

**Judge Ron**

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**Subject:** FW: NOTIFICATION OF ASHLAND COUNTY COMMON PLEAS COURT, GENERAL AND DOMESTIC RELATIONS DIVISIONS, COVID-19 PROCEDURES AND TRAINING AIDS  
**Attachments:** JE\_CV\_COVID 19 - STANDING ORD-filestamped.pdf

*From the desk of:*

**Hon. Ronald P. Forsthoefel**

Ashland County Common Pleas Court

142 West Second Street

Ashland, Ohio 44805

Website: [www.ashlandcommonpleas.com](http://www.ashlandcommonpleas.com)

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**Designated Staff: Please forward to various stake holders as previously requested on March 20.**

**To the Ashland County Bar Association, all other Attorneys appearing in the Gen/DR Divisions of the Ashland County Common Pleas Court, Media, Ashland County Commissioners and Media outlets:**

**Effective March 30, 2020 the Ashland County Common Pleas Court General and Domestic Relations Divisions will be conducting ALL hearings by telephone conference and/or Skype for Business video conferencing, with limited exceptions where circumstances dictate or require other arrangements. We will work with all litigants to make sure our Court remains open, functional, and responsive to the justice needs of Ashland County. We encourage any attorneys/litigants who have pending civil cases that are not time critical (no constitutional right to speedy trial, no need for injunctive relief, etc.) to consider requesting that their proceedings be continued if they are uncomfortable with video conferencing.**

**COURT STAFF WILL BEGIN THE PROCESS OF CONVERTING IN-COURT HEARINGS (Scheduled on and after March 30, 2020) TO VIDEO HEARINGS BEGINNING MARCH 24, 2020. HEARINGS ALREADY SCHEDULED WILL BE CONVERTED TO VIDEO APPROXIMATELY ONE-WEEK IN ADVANCE, SO WE DON'T GET TOO FAR**

**AHEAD OF OURSELVES WHEN SCHEDULING. YOU MAY, HOWEVER, ANTICIPATE THIS TEMPORARY SITUATION TO BE IN EFFECT FOR SEVERAL MONTHS. ALL NEW HEARINGS SCHEDULED ON AND AFTER MARCH 23, 2020 WILL BE SCHEDULED AS VIDEO-ONLY HEARINGS (unless an exception is necessary). SHOULD THE EMERGENCY STATUS END PRIOR TO THE OCCURANCE OF ANY VIDEO HEARING ALREADY SCHEDULED, WE WILL GIVE COUNSEL THE OPTION OF KEEPING THE VIDEO HEARING OR CONVERTING IT BACK TO AN IN-COURT HEARING.**

**Attached is a copy of the Judgment Entry issued March 20, 2020 which outlines our procedures in more detail. Some court appearances will still require personal appearances, but we believe we can accommodate most matters by video conferencing. Mediations and proceedings not requiring a court record or the presentation of evidence can be accomplished through a telephone conference call. This Court has been developing continuity of operations capabilities through the use of cloud computing and video conferencing (and effectively utilizing them) for several years now. My staff will assist any attorney or litigant who needs additional assistance in navigating our video conferencing processes. To help all attorneys become familiar and comfortable with video conferencing (if you have not yet participated in one), we have two (2) training/orientation videos we've recorded, which we encourage all attorneys to view and to also make available to their clients and prospective witnesses.**

**The first video is 27 minutes in duration, and provides an overview of all the controls and buttons a video conferencing participant will see on their computer screen, as well as demonstration and description of what those buttons and controls do. It also gives a demonstration of the difference between ACTIVE participation in a video conference and being CONNECTED BUT NOT ACTIVELY PARTICIPATING when using the hang-up feature. The first/orientation video can be accessed for download by clicking on this link:**

**<https://ashlandcommonpleas-my.sharepoint.com/:v:/p/court/ESJNAfOew-xPljcDbFOCW70Bp2jlVbXReFwpUZTfflNsPg?e=ggmCqh>**

**The second video is approximately 15-16 minutes in duration, and with just a little bit of levity, demonstrates how the connectivity feature of the hang-up function (after initial active participation) can facilitate confidential communications between an attorney and their criminal defendant client and in**

addition, can allow the Court and parties to monitor the status and separation of remotely connected witnesses awaiting their turn to testify. It briefly demonstrates how someone connected to the conference, but not actively participating, can be placed in a waiting or hold status, and then called upon by instant message to re-join the video conference as an active participant. The second “Using Remote Witnesses” video can be accessed for download by clicking on this link: [https://ashlandcommonpleas-my.sharepoint.com/:v:/p/court/EUr2kQKXS0tPns9QKVH8f\\_IBkWwCSAdaQGtPBZeUr-u4Pw?e=Gsg4gx](https://ashlandcommonpleas-my.sharepoint.com/:v:/p/court/EUr2kQKXS0tPns9QKVH8f_IBkWwCSAdaQGtPBZeUr-u4Pw?e=Gsg4gx)

