



# MEDINA COUNTY COMMON PLEAS COURT

## Probate and Juvenile Divisions

93 Public Square, Room 104, Medina, Ohio 44256

KEVIN W. DUNN  
Judge

MEDIA RELEASE

July 23, 2020

## Medina County Probate and Juvenile Court in an Unprecedented Time in History



*From top left:* Magistrate Derek Cek, Network Administrator Mike Stiles, Judge Kevin W. Dunn, and Chief Magistrate Susana B. Lewis join a Zoom meeting to discuss continued virtual hearing procedures in the coming weeks.

cancelling the conference. This was one of the first state closures of its kind. We had heard about the virus impacting those across the world, distant from us, but it became a reality and public safety issue for all Ohioans at that moment.

The next day, I returned to Medina and met with county officials and judges to collaborate and come up with a safety plan. As directed by the Supreme Court of Ohio's Emergency Orders, our court remained open to emergency hearings in-person only, however, non-emergency hearings were rescheduled, and some proceeded by telephone.

Juvenile and probate courts are entrusted with the care of citizens that must have access to the court at all times. These citizens include abused or neglected children, children or adults who are developmentally disabled and in need of protection, persons in need of emergency hospitalizations, and more. For these reasons, courts have long had continuing orders of operations plans (COOP), to allow us to function during emergency closures. Admittedly, the COVID-19 pandemic was not the emergency anyone envisioned, but the Court responded swiftly and with great resolve nonetheless.

Within days of the first announcement, I took immediate safety measures including adapting social distancing requirements and increased sanitization. Staff were reassigned to work remotely where

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*To learn more about the Medina County Juvenile and Probate Court or Court programs, visit our websites at [www.MedinaJuvenile.org](http://www.MedinaJuvenile.org) and [www.MedinaProbate.org](http://www.MedinaProbate.org).*

possible. With the help of the Medina County maintenance professionals, we also installed a new window with a glass divider for filings in Probate Court to safely shield court employees and the public needing assistance. We held remote hearings by telephone where appropriate in non-emergency matters. We put the old adage of necessity is the mother of invention to the test, and with the help and collaboration of everyone, we safely continued the operations of the court.

In May, the Medina County Probate and Juvenile Court was awarded a technology grant by the Supreme Court of Ohio to help fund the purchase of necessary technology to conduct hearings remotely and to allow for telework where possible. Mike Stiles, the Court's Network Administrator, proved invaluable in his research, training, and development of the Court's virtual platform practically overnight.

No sooner did the new technology get installed, the Court began the use of a virtual internet application, Zoom, to conduct uncontested hearings. The use of technology has allowed the court to set and resolve many matters that COVID-19 curtailed. For those who have never used a virtual application, it's a simple video conferencing tool that allows you to host a live video and audio with multiple attendees. All that is needed is a computer, or a cell phone or smart device, and an email address. The court began a protocol to create meetings and send litigants a private email with a link to attend on a given date and time. The court can also deny access to a meeting and terminate it. The application also allows litigants to converse together in virtual waiting rooms as they would in-person in the courthouse. Litigants, attorneys and others have been attending hearings virtually for more than a month now and I am happy to report that in many cases, it truly works. We are using this platform to conduct Drug Court review hearings, some delinquency and traffic proceedings, civil status hearings, and more. The use of technology recently allowed a child's extended family to be present virtually in her adoption hearing, showcasing a moment of absolute joy in such trying times.

When recognizing the benefits of technology, we also have to consider the obvious limitations. Technology is limited in contested hearings where live appearances are necessary and where social distancing requirements must be adhered to, although difficult in courtrooms which were not designed for distance. We have to be patient when it comes to unreliable technology for some, or minimal knowledge of using a new application. Lost also is the human touch that is so vital to everything we do. That being said, I am reminded that this pandemic is an unprecedented time in history, and know that the Court will be called upon to continue to adapt, implement, and move forward. With great resolve, the Court is committed to doing so in the very best way possible.

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