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Texas Judiciary Marks One Million Virtual Court Hearings

The Third Branch is approaching its one-year anniversary of utilizing Zoom for court proceedings



AUSTIN – The Texas Judiciary announced today that Texas judges have held over one million court hearings via Zoom. The milestone was reached after more than 2,000 state judges have used the platform to hold virtual court proceedings since the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020.

Johnson County Court at Law Judge Robert Mayfield held the state’s one millionth zoom hearing for a criminal guilty plea proceeding on Wednesday, February 3rd.

“The pandemic has greatly challenged all professions, especially the judiciary. Suddenly we found all our familiar norms were no longer viable and judges were forced to adapt on the fly,”

said Judge Mayfield. “When I took the bench in 1999 my computer skills were limited. I could email staff and purchase books online. Now my normal court day is conducted in cyberspace – hearings, pleas, conferences, rulings and signatures—are all controlled by pushing keys and clicking a mouse. Never could I have imagined this, but the judiciary, using modern technology, has met the challenge of our new world.”

“This time last year all I thought “zoom” meant was to hurry down the highway. Now Zoom has revolutionized the Texas justice system, allowing courts to continue to function without the health risks to court participants from in-person proceedings,” said Texas Supreme Court Chief

Justice Nathan Hecht. “I am proud of our Texas Judges for their ability to adapt to a new way of holding court and their commitment to ensuring justice continues throughout the pandemic.” In addition to holding hearings in every case type and type of proceeding online, Texas was also the first state to have its nine-member Supreme Court host remote oral arguments, the first state to hold a virtual non-binding civil jury trial in May 2020, and it became the first state to hold a virtual criminal jury trial in August 2020. Texas has since held over 25 virtual jury trials and 50 grand jury proceedings.

“Life during the COVID-19 pandemic has been anything but normal. However, we have strived to continue to operate the court system as close to normal as possible,” said David Slayton, Administrative Director of the Office of Court Administration. “The silver lining of the pandemic has been the overwhelming positive reaction to online proceedings and the fact that it has given people greater access to their courts.”

Tarrant County District Judge Mollee Westfall and Edinburg Child Protection Court Judge Carlos Villalon are the Judiciary’s top users of Zoom, hosting the most online hearings throughout the past year.

“Holding virtual court through Zoom has allowed me to keep my court open and working during the pandemic. I have conducted numerous pleas and hearings of all kinds, including a two-day hearing with a participant on death row,” said Westfall. “The lawyers on both sides and the defendants and witnesses have adjusted to Zoom court with remarkable flexibility. I almost never have to tell anyone to unmute themselves anymore!”

“While court proceedings across the country have been delayed or postponed because of the pandemic, the Texas judiciary’s use of Zoom has allowed our court to continue to hear cases in a timely fashion and to address the needs of our children and families,” said Villalon.

To satisfy open court constitutional provisions, judges stream the proceedings online via YouTube. A listing of court YouTube channels can be found at <http://streams.txcourts.gov>.

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