

**MEDINA COUNTY COURT OF COMMON PLEAS
DOMESTIC RELATIONS DIVISION
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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SUBJECT: The efforts that Judge Mary Kovack of the Medina County Court of Common Pleas, Domestic Relations Division has taken in order to meet the challenges of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The Medina County Domestic Relations Court has been ahead of the curve in protecting the safety of the public and court staff while addressing the needs of those who need Court services.

The Domestic Relations Court became one of the first courts both in Medina County and in the Northeastern Ohio region to take steps to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. At that time, Judge Kovack furloughed all inmates then-incarcerated in the Medina County Jail pursuant to an order issued by the Medina Domestic Relations Court. Additionally, Judge Kovack ordered a stay on the execution of any outstanding warrants issued by the Medina Domestic Relations Court. Finally, she ordered that any individual who was arrested or detained pursuant to a warrant from the Medina Domestic Relations Court, notwithstanding the stay of execution order, should be immediately released on a personal recognizance bond. The efforts had the immediate effect of limiting the exposure of individuals to the court and other litigants, law enforcement, and limited the incarceration of individuals, which is proving to be an especially dangerous environment for the spread of COVID-19 to both other inmates and jail staff.

Around the same time, the Judge also began to engage the county and other agencies, including the Medina County Health Department, in discussions related to planning, establishing guidelines for quarantine and isolation, plans for exposure of a court or court employees and other issues directly related to the safety and security of employees, litigants, and the public at large, as the COVID-19 spreads throughout the region and our community. During those meetings the Court, and others, successfully argued for the assignment of fulltime maintenance staff to the courthouse so that the public areas can be appropriately cleaned and sanitized consistently, thoroughly and regularly throughout the workday.

Additionally, the Judge instituted procedural modifications in order to implement social distancing and limit face-to-face contact, so as to protect court employees, the public, and the

attorneys. The Court closed its public window and directed all public traffic to the bailiff's desk in the Domestic Relations Court's lobby. This limited congestion in the hallways and allowed individuals to maintain at least minimum social distancing, and often greater than the six (6) feet provided for by the Ohio Department of Health. The Court marked an area with bright white tape to establish an appropriate distance between the employee working at the desk to respond to the public's questions and sign individuals in. Also available are gloves, individually packaged alcohol wipes and masks.

The undersigned judge also divided court staff into multiple shifts, which allows the Medina Domestic Relations Court to continue functioning while allowing staff to maintain appropriate social distance at work. By limiting the amount of time spent "on-site" at the courthouse, the undersigned judge has taken appropriate steps to limit potential exposure to COVID-19.

This is an evolving situation for everyone, including the Court. The undersigned judge initially moved nearly all hearings to begin with a telephone conference with the Court. This allows the Court to adequately assess the needs of the parties and to proceed accordingly, all while accommodating the safety of the litigants, attorneys, and court staff. Judge implemented this change in order to provide greater stability and regularity moving forward, because the current COVID-19 health crisis may ultimately be measured in terms of months rather than days and weeks.

Additionally, with the assistance of an Ohio Supreme Court technology grant, the Court will implement a video conferencing system so nearly all in-person hearings will be conducted virtually, without the need for the public or attorneys to come to the Courthouse. The system selected by the Court is user friendly and will ensure each and every litigant has an equal opportunity to be heard, and access to justice is available to every person, not just those with a background and resources give them access to advanced technologies. The system is expected to be in place by Friday, April 17, 2020 and effective Monday, April 20, 2020 will replace all in person hearings except those who walk in seeking emergency relief or domestic violence civil protection orders.

The Court is also accepting faxed filings. The Court has had so many phone calls regarding problems with child exchanges and visitation in light of every change or new order from the Department of Health that we have created an informal emergency mediation process that allows the Court to schedule expedited teleconferences with the Court's mediator. Notably, the Judge made the difficult decision to close the Court's Supervised Parenting Time and Exchange Center. The Judge also suspended all parenting education classes. Thanks to technology, the Parenting Time Center is beginning supervised video visits so children can have monitored remote visits with parents.

The Judge has taken many steps to stop the spread of COVID-19. The undersigned judge is concerned with the safety and the well-being of others, and is both cognizant and mindful of others' fears. As a domestic relations judge, Judge Kovack is acutely aware of domestic violence concerns, and protecting the best interests of minor children. So, too are other things brought on by COVID-19, which require Judge Kovack's attention, irrespective of the type or category of the cases. For example, a health care worker desperate to terminate his or marriage to get his/her

affairs in order in case the worst possible case scenario; the strain on children who have an ill parent or a parent who will not allow the child to see the other parent because of the Governor's orders, or just plain fear; child/spousal support and emergency orders regarding loss of job and the resulting economic impact, such access to food, health insurance, loss of housing, unpaid mortgages, unpaid rent all necessarily involve a person's health, safety, housing, or to prevent some other serious harm. When deciding parenting time issues, the court must consider the minor child's best interest, which necessarily involves the child's health, safety, housing or the prevention of harm. This is why the Court is working hard to do case-by-case assessments.

According to Judge Kovack, “It is important to balance public safety with the ability of the Court to assist families who are facing even more challenges now during this pandemic than ever before.”