



Press Release

Alaska Court System, 824 W. 4th Avenue, Anchorage, AK 99501

Contacts: Nancy Meade, General Counsel, nmeade@akcourts.us

Jury Trials Suspended through November 2, 2020, by Special Order of the Chief Justice

Anchorage, Alaska, August 6, 2020

On Thursday, Chief Justice Bolger issued [Special Order 8183](#) extending the suspension of in-person criminal and civil jury trials until November 2, 2020.

The order recognizes that holding in-person jury trials at the current time could be detrimental to the health and safety of Alaskans because of rising COVID-19 case counts and increasing community spread. The current circumstances of the pandemic make it challenging to have jurors and all necessary trial participants gather in indoor settings for in-person jury trials. Although jury trials play a critical role in our justice system, Alaskans must be safe when fulfilling their civic duty as jurors and participating in a trial. The order notes that on approximately September 18, the chief justice will review whether to continue the suspension beyond November 2.

Although the order generally suspends all jury trials, it also authorizes the presiding judges of Alaska's four judicial districts to allow an in-person jury trial to proceed in "exceptional circumstances." Any in-person jury trials will be conducted with strict adherence to CDC recommendations and state and local health mandates. In addition, the chief justice may allow jury trials to proceed as pilot projects to test health and safety procedures; these would allow the court to make sure that jurors can serve effectively and safely before additional jury trials take place. For example, the chief justice has already authorized civil presumptive death trials, which are generally limited in time and use six jurors, to be held by videoconference.

The Chief Justice's order does not impact grand jury proceedings, and does not delay any proceedings other than jury trials. Criminal hearings that can be conducted by phone or video will continue to take place, including arraignments, bail hearings, change of plea hearings, sentencing, and bench trials decided by a judge without a jury. The vast majority of criminal cases are resolved without a jury trial typically through negotiations between the prosecutor and the defendant. In civil matters such as family law cases, domestic violence cases, and child in need of aid cases, hearings and non-jury trials continue to take place via telephone and/or video conference to protect the parties and court staff.

While delaying in-person jury trials will have an impact on the justice system, it is a necessary step for protecting Alaskans' health and safety.

###