


The order below is hereby signed.

Signed: September 19 2023




Elizabeth L. Gunn
U.S. Bankruptcy Judge

**UNITED STATES BANKRUPTCY COURT
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**

In re:

Order on Hearings

General Order No. 2023-01

ORDER ESTABLISHING HEARING PROTOCOLS BEFORE JUDGE GUNN

On December 19, 2022, the Court issued its *Order Establishing Hybrid Hearing Protocols Before Judge Gunn*,¹ which permitted hybrid hearing attendance for all persons under the temporary exception to the judiciary's broadcasting policy due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The exception to the broadcasting policy for bankruptcy courts will expire on September 21, 2023 and requires modified hearing procedures. On September 12, 2023, the Judicial Conference of the United States approved a policy to allow remote public live audio access to non-trial proceedings that do not involve witness testimony. Therefore, effective September 22, 2023, and continuing until further Order of the Court, General Order 2022-03 is vacated, and the following procedures shall apply for members of the public, debtor(s), parties-in-interest, and attorneys appearing on behalf of debtors and parties-in-interest:

¹ Available at <https://www.dcb.uscourts.gov/sites/dcb/files/General%20Order%202022-03.pdf>

1. Hybrid Hearings. Unless otherwise ordered by the Court, all hearings scheduled on any matter, whether in a main case or adversary proceeding, and regardless of chapter, will be held in-person in Courtroom 1² and by Zoom for Government. All trials and any other hearing specifically ordered by the Court will only be held in-person in Courtroom 1. If a matter is scheduled for an in-person only hearing, remote access shall only be provided upon prior leave of Court by contacting the Courtroom Deputy or filing a motion at least two (2) business days prior to the hearing.

2. Public Access. Courtroom 1 will be open and available for public observation of all trials and hearings. Public live audio access will not be granted for in-person trials or hearings involving witness testimony. Members of the public may attend hearings remotely by telephone audio access only if the hearing does not involve witness testimony and shall be limited to listen-only participation. Public live audio access will be suspended during any witness testimony in any hearing. The Court will continue to post audio recordings of trials and hearings on the docket for public review through PACER following the trial or hearing.

3. Hearing Self-Scheduling. Unless specifically requesting an in-person only hearing, when setting a hearing utilizing the Court's self-scheduling procedures from an available date on the Court's website,³ parties should clearly include in their notice that the hearing shall be held in the hybrid format.

4. Scheduling an In-Person Hearing. Notwithstanding ¶¶ 1-3 of this Order, any party may contact Judge Gunn's Courtroom Deputy and request that any hearing be held exclusively in-person. In so making the request, the party should have already discussed the matter with the

² In the event a hearing is moved to another courtroom in the courthouse, all references to Courtroom 1 herein shall apply to the applicable courtroom.

³ <https://www.dcb.uscourts.gov/HearingDates>

opposing party and be able to inform the Courtroom Deputy if the parties are in agreement on the request for an exclusively in-person hearing. If there is not an agreement between the parties for an exclusively in-person hearing, the Court will hold a hybrid preliminary hearing for scheduling purposes. Any notice of an in-person only hearing shall clearly and conspicuously state that the hearing will be held in-person in Courtroom 1.

5. Witnesses. Absent a finding under Federal Rule of Bankruptcy Procedure 9017 and Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 43(a), all hearings requiring witness testimony and/or the introduction of substantial evidence shall be set for an in-person hearing. Evidentiary hearings that will progress solely by uncontested witness proffers may be held virtually. Parties should take note that in the event a hybrid hearing becomes contested, any party that is appearing virtually may be required to appear in-person to comply with Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 43(a) and/or this Order.

6. Compliance with Courthouse Orders and Policies. Parties appearing in-person for hearings must comply with all applicable orders entered by United States District Court for the District of Columbia and any posted requirements regarding Court operations. This includes, but is not limited to the *Mask Policy in the Public Areas of the Courthouse and Courtrooms Effective 17, 2022*.⁴ See <https://www.dcd.uscourts.gov/court-information> for more information on courthouse policies.

7. Compliance with Virtual Hearing Expectations. Unless otherwise instructed by the Court, all counsel and parties participating by Zoom for Government shall appear by video. Telephonic/voice only appearances for counsel and parties must be approved prior to the hearing.

⁴ Available at: https://www.dcd.uscourts.gov/sites/dcd/files/Mask%20Policy%20in%20the%20Courthouse%20Updated%20October%202022_.pdf

Parties may request telephonic/voice only appearances by contacting the Courtroom Deputy or filing a motion at least two (2) business days prior to the hearing.⁵ In addition, all parties participating by Zoom for Government before Judge Gunn should review and be familiar with the “Virtual Hearing Expectations,” attached hereto as Exhibit A.

