

OPEN NINTH:
CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM
RETURNING TO NORMAL: COVID, VACCINES, AND COMMUNITY
EPISODE 121
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HOSTED BY: DONALD A. MYERS, JR.

(Music)

NARRATOR: Welcome to another episode of “Open Ninth: Conversations Beyond the Courtroom” in the Ninth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida.

And now here’s your host, Chief Judge Don Myers.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Hello, and welcome to Open Ninth. Here with me today is Deputy County Administrator and Director of Public Safety for Orange County, Danny Banks. Danny was appointed to the position in March of 2019, after serving 25 years in local law enforcement. As the pandemic has hit our region, he’s been at the forefront of navigating the county’s response here in Orange County.

It’s great to have you here with us, Danny. Thanks for joining --

DANNY BANKS: Judge, thank you for the opportunity to join you. I appreciate being here.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, I’m looking forward to the conversation. I’ve really enjoyed the privilege of working with you over the last couple of years as you’ve come into this position with the Mayor, new. And so let’s start out -- if we could, let’s just tell our audience a little bit about your background. You have a law enforcement career. Tell us about that.

DANNY BANKS: I do. Uniquely, I was born and raised in Orange County, and so I spent my whole life here, other than going off to college. And started my law enforcement career with the Orange County Sheriff’s Office, and spent about six years there before I transitioned to FDLE, Florida Department of Law Enforcement, and spent the rest of my career there. I retired from FDLE just two years ago as the special agent in charge of our Orlando region.

So I was privileged back when Mayor Demings took office that he gave me a call and asked me to come over to County Administration with him and be the Public Safety Director and Deputy County Administrator. So that's one of those jobs you don't say no to. So I think like everybody else, you would not have anticipated coming into the job and then here we go with certainly the worst pandemic any of us have seen in our generation, so -- but perhaps, you know, timing was everything and it's nothing. So hopefully we're going to come out of this the better.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Tell me a little bit about that experience in law enforcement that prepared you for the role that you have now.

DANNY BANKS: Oh, gosh. You know, I think experience in any kind of role prepares you for things for the future. I certainly have relied on my 25-year career in law enforcement -- and that's across local law enforcement and state law enforcement -- relied on that for what we're seeing now, particularly in emergency management.

As the special agent in charge for FDLE for the Orlando region, any time there's an emergency management event, and that can be major hurricanes to things like the Pulse nightclub shooting, all state law enforcement comes under FDLE. And so, you know, that experience having served in hurricanes -- not particularly in Central Florida but all over the coast of Florida, and then traveling places like Mississippi and Louisiana, North Carolina, hurricanes there -- and you really get a feel for the value of strong emergency management.

One perspective it always gave me -- and I've never been one to really like the comment of, you know, that's someone else's job. You know, at some time during the community's worst times, someone has to be in charge and has to really have a perspective to -- okay, how are we going to get our community through this. That's really what, to me, emergency management is all about.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Um-hum.

DANNY BANKS: Someone has to manage the crisis on behalf of the community to try to get the community to the other side of it. So I'm hopeful that 25 years, serving some of that position in law enforcement, has, you know, made me better prepared to serve in my role as Public Safety Director, you know, for the past year in Orange County.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: As Public Safety Director -- that's a relatively small title, I think, for the scope of the responsibility that you have. Tell us, what is that position responsible for in our community?

DANNY BANKS: Sure. So --

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Because we don't get to see you up front. You are mostly working behind the scenes.

DANNY BANKS: That's right. That's the -- up front is the Mayor's role, and is certainly one he does well. But -- so my role, uniquely, is to oversee the Fire Department, the Jail, our Health Services Department, and our Emergency Management Department for Orange County.

So unfortunately that's generally all of the major departments that have come into play during the COVID response, so -- and unique to every one of them a significant response. I know you're familiar with our -- certainly our Corrections and Jail response, but our Fire Department response to the COVID pandemic has been really just stellar. And health services -- all the community health coordination with our Department of Health, it's been monumental.

So the unique thing a lot of people sometimes don't realize is, you know, we talk a lot about the COVID pandemic response, but independently those organizations, those departments, have normal business to run, just like the courts. You know, when you're running a major Fire

Department that still responds to hundreds of thousands of calls for service every year, those calls just haven't stopped, so they've had to do that in addition to being one of our major resource providers to the COVID pandemic response. And same thing with the Jail. You know, you have to have the safety and security of inmates and staff in mind on a normal day, let alone a pandemic. So it's been a lot of long hours and long weeks for the past year for a lot of people.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, you are coming up on two years -- or right at two years, I guess, in the role.

