



Virtual Courtroom Standards and Guidelines

Adapted, with gratitude, from the Michigan Trial Courts' State Court Administrative Office *Virtual Courtroom Standards and Guidelines* April 2020

Guidance from Michigan State Courts

The guidance provided here is designed to ensure courts conducting remote proceedings do so based on standards, guidelines, and best practices.

The Michigan Virtual Courtroom Task Force has identified current best practices from colleagues around the state. These best practices are not the only way to meet a standard, but they are examples of what is working and are offered to assist each court and judicial officer to develop their own procedures. The [Michigan Trial Court Standards for Courtroom Technology](#) provides guidance on the requirements to support audio and video recording and guidance on the types of court proceedings authorized to use videoconferencing and the authorized uses for videoconferencing. The Michigan Judicial Institute (MJl) has developed resources to assist courts in setting up and conducting a remote proceeding including a [checklist](#) and a [bench card](#) for judges.

A. Virtual Hearings

1. Standard

At the start of each hearing in Michigan, the court must verify with each participant that they are able to proceed and are aware of the procedure for participation, including the time and method of participating. Criminal defendants have a right to be present for each critical stage of a criminal proceeding, and all procedures associated with remote hearings must be consistent with a party's Constitutional rights. A defendant may waive the right to be physically present for a hearing and appear by video. Victims have a Constitutional and statutory right to be present.

Guidelines

The court should address, on the record, that the parties are waiving any right they may have to be present in the courtroom for the proceeding. In addition, if there is a victim involved, the court must ensure that the victim's right to be present is addressed on the record.

MI Best Practices

Address parties on the record to verify that they are waiving their right to be present in the courtroom for the proceedings. In addition, if there is a victim involved, the court should ensure that the victim's rights are addressed on the record. See [The Van Buren Circuit Court \(C36\)](#).

2. Standard

Proceedings conducted via videoconferencing technology must be recorded by the court, except for those hearings that are not required to be recorded, such as small claims



proceedings or informal traffic hearings. The required recording must be sufficient to produce a verbatim written transcript as if the hearing were held in person in the courtroom.

For purposes of generating a transcript, courts may use the recording of a remote proceeding generated using Zoom or another remote meeting service provider.

Guidelines

When using videoconferencing technology or telephonic equipment, best practice is for the system to feed directly into the court’s recording system. When the court calls into the Zoom virtual courtroom using Polycom, the courtroom’s recording system will record the proceeding in the same way as it would for making a point-to-point Polycom call. Where a direct feed into the recording system is not possible due to equipment limitations, a microphone should be placed near the speaker.

Alternatively, courts that use Justice AV Solutions (JAVS) may purchase Notewise software to record computer- based conference calls. Notewise is a digital recording application that allows direct recording of any conference calls through Zoom, GoToMeeting, and other software. Notewise allows operators to listen to monitoring streams and make time-stamped notes, either manually or through quick keys.⁶ Courts using other digital recording systems are encouraged to explore similar options for those programs.

MI Best Practices

Use the recording feature in Zoom to create a record of proceedings. Utilize the audio transcript feature in Zoom to create a log for future transcribing. See [Macomb County Circuit Court \(C16\)](#).

3. Standard

When using Zoom, participants should not have their phone number displayed on the screen. When a participant calls in, the default setting in Zoom is for the phone number to be displayed on the screen. The court should change the phone number to the participant’s name. Directions for doing this are found [here](#).

MI Best Practices

Change a participant's phone number to their name after they sign in and are in the waiting room. See [The Oakland County Circuit Court \(C06\)](#).

4. Standard

When hosting hearings, the court should enable the “Waiting Room” function in Zoom. The “Waiting Room” allows the host to control who is admitted to the hearing and prevent participation by individuals who are not litigants in that case. This allows the court to keep the courtroom secure while still allowing the public to view proceedings via YouTube.

MI Best Practice

Use the “Waiting Room” function available within Zoom. See [The 41B District Court in Clinton Township \(Macomb County\)](#)

5. **Standard**

Courts should post their daily dockets (on the court’s website, if available) and indicate on the docket which hearings are being held virtually.⁷ Instructions on how to access virtual hearings should also be provided. To avoid disruption and keep the virtual courtroom secure, the Zoom Meeting ID(s) should not be provided to the public or press; nonlitigants should only have access to the YouTube channel where the proceeding is live streamed.

