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 attendance 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:

* Judicial hearing time, remote or otherwise, in each division will be limited to five 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 with a large number of people to support them in person as we do not have the capacity in the court room to allow that.
* We will have a mechanism in place that 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 of a number as we anticipate no-shows and others that may do plea by waivers.
* We will continue having Windham/Windsor alternating Rule 5’s weekly.
* In-service will continue the second Friday of the month 8-12 with no hearings and the Clerk’s office closed.

The weekly schedule is as follows:

White River Junction

Monday – RFA

Tuesday – Arraignments

Wednesday – Juvenile

Thursday – Magistrate hearings (alternating weeks of OCS cases and Non-OCS cases) held in a larger courtroom; and Case Manager Conferences (held in small courtroom second floor)

Friday – DUI Docket 1st and 3rd Friday of the month, 2nd Friday and 4th Friday will be criminal hearings

Woodstock (all hearings in large courtroom, second floor)

Monday – Probate

Tuesday alternating Domestic and Civil hearings

Thursday alternating Domestic and Civil hearings

Friday alternating Domestic and 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 and those cases that were scheduled and then cancelled because of COVID may take priority in some instances.

We will set up a Teams bench/bar 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 may be altered. 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**