Chief's Column – July 2021
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Moving Forward: Looking at the Post-COVID Courts

I am writing this column eight weeks in advance of publication. That's a lot of lead time, and a lot of change is set to happen between now and then. But, regardless of the timing, I am pretty certain the most pressing question on everyone's mind is – *how are the courts going to move forward post-COVID?*

Answering that question isn't easy. Timing, unfortunately, does come into play. As I write, everything is in flux everywhere. COVID mandates and recommendations are changing weekly. The courts are ramping up and preparing to fully open in July. Every indication leads to this reality. But, not knowing how all the variables will play out, I can't offer you detailed answers. How the courts move forward is as much about the big picture as it is about the small details. And, the big picture of what the future of the courts looks like is something I can offer.

First and foremost, the efficiencies we all worked so hard to establish during the pandemic will remain. The post-COVID court will be a hybrid of remote options and traditional procedures. There will be in-person and virtual hearings. Jury trials will resume in full, but the days of seating jurors shoulder-to-shoulder in jury assembly rooms and for voir dire are likely gone. Witnesses will testify in the courtroom or remotely when it's appropriate. The virtual procedures that are cost effective and efficient will stay. The court will not go back to its old ways and leave behind the gains it made. We'll bring those gains forward and create a new normal.

And, we will need them. There is a lot of work ahead of us. The pandemic created a backlog in courts across the nation the likes of which the judicial branch has never seen. The workload is daunting, I know. But, we will have the resources needed to get the work done. The state legislature reallocated the funds for the three additional judgeships, and included funding for case managers and additional senior judge days in the budget. With these judgeships, we will have the opportunity to effectively distribute caseloads to ensure that the divisions needing extra help get extra help. And, the extra support staff ensures that the work behind the bench keeps pace.

We'll also need more space. Having more judges and staff is meaningless if they don't have somewhere to work. Orange County built the downtown courthouse with three shell floors for future expansion. That foresight has been invaluable. Orange County facility crews began work on two of the shell floors early this year. The 13th floor, which will be designated "M", will house five new courtrooms, three courtrooms for jury trials and two for family cases;

constructions starts in September and should be operational in August 2022. Eight new chambers are currently being built on the 14th floor and are slated to be finished this October.

The courts are ready to move forward into a post-COVID world. But, are we? Remember, I am writing this in May. The quick changes have been unsettling to a lot of people. There was a lot of reluctance going into the pandemic, and there is a lot of reluctance coming out. Thousands of people come through our courthouses daily. It is not easy to go from isolation to mingling with strangers. Perhaps in July, we've all settled back into our comfortable professional and social routines. But, if there is still some lingering reluctance, remember to go easy on yourself and others. Be respectful of those who still choose to wear a mask, and wear one yourself if that makes you more comfortable in public spaces. We're all finding our own way back to normal, so let's give each other the same support we gave when the pandemic began.

My post-COVID normal looks nothing like what it did pre-COVID. I am exiting this pandemic stepping into the role of chief judge, and learning what this new normal looks like for me. But, you can expect from me the same support I gave before I became chief. My door is always open and I am always here to help you navigate your issues. And, I am ready to lead the courts forward into a bright post-COVID world.