

Court Information Release



United States District Court
Northern District of Illinois, Eastern Division
219 South Dearborn Street, Chicago, Illinois 60604

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Contact: Julie Hodek, Public Information Officer
United States District Court for
the Northern District of Illinois
219 S. Dearborn St., #2548
Chicago, IL 60604
312-435-5693

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

CHICAGO, Ill. – Chief Judge Rebecca R. Pallmeyer delivered the annual State of the Court Address at a brown bag luncheon sponsored by the Chicago Chapter of the Federal Bar Association. In her remarks, Judge Pallmeyer highlighted the Court’s operations throughout the pandemic, how the Court has been able to safely conduct jury trials and naturalization ceremonies during the public health crisis, and the Court’s involvement in providing COVID-19 vaccines and free COVID-19 tests to the public.

Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 health crisis, the Court has conducted a number of in-person operations, including jury trials. Trials were paused for a portion of 2020, and again early last year. But in April 2021, the Court resumed jury trials, and since then has been conducting trials without interruption and while maintaining the following mitigation strategies:

- Screening jurors via written questionnaire
- 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

The Court has also engaged in a comprehensive COVID-19 testing program. Testing of staff began in February 2021, using the non-invasive COVID-19 saliva test, a PCR test developed at the University of Illinois and administered by SHIELD Illinois. The Court has continued to use the SHIELD test for all jurors, witnesses, and lawyers in jury trials. To date, the Court has administered more than 26,500 tests in the Court’s testing room on the second floor. In January 2022, the Court, in partnership with Chicago Department of Public Health, opened a free SHIELD testing clinic in the lobby of the Dirksen Courthouse. To date, 5,200 tests have been administered at the Dirksen Courthouse community site. The public is invited to take advantage of this free and highly accurate testing process.

Vaccination is mandated for Court staff. Last summer, in partnership with the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH), the Court also hosted a free walk-up COVID-19 vaccination clinic in the lobby of the Dirksen U.S. Courthouse, making the vaccine available to attorneys, jurors, individuals attending naturalization ceremonies, and members of the public. Then, in December 2021, the Court and IDPH hosted another community pop-up COVID-19 booster clinic at the courthouse, at which over 1,200 vaccines were administered.

Throughout calendar year 2021, the Court has continued conducting naturalization proceedings—some 630 ceremonies at which we welcomed nearly 25,000 new citizens. This includes ceremonies in the Quincy Courtyard, the outdoor plaza adjacent to Dirksen Courthouse, and 11 ceremonies at special venues throughout the district including Wrigley Field, Cantigny Park, and Naval Station Great Lakes.

Earlier this year, to guard against judges' inadvertent participation in cases in which they have financial conflicts, the Court adopted a significant rule change. Parties are now required to disclose their affiliates, defined as any entity or individual owning, directly or indirectly (through ownership of one or more other entities), 5% or more of a party. This new disclosure obligation assists the Court by bolstering its existing conflict-checking measures.

Judge Pallmeyer reported that Judge Matthew F. Kennelly assumed senior status effective October 7, 2021. Although Judge Kennelly continues to carry a full case load, his taking senior status created a judicial vacancy in the Northern District of Illinois. In April, President Biden announced his intention to nominate attorney Nancy Maldonado for Judge Kennelly's seat. If confirmed, she would be the first Hispanic woman to serve as an Article III judge in Illinois.

President Biden also nominated District Judge John Z. Lee to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit to the seat to be vacated by Judge Diane Wood, who will be assuming senior status. On April 25, 2022, the nomination was sent to the Senate. If confirmed, Judge Lee would be the first Asian American to serve as a Court of Appeals judge in the Seventh Circuit. Both Judge Lee and Judge-Designate Maldonado have been voted out of Committee, and we look forward to their confirmation.

Judge Pallmeyer also noted developments in Court security. On May 6, 2022, LaDon Reynolds was sworn in as U.S. Marshal for the Northern District of Illinois, filling a slot that had been vacant for nearly four years. Judge Pallmeyer also reported on Congress' recently approved plan to fortify security surrounding Dirksen Courthouse. This includes the demolition of dilapidated, vacant buildings that sit feet from the courthouse and were purchased by GSA in 2005 as a security buffer for the Dirksen Courthouse. Once completed, the redevelopment will appropriately secure and landscape the area surrounding the Courthouse. Judge Pallmeyer said her hope is that this much-needed security project will enhance the dignity of the neighborhood, beautify and promote foot traffic in Chicago's iconic State Street Corridor, preserve public safety, and restore Mies Van der Rohe's vision for the Chicago Federal Center Complex.

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