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Supreme Court: Wisconsin courts turn to livestreaming to keep courts open, accessible

Posted on Friday, Apr 10, 2020

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Madison, Wis. (April 10, 2020) – An increasing number of Wisconsin courts are taking advantage of online videoconferencing and livestreaming services to keep courts operating and accessible to litigants and the public during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The court system has issued Zoom online videoconferencing accounts to each of the state's 249 circuit court branches and is encouraging judges to livestream their proceedings, said Director of State Courts Randy R. Koschnick.

Zoom allows parties, attorneys and others to make court appearances via audio or video feeds from remote locations as if they were in the courtroom. Judges are able to control admission to video conferencing sessions, and attorneys and clients are able to hold separate breakout conversations as needed. The remote feeds are then combined into a split-screen session and streamed live via YouTube's streaming service.

"This technology makes it possible for our courts to keep cases moving, while protecting the health of people who would otherwise be in the same courtroom. Just as important, the public and media are able to observe open proceedings as they are happening, despite the pandemic," Koschnick said.

Participants in a proceeding may join a Zoom session by video with a laptop or smart phone equipped with a camera, or they may join with only audio if they do not have a device equipped with a camera. It's always a good idea to run a test a connection first to ensure bandwidth is sufficient, Koschnick said.

Last month, after Gov. Tony Evers declared a public health emergency, the Wisconsin Supreme Court issued orders temporarily prohibiting circuit courts statewide from holding jury trials and in-person appearances, with very limited exceptions. Courts were instead asked to take appearances by telephone or videoconferencing technology whenever possible.

“This technology addresses a number of concerns raised in the legal community as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Courts are able to continue carrying out their vital work, and more people than ever are readily able to observe live circuit court proceedings,” Koschnick said.

Since the Zoom accounts were issued in mid-March, about 70 circuit court branches in 23 counties have established YouTube channels, and a limited number of those courts are streaming proceedings on a regular basis. A list of circuit courts that have established accounts can be found on the court system’s website, wicourts.gov under the “live stream courts” tab at the top of the page.

More courts are being added daily, and that number will increase as proceedings that were canceled at the onset of the public health emergency are rescheduled and courts work through previously scheduled telephone conferences. The goal is to have all of the state’s circuit court branches capable of using the technology to livestream public proceedings, Koschnick said.