Greetings Everyone.

This has been a very crazy time for all. If you told us back in January that we would drastically reduce court operations I would not have believed you. In our region we have not only had the challenge of reducing in person hearings to emergency hearings but also learning a new case management system. We look forward to welcoming people back which is the reason for this message.

The Supreme Court has issued an order that allows us to increase hearings any time after June 1 under certain restrictions. Our first concern is the health and safety of our staff, our justice partners, and the public. We must balance the gradual increase in hearings with the safety of everyone. For years we ran on the premise that personal appearance was required and only under special circumstances were people allowed to participate by phone, it’s the opposite now - we should be assuming hearings are by remote appearance unless there is a circumstance that requires personal appearance. Keeping in mind the order issued by the Vermont Supreme Court and our concerns around health and safety we will begin the expansion of hearings the week of June 15 as follows:

* Hearings in each Division can be no more than 5 hours per day
* We will continue to maintain social distancing by allowing no more than 10 people in the courtroom at a time, this includes the Judge, the Court Officer, and the Court Recorder.
* Your clients should not plan on attending in person with more than one support person as we do not have the capacity in the court room to allow that. Based on numbers the support person may not be able to go in the courtroom.
* We may require some people to wait outside or in their cars until they are called to come back into the courthouse. For example, at arraignments, we would allow the first 5 people in, the remaining people would be either asked to come back at a certain time or may be given a buzzer and would be buzzed to come back. This seems very foreign, but we must maintain safety and social distancing.
* We only have the capacity to cite 24 people for arraignment starting at 8:00 a.m. and then an additional 10 people at 1:30 p.m. on Tuesdays in order to maintain the 5-hour block. We are utilizing that large number as we anticipate no-shows, waivers of appearance filed in advance and others that may do plea by waivers.
* Rule 5’s will continue the weekly alternating schedule between Windham and Windsor counties.
* In-service will continue on the first Friday of the month from 8-12 there will be no hearings and the Clerk’s office will be closed.

The weekly schedule will be as follows:

Brattleboro

Monday – Magistrate hearings in Courtroom #2 (alternating OCS cases two Mondays in a row and then the following Monday non-OCS cases and so forth) and Case Manager conferences in Courtroom #3

Tuesday – Arraignments in Courtroom #1

Wednesday – RFA hearings in the a.m. Courtroom #1/Juvenile hearings in p.m. in Courtroom #2

Thursday – Juvenile in Courtroom #2

Friday – mental health a.m. Courtroom #1/criminal p.m. Courtroom #1 [Probate Name Changes may occur in the Clerk’s office]

Newfane

Monday – Domestic hearings

Wednesday – Civil hearings

Thursday – Probate hearings

Friday – Civil hearings

We know that this plan will not get us to a place where we are all caught up, but we hope that everyone understands that this has to be gradual and that health and safety has to come first. We will continue to evaluate and over time you will see more and more added. Baby steps.

You will begin to get hearing notices soon. Staff will be giving lists of pending cases to their judges to determine how to schedule. Those cases that had hearings that were in progress or that were scheduled and then cancelled because of COVID may take priority in some instances.

We will set up a Teams bench/bar meeting and the Judges will be available to answer questions, we ask that people participate by phone and not video as we can accommodate more people by phone than by video. The notice will have the number and PIN to call into.

As to the physical building, you will see new signage on the floor and in other areas requiring social distancing, a mask is still required in the building. The flow of the courtroom will be different, you will not have a center aisle, rather the isles will be on the outer edge of the court room. We encourage people to spread out in the court room and you may utilize the jury box to allow for social distancing. In addition, Plexiglas is going to be installed in many places in the building. We will have hand sanitizer available and if you forget a mask, we will have some disposable ones.

We ask that you be patient with us, this is new to everyone. You should not expect that Court will look anything like it did before both in terms of the physical presence as well as how the Court runs.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all of you throughout this pandemic. We appreciate your understanding and patience with the Court. We are all in this together. We look forward to seeing or hearing you all again, in the meantime please stay safe.

**Anne Damone**

**Regional Superior Court Clerk**

**May 21, 2020**