MI Best Practices

Displays the court’s daily docket/court calendar on its website and live streams its hearings. See [The Van Buren Circuit Court \(C36\)](#).

B. Attorney/Client Communication

1. **Standard**

The court must provide a method to enable confidential communication between a party and the party’s counsel.

Guidelines

In Zoom, courts can allow an attorney to meet with their client in a “breakout room.” “Breakout rooms” will not be audio or video recorded under certain circumstances. If the meeting is being cloud recorded (recommended), it will only record the main room, regardless of what room the meeting host is in. If local recording is being used (not recommended), it will record the room the participant who is recording is in. The host can set a predetermined amount of time and bring them back into the Zoom Meeting. If the host does not want to put a time constraint on the “breakout room,” the host can send a time warning to the breakout room participants to notify them that they should wrap up. If selected as a “breakout room” option, participants in the “breakout room” can rejoin the hearing when they are done meeting.

MI Best Practices

Use the “breakout” room to accommodate attorneys who need to confidentially meet with a client. See [Oakland County Circuit Court \(C06\)](#).

C. Public and Press Access

1. **Standard**

Access to proceedings must be provided to the public either during the proceeding or immediately after via access to a video recording of the proceeding, unless the proceeding is closed or access would otherwise be limited by statute or rule.

Guidelines

The court should create a YouTube account (live streaming channel). The court can work with its local court website administrator to post a link to the YouTube channel.

Information about public availability of court proceedings via live streaming must be accessible to the public and press. This can be accomplished by posting the information on the court’s website. If the court does not have a website, it is the court’s responsibility to develop another method to effectively communicate the availability of court proceedings. Further information about setting up and enabling a YouTube account can be found [here](#).

YouTube automatically records and stores content that is streamed on a channel per its licensing agreements. A YouTube recording is not the official record of the court and need not be maintained on the court’s YouTube Channel. Each court is urged to review YouTube’s Terms of Service [here](#), especially the possible uses of content recorded to YouTube, to decide whether recordings should be maintained there.

MI Best Practices

YouTube should be used to live stream court proceedings. See [The 41B District Court in Clinton Township \(Macomb County\)](#) and their live stream website [here](#).

D. Making a Clear Record

1. Standard

Courts shall make a verbatim record of each proceeding.

Guidelines

These guidelines are intended to provide some instructions on how to ensure that the recording is clear and can be used to accurately develop a transcript. Also see section A2 for standards and guidelines on using Zoom to record proceedings.

Use Gallery View

When multiple people talk at once, the Zoom system may have difficulty determining which participant is speaking because the default function is to shift the screen to the person speaking. Using the “gallery view” will prevent the program from doing so, and it will allow the court to see all of the participants and the court reporter/recorder to know who was speaking. Click [here](#) to learn more about “gallery view.”

Advise Parties to Speak Slowly and to Wait Until Prompted

Judges and court staff must be vigilant in ensuring quality recording so an accurate transcript can be prepared. Because of a few second time delay when participating via telephone or video conferencing, parties may be more likely to overlap when talking. Judges or court staff should frequently remind parties to talk slowly and to not interrupt. If overlap occurs, courts should ask parties to repeat what they said and encourage parties to only speak when they have been prompted to do so, unless there is an objection or some other reason to speak out of turn. At a minimum, parties appearing telephonically should be instructed to identify themselves each time they speak.

Courts Must Act as Zoom Host to Control Meetings

Zoom has a number of features that can control who may enter a virtual hearing and who may speak during it. The host of the proceeding has the ability to mute or unmute all participants in the virtual courtroom; it requires that the host be logged into Zoom to create that control. Zoom also allows the designation of a co-host; judges can be the host and a staff member, either a clerk or recorder/operator, can be the co-host and manage participants. The host can also engage a feature that mutes participants upon entry into the virtual courtroom. Judges should advise participants that they are using that feature. Participants who want to speak may “raise their hand;” the host can then unmute them so they can speak. The judge is responsible for maintaining order and decorum just as they do in the physical courtroom. For more information on hosting a meeting, click [here](#).

