



CHANGES COMING TO VIRTUAL COURT PROCEEDINGS IN NOVA SCOTIA

Thursday, Feb. 11, 2021

Testing and training are underway for a new platform to hold virtual court proceedings in Nova Scotia, in preparation for Microsoft retiring its Skype software this summer.

When virtual court was piloted in the early months of the pandemic, the Nova Scotia Courts used Skype for Business. The platform was a secure option supported by Nova Scotia Digital Services and was already available to all judges and court staff through the province's existing Microsoft software suite.

Skype is still being used now, but it will reach its end of life on July 31, 2021. With that in mind, the Nova Scotia Judiciary has agreed to use Microsoft Teams as the new platform for virtual court proceedings.

Teams looks and functions much like Skype, but this is not simply a matter of replacing one platform with another. This will be a phased transition over several months. For now, Skype will continue to be used for most fully virtual proceedings and some remote aspects of in-person proceedings. As more users become comfortable with the new platform, and any issues are addressed, Teams will start to be used more widely for court proceedings.

Members of the Bar and other organizations that regularly participate in court proceedings (i.e. court support workers, Victim Services, law enforcement and community justice organizations) are encouraged to start reviewing the Teams platform now to ensure they are prepared for the transition.

As with Skype, existing practice directives and court protocols established by the judiciary will apply when Teams is used for court purposes.

Counsel and others involved in a virtual proceeding will be expected to take part in a short tech-check ahead of the proceeding. Your tech-check should take place in the same space that you will appear in for the actual court proceeding. Any changes you make can affect your ability to connect successfully.

Counsel and other participants are reminded to review the following list of considerations before the virtual proceeding, to ensure a better experience for everyone:

- 1) Participation in virtual court proceedings requires a commitment to technology. Counsel and the parties involved must have the ability to effectively connect to a video/audio conference in a consistent and reliable manner.
- 2) The required technology to participate by video includes a web camera for video display, audio and a microphone.
- 3) A reliable headset with a microphone is strongly recommended. This provides a better audio experience and reduces background noise for others when you are speaking. Earphones also work well.
- 4) To help avoid Internet interruptions or failure, participants are encouraged to have a hard-wired connection to your network. Wi-Fi connections are not as reliable. Counsel must also have their own Internet network to connect.
- 5) Devices such as Google Home, Alexa and Echo should be turned off during your participation in the proceedings.
- 6) While the Court will offer a tech-check prior to the court proceedings, you are encouraged to engage support from an independent IT expert who can provide you with help and advice. Court staff are not responsible for troubleshooting connectivity issues for counsel and parties.
- 7) Counsel and the parties are encouraged to regularly test the technology required for video conferencing, especially after installing additional hardware or software to your device. Participants are encouraged to connect to the virtual court proceeding at least 10 minutes early to allow time to resolve any unexpected issues.
- 8) Ensure you are set up in a quiet, private area with appropriate lighting. Avoid setting up your device in front of a window, as you will appear in shadow.
- 9) When appearing by video, your screen name should be your given name and surname. If your user profile includes a photo, ensure the photo is professional and appropriate for court, as others in the proceeding will be able to see that if your camera is disabled or not working.
- 10) Counsel and parties are not permitted to record video or audio of any virtual court proceedings or virtual judicial settlement conferences.

For more information on Virtual Court, please visit www.courts.ns.ca/Virtual_Court.htm.

Media Contact:

Jennifer Stairs
Communications Director
Nova Scotia Judiciary
902-221-5257
stairsjl@courts.ns.ca