DANNY BANKS: That's right. This week.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And we're almost, to the week, a year from the time that the pandemic really flew onto the radar. Some people might say you stepped in it.

DANNY BANKS: I did. I fell in it, or maybe I was pushed in.

But that's right. Just this morning I provided, you know, a biweekly update to the Board of County Commissioners. Part of my presentation this morning was reminding now that this is in fact the one-week [sic] anniversary of when the Mayor first declared an Emergency Order in Orange County.

As I was preparing for that presentation this morning, I looked back on where we were a year ago, and it really -- it stopped me in my tracks looking at the numbers. So my first presentation to the Board of County Commissioners was March 10th of last year, a year tomorrow. On that day, I advised them that the State of Florida had 12 cases -- the State of Florida. No cases at that time in Orange County.

And here we sit, a year later, almost two million cases in the State of Florida, tens of thousands of people have died. Orange County, over 116,000 COVID cases cumulative in one year, and a little over 1,100 deaths in just one year.

But I share those numbers now with some optimism moving forward. You know, some months we've all looked forward to now, at a position that we're all hopeful and optimistic for what this -- the future months this year will bring to us.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And no doubt, looking in the rearview mirror, we have just made phenomenal progress, certainly it seems in the last month or two. But there was just that slow build up, and then waves that came through, spikes, different circumstances related to holidays or gatherings of people. And it is so encouraging to be able to see all of that in the rearview mirror and appreciate where we are today with the sense of hope and optimism that we have.

Let's talk a little bit about the status. You've kind of given us the numbers of where we are currently -- or where we have been over the course of the last year. Where are we currently? Where are we seeing infection numbers being picked up here in Orange County, and what's the percent positivity rates and those kind of things?

DANNY BANKS: So we're fortunate -- and I'll tell you, I think the vaccine is having a lot of impact. We're fortunate in that our positivity rates, our hospitalizations, our deaths have slowed significantly. Clearly, that is the impact of the vaccine, particularly given its focus on our older population, 65-plus, where over 60 percent of that population in Orange County has been vaccinated and thus they're effectively protected from hospitalization and death. So clearly those have affected our numbers in a very good way.

We're down now, as we sit today, March 9th, the 14-day positivity rate, at about five-and-a-half percent of the people that are getting tested, so that's good and it's cause for optimism. That's not something we could have said even a month ago or two months ago.

And you mentioned the flexibility in those rates. You know, we sat for many months, particularly in Orange County but throughout the nation, really just knowing that, you know, a holiday was going to come and people were going to gather and that was going to cause our rates to go up. And we just knew we were constantly going to ride this ebb and flow, but we had no solution other than to keep protecting ourselves and, to some extent, keeping businesses closed and people social-distanced and just limiting our own capabilities. We had no solution until the vaccine came. So that's our cause of optimism now.

Late December, right at January 1, we started the vaccine initiative, and clearly that has had a significant impact. It's been very aggressive for us, but we know we still have many, many months to go before we really get to that immunity level that everyone could be protected.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Because you're in this role, and because I think it's commonly misunderstood, can you just give us an overview of the distribution of the vaccine? Where's it coming from, who's controlling how much comes to Florida and to Orange County, and what that decision-making process might look like?

DANNY BANKS: Sure. So the Federal Government really controls the dissemination of the vaccines to all of the states, and that's been going on since inception back in December. So every week the State of Florida, as a for instance, gets a particular allotment that comes to the state, and then the state partials that out by counties through their Department of Healths, and to the hospitals, different sites that are now accessible for vaccine.

Some things that have changed with the new administration in The White House and new Federal Administration, there is more direct allocation to vaccines to particular organizations such as the Federal Pharmacy Program. We've seen where local pharmacies now are getting direct allotments. That was helpful to us.

You know, just as recently as only a month ago, there were really only three sites accessible in Orange County to be vaccinated. That was certainly through our Department-of-Health-run site, the Convention Center, through our hospitals, and we had minimal other opportunities through healthcare organizations to get vaccinated, and that was it.

Now, with those pharmacies -- we have Publix, we have Walmarts, we have the others who now have expanded that opportunity. Now we have over 70 sites in Orange County that people have the opportunity to choose from, still driven by the availability of vaccine. But, you know, again, just within the past week, we've actually seen a transition to having more vaccine and more appointments available for people than the demand to fill them.