Allow or Limit Chat Functionality

The court, through the host (or co-host), can allow the host and participants to “chat” with everyone, with only the host, with everyone publicly or privately, or with no one. The chat function allows participants to type text (comments) during the proceeding. It is up to the court to allow or limit the function. For example, a private chat between an attorney and client may be desirable; however, a chat between the court and one attorney could allow for ex parte communication or comments to be made that are not included in the official record. If a court elects to enable the chat feature, public chats (not private chats) may be saved. When saving the chat, the court can save any chat messages that the host received privately or those chat messages that were sent to “everyone.” Messages sent privately between participants, not including the host, cannot be saved by the host. For more information on the chat functionality, click [here](#).

Judges should use caution when using the chat feature within Zoom to ensure there is no ex parte communication between the judge and one party.

Remove Disruptive Participants

Zoom allows a host to remove a participant if needed. If the court is using the “waiting room” feature, a participant can be returned to the “waiting room.” That participant cannot rejoin the meeting on their own and can only be readmitted by the court host. To learn more about the “waiting room” functionality, click [here](#). Also, see section A4 for further information regarding utilizing this function.

Put a Participant on Hold

A host can temporarily remove a participant from the virtual courtroom, while the rest of the participants continue the meeting. When one or more participants are put on hold, the attendees’ video and audio connections will be disabled. This might be used when the judge wants to speak to the attorneys (without a witness hearing) or address an issue with only court personnel. For more information on putting participants on hold, click [here](#).

Play Sound when a Participant Enters or Leaves a Meeting

A host can configure settings to play a sound when someone enters or leaves a proceeding. This will help the court and the recorders and operators track the participants in the hearing. Information about these settings can be located [here](#).

Troubleshoot an Audio Echo in a Meeting

There are three causes of an audio echo, or feedback, during a Zoom meeting:

- 1) The participant called in by phone and is using his or her computer's audio at the same time;
- 2) There are participants with computer or telephone speakers that are too close together; or
- 3) There are multiple computers with active audio in the same conference room.

In each instance, the feedback can be eliminated if there is only one audio source. Zoom has [step-by-step instructions](#) on its website about how to address this issue

2. Standard

Numerous security incidents have occurred nationwide involving the use of video and teleconferencing platforms. The following steps will help mitigate such hijacking:

- Do not make Zoom meetings open to the public. In Zoom, use the "waiting room" feature and control the admittance of guests.
- For a separate private meeting, use the scheduling options in Zoom to create a meeting for a specific time, and with a unique Meeting ID that is shared only with the invited participants.
- Do not share any Meeting ID on an unrestricted, publicly-available social media post. Only provide the Meeting ID and password(s) directly to specific litigants.
- Manage screen sharing options by limiting screen sharing to "Host Only."

MI Best Practices

[The 41B District Court in Clinton Township \(Macomb County\)](#) is using the "Waiting Room" function available within Zoom to ensure that the correct participants are in the hearing.

E. Logging Requirements

1. Standard

Videoconferencing a proceeding must allow for the person conducting or administering the proceeding to create a recording sufficient to enable a transcript to be produced subsequent to the hearing. Comply with current logging standards to facilitate accurate transcript preparation.

Guidelines

To assist in complying with logging standards, the judge or hearing officer should establish and adhere to certain verbal practices, including:

- Stating the case number and title;
- Indicating the start and end time of the hearing;

- Requiring each participant to state and spell their name;
- Reminding all participants to speak slowly, clearly, and one at a time.

Zoom has a private messaging “chat” feature that may be used to create the log. Any content created using the “chat feature” is saved along with the audio/video when it is being recorded. The chat file in Zoom provides a time- stamped log of the chat messages, showing who the message was from and the time it was sent. The person in charge of recording may create the log by typing notes into the “chat” feature, including the name of the court, name of the judge, case number, case name, parties present, witnesses called, and any other essential notations during the hearing. When a transcriber is producing a transcript from one of these recordings, looking at the play timeline at the bottom of the screen will allow him or her to obtain the time of any witnesses speaking and assist in the production of an accurate transcript.

