



Supreme Court of Illinois

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SUPREME COURT APPROVES FOUR ILLINOIS COUNTIES AS FIRST TO TRY CAMERAS IN TRIAL COURTROOMS

Chief Justice Thomas L. Kilbride announced on Tuesday that the Illinois Supreme Court has approved the application from the 14th Judicial Circuit in northwestern Illinois to allow news media cameras in trial courtrooms in the state for the first time.

Chief Judge Jeffrey W. O'Connor of the 14th Circuit applied to the Supreme Court for approval last week, one day after Chief Justice Kilbride announced that an experimental program was unanimously approved by the seven justices on the Court.

The 14th Circuit is comprised of Henry, Mercer, Rock Island and Whiteside counties.

"Today's Order is a historic one," said Chief Justice Kilbride. "For the first time in state history, citizens not physically present will be able to see and hear proceedings in our trial courts. My colleagues and I announced this change in policy hoping to promote greater openness and accountability. But we must carefully balance the goal of openness with the rights of defendants and parties to have fair trials.

"This pilot project will allow us to test the policy we have put in place and see if it is workable in Illinois, or if any changes need to be made before moving toward a full statewide policy. My colleagues and I are thankful for the 14th Circuit and Chief Judge O'Connor's willingness to serve in this pilot project. We look forward to their results."

In his formal request to the Court for approval, Chief Judge O'Connor noted that the news media in the area are already familiar with broadcasting trial proceedings because Iowa, just across the Mississippi River, has allowed cameras in courtrooms since 1979, and media have aired court coverage in the Quad Cities area, which includes Illinois communities.

"I have already met with some of our media, some of our judges, and others responsible for administering our court system; and we are all willing to do our best to make this work while ensuring the guarantees of a fair trial," said Chief Judge O'Connor. "Being 500 yards away from the Iowa media market in Scott County, our local media is well aware of how to broadcast trial proceedings. I believe it would be a seamless transition and a good pilot."

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Chief Judge O'Connor said he plans to have additional meetings with the media, county sheriffs, prosecutors, public defenders and court administrators to put the pilot project into effect as soon as possible.

The Order approving the 14th Circuit also requires that a judge presiding over a proceeding in any circuit that is approved for the pilot project file a report with the chief judge of the circuit, the Chief Justice and the Supreme Court justice of the district where the judicial circuit is located. The report must be filed within a reasonable time after extended media coverage is completed and is to be confidential for the purposes of assisting the Supreme Court in its evaluation of the experimental program and formulation of policy.

The chief judge of the circuit approved to participate in extended media coverage also is required to file a monthly report with the Chief Justice and the Supreme Court justice of the district where the circuit is located.

Chief Justice Kilbride announced on January 24 the Supreme Court's approval of an experimental program to allow news media cameras and audio in trial courtrooms. The Supreme Court has allowed cameras to broadcast its own oral arguments, and those of the Illinois Appellate Court, since 1983. At that time, however, the Court specifically rejected allowing news cameras during trial proceedings, and the issue made little headway until Chief Justice Kilbride and his colleagues took another look.

The policy approved unanimously by the Court includes some of the same provisions in the Iowa camera rules. The pilot project will be implemented in Illinois on a circuit-by-circuit basis. To participate, the chief judge of a judicial circuit must request approval from the Supreme Court.

Chief Judge O'Connor was the first chief judge of the 23 judicial circuits in the state to make a formal petition.

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