

Chief Judge Rebecca R. Pallmeyer's May 25, 2020 Video Message to the Bar

Hello, I'm Rebecca Pallmeyer. It's my honor to serve as Chief Judge for the United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois.

I wanted to take a few moments to let you know that my colleagues and I, here in Chicago and Rockford, are thinking about you, your families, friends, and practices. We recognize the difficulties you are facing and will continue to face in the coming months.

COVID-19 has had a profound impact on our lives and on the practice of law. Everyone I challenged, but among the hardest hit are the economically vulnerable, senior members of our communities, individuals who have preexisting physical concerns, and persons of color. Far too many people have lost their lives, and many thousands more have lost their jobs due to the pandemic. Schools, places of worship, community gatherings have all become virtual. Social interactions of all kinds have been cancelled or completely altered.

Each of us in the legal community has experienced the pandemic differently. Some of you moved seamlessly into working from home and don't miss the daily commute. Many others find themselves struggling with the responsibility of home-schooling impatient little ones or bored teenagers. Some are running errands for elderly relatives or caring for a sick loved one, all the while worrying about a fragile law practice. All of us are concerned about the possibility of contagion and the long-term effects of this virus on the economy and on our practice. And we can expect that the coronavirus will alter our lives for the foreseeable future. Things in the Court must change, as well, and that is the reason for this message. I felt it was important that you hear from me about our Court's efforts to keep you safe while we ensure that the wheels of justice continue to turn.

Since mid-March, our Courthouses have largely been empty. But the court itself remains active. Every day, one emergency judge has been on-site at the Dirksen Courthouse, conducting hearings on emergency matters in civil and criminal cases. All other judges and staff continue working from home, relying on technology, just as you are doing. More than 1350 new civil cases have been filed. Attorneys have filed more than 7200 motions, and judges have entered 34,200 orders. In addition, the emergency judges have handled over 500 emergency motions filed since the start of the pandemic.

At some point – soon, we hope – more of us will be able to return to the Courthouse. But we need to take steps to ensure everyone's safety. I have appointed a Task Force to plan for the safe resumption of operations at the Courthouse, and the Task Force has made progress. We have conferred with public health officials and reviewed guidance on safe operations in public spaces and office buildings, guidance on everything from screening of visitors to appropriate cleaning processes. I know you will understand that

court operations will look quite different when we return, at least for the next several months. We have treasured a culture of accessibility in the Northern District of Illinois; since I was a young lawyer, and long before, it has always been the case that an attorney could file a motion and appear before a judge to argue that motion later that week. That culture of frequent “face time” with judges, status conferences, and motion hearings, will need to be suspended, particularly in civil cases. In criminal cases as well, because of the difficulties of transporting detainees, nearly all of our court proceedings will need to be on paper, or by phone or videoconference, not in person. The details are set forth in the Fourth Amended General Order, to be posted to our website.

This is not a change any of us want—but it is a change we believe we need in order to reduce the number of individuals in our Courthouses, our lobbies, our elevators, and our courtrooms. We are also examining the jury trial process to determine how, safely, to assure social distancing is possible for jurors as they come to the courthouse, participate in the *voir dire* process, hear evidence, and deliberate. When we do resume jury trials, we will need to focus on criminal trials that have been delayed the longest.

Although much of our professional lives have been at least temporarily altered, I want to address what will remain the same.

The Northern District of Illinois has always been an active trial court with a nationally recognized trial bar membership. Many of you know that we recently celebrated this court’s 200th anniversary. Those celebrations, the PBS documentary that aired, and a new book, *Chicago Rules*, have all highlighted the Northern District’s lasting impact upon many important local and national issues – civil rights, employment law, criminal cases, corporate responsibility and the environment, to name just a few. As a legal community, we have always believed that the best outcomes in the justice system are achieved through a vigorous and collegial trial process, and we will continue to try cases here.

Our judges and lawyers have always worked together – in person in our courtrooms – as partners to achieve justice in both criminal and civil cases. I pledge to you that our court will move in the safest possible manner to allow as much of our traditional courtroom interaction to return as soon as possible – in a responsible, thoughtful manner, relying on the facts, medical evidence, and wise counsel from leading experts.

Your safety and the safety of our greater community comes first. But our hard-earned tradition of personal interaction and our nation’s highest caliber federal trial practice here in the Northern District will not be lost.

I will continue to update you from time to time as the situation evolves. When it’s safe to do so, I know that I will want to again see lots of lawyers in the courtroom, every day, face to face.

In the meantime, I wish all of you – and your families, friends, and staff – safety and good health. As the children are telling us in chalk on the sidewalk, we will get through this together. I hope to see you personally very soon.