Every day at the Convention Center right now, we have appointments that are going left unfilled. Now, I expect that to change Monday. The Governor just announced yesterday we're dropping the age down to 60, which is great. That will bring in another flood of people that previously didn't have access. But that's a good problem to have when you have more vaccine accessible than you are filling the demand, so we're optimistic about expanding that group larger soon.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: I know early on in the delivery of the vaccine that among some groups or populations that we weren't seeing a very high response rate to folks who were saying, yes, I'd like to get the vaccine. I spoke to some organizations and they were pushing 30 percent, maybe, of their folks.

DANNY BANKS: Right.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That seems to be changing now.

DANNY BANKS: I think there was some initial hesitancy because of fear of the vaccine. There was -- and people like myself, just really uneducated, you know. Here I sit

overseeing all this, and I'm a 25-year cop; what do I know about medical, you know, response and so forth. But I've received a lot of education on this, and particularly with the vaccine, really a knowledge that it is safe, it is certainly effective. And I think a lot of people were hesitant initially, but as they've seen their friends, their family members, particularly older family members who have been successfully vaccinated and now have developed that immunity, a lot more people are aspiring to get vaccinated now. They realize it is safe, it's effective, it has worked for their friends, for their coworkers, so we're really continuing to promote that.

We know that our safety as a community will come in the more people that we can get vaccinated. So we're really still trying to promote that opportunity.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So the target number that we hear, of course, and it's moved -- fluctuated somewhat over time, somewhere between 60 and 80 percent --

DANNY BANKS: That's right. That's what they refer to, that herd immunity. And, you know, I think it will be a long time still before we reach that level of our total population who has been vaccinated. But there's still value in the 40 percent, the 50 percent. Everything we can still work toward, there's still tremendous value there.

You think of our 65 and older population now, I mentioned, a little over 60 percent of them are already effectively vaccinated. But 60 percent of that population is certainly not herd immunity. But the significance of that impact is -- you know, can hardly be measured. We see such a tremendous drop in deaths and hospitalizations amongst that population. And when you've effectively removed 60 percent of the people who may contract the virus and spread it to others, you're really having a very positive impact on the community.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: I know you're not a medical expert -- and maybe you did or didn't stay at a Holiday Inn Express last night -- but, you know, the question on everybody's

mind is, when can we start the return to normalcy? When can we ditch the masks? When can we stop worrying about social distancing? I hope we never have to worry about not washing our hands. I -- this washing our hands thing has been --

DANNY BANKS: Just a good practice.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: It's a great practice. And we've seen its impact. I mean, the numbers of flu cases are down so dramatically.

DANNY BANKS: Absolutely. Absolutely. I'm glad you mentioned that because that's true. And none of us would have known. I think we all generally knew that disease and sickness is passed, you know, by not as stringent health practices and cleanliness as we're all accustomed to practicing now. But clearly it has an impact. Clearly that has had an impact on the spread of COVID.

And you mentioned the flu. It's almost an afterthought now to realize flu season has almost swept by us, and because of our practices with COVID protections, flu was minimal this year. Clearly that's because of all the effects our social distancing, and cleanliness, and masking has had.

So I think we're all optimistic to get out of the masks and get back to work and get to the interaction. I think we're not there yet, though. We certainly don't want to go backwards, particularly to the population that still is at risk. You know, we don't want to pull all of our guards off yet until we're comfortable that when we pull those guards off -- and those guards include, you know, bringing people back together and enabling the opportunities that we've all been accustomed to, other than the past year. We don't want to pull our guard off yet, but we're getting much, much closer than we ever were in recent months.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Do you think that we're likely to make some decisions to live with some of these on a long-term basis -- some of these restrictions or protections?

DANNY BANKS: I think many people will be accustomed to it and they realize the value. You know, we all think back and, you know, you can envision getting on the airplane just as recently as a year-and-a-half ago and seeing someone wearing a mask, and that was an oddity. Now, it's common. In fact, you go anywhere and you don't see people masked, they're more noticeable than the people who are masked.

And I think there will be a lot of people that recognize the value in more protection for themselves of any type of disease, including the flu. I think things of people having hand sanitizers, washing their hands, wearing masks -- even after we potentially come out of mask mandates, I would expect we'll still see people masking.

