

# Court Worker Unions Question Full Staff Return to NY Courthouses

The Civil Service Employees Association is one of several unions that were left with concerns and unanswered questions when the court system rolled out its latest coronavirus reopening decision on Monday.

By **Ryan Tarinelli** | April 20, 2021 at 06:44 PM



Courtsrooms around the state are already being refitted for the return of in-person trials.

The largest union in New York's court system says officials are moving too quickly in ordering all court staff to report for in-person work on May 24.

The Civil Service Employees Association is one of several unions that were left with concerns and unanswered questions when the court system rolled out its coronavirus reopening decision on Monday.

"The first we heard about this was yesterday," said CSEA spokesman Mark Kotzin in a statement on Tuesday, arguing the court system made no attempt to coordinate with the union about the staffing return. There appears to be no centralized plan for the return of all court staff, according to Kotzin.

The union, which is the largest bargaining unit in the state court system, represents court officers, court reporters, clerks and clerical workers, among others. It represents between 5,000 and 6,000 workers in the court system.



Chief Judge Janet DiFiore

Chief Judge Janet DiFiore announced the return date in a video statement on Monday and ordered all court staff and judges to physically return to courthouses starting May 24.



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“It is time to return to our normal and full courthouse staffing levels in order to support the fuller resumption of in-person operations, including jury trials and other proceedings in our courts,” she said.

Peter Piciulo, president of the Court Officers Benevolent Association of Nassau County, issued a statement saying the move “unnecessarily puts our employees at risk.”

“This announcement came as a complete surprise. There is currently no plan in place of how to accomplish this safely,” he said in the statement. “Our buildings were not constructed with the concept of social distancing in mind, and for some of them, especially those with smaller courtrooms, it is impossible.”

DiFiore, in the video, said they are drafting a “plan that will limit the number of people physically present in our courthouses to safe and responsible levels.”

Coronavirus safety measures will stay in place, including social distancing protocols, temperature checks and face masks, DiFiore said.

But practical concerns have already arisen.

Some court reporters are known to have office environments where they work in close proximity to each other, said Eric Allen, who serves as president of a New York City court reporters union.

“They are inches apart — inches apart,” he said. “And the social distancing guidelines cannot possibly be followed in that setting.”

Under mandatory coronavirus guidelines for offices, there can be no more than half of the maximum occupancy and people must be six feet from each other “unless safety of the core activity requires a shorter distance.”

Allen wondered whether there was a plan to give court reporters additional space. If there was a plan to do that, the union hasn’t seen the details, he quipped.

DiFiore said their plan to bring back full staffing “is in line with the state’s reopening efforts, and with the latest public health guidance.”

A former judge told the Law Journal that some judges have said they do not think it’s wise to have them return to courthouses “just to sit in their chambers and conduct the same virtual proceedings they were able to do from home.”