8. Required Appearance of Debtor/Debtor Designee. In all non-individual debtor cases, the debtor designee and/or a principal of the debtor shall appear for all status conferences and dispositive hearings unless otherwise excused by the Court prior to the scheduled hearing. In all individual debtor cases, the debtor(s) shall appear at all dispositive hearings unless otherwise excused by the Court prior to the scheduled hearing.

[Signed and dated above.]

⁵ The Court recognizes the nature of last-minute technical problems at hearings and non-video appearances will be liberally granted as a result thereof. However, parties should not rely upon telephonic appearances as a regular option.

Exhibit A

Guidelines for Virtual Hearings Before Judge Gunn

These guidelines apply and must be followed in any hearing conducted before the United States Bankruptcy Court for the District of Columbia by Zoom for Government. The Court's "Virtual Courtroom," while conducted in Zoom for Government, is nevertheless a federal courtroom, and all counsel and parties must govern themselves in the manner they would in the physical courthouse. Parties are encouraged and invited to (i) request a session with the Courtroom Deputy to test their technology and/or (ii) log into the Court's virtual courtroom up to 15 minutes prior to the *first* scheduled hearing of the day to test their connections and technology.

The broadcasting, televising, recording, or photographing of Court proceedings is strictly prohibited except as specifically authorized by the Court regardless of whether such proceedings are conducted in the physical courtroom, virtual courtroom, or remotely. Pursuant to Judicial Conference Policy, only parties or their professionals may utilize video. All members of the public may utilize either remote public live audio access to non-trial proceedings that do not involve witness testimony or in-person attendance for any matter.

1) Manner of Connecting.

- a. All parties are encouraged to use a computer and wired internet or wireless internet connection to connect to the virtual courtroom. However, parties may use tablets or phones to connect to the virtual courtroom. Parties connecting to the virtual courtroom do so at their own risk if their connection becomes unstable. Cellular service connections, in particular, can become unexpectedly unstable. The Court encourages parties, to the extent possible, not to rely on cellular service and connect to virtual hearings through a computer, wireless internet, or a landline phone.
- b. Nothing herein shall prohibit any party from connecting to the virtual courtroom with more than one device, provided however that doing so does not result in an echo or any other technological issues.

2) Video.

- a. All parties must appear by video from a quiet location and have, at a minimum, their head and shoulders visible in the video feed. Multiple parties (*i.e.*, attorney and client, co-debtors, etc.) may utilize the same connection and video feed as long as the Court can see each party's head and shoulders at all times.
 - i. No party may appear by video from a moving vehicle. Appearance in the virtual courtroom from parked/stopped vehicles is highly discouraged.
 - ii. Absent extraordinary circumstances, parties should remain stationary while appearing in the virtual courtroom (*i.e.*, not walking or otherwise moving around their location).
- b. Parties shall ensure that the name visible with their video feed is appropriate. Parties are encouraged to use their full name(s) as it assists the Court, Courtroom Deputy, and court reporters. Upon request prior to calling court into session, the Courtroom Deputy can assist parties with changing their name(s). Video feeds with multiple parties may include all names or just one name of one of the parties included in the feed.
- c. A party's video feed should remain active at all times during the hearing in which the party is participating. However, a party may briefly turn off their video to avoid visual

distractions if they are not actively speaking to the Court. Parties observing a hearing (but not participating therein) or waiting for their hearing to be called may turn off their video until their hearing is called. All images visible when a video feed is inactive must be appropriate.

- d. Parties may use appropriate virtual backgrounds or blur filters except when more than one person is appearing in the same video feed at the same time. No other filters are permitted. When more than one party is in a video feed, all virtual backgrounds and filters must be disabled so as to avoid one party not being visible at all times.

3) Audio.

- a. Parties may use either audio option available by Zoom: i) connection through their computer/tablet/phone; or ii) dialing in from a separate phone (*i.e.*, a second, separate device other than their video feed). Parties should confirm that the microphone associated with their device is sufficient to allow all parties in the virtual courtroom to hear them.
- b. Parties may use headphones to minimize background noise and/or echo in the virtual courtroom.
- c. Parties should be familiar with the mute function of their device prior to their hearing. In order to maintain a clear record, parties should keep their microphone on mute until their matter(s) is called and at all points during their hearing(s) unless actively speaking. The Court will provide time for parties to unmute and recognizes that objections or other interjections may be slightly delayed compared to an in-person proceeding due to the need to unmute. Parties observing by telephone or waiting in the virtual courtroom for their virtual hearing shall keep their devices on mute at all times.
- d. The Court reserves the right to mute any person at any time during a hearing if they are not complying with these requirements. If the Court mutes a party appearing by telephone, the party must use *6 to unmute themselves.
- e. While occasional environmental background noises are a recognized part of virtual hearings, parties should do their best to minimize background noise(s) to the extent possible.

