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Criminal trials in N.J. can resume this week while jury selection will stay partially remote

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New Jersey can resume criminal trials on Tuesday, more than a year after juries were first suspended statewide because of the coronavirus.

Priority will be given to cases where the people charged are awaiting trial in jail, according to an order from the state Supreme Court. Civil jury trials will largely stay remote for now, as well as the initial phase of jury selection.

Civil cases may be face-to-face if the person who initiated the trial “has a limited life expectancy,” according to the order.

The shift comes as coronavirus deaths drop to the single digits and hospitalizations dip to their lowest number since the pandemic’s early days, although this isn’t the first attempt to revive in-person juries.

Criminal trials briefly resumed last fall during another drop in infections, but only six statewide made it to a verdict, according to court spokeswoman MaryAnn Spoto.

Thousands of criminal cases have been on hold in recent months.

Lawyers have raised concerns that people who had not been convicted were nonetheless forced to risk infection behind bars while awaiting trial, and justices did rule earlier this year that some should be released. Tens of thousands of eviction cases have also piled up, and officials have said the state is simultaneously facing a shortage of judges.

A lot of work has continued virtually over the past year, and Superior Courts still made decisions concerning more than 259,000 motions during the pandemic, according to state records.

Some court business will stay remote indefinitely to save time and money, officials said.

That includes municipal court hearings for less-serious charges, landlord and tenant meetings, small-claim trials and child support hearings.

Potential jurors for all trials will first be screened remotely. A smartphone is enough to answer questions, officials said.

Candidates who don’t have computers or an internet connection can ask court officials for help.

Potential jurors for criminal cases will eventually be questioned face-to-face.

All courthouse services should generally resume by Aug. 2, acting Administrative Director of the Courts Glenn Grant wrote earlier this month.