



# Supreme Court of Appeals State of West Virginia

## News

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### **New Remote Technology Provides Safe Access in Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Cases in Kanawha County**

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. – Kanawha County victims of domestic violence and sexual assault can now access the court system without fear of being in the same room with their assailants through a pilot program launched on Monday by Supreme Court Chief Justice Evan Jenkins.

“It will absolutely save lives,” said Julie Britton Haden, program director of the YWCA Charleston Resolve Family Abuse Program.

Chief Justice Jenkins noted that October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month. About 10,000 petitions for domestic violence protective orders and personal safety orders have been filed in West Virginia since January 1, 2021, said Chief Justice Jenkins.

Previously, victims of domestic violence had to file petitions for domestic violence protective orders or petitions for personal safety orders in person at magistrate court. Sometimes, respondents try to prevent victims from entering court facilities or follow them to their cars or home after hearings.

Victims can still file initial petitions and attend follow-up hearings at the Kanawha County Judicial Building, but the pilot project gives them the additional option of going to the REACH (Rape Education, Advocacy, Counseling and Healing) site or to the YWCA Charleston Resolve Family Abuse Program.

Victims should call ahead to make appointments at these confidential locations. The REACH 24-hour hotline is 304-340-3676 and the YWCA Resolve 24-hour hotline is 304-340-3549. The remote sites are available for remote hearings 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. Magistrate Court is accessible 24 hours a day for those needing protective orders and personal safety orders.

The new program “is about safety, justice, and helping people in their time of need,” said Chief Justice Jenkins.

Eleventh Family Court Circuit (Kanawha County) Judge Brittany Ranson Stonestreet said she and the other family court judges are excited to use the new pilot program equipment, which is also available in Cabell and Ohio Counties.

She recalled the first domestic violence case she presided in after she became a family court judge in December 2020. The woman was visibly shaking, talked in a whisper, and jumped every time the respondent in the case spoke. “She was absolutely terrified,” said Judge Ranson Stonestreet.

Judges make decisions based on the merits of the case, and that can be difficult if one party is too scared to talk and present evidence when the abuser is sitting next to them in a small courtroom, said Judge Ranson Stonestreet, while also adding that the remote location option “is going to make a big difference.”

Victims can talk more freely and thoughtfully if they are in a separate, confidential location said Chief Kanawha County Magistrate Traci Carper-Strickland. “It’s a fantastic program,” she said.

Legal Aid Attorney Christen Justice said she also served victims who were shaking out of fear of the respondents in their cases. “I think this is going to be a life-changer for the people we work with,” she said.

Charleston attorney Alan Pritt said he appreciated that the remote access project became a reality and not just another good idea never put into practice. He said he appreciated the court system’s work on the project.

The remote access computer equipment was purchased with a federal grant from the West Virginia Department of Homeland Security, Division of Administrative Services, Justice and Community Services, the state administering agency for the STOP Violence Against Women Grant Program.

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