I think we've all realized an opportunity, to some extent, to conduct business virtually. That works. Certain business functions work virtually. Some don't. But we've come through that experience in the past year to realize there may be some business services, and particularly in government things like permitting and other things that are important to Orange County Government, that we realize we can effectively do virtually. May never have gotten to that decision unless we were forced to do it, as we've been in the last year. But I think we'll see some permanent changes in that regard.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, I know we've experienced that in the court system as well.

DANNY BANKS: Absolutely.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: I laughed -- or joked early on, I guess, that in the first seven months of the pandemic, I felt like we advanced more than we would have in the seven years --

DANNY BANKS: Absolutely.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: -- in technology, had we not been forced to.

DANNY BANKS: And I think, you know, by force really, you know, unintended force, it forced us to realize opportunities to evaluate our own efficiency. So there has been some good that has come out of the pandemic response. But we certainly know we want to get to the point of public interaction, things like restaurants and shows and travel and that kind of industry.

I know you participate with us every day in our Executive Policy Group meeting, but when we hear from our airport now it's -- we're privileged and blessed that Orlando International, on many days, in fact most days, is leading the nation in airport passengers. But we're still only operating at about 50 percent of what our normal capacity is, and that's largely driven by tourism. We're optimistic to that day to come. But that just necessitates, you know, our ability to give people the opportunity to get together again.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So we find ourselves some percentage of the way through this pandemic. And I hesitate to say that's 75 percent or 50 percent, but we're making progress.

Can you think back to the day that you first heard about the virus -- that you first became aware?

DANNY BANKS: Oh, yeah, that -- absolutely. That was in January of last year. You know, we knew it was in China, there was the discussion and -- of ultimately -- and I knew -- this was in February. In fact, the Mayor and I had a discussion. We knew it was a matter of time. Even -- this was before it even came to the United States. And recall that the first cases in the United States were in Washington State.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Um-hum.

DANNY BANKS: We knew it was a matter of time before it came to Orange County. We knew -- as I mentioned earlier, you know, my first briefing to the Commission was March the 10th of last year, and we did not have a case in Orange County yet. Had cases in Florida. We remarked back then that, gosh, you know, one of the largest tourist destinations in the world still has not -- you know, the transient nature of our traffic in Orlando just was ripe for someone coming in and bringing it, so we knew it was a matter of time. We remarked that at that time we still had not had a case. Well, it wasn't long before we had our first two cases.

And then I still remember the days when we actually had our first double-digit cases, and it was traumatic to us. We almost had a sense of failure that we weren't effectively protecting our community. And then we realized, you know, we controlled to the extent we could. And who would have thought, even months later, we were seeing over 1,000 cases per day.

But I think we were very thoughtful very early to do as best we could to implement safety measures to try to save as much of the spread from occurring as we could. And a lot of those safety measures were not popular. Recall one of the first executive orders of the Mayor was to implement a curfew.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Um-hum.

DANNY BANKS: That's almost laughable now if you think about it as a strategic thing, but that was the first step we took was a curfew. That was well before masking order and so forth. And then as those numbers occurred, you know, Mayor Demings certainly was not hesitant to squeeze the trigger on additional measures. And I think clearly they worked.

It's remarkable to me, and I've made this comment numerous times, you know, here we sit in perhaps one of the world's worst pandemics in maybe three generations. Yet from

inception to now vaccine and really seeing the light at the -- tunnel, it's only been a year. This is a pandemic that would have wiped out a third of the world's population a hundred years ago.

So I really commend what I'll call medical science for in a year being able to effectively create a solution to getting the world back on track that literally would have wiped out a third of the world's population a hundred years ago.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: We've been very fortunate, I think, in Orange County in particular, to enjoy, I think, some great leadership at a lot of different levels. But as important as that, the teamwork, the communication that's gone on between the medical experts, the policy group and those that are making the decisions for the safety of the community. And you've played such a critical role in that, as I said, behind the scenes most of the time.

But I am just so grateful to have this chance to talk with you, to have you share some of your insights about it, and to express our appreciation to you for your calm and steady hand working behind the scenes on these issues for all of us. I know how much of a help you've been to us here in the courthouse as we've managed the pandemic and tried to keep folks safe coming in. Fortunately, very successfully. But just want to express our gratitude and appreciation to you.

Thank you so much, Danny.

DANNY BANKS: It's my pleasure. Yes, sir. Thank you for having me.

NARRATOR: You've been listening to "Open Ninth: Conversations Beyond the Courtroom" brought to you by Chief Judge Donald A. Myers, Jr., and the Ninth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida. For more information about the Ninth Judicial Circuit Court, follow us on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn.

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