

# How Federal Courts Used Their Public Websites During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Overview and Some Lessons for the Future

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To successfully continue with court operations during the COVID-19 pandemic, federal courts have operated under various modified procedures and public access protocols. Courts have provided information about these pandemic procedures and accessibility primarily via their public websites.

This report provides an overview of the availability of information about court operations during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically court information on the federal courts' public websites and how the information is presented to and accessed by website visitors. This overview also describes the differing approaches federal courts have taken for disseminating COVID-19 information on their websites and concludes with suggestions on how courts might enhance the accessibility of that information.

In February 2021, Center staff reviewed the 200 federal court public websites of the district (n=96), bankruptcy (n=90), and appellate courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court (n=14).<sup>1</sup> For ease of presentation, we categorized the territorial courts, the Court of Federal Claims, and the Court of International Trade as district courts, and the Supreme Court, as well as the thirteen courts of appeals, as appellate courts.

We examined whether each public website provided court-related COVID-19 information in the following areas of the website: 1) the homepage; 2) a dedicated 'COVID-19' webpage; 3) a 'News and Announcements' section; and a 4) a 'General Orders' webpage. We also explored whether a site visitor would be able to retrieve the court's posted COVID-related information using a court website's search function with a range of pandemic-related search terms.

As a quick reference, tables summarizing our findings are in the Appendix (page 27), in addition to the body of the report.

### *Overview of COVID-19 Information on Court Websites*

- Approximately two-thirds to three-quarters of the federal district, bankruptcy, and appellate courts highlighted pandemic-related information using a website banner or alert box on the homepage (Table 1), and approximately three-quarters of them had some type of pandemic-related information on their homepage (Table 2).
- Nearly 60% of the district and bankruptcy court websites aggregated their pandemic-related information on a dedicated webpage (e.g., a COVID-19 Information webpage) (Table 3).

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<sup>1</sup> United States Courts, Court Website Links, <https://www.uscourts.gov/about-federal-courts/federal-courts-public/court-website-links> (visited Oct. 12, 2020).

- Nearly all appellate and bankruptcy courts included COVID-related information in their websites' 'News and Announcements' section, with about three-quarters of the district courts doing the same (Table 4).
- Approximately three-quarters of district and bankruptcy courts included COVID-related orders on their local rules or administrative, general, or standing order webpage. Less than half of the appellate courts did so, since only a few appear to have a dedicated webpage or website area for such orders (Table 5).
- The COVID-related search terms or strings that most frequently retrieved at least one item of pandemic-related court information (e.g., resource or document) using a court website's search function rank as follows: 1) "covid-19" (district, bankruptcy, and appellate); 2) "coronavirus" (district, bankruptcy) and "pandemic" (appellate); and 3) "pandemic" (district, bankruptcy) and "covid-19 pandemic" (appellate) (Table 6).

### *Suggestions for Presenting COVID-19 Information on Court Websites*

The report concludes with suggestions for federal courts who would like to improve their website visitors' ability to effectively locate its COVID-19 court information.

- Create a COVID-19 information webpage to provide website visitors with an aggregate of the federal court's coronavirus and coronavirus-related information (e.g., news, notices, instructions, orders, etc.).
- Increase the number of search terms that effectively retrieve pandemic-related information, including abbreviated, informal, and formal terms (e.g., "covid" as well as "COVID-19").
- Use descriptive hyperlinks, captions, filenames, and supplemental information so the contents of a court's posted material are clear, and court website users can easily ascertain its relevancy, whether the user is a member of the general public, a court employee, or an attorney.
- Install a search function (search bar) on the website's homepage so that court website users can efficiently and readily retrieve their desired COVID-19 information.

Though this report concentrates on the presentation and accessibility of COVID-19 information on the federal courts' public websites, it can also be used as a post-pandemic resource for how the courts can strengthen its online communication with its website users, in general and during future emergencies (e.g., temporary or extended court closures, relocations, or operational changes due to natural disasters).

## I. INTRODUCTION

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization announced that the COVID-19 viral disease was a pandemic.<sup>2</sup> On March 13, 2020, former President Donald Trump declared coronavirus (COVID-19) to be a national emergency.<sup>3</sup> On January 20, 2021, President Joseph Biden signed an executive order “requir[ing] compliance with [Centers for Diseases Control] guidelines with respect to wearing masks, maintaining physical distance, and other public health measures by: on-duty or on-site Federal employees; on-site Federal contractors; and all persons in Federal buildings or on Federal lands.”<sup>4</sup> The following day, on January 21, 2021, the Biden Administration released the National Strategy for the COVID-19 Response and Pandemic Preparedness which “outline[d] an actionable plan across the federal government to address the COVID-19 pandemic.”<sup>5</sup>

Like the rest of society and its institutions, the federal district, bankruptcy, and appellate courts have grappled with how to continue operating during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>6</sup> The federal government (executive, legislative, judicial) and state and local governments have adopted varying Centers for Diseases Control COVID-19 safety guidelines<sup>7</sup> and jurisdiction-specific protection measures. Such measures include, for example, the wearing of face masks; social distancing; restricting or prohibiting large social gatherings; closing or limiting operations of businesses; distance learning for public schools; and remote operations for government offices.

