

NEWS RELEASE

Ilene Shapiro – Summit County Executive
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE



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Executive Shapiro, Common Pleas Court General Division, and Sheriff Fatheree launch Virtual Courtroom

SUMMIT COUNTY, OHIO—Summit County Executive Ilene Shapiro, Summit County Common Pleas Court General Division, and Sheriff Kandy Fatheree officially launched the Virtual Courtroom project last week. Borne out of necessity during the COVID-19 pandemic, the project spurred a \$12 million investment to propel Summit County’s criminal justice system forward with efficient, secure technology. The Virtual Courtroom now allows court staff to hold criminal call days and other proceedings completely remote, saving time, money and increasing safety for deputies, court staff, inmates and all other parties involved.

“The pandemic challenged us to be adaptable, and this recognition helped us discover different avenues to best serve our residents,” said Executive Shapiro. “Between attorneys, inmates and their families, and our court and jail staff, so many people are affected by the criminal justice system. Investing in technology that allows us to be safer and more efficient just makes sense.”

Before the pandemic, inmates were transported from the jail to the court for each call day. When the pandemic began, CCTV was used to videoconference from the jail. Sound quality was not ideal, judges were only able to see one individual at a time, and travel time across the jail increased security risks. All ten Common Pleas General Division judges shared just two kiosks at the jail, while four of ten courtrooms had zero technology capability.

“The COVID pandemic forced us to quickly reevaluate how we were doing things at the jail,” said Sheriff Fatheree. “The initial CCTV system we developed served its purpose at the time, but the updates and investments we have made since then have truly moved us into the future. The Virtual Courtroom will make court proceedings faster and more efficient. It will also dramatically reduce the number of inmate transports, which improves the safety of my deputies, results in a significant savings to Summit County residents, and is better for the environment.”

Fast forward to the new upgrades ushered in by the Virtual Courtroom project. The virtual courtroom utilizes brand-new, custom scheduling software that integrates with both the court and jail management system. Instead of two kiosks, there are now twenty-three rooms throughout the jail equipped to use this

technology in conjunction with all ten Common Pleas General Division courtrooms. Each housing unit hosts two to four kiosks, reducing transportation time and increasing security. Phones accompany each kiosk to easily allow inmates to speak with their attorney. Attorneys call a central number to reach their client via automated prompts or are directed by a technology bailiff. The increase in kiosks allows judges to skip to other inmates during the proceedings rather than wait for an inmate's call to be completed, saving time.

"The Common Pleas General Division judges are excited to be at the forefront of these new technology upgrades. Like all public institutions, we are always looking to enhance our operations and seek solutions that better serve those interacting with the criminal justice system," said Administrative Judge Kathryn Michael. "We appreciate the financial investment the County Executive has made in the Virtual Courtroom and look forward to continued partnership with her office and Sheriff Fatheree to make future advancements."

The Executive's Office Public Safety staff facilitated the project from the genesis of the new software system to its launch. Collaborating with IT teams at the court and jail, the software was tested by adding one judge's call day at a time.

To run the operation, the Common Pleas Court General Division has hired eight new, full-time staff members, including seven technology bailiffs and a supervisor, stationed at the jail. Any necessary paperwork for inmates can be printed out by the technology bailiff staff and immediately sent back to the court. Ensuring inmates have all necessary paperwork before the proceeding keeps inmates informed on their case and saves time by alleviating the need for the judge to read through each piece of paper. However, not all proceedings are heard virtually. Some hearings, including trials, are still heard in person.

The project also included the expansion of Summit Connects, linking the criminal justice system to Fairlawn Gig. The Common Pleas Court General Division and Summit County Jail are now equipped with secure, high-speed internet.

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