

JUDICIAL STABILITY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Extraordinary times can test our fundamental institutions. The COVID-19 virus is such an event.

Although we are still in the early days of this pandemic, I am confident our judicial system will be able to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

Over the past week, the Nova Scotia Courts have introduced a wide range of preventative measures that will help minimize the spread of COVID-19, while keeping the Courts open to hear urgent and essential matters. These measures are based on the advice of public health officials and will help protect the health and well-being of our staff, justice participants and all Nova Scotians while the Courts continue to operate.

Courthouses are busy places; practical steps like postponing jury trials, alternative methods for filing documents, hearing matters by telephone and video, and adjourning all non-urgent proceedings has drastically reduced the number of people coming through our doors.

Because the fact is, the Courts cannot close.

As the third branch of government, an independent judiciary is vital for our Canadian democracy to function. It is never more important than in times of crisis. Judges provide resolution of disputes for all aspects of society. They uphold individual rights, enforce laws, respond to urgent circumstances facing children and families, provide oversight of government actions and ensure that the rule of law prevails.

Like many sectors right now, the judicial system is grappling with fewer human resources, more people working from home and increased demands on existing technology. Many of the measures introduced over the past week are novel — as such, it may take longer to process documents or to respond to inquiries, but it will get done. Thank you to our dedicated judges and staff, at all levels, who have been working around the clock on this.

It is also important to recognize the remarkable and unprecedented level of cooperation and collaboration we have seen among the Judiciary, the Nova Scotia Department of Justice, the provincial and federal prosecution services, Nova Scotia Legal Aid, private counsel, corrections services, law enforcement agencies and public health officials.

Our current situation looks to be the new normal, at least for the foreseeable future. The willingness of everyone involved to be decisive and flexible is the much-needed oil to keep the wheels of justice turning.

In these times of uncertainty, citizens need to be confident that their public institutions continue to function and maintain societal values. I am very happy to report that the Nova Scotia Courts are providing this essential service.

Michael J. Wood
Chief Justice of Nova Scotia