During the pandemic, physical access to federal courthouses and court buildings has variously been prohibited (e.g., general public access via video or teleconference only, remote work by court staff), limited (e.g., reduced hours, restricted or closed areas, access restricted if person exhibits COVID-19 symptoms or is subject to quarantine measures) or remained mostly

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<sup>2</sup> Bill Chappell, *Coronavirus: COVID-19 Is Now Officially A Pandemic, WHO Says*, NPR.org (Mar. 11, 2020), <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/03/11/814474930/coronavirus-covid-19-is-now-officially-a-pandemic-who-says>.

<sup>3</sup> Lisa Mascaro, Zeke Miller, Andrew Taylor, Jill Colvin, *Trump Declares Virus Emergency; House Passes Aid Package*, APNews.com (Mar. 14, 2020), <https://apnews.com/article/83b0c8e168548fd453b0c177dd1f203a>.

<sup>4</sup> Exec. Order No. 13991, *Protecting the Federal Workforce and Requiring Mask-Wearing* (Jan. 20, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/20/executive-order-protecting-the-federal-workforce-and-requiring-mask-wearing/>.

<sup>5</sup> National Strategy for the COVID-19 Response and Pandemic Preparedness (Jan. 21, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/National-Strategy-for-the-COVID-19-Response-and-Pandemic-Preparedness.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> United States Courts, *Judiciary Preparedness for Coronavirus (COVID-19)* (Mar. 12, 2020), <https://www.uscourts.gov/news/2020/03/12/judiciary-preparedness-coronavirus-covid-19> (visited Oct. 13, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): How to Protect Yourself & Others*, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html> (visited Oct. 13, 2020).

unchanged with some safety measures instituted (e.g., building access screening notices, face masks required, no cash accepted for court payments).<sup>8</sup>

Many federal courts have adopted or extended the use of remote technology (video and teleconference) to conduct court proceedings, with additional authority under the CARES Act.<sup>9</sup> Judges and other employees have also been working from home to various degrees. Courthouses have also adopted other changes in procedures such as allowing electronic instead of “wet” signatures on hardcopies of documents and installing drop-off boxes outside courthouses, where staff can retrieve payments and paperwork deposited by parties (plaintiffs, defendants) and attorneys.<sup>10</sup>

To keep the public informed and aware of their pandemic-related operations (e.g., closings, deadline extensions, reduced hours, remote procedures, grand jury hearings), federal courts have relied on their respective public websites to provide immediate and updated information to those who have pending legal matters with the courts<sup>11</sup> or other interest in court matters.

## II. AVAILABILITY OF COVID-19 INFORMATION ON FEDERAL COURT WEBSITES

Each district, bankruptcy, and appellate court separately manages the content and operations of its own public websites.

Many of the federal courts’ public websites use a standard template (e.g., header, category toolbar with drop-down menus to access webpages, topic boxes on homepage) derived from the “Court Website Toolbox,” which is a “collection of resources, developed by the AO [Administrative Office of the United States Courts]<sup>12</sup> in collaboration with the [federal] courts, for use in the design and development of court Internet websites.

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<sup>8</sup> United States Courts, As Courts Restore Operations, COVID-19 Creates A New Normal (Aug. 20, 2020), <https://www.uscourts.gov/news/2020/08/20/courts-restore-operations-covid-19-creates-new-normal>.

<sup>9</sup> The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (“CARES Act”), H.R. 748, 116th Cong. (2019-2020) <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/748>. A congressional bill in response to the “COVID-19 (i.e., coronavirus disease 2019) outbreak and its impact on the economy, public health, state and local governments, individuals, and businesses.”

<sup>10</sup> U.S. District Court for the Western District of Wisconsin, Public Notice Regarding Paper Filings and Payments, <https://www.wiwd.uscourts.gov/news/public-notice-regarding-paper-filings-and-payments> (Mar. 19, 2020).

