

Dear members of the Mercer County Bar Association, We are heading into the second month of social distancing that has closed the Mercer County courthouses and seen the Mercer Vicinage judges and staff working remotely. We at the judiciary are committed to continuing to handle as many matters as possible while protecting the health and well-being of our judges and staff as well as the attorneys and litigants who appear before us. While jury trials are suspended, our judges are continuing to conduct detention and CJP hearings remotely, are hearing oral arguments for motions and orders to show cause virtually, and are conducting large numbers of case management conferences by telephone or video conference. Some docket types are more limited than others, but we are striving daily to hear as many kinds of cases as possible under these challenging circumstances. The family division has started hearing domestic violence restraining order cases with consent of both sides, emergent matters are being heard and decided on a daily basis in all divisions, and civil commitment hearings have resumed. Many more court events are taking place across all of the divisions in an effort to continue to serve you and the public despite the need for remote proceedings.

Our presiding judges and I are committed to keeping the bar association informed about all local and statewide AOC initiatives. We are forwarding notices affecting the practice of law to your Executive Director and President and our presiding judges have been in constant contact with the Association's representatives for their various divisions. Starting this week, the Mercer Presiding Judges, assisted by division judges and staff, will be conducting live bench/bar meetings to update members on what is happening at the courts and to take questions from members. The Bar Association is facilitating many of these efforts. We are also open to suggestions from the bar that we can consider implementing in our current virtual format.

The Administrative Office of the Courts is also committed to increasing the number and kinds of both virtual filing and processing platforms and legal proceedings that can be conducted remotely. They have expanded electronic filing systems that, while not the equivalent of eCourts systems, nonetheless allow for electronic filing across many additional dockets. We urge you to familiarize yourselves with these expanded opportunities and to utilize them to serve your clients. The Bar Association administration and leadership have been important partners with the courts in circulating updates explaining the judiciary's efforts to support the practice of law in these unprecedented times. We thank them for their efforts and look forward to continued excellent communication between bench and bar. After all, that has always been the "Mercer way."

It is my sincerest hope that you and your families stay well. We will weather this storm together. Be assured of my continued support for you personally and professionally. All of us are longing to get back to "normal," but no one knows when that will be or what that will look like. Until then, know that we will continue to serve you and the public to the best of our abilities.

Mary C. Jacobson, A.J.S.C.

April 21, 2020