Courts may also contract with freelance CSRs, CERs, and CEOs for recording purposes. If the court uses a CSR to stenographically record the hearing as a Zoom participant, there is no need to log the proceeding or record the proceeding separately because the stenographer’s recording and notes are the official recording from which the transcript is prepared. It is recommended that the court maintains a backup recording of a CSR’s record of the proceeding. The CSR stenographically recording a proceeding has the same responsibilities to interrupt and clarify as if all participants were physically present in a courtroom.

The host of the meeting should monitor the hearing to ensure that the sound is functioning, speaking is clearly heard, and the video is recording. This will ensure that the record is captured appropriately and thoroughly for future transcription. Judges should consider allowing staff to host or co-host each hearing to facilitate this responsibility.

F. Exhibits

1. **Standard**

Materials that are intended to be used as evidence at or during a trial shall not be filed with the clerk of the court, but shall be submitted to the judge for introduction into evidence as exhibits.

Guidelines

Courts can allow exhibits to be submitted to the court via e-mail to the proceeding so they can be marked and logged before the hearing. Courts can also consider other available technologies to accomplish this, such as Dropbox or WeTransfer.

G. Providing Zoom Meeting Information to Parties

1. **Standard**

The court shall provide adequate notice to the parties and ensure that the parties are able to participate remotely.

Guidelines

The court can provide the Zoom hearing information to parties in the following ways:

- a. Court staff may phone the parties in advance and obtain the e-mail address to which the

- meeting code/invitation and any password can be sent;
- b. If the party does not have e-mail or the ability to join by video, provide the telephone number to join the meeting and the meeting code so that they can participate via phone; or
 - c. The court may design a new document that lists the court proceeding, court date, time of hearing, and the Zoom Meeting ID.

MI Best Practices

[The 41B District Court in Clinton Township \(Macomb County\)](#) e-mails participants specific instructions on how to access Zoom, along with the Zoom Meeting ID.

[The Kent County Probate Court \(P41\)](#) uses the SCAO notice of hearing form and modifies it to add the Zoom Meeting ID and information about accessing Zoom.

H. Business Processes in Support of Virtual Courtroom

1. Standard

Courts must be able to support their fundamental business processes when establishing a virtual courtroom. This includes the ability to operate as if the court was using its traditional brick and mortar courthouse. The court needs to account for electronically filing documents, electronically signing orders to document the court's hearings, and maintaining the decorum of the court. Each court will have slightly different business processes to account for local differences.

Guidelines

Electronic filing

If in-person filing of court pleadings is limited due to the state of emergency, look for or consider administrative orders for court pleadings to continue to be accepted for filing by other means, such as U.S. mail, e-Filing, e-mail, or facsimile.

MI Best Practices

[Livingston County Circuit Court \(C44\)](#) is allowing PPO documents to be filed via e-mail from a local domestic violence shelter.

Electronic signatures

Electronic signatures on documents may be statutorily permitted. While it may seem more efficient to allow staff to stamp the judge's signature on orders that were entered on the record or could be approved in the judge's absence, it might also be prohibited and only the judge should be affixing his or her signature to documents.

Clerks may be prohibited from affixing a judge's signature to a document unless the judge signed the original document and the clerk is affixing the signature to a duplicate copy.

Maintaining the Decorum of the Court

Despite not being physically in the courtroom, the court should continue to remind participants of the following:

- a. The proceeding is live. Anything said during the proceeding may be overheard by all of those observing.

- b. The proceedings are being recorded. Everything said will be captured and made part of the record just as in a physical courtroom.
- c. Courtroom decorum rules still apply. Those participating should continue to operate as if they were inside the courthouse. Standards, including decorum, demeanor, and dress code, still apply.
- d. Staff participating in virtual proceedings should have a professional background. Courts are encouraged to use pictures of their courtroom as the background. If the court does not have one available, SCAO can provide one. Information on how to set up a virtual background for the court can be found [here](#).

MI Best Practices

[The Van Buren Circuit Court \(C36\)](#) provides participants with instructions on how to join a virtual court proceeding. The instructions remind participants that the “call is a court proceeding and an extension of the court.”