

Protection from Abuse (PFA) Procedures in Allegheny County, PA during the COVID-19 Crisis

Updated August 31, 2020

A Judicial Emergency was declared on March 16, 2020 and extended to the present for the Allegheny County courts (Fifth Judicial District of Pennsylvania) due to the COVID-19 pandemic. On August 31, 2020, President Judge Kim Berkeley Clark issued an Administrative Court Order that sets forth the current Judicial Emergency Operations Plan that will be in effect through December 31, 2020. The Administrative Order is posted on the court website at:

<https://www.alleghenycourts.us/Home/Default.aspx>. At this website, there is detailed information about emergency operations for all Divisions in the Allegheny County courts.

The current Judicial Emergency Operations Plan has affected Protection from Abuse (PFA) procedures in Allegheny County. An overview of current PFA procedures is set forth below. There may be limited entry into court facilities. Only court participants can be certain to be admitted – friends and family members of participants might *not* be able to enter the court facilities.

Anyone appearing at a court facility will have to wear a face mask and be required to maintain social distancing in accordance with CDC & Health Department recommendations.

A videoconferencing software called Microsoft Teams may be used during court proceedings. Microsoft Teams may be downloaded ahead of time here: <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/microsoft-teams/download-app>

1. Filing for a Temporary PFA Order from Family Court:

- The Family Court Facility at 440 Ross Street in downtown Pittsburgh has been partially reopened as of June 1, 2020. Anyone who wants to file a PFA Petition and obtain a Temporary PFA Order from Family Court must go to the Family Court Facility (440 Ross Street, Room 3030, Pittsburgh, PA, 15219) between the hours of 8AM and 11AM on any weekday except for court holidays. Judges will handle Temporary PFA hearings by videoconference.

2. **Final PFA Hearings shall be heard through Advanced Communication Technology (ACT), until further Order of Court, so parties should only plan to be available by telephone.** Parties should consult with their attorneys for how to participate in these hearings. Questions can be addressed to the PFA Unit at Family Court at 412-350-4441.

3. Emergency PFA Petitions can be filed before a Magisterial District Judge (MDJ) as follows:

- At Pittsburgh Municipal Court at 660 First Avenue, Pittsburgh PA, 15219 on weekdays from 11AM through the afternoon/night until 8AM, and also on weekends and court holidays 24 hours/day;
- or -
- At any neighborhood MDJ office on weekdays from 11:00AM until 3:30PM.

4. Changed procedures for filing PFA Order violations:

Complaints for Indirect Criminal Contempt (ICC) for Violations of PFA Orders must be filed by the police and not by PFA plaintiffs. Only ICC complaints filed by the police will be accepted by the court.

During the Judicial Emergency, an effort has been underway to reduce the number of inmates at the Allegheny County Jail due to the spread of COVID-19. **It is very important for victims whose perpetrators have been incarcerated to sign up for Jail Release Notification through the Center for Victims at 1-866-644-2882 and through the statewide PA SAVIN at 1-866-972-7284.**

Domestic violence victims who have questions or would like assistance with any of the procedures described above should **contact the Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh:**

- Call the 24/7 Hotline at 412-687-8005
- Connect with an advocate by texting 412-744-8445
- Visit WCScanHelp.org and click "Chat for Help."

During the COVID-19 crisis, safety planning is more important than ever. WC&S is available 24 hours a day. Our services are confidential, free of charge, and remain available throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.