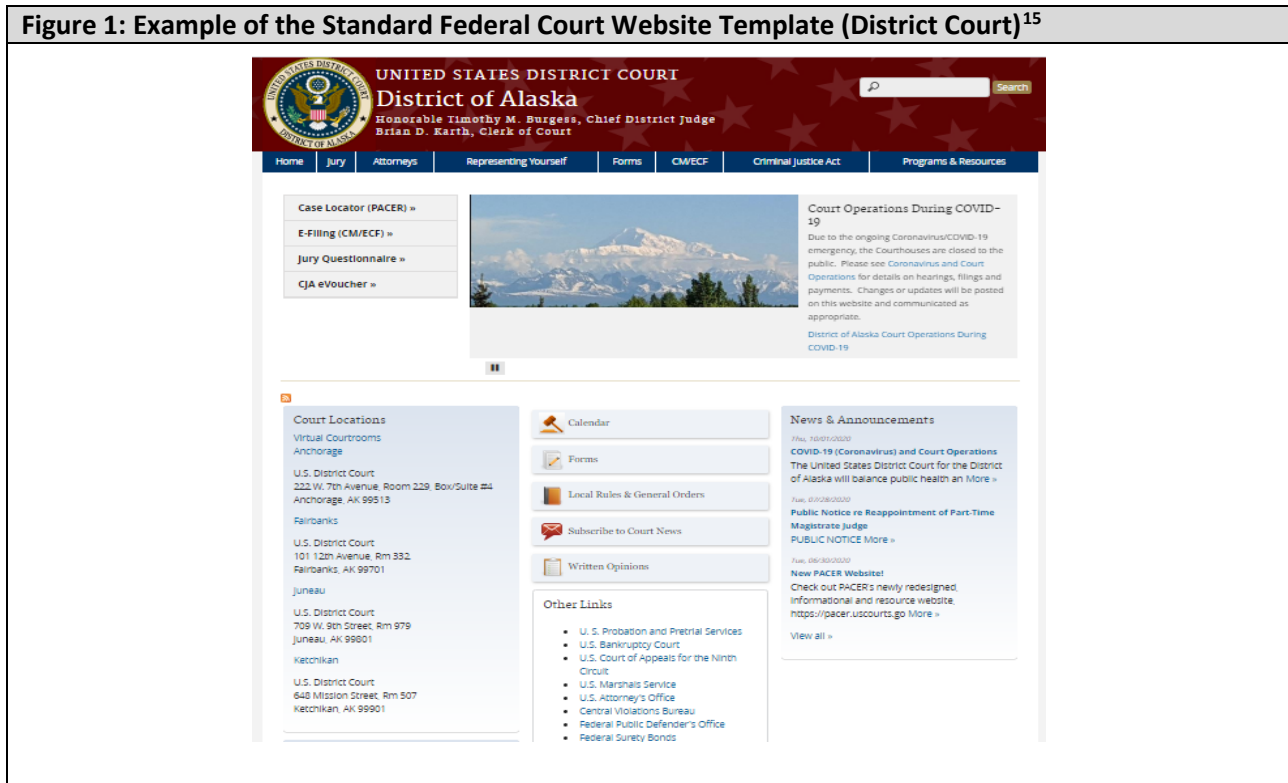
<sup>11</sup> “Day-to-day responsibility for judicial administration rests with each individual court. By statute and administrative practice, each court appoints support staff, supervises spending, and manages court records.” Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, Judicial Administration, <https://www.uscourts.gov/about-federal-courts/judicial-administration> (visited Oct. 12, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> The Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, established in 1939, “supports and serves the nonjudicial, administrative business of the United States Courts.” The United States Government Manual, (<https://www.usgovernmentmanual.gov/Agency.aspx?EntityId=nbKrEPzeztc=&ParentEId=+klubNygV0o=&EType=jY3M4CTKVHY=>) (visited Oct. 12, 2020).

The toolbox is available for appellate, district, and bankruptcy courts, and probation and pretrial services offices.”<sup>13</sup> The toolbox has a standard template style for each court type: district (Figure 1), bankruptcy (Figure 2), and appellate courts (Figure 3).

Given these common website templates and the purpose of the Administrative Office’s toolbox,<sup>14</sup> the placement of COVID-19 information on many federal court websites is fairly standardized. A court website’s COVID-related information tends to be displayed where a site visitor might expect them to be, that is, on its homepage, in news and announcements, or on a designated webpage. And the information is presented in a straight-forward manner with very few embellishments (e.g., highlighted boxes, accessible weblinks, red, black, or blue text).