4) Screen Share/Documents.

- a. Parties should be familiar with the screen share function of their device(s) in Zoom prior to the hearing, paying specific attention to the ability to share one program (*i.e.*, Adobe Acrobat) versus sharing an entire desktop. The party sharing their screen shall ensure that only the website/document being shared is visible and that all other tabs are closed. All parties seeking to use documents during a virtual hearing shall have electronic versions of the documents open and readily available for use. The Court will not allow a document to be shared by holding a physical copy up to the video feed. All content shared by a party as an exhibit or visible on a party's desktop while sharing an exhibit must be appropriate.
- b. Unless otherwise instructed by the Court prior to the virtual hearing, all exhibits, redacted as required by Federal Rule of Bankruptcy Procedure 9037, must be filed electronically prior to the virtual hearing. If an unredacted version of a document containing personally identifiable information is required for the virtual hearing, counsel must email the unredacted version to either Judge Gunn's Courtroom Deputy or Gunn_Chambers@dcb.uscourts.gov. Counsel and parties are encouraged to share copies of electronic documents not otherwise filed as exhibits *prior* to the virtual hearing. A rebuttal exhibit may be shared without prior electronic filing provided that, if admitted, it is uploaded to the docket promptly upon conclusion of the hearing.
- c. Parties must request approval before beginning to share their screen. In the event of delays or other issues with screen share by a party, the Court reserves the right to control and run the screen share function.
- d. Because screen sharing results in smaller video windows of the parties in Zoom, when a document or other screen share is no longer required to be viewed, the screen share should be deactivated so the Court may return to a full-sized video feed.

5) Witnesses.

- a. Absent a finding under Federal Rule of Bankruptcy Procedure 9017 and Federal Rule of Evidence 43(a), all hearings with witness testimony must be in person.
- b. In accordance with Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 43(a) (made applicable by Federal Rule of Bankruptcy Procedure 9017) and Federal Rule of Evidence 611, for good cause and in compelling circumstances, a witness may be permitted to testify by contemporaneous transmission from a location other than the courtroom ("Remote Witness").
- c. All Remote Witnesses shall be affirmed over video, and such testimony will have the same effect and be binding upon the Remote Witness in the same manner as if such Remote Witness was affirmed by the Courtroom Deputy in person in open court.
- d. Each Remote Witness shall comply with the requirements set forth herein for Video and Audio. A Remote Witness and counsel may appear in the same video feed, subject to the Video and Audio requirements set forth herein. However, an opposing party may move for the Court to order separate video feeds to be established for the Remote Witness and counsel.

- e. The Remote Witness may not communicate with any other person regarding the subject of the testimony, by electronic means or otherwise, during the hearing. If the Remote Witness or counsel seek to communicate with one another, either shall openly request a recess for such purpose. If such request is granted by the Court, the Remote Witness and counsel may privately confer offline or in a Zoom breakout room.
- f. The party sponsoring a Remote Witness shall ensure that the witness has either (i) printed or (ii) readily accessible and reviewable electronic copies of all exhibits filed with the Court by all counsel prior to the start of the virtual hearing.

6) Virtual Appearances.

- a. Parties should prepare for video hearings just as they would for in person hearings.
- b. Parties should conduct themselves professionally and dress appropriately. If travelling, please have court appropriate attire available for use.
- c. Parties should not wear a mask when addressing the Court. Parties and counsel should advise witnesses of the same requirement. If personal health or safety is a concern for any party, arrangements should be made prior to the virtual hearing such that each party may participate from a separate location. The Court recognizes there may be extraordinary circumstances when appearing in separate locations is not possible and/or mask wearing is necessary and unavoidable given the location of a party. However, parties should not rely upon this option on a regular basis and, if multiple appearances will be necessary over the course of a case, work to facilitate attendance in separate locations where mask wearing is not necessary.
- d. The virtual courtroom is a federal courtroom. No party should be eating or smoking on video while Court is in session.

7) Technological Emergencies. The Court recognizes that technological emergencies may happen during a virtual hearing including, but not limited to, loss of internet, loss of power, and computer problems. All parties should have the ability to telephone Judge Gunn's main chambers line immediately upon a technological emergency. Chambers will alert the Judge and work to troubleshoot or otherwise reschedule any hearing. Loss of cellular signal when attending solely by cell phone, absent something further, shall not constitute a technological emergency.