



Supreme Court of Illinois

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SUPREME COURT APPROVES CAMERAS FOR COURTS IN FIVE MORE ILLINOIS COUNTIES

Chief Justice Thomas L. Kilbride of the Illinois Supreme Court and Chief Judge Val Gunnarsson of the 15th Judicial Circuit in northwestern Illinois announced on Wednesday that news cameras will be allowed in trial courts in five additional Illinois counties under a pilot program approved by the Supreme Court earlier this year.

The counties that make up the 15th circuit are Carroll, Jo Daviess, Lee, Ogle and Stephenson. They join Madison County in the Third Judicial Circuit, Kankakee County in the 21st Judicial Circuit and Henry, Mercer, Rock Island and Whiteside counties in the 14th Judicial Circuit where extended media coverage was approved earlier by the Supreme Court.

“Chief Judge Gunnarsson’s application and approval by the Supreme Court to allow cameras in the trial courtrooms in the 15th Circuit bring more geographical diversity to the pilot project for electronic coverage approved earlier this year,” said Chief Justice Kilbride. “The 15th Circuit is a more rural area, and will provide a host of smaller newspaper and radio stations with the opportunity to provide their readers and listeners with picture and audio coverage.”

“As the pilot project goes forward, I am confident that Chief Judge Gunnarsson and all the judges in the 15th Circuit will carefully balance the goals of greater openness and access to the courts while ensuring the constitutional guarantees of a fair trial and a fair proceeding.”

Approval of the 15th Circuit extends the pilot project to the Second Judicial District.

“I am pleased that Chief Judge Gunnarsson and the judges in the 15th Circuit have embraced the pilot project,” said Justice Robert R. Thomas, whose Second Judicial District includes the circuit. “The predominantly rural area also extends to the fringes of the Quad Cities and Rockford areas, where TV audiences could get a video glimpse of how our courtroom processes really work, rather than how they are typified in TV fictional coverage.”

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Chief Judge Gunnarsson said he has been in contact with all the judges in the 15th Circuit and they are committed to the success of the program.

“We are all looking forward to it. This is an outstanding step forward for our local courts,” said Chief Judge Gunnarsson. “We are a little bit different from the areas that have been approved for cameras so far. We are a predominantly rural area, with multiple small and medium print and radio outlets. The needs, concerns, practices and expectations of small and medium-sized media like ours are bound to be different from those of a larger, metropolitan area. Likewise, the issues confronting rural courtrooms and how we might adjust to enhanced media coverage could vary from those of a busier, larger jurisdiction.”

Chief Judge Gunnarsson noted that the circuit has 17 different courtrooms in the five counties that make up the circuit, and that he intends for him and the judges to meet with media throughout the circuit to discuss unique issues posed by the geographical make-up.

“We are promising our best efforts,” he said.

The Supreme Court order approving the 15th Circuit requires that a judge presiding over a proceeding in which cameras or audio are allowed must 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.

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 fellow justices took another look.

The 14th Circuit was the first to be approved for cameras. Chief Judge Jeffrey W. O’Connor of the 14th Judicial Circuit already has implemented a policy and cameras have been allowed in several proceedings there. Chief Judge O’Connor also has granted a request by the media for camera coverage of a trial scheduled for June in Whiteside County for a defendant accused of murder.

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