**Figure 1: Example of the Standard Federal Court Website Template (District Court)<sup>15</sup>**

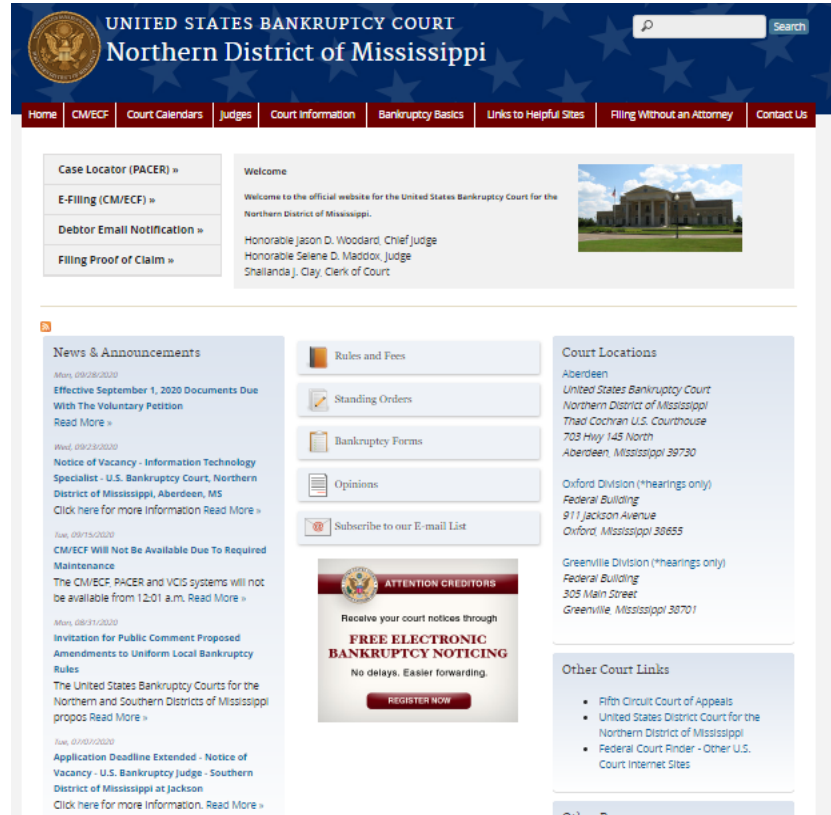


<sup>13</sup> Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, Communications Resources, <https://aoweb.ao.dcn/program-support/communications-resources> (visited Oct. 12, 2020). As of November 2020, 180 federal courts (84 district courts, 86 bankruptcy courts, 10 appellate courts) are using the AO’s ‘Court Website Toolbox’. E-mail from James Davison, AO, to Angelia N. Levy, Federal Judicial Center (Nov. 10, 2020) (on file with author).

<sup>14</sup>“The Court Website Toolbox allows courts to create and maintain their own public-facing online presence for little added cost by using AO templates, design elements, content, accessibility tools, and analytics. This approach allows courts to easily provide public access to website content required by statute or by Judicial Conference policy and ensures a consistent and easy-to-use experience for users.” Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, *Public Outreach: Emphasizing the Court’s Role in Civic Outreach*, 2016 Director’s Annual Report, <https://www.uscourts.gov/statistics-reports/public-outreach-annual-report-2016>.

<sup>15</sup> U.S. District Court, District of Alaska, homepage, <https://www.akd.uscourts.gov/> (image captured Oct. 1, 2020). Last visited Jan. 7, 2021.

