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## **N.J. suspends new jury trials, federal courts restrict access amid coronavirus fears**

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New Jersey is suspending all new jury trials indefinitely, effective immediately, as the coronavirus pandemic continues to spread across the state.

Jury trials already underway will continue, and grand juries will still hear cases, according to a Thursday order by state Supreme Court Chief Justice Stuart Rabner.

“While jury trials are a critical component of our justice system, this extraordinary step is necessary to protect the health and safety of the community,” Rabner said in a statement.

“At the same time, we will make every effort to keep our court system running in the face of this health crisis,” he said.

Also on Thursday, the federal courts issued new restrictions about who is allowed in the courthouse.

Gov. Phil Murphy said he was in “full support of the Judiciary’s response to this public health emergency.”

It was not immediately clear how many trials this will affect in Superior courts throughout the state’s 21 counties.

Although Rabner had previously stopped some work trips, courts were operating normally earlier in the day.

Some potential jurors in Essex County had expressed concern Thursday about being packed into waiting areas with hundreds of other people.

“This is a perfect environment for spreading the virus throughout the community,” Dan Hurley, 62, of Montclair, told NJ Advance Media earlier.

### **State court changes**

Motions and hearings in state courts will be conducted remotely by phone and video. That will keep the system from completely shutting down, said Peter Verniero, a former justice of the New Jersey Supreme Court and state attorney general.

“This is unprecedented, but it’s not surprising,” Verniero said about the suspension. “We have to be patient and be tolerant of delays as much as we can.”

The suspension especially affects people waiting in jail, said Craig Hubert, a lawyer with the Szaferman, Lakind, Blumstein and Blader firm in Lawrenceville.

The right to a speedy trial is guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution, he said. "This may not bring things to a screeching halt, but this could lead to a massive slowdown," Hubert added.

Courts were ordered to stagger landlord and tenant cases, as well as small claims and other non-jury work, to keep large numbers of people from gathering. The governor previously asked that events with more than 250 people be cancelled.

The chief justice also suspended all out-of-state work travel for staff. Tours and some training were cancelled, while committee meetings and conferences will be moved to video.

### **Federal court changes**

While the state is halting juror service, the District of New Jersey federal court system announced that jury trials will continue.

The courts are "still functioning in order to perform our constitutional duties of serving the public," Chief U.S. District Judge Freda L. Wolfson wrote in a letter Thursday. Residents summoned to jury duty in federal court must have a doctor's note in order to be excused.

"A general statement that you do not wish to appear because of COVID-19 will not suffice," Wolfson wrote.

However, the federal court system did announce new restrictions on who can enter federal courthouses as the threat of coronavirus grows. Those buildings are located in Newark, Trenton and Camden.

The people barred from entering any of the federal courthouses include:

- Anyone who has been diagnosed with COVID-19 or had contact with someone who has been diagnosed.
- Anyone who has been asked to self-quarantine by any doctor, hospital or health agency.
- Anyone who has traveled to China, South Korea, Japan, Italy or Iran.
- Anyone who resides or has had close contact with someone who has been asked to self-quarantine or visited those five countries within the last 14 days.
- The court urged anyone unable to keep a court appointment because of the restrictions to contact their attorney or a court office.

The restrictions will remain in place until it's safe to remove them, the public notice said.

Twenty-nine people have tested positive for the virus in the state, and one has died. Gov. Phil Murphy has declared a state of emergency, and President Donald Trump suspended most travel from Europe Wednesday.