

To the Members of our Bar Associations:

Let me start by thanking all of you for your patience. The last three days especially has been a test for all of us in handling minute by minute changes and dealing with the unknown as we address our Court's continued operations amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

As you know, we are now operating under SJC Order OE-144 and Probate & Family Court Standing Order 2-20. When our Court was closed on Monday and Tuesday, Register Casey-O'Brien, Chief Probation Officer O'Brien, Assistant Chief Court Officer Barnes, Facilities Supervisor Elridge, all of our Judges, JCM Yee and all of our AJCMs met each day at 8:15 in courtroom one (keeping our social distance) in order to create a plan for how to handle the directives of these Orders. Over the many hours we worked together in those two short work days, we created a process for hearing motions and for limiting interactions in the court while sharing information. To the credit of all involved during this time, this was truly a team effort and we accomplished so much in such a short amount of time.

When Standing Order 2-20 came out late yesterday afternoon, we abruptly changed course and worked creating a new plan for today. One of the biggest and most important changes all of our departments have implemented is a team approach to staffing the Court. The idea is that only a small segment of each department is in the Court for the work day and will work for a set number of days. All other employees are at home and available to work remotely or to come to court within short notice as needed. The hope of rotating staff is to reduce and contain the spread of the virus if any one of us is diagnosed. If someone in one team becomes sick, that team will self-quarantine while the next team comes in to handle our emergencies. It is our hope that this process will allow the Court to stay open by avoiding cross infection of our entire staff. This, of course, requires a limitation on the cases we are able to hear with the reduced staff. The employees of each department remain self-contained and are not in contact with the other department staff and staff is not rotating between Lawrence and Salem, again reducing the potential for additional exposure. Our facilities has been amazing in their continual efforts to keep the building sanitized.

We are currently hearing only emergencies as defined by Standing Order 2-20 and such hearings are being conducted telephonically. Although we have limited staff, we are still able and currently equipped to handle these cases. Register Casey-O'Brien has worked hard to make sure that the greeting on the Court's phone system and the signage outside the Court provides information to our users. Her staff is fielding questions telephonically and helping identify cases that need to be heard as an emergency. The Judicial staff is working non-stop to contact the attorneys and litigants on our current case lists to inform them of the general continuance of their case and to answer questions as needed.

We know the anxiety that limited access to the Court invokes. We have been impressed with the patience and positive response we have received from the public and the Bar when they are called to explain why cases are being taken off the list. In the hundreds of

cases called thus far, we have experienced literally only one (non-local) attorney who was demanding of a non-emergency hearing. To have such an overwhelmingly understanding response is a testament to how our Bar and our litigants are part of the solution and not part of the problem. Similarly, I have received emails from a number of attorneys offering to help us handle our backlog once the Court resumes more regular operations. Please know that your outpouring of assistance is appreciated on many levels and that we may take you up on your offers in the future.

Each of the Department Heads and the Judges are also in constant contact with our Chiefs and with our colleagues in other Courts, by phone, email and text messaging, sharing information and collectively brainstorming how best to handle the novel issues we face. We have also worked to make the implementation of the Standing Order clear by issuing Continuance Orders on pending cases as well as issuing Orders clarifying the extension of temporary guardians and conservators for minor and adults. We are sending out to Petitioners certified copies of such automatic extensions under the Standing Order as soon as possible. Matters taken under advisement by our Judges will continue to have orders or judgments issued. Probation is providing us with a list of all cases involving drug screens and investigations so we can address the best interests of children in the parenting plans in place.

Once we are able to safely have more staff return and the pandemic is no longer jeopardizing our Court's continued operation, we will begin to expand our hearings. The plan we developed to implement Standing Order 1-20 and to hold telephonic motion hearings, is in place and ready to begin once it is safe to do so and we are prepared to expand as safety dictates.

This transition from our brick and mortar courthouse to electronic hearings will not come without problems but know we are trying our best to make this as smooth as we can within the confines we face. We are in unprecedented times trying to address a pandemic we cannot predict and balancing the public's health and safety against our eternal interest in dispensing justice in a fair and swift manner. Thank you for your continued commitment to our Court as we adapt to these changing conditions together. I will remain in contact with your Bar's liaison for feedback and will be sure to provide you more information as it becomes available.

Stay well.

Jennifer