**THE VIDEO LINKS ABOVE WILL EXPIRE ON MAY 31, 2020. IF YOU SEE AN ERROR MESSAGE ON YOUR SCREEN WHEN YOU CLICK ON THE LINK, IT IS BECAUSE YOU NEED TO DOWNLOAD THE VIDEO, IT WILL NOT PLAY THROUGH YOUR WEB BROWSER. A “DOWNLOAD” BUTTON SHOULD APPEAR AT THE TOP OF YOUR COMPUTER SCREEN, CLICK ON THE DOWNLOAD BUTTION/TAB AND RESPOND “YES” WHEN ASKED TO CONFIRM WHETHER YOU WANT TO DOWNLOAD THE VIDEO FILE. THE FILES ARE IN .AVI FORMAT AND WILL PLAYBACK IN WINDOWS MEDIA PLAYER AS WELL AS MANY OTHER VIDEO APPLICATIONS.**

In addition to these two training videos, the Court has scheduled **TWO OPEN-ACCESS VIDEO CONFERENCING SESSIONS** (primarily for legal counsel and other users of court services) so you/they have an opportunity to log on to an active video conference session (AFTER WATCHING THE TWO VIDEOS LINKED TO THIS EMAIL) to explore, practice and familiarize themselves with the Skype for Business video conferencing tool. Please note that each session will support up to 250 simultaneous log-ins. Only five (5) live video feeds, in addition to the user however, are active at any time as a way to place some limit on the amount of internet band-width consumed by the tool. We **DISCOURAGE** media, those just curious, or anyone who won't be tasked to use this service, from logging in to either of these practice video sessions. They are meant for the attorneys, law firms and their IT support staff, as well as expert witnesses and others who will be tasked with using the tool to accomplish the completion of an actual case hearing of some type. A member of the Court's staff will be monitoring each of the open video conferencing sessions for approximately one hour each session, to answer questions and to assist participants. Otherwise, the participants will be left to explore on their own.

The FIRST exploration video session shall occur on THURSDAY, MARCH 26, 2020 at 10:00 a.m., and will be monitored by court staff for one hour. The link for this session is:

<https://meet.lync.com/ashlandcommonpleas/judgeron/6IF0AAHF>

The SECOND exploration video session shall occur on THURSDAY, MARCH 26, 2020 at 3:00 p.m., and will be monitored by court staff for one hour. The link for this session is:

<https://meet.lync.com/ashlandcommonpleas/judgeron/OAU5R4EC>

If any attorney is encountering difficulties, or wants individualized assistance closer to a scheduled hearing date, contact the designated court staff person for your type of case. A listing of court staff and the types of cases they are primarily responsible for can be found at the Court's website under the staff link. The Court's website address is [www.ashlandcommonpleas.com](http://www.ashlandcommonpleas.com).

Please note that Skype for Business is functional on Windows PC's, tablets, and laptop computers, Android tablets and computers and cell phones, newer Apple iOS devices (such as iPods and iPads) and iPhone. There are down-load apps for Apple and Android Devices. Windows devices use a web-app plug in that auto-loads the first time you join a Skype for Business hearing.

By using the processes outlined above, the Ashland County Common Pleas Court, General and Domestic Relations Divisions, is attempting to accommodate the current health and safety need for limiting person-to-person contact and for maintaining social distancing, yet keep the Court responsive to the justice needs of our stakeholders. It is our intention to keep our court open and functional, to keep our dockets moving, to address new cases as they are initiated, and to provide access to justice for all citizens. We truly appreciate similar efforts on the part of our legal professionals to perhaps exceed your comfort zone and work with us in utilizing the video conferencing tools. The attorneys dealing with the criminal docket have been exposed to using Skype for Business for years, and most have adapted well and even prefer the use of video. We realize

**that there are those who may struggle with technology. I want to assure you that where necessary, we will make accommodations for those individuals and still provide for the mitigation of person-to-person contact.**

**Although I've tried to be as thorough as possible when deciding upon our processes and methods, there will no doubt be unique situations in every case that will require some on-the-fly adjustment to procedure. I've attempted to make sure that regardless of the nature of the hearing, court staff will be able to react positively to any unique situation or wrinkle that may occur during the course of a hearing. And despite all of that, I won't be surprised if in some cases, we find ourselves in a situation that will simply preclude a video hearing from proceeding further, and we'll have to continue things to a later date and move on. This is uncharted territory for most of us. While I believe this Court and our staff have uniquely positioned this Court to deal with the current pandemic situation, with little impact upon our Court's ability to maintain 100% functionality, I do know that we can't anticipate every potential issue. We will do the best we can do. I hope that by proceeding in this fashion we are also assisting counsel in maintaining their operations. Even if an attorney, party, or witness find themselves unfortunately subject to quarantine or an inability to access their office, remote access gives us options to deal with any physical displacement.**

**The remote access supported by Skype for Business allows us all some flexibility in location, and doesn't rely on brick and mortar facilities. It does, however, require adequate internet bandwidth. So please don't attempt to access a conference using a 3G cell signal, a weak 4G cell signal, or a weak Wi-Fi router connection. Doing so will create complications and only frustrate you. We've had enough experience to know that internet broadband, as good as it is these days, has its limitations.**

**Thank you to all attorneys and legal professionals for your understanding, assistance, adaptation, and cooperation during this extraordinary period in our lives.**

**I wish you all the best of health, safety and peace of mind as we deal with these emergency procedures.**

**Best regards,**

**Judge Ronald P. Forsthoefel  
Ashland County Common Pleas Court**