State of the Court since becoming Chief Judge, Hon. Rebecca R. Pallmeyer, delivered the State of the Court Address at a brown bag lunch sponsored by the Chicago Chapter of the Federal Bar Association. In her remarks, Judge Pallmeyer highlighted the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to court operations, how the Court was able to continue operations throughout the pandemic, and the expected return to more in-person proceedings in recent months.

As the COVID-19 became a growing global health crisis, the Court issued several General Orders, which extended deadlines in civil cases and established guidelines for emergency proceedings. In-court staff was reduced to a handful of judges and a single clerk. Each day, one emergency judge was on-site at the Dirksen Courthouse, conducting hearings on emergency matters in civil and criminal cases. Most of the district’s judges and staff began teleworking. Judges began issuing only written rulings and conducting hearings by telephone or videoconference. Civil hearings, bench trials, and settlement conferences were conducted remotely. The Court quickly transitioned from being an entirely in-person operation, to a nearly entirely remote operation in just days.

Additionally, under the federal CARES Act, the Court authorized the use of videoconferencing or teleconferencing for certain criminal proceedings, so long as the defendant gave consent after consultation with counsel.

Judge Pallmeyer also appointed the Re-start Taskforce, which includes Judge Matthew Kennelly (chair), Judge John Tharp, Judge Manish Shah, Judge Susan Cox, and Clerk of Court Tom Bruton. They were tasked with determining practices for resumption of courthouse operations while protecting the health and safety of court staff, lawyers, litigants, and the public, while mindful of state and local government restrictions and the personal challenges of the staff and public. Judge Pallmeyer and the Taskforce took the immediate steps of requiring face masks throughout the courthouses, reconfiguring courthouse entrances and exits, setting up sanitization stations and social distancing reminders, and limiting elevator capacity.

After months of planning, in August 2020, the Court resumed in-person jury trials and with the following precautions in place:

- Excusing jurors for whom jury service created a particular hardship
- Providing free juror parking and lunch
- Limiting jury selection to just one trial per day with no more than 50 potential jurors reporting on a single day
- Seating selected jurors in a re-engineered jury box in a larger courtroom to enable spacing
- Installing audio equipment to enable remote side bars, adding microphone covers
- Providing access to a separate full-size courtroom where jurors can socially distance during breaks and while deliberating

Jury trials again came to a halt in November when COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations surged. On November 12, 2020, Judge Pallmeyer ordered restrictions on activity in both the Dirksen and Roszkowski U.S. Courthouses. Jury trials were again suspended and all hearings in civil cases were to be conducted virtually, either by either via phone or video. Court employees were instructed to telework. Only those criminal hearings that had to be conducted in person--initial appearances, detention hearings, criminal bench trials, and guilty pleas or sentencings in which the defendant has refused to consent to a remote proceeding--were held at the courthouse.

As COVID-19 metrics improved and the vaccine became available, in April 2021, the Court resumed in-person jury trials with the added benefit of the SHIELD screening, non-invasive COVID-19 saliva test developed by the University of Illinois. It is believed that the Northern District of Illinois is the first court to implement such a coronavirus screening program. SHIELD tests are conducted in both courthouses and results are available within 24 hours. Courthouse employees, potential jurors, empaneled jurors, and case participants are tested regularly. To date, the Court has administered more than 12,560 SHIELD tests.

In partnership with the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH), the Court hosted a free walk-up COVID-19 vaccination clinic in the lobby of the Dirksen U.S. Courthouse from June 29 until July 14, 2021, making the vaccine available to attorneys, jurors, individuals attending naturalization ceremonies, and members of the public.

Judge Pallmeyer noted new additions to the Northern District of Illinois bench. On September 28, 2020, Judge Franklin U. Valderrama was sworn in as a district court judge. He fills the seat vacated by former Chief Judge Rubén Castillo, who retired from the bench in 2019. Prior to joining the district court, Judge Valderrama served as a Chancellor, a judge in the Chancery Division of the Circuit Court of Cook County. Judge Valderrama is the first Panamanian American to serve as an Article III judge.

On September 29, 2020, Judge Iain D. Johnston was sworn in as a district court judge in the Court's Western Division. Judge Johnston filled the seat vacated by Judge Frederick J. Kapala, who took senior status in 2019. Since 2013 and until joining the district court bench, Judge Johnston served as U.S. Magistrate Judge on the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois in the Court's Western Division in Rockford.

On February 11, 2021, Margaret J. Schneider was sworn in as a magistrate judge for the Western Division. Before joining the bench, she served as an Assistant U.S. Attorney in both the Eastern & Western Divisions of the district. Judge Schneider fills the seat vacated by Judge Johnston when he was elevated to the district court bench.

For the first time, in several years, there are no judicial vacancies in the Northern District of Illinois. Judge Matthew F. Kennelly recently announced, however, that he will assume senior status effective October 7, 2021. This decision will create a vacancy on the court, but Judge Kennelly expects to maintain a full civil and criminal case calendar.

Additionally, on January 1, 2021, Magistrate Judge Sheila M. Finnegan assumed her new role of Presiding Magistrate Judge as Magistrate Judge Susan E. Cox finished her term in that position.

In August 2020, Judge Pallmeyer appointed a Racial Justice Diversity Committee for the Northern District of Illinois to independently review any procedures or practices that might be helpful in aiding the Court to address racial disparities. The Committee will seek to evaluate methods that may help overcome any barriers to achieving the goal of equal justice for all. The Committee is chaired by retired District Judge Rubén Castillo and retired Circuit Judge Ann Claire Williams and will release a public report which outlines its recommendations to the Court and bar.

The COVID-19 pandemic prevented the Court from proceeding with naturalization ceremonies from April through July 2020. Since then, however, the Court has conducted some 418 socially distant naturalization ceremonies in various court spaces, including outside the Dirksen Courthouse in Quincy Court, and naturalized over 13,403 new citizens. On July 2, 2021, Wrigley Field, home of the Chicago Cubs, hosted the Court and 172 citizenship candidates for a first-of-its kind naturalization ceremony.

As she looked ahead, Judge Pallmeyer predicted that even once life returns to “normal,” a remote practice will continue within the Northern District of Illinois. Many routine motions or status reports that can be addressed briefly, she noted, will likely continue to be conducted by video or telephone conference.

In 2020 and in the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Judge Pallmeyer delivered the State of Court by videoconference. Judge Pallmeyer was sworn in as Chief Judge for the Northern District of Illinois on July 1, 2019. She is the first woman to lead the Northern District of Illinois as Chief Judge.

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