

Berrien County Trial Court

Mabel Johnson Mayfield, Chief Judge ~ Carrie Smietanka-Haney, Administrator
Courthouse – 811 Port Street, St. Joseph, MI 49085
(269) 983-7111; FAX (269) 982-1567
www.berriencounty.org

PRESS RELEASE

Berrien County Trial Court Return to Phase Three

March 4, 2021

In compliance with the Michigan Supreme Court's Administrative Orders 2020-14 and 2020-19, the Berrien County Trial Court has been following the phased re-opening plan found in the MSC's Return to Full Capacity plan. The Trial Court has been in Phase 2 since Monday February 1st with a very limited set of hearings held in-person. Most hearings have continued to be conducted using remote video technology through Zoom. Staff have returned to the building and have been and will continue to be available to serve the public by phone, e-mail, or mail.

Effective Monday March 8, the Berrien County Trial Court will move to Phase 3 of re-opening operations. While we will continue to leverage Zoom for remote court proceedings, some parties will be allowed access to additional in-person proceedings. The courthouse buildings will not be open to the general public at this time and entrance to the building will only be allowed for parties or those under subpoena. Those with general questions will be turned away and provided with the means of contacting the court to handle their business in another fashion. Individuals with business with non-court departments housed in the courthouse facilities (i.e. the County Clerk, Prosecutor's Office, Information Systems, Michigan Department of Corrections) will be served by appointment only.

Additional changes include the following:

The Self-Help Legal Resource Center will be open for appointments only. If you require the assistance of the self-help center, please contact them at ext. 8790 or LRC@berriencounty.org.

The court will allow individuals into the courthouse to file paperwork with the court on a walk-in basis. Individuals who come to the court to file will be allowed to do so, but are asked not to linger in other areas of the courthouse. For filers with business in probate court, due to the length of time it can take to initiate a filing you may call the probate department at ext. 8365 to make an appointment to file your paperwork in person. You are not required to have an appointment, however please understand persons with an appointment have priority for assistance and you may have to wait until all priority appointments are completed. Those coming to the court for filing purposes only will be asked to leave their name and contact information for possible contact tracing. Filers are

still encouraged to submit filings via the court's drop boxes or through mail when at all possible.

For those individuals with a pending court case requiring that their fingerprints be taken, the court is also offering this by appointment only. Those requesting to schedule a fingerprint appointment should do so primarily through the police department who issued their citation. If unable to schedule with the police department, individuals can contact the court to schedule an appointment at either ext. 8749 or by e-mail at szabel@berriencounty.org.

All in-person court proceedings continue to be for parties only to limit exposure of the COVID-19 virus. Hearings are available to the public as they have been through the court video request process at the court's website (address listed below) and continue to be free of charge. Jury trials will continue to be livestreamed to the court's YouTube page at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCIK6TOjuFC4YZbrzbqrVdPw?view_as=subscriber.

All individuals coming into the buildings will be required to complete a health screening prior to being admitted. All members of the public will be required to wear a face covering at all times while in the courthouse facilities. If any individual does not pass the health screening or is unwilling to wear a face covering, that individual will be turned away and given means to contact the court to reschedule their appearance.

At the St. Joseph courthouse, the Trial Court will be leveraging additional technology to check-in members of the public for their hearing. A text messaging system will be utilized to inform the public of when their case is being called, so individuals are encouraged to bring their cellular devices for ease of communication. Note that cell phones and other electronic devices are now allowed into courthouse facilities effective May 1, 2020 per MCR 8.115, but no recording or photography is allowed and all devices must be silenced upon entry into the buildings. While the Niles courthouse location will not be using a text messaging system for entrance at this time, attendees are still able to bring their cellular devices to the building under the same rules. Additional information regarding the use of cellular devices is posted at each public entrance and outside of each courtroom.

The public is encouraged to visit the Trial Court's website at www.berriencounty.org/1058/Trial-Court for additional information, including how to contact each division of the court. Frequently asked questions are available on-line as well as full copies of all administrative orders (including LAO 2021-02 Plan to Return to Full Capacity – Phase Three Forward).