

Judiciary appoints COVID-19 task force

Group will study ways to hold jury selection, trials during pandemic

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Illinois' judicial branch announced the creation of a COVID-19 task force to guide the court system through its court-reopening processes.

According to the announcement Tuesday by the Illinois Supreme Court, the task force under the Illinois Judicial Conference will evaluate technology options for jury selection and trials, how to hold remote proceedings while maintaining due process and keeping court personnel and the public safe during the pandemic.

The IJC's task force will be chaired by J. Timothy Eaton, a partner at Taft Stettinius & Hollister LLP, and its vice chair is 17th Judicial Circuit Chief Judge Eugene G. Doherty.

Revamped into its current form in 2018, the Judicial Conference is a 29-member body chaired by the chief justice that's tasked with developing the judiciary's strategic plans and suggesting "improvements in the administration of justice," according to Supreme Court Rule 41 which governs it.

The high court's Tuesday announcement says recommendations by the COVID-19 task force "will be expeditiously vetted by the IJC and then forwarded to the Illinois Supreme Court for consideration."

In an interview Thursday, Eaton said the task force is a way to include lawyers from different practice areas and different communities into the court's broader discussion. Among the 14 non-judge members of the IJC — among them is Eaton himself — most are court officials or personnel, he said.

"One of the purposes of this [task force] is to get feedback from lawyers and stakeholders who are using the courts as well," he said.

Eaton said the task force in its earliest discussions is looking into the possibility of handling juror selection remotely, which would eliminate the need to assemble dozens of people in-person.

"If we can cut down somewhat on congestion in the courthouse under the circumstances, that's a good thing," Eaton said.

In addition to Eaton and Doherty, the other attorneys and judges named to the task force are:

- Maryam Ahmad, the chief of the Cook County State's Attorney's Juvenile Justice Bureau and president of The Chicago Bar Association;
- Tammy Bumgarner, the Springfield-based director of the state of Illinois' Court Reporting Services;
- Cook County State's Attorney Kimberly M. Foxx;
- John Gallo, CEO and executive director of Legal Aid Chicago;

- Keith Grant, Public Defender Division chief for the Lake County Public Defender's office in Waukegan;
- Patricia Brown Holmes, managing partner of Riley Safer Holmes & Cancila LLP;
- Cook County Circuit Judge LeRoy K. Martin Jr., presiding judge of the court's Criminal Division;
- 11th Judicial Circuit Associate Judge Amy L. Mc-Farland;
- Cook County Circuit Judge Ramon Ocasio III;
- Dennis J. Orsey, counsel at Dennis J. Orsey P.C. in Granite City and president of the Illinois State Bar Association;
- Cook County Associate Judge Rena Van Tine; and
- Rock Island County Circuit Court Clerk Tammy R. Weikert.

The task force will be supported by Allison Spanner, the director of strategic planning for the Administrative Office of Illinois Courts.

Last October, as the IJC marked one year in its current format, it issued its Strategic Agenda for the Illinois Judicial Branch, which details five broad goals to be implemented between now and 2022.

“The Illinois Judicial Conference helped establish the Court's vision statement to be trusted and open to all by being fair, innovative, diverse, and responsive to changing needs,” Chief Justice Anne M. Burke said in the task force press release. “That statement looks prophetic after the events of 2020 and this group will help us achieve those goals.”

Trial courts across the state limited their operations starting in March as COVID-19 cases began to spread in Chicago and elsewhere in Illinois.

In late May, the high court issued an order and accompanying guidelines allowing the states' 24 circuit courts to start returning to normal operations on June 1. The guidelines urged chief judges to maintain social-distancing rules, avoid crowding in court facilities and increase use of videoconferencing tools for hearings.

The Cook County Circuit Court — Illinois' largest by a wide margin — is set to resume many functions on July 6, but jury trials are still on pause.