

Family & Juvenile Court Update

July 10, 2020

Greetings:

I write this message to update the public about operations at Thurston County Family and Juvenile Court.

As many of you recall, FJC operated on reduced hours (afternoons only) between March 23 and May 15, 2020. During that time, many hearings and trials set on our old calendar system were cancelled and our primary focus was emergency motions. The court also began using administrative processes without hearings to address many types of proposed agreed orders. Beginning May 18, FJC re-opened full days and began to add many more types of proceedings back into the daily calendar schedule. The calendar system put in place starting on May 18 was designed to address matters that had been cancelled between March and May, as well as many matters that were awaiting hearings that were not available during the emergency-only phase. To protect public health, the court created time-specific calendar sessions many of which are heard using ZOOM or a telephone bridge line. This has allowed the court to hear many cases without bringing people to the courthouse.

Although the courthouse is open from 8 am to 5 pm every day, I am pleased to report that the vast majority of participants in hearings and trials have participated using ZOOM or the telephone bridge. Court staff and judicial officers miss seeing you in person, but we are happy to be able to support remote participation in hearings in order to keep everybody healthy. As anticipated, with so many new processes, there have been some technology glitches and process bumps along the way. The court continues to work on making our processes smoother and more understandable. Thank you for your patience through this transition period. As we have gained more experience with our new systems, we believe we are having success in the vast majority of cases. We define success as being able to conduct meaningful hearings while supporting remote participation for most people.

The new processes and technology involve substantial administrative support behind the scenes. We wish we were able to address the same volume of proceedings we heard before the pandemic. This is not yet possible, but we continue to expand the types and numbers of proceedings we are able to hear.

The court anticipates continued restrictions on large gatherings for many months. With that in mind, we have made the following decisions:

1. The current calendar structure at FJC will remain in place through the end of December 2020. As we gain experience in processing our cases under the new system, we may increase calendar caps to increase capacity. However, we expect the current structure that relies heavily on time-specific calendaring and remote participation will remain in place until the end of December. This means you may schedule motions out into the Fall with confidence that the court won't change the schedule and require re-noting.
2. The requirement for orientation will continue to be suspended at least through the end of August. Parties should review written materials posted on the website. Parties who want to attend orientation starting in September should watch our website for additional details.

3. Our staff is working hard to reset settlement conferences and trials. We appreciate your patience as this will take some time. If you had a settlement conference or trial cancelled and you have not yet filed a Notice of Trial Setting, please do so. This notice schedules your case for an administrative calendar and puts your case in line to receive new dates.
4. In our prior communications we asked that parties delay scheduling low priority motions until after July 10. Low priority includes contempt, show cause, and default motions. If you already scheduled this type of motion for the month of July, your hearing will go forward. If you have not yet scheduled this type of motion, we ask that you wait until August 3 or later to note your hearing. We make this request so that we can ensure sufficient hearing time to address other higher-priority motions.
5. FJC will not host in-person meetings or trainings for the foreseeable future. We look forward to seeing you at ZOOM meetings, such as the Family Law Bar section meeting coming up on July 14, 2020.
6. Please read materials posted on our website *before* contacting court administration. We have developed information documents to explain our processes and answer frequently asked questions. This allows our court staff to focus their efforts on resetting matters and supporting our current operations.
7. ***Judge's copies are now required for certain matters:*** the requirement for judge's copies remains suspended for most matters. However, effective immediately, the following electronic judge's copies are required:
 - a. FJC Judge's Friday Calendars (Motions, Revisions, Relocations)
 - b. Dependency filings submitted less than three business days before a scheduled hearing;
 - c. Case-specific requests from a judge.

Please follow the guidelines in the attached document for directing these e-bench copies to FJCjudgescopies@co.thurston.wa.us.

8. The 4 pm ex parte calendar for family law emergencies will continue with the same process and requirements as we have been using with one exception. Participants will no longer provide a phone number to court administration and get called from the courtroom clerk. Instead, participants will join the hearing via the phone bridge. Instructions are on the Notice of Hearing and on our website [here](#).

Thank you for your continued patience and support. I hope you remain healthy and I look forward to seeing you in the future.

Judge Mary Sue Wilson
Chief Judge
Thurston County Family and Juvenile Court