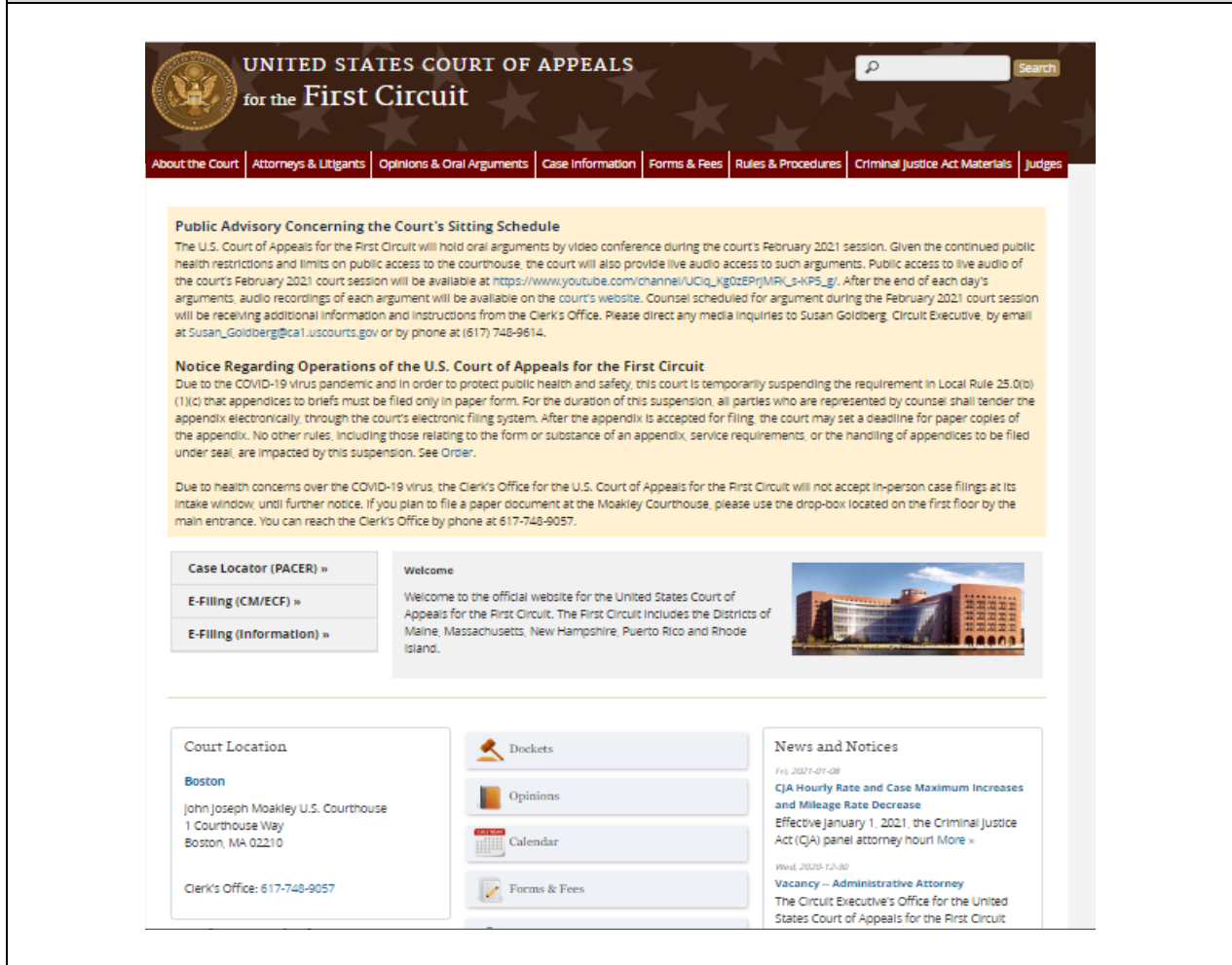
Figure 2: Example of the Standard Federal Court Website Template (Bankruptcy Court)<sup>16</sup>



<sup>16</sup> U.S. Bankruptcy Court, Northern District of Mississippi, homepage, <https://www.msnb.uscourts.gov/> (image captured Oct. 1, 2020). Last visited Jan. 7, 2021.



**Figure 3: Example of the Standard Federal Court Website Template (Appellate Court)<sup>17</sup>**



### A. Placement and Presentation of COVID-19 Information on Court Homepages

When alerting the court’s public website users to its COVID-19 information, most of the court websites used a semi-large rectangular box or a rectangular or strip-like banner on its homepage, normally affixed at or near the top of the webpage.

The boxes and banners primarily include information about the court’s COVID-19 operations with occasional COVID-19 community news (e.g., operation updates, courthouse access requirements, general orders, weblink to its dedicated COVID-19 webpage). Figures 4-6 show examples of boxes and banners on federal court websites.

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Court of Appeals, First Circuit, homepage, <https://www.ca1.uscourts.gov/> (image captured Oct. 1, 2020). Last visited Jan. 7, 2021.

**Figure 4: COVID-19 Information Banner for the U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the District of Colorado<sup>18</sup>**



<sup>18</sup> U.S. Bankruptcy Court, District of Colorado, homepage, <https://www.cob.uscourts.gov/> (image captured Oct. 1, 2020). Last visited Jan. 7, 2021.

Figure 5: COVID-Information Box for the U.S. District Court for the District of Connecticut<sup>19</sup>



Figure 6: Red Text Alert Banner on the U.S. District Court for the District of Guam<sup>20</sup>



<sup>19</sup> U.S. District Court, District of Connecticut, homepage, <http://www.ctd.uscourts.gov/> (image captured Sept. 17, 2020). Last visited Jan. 7, 2021. Note: In January 2021, the court updated its homepage in how it displays its COVID-19 court materials (e.g., includes links to CARES Act, video message from its Chief Judge).

<sup>20</sup> U.S. District Court, District of Guam, homepage, <http://www.gud.uscourts.gov/> (image captured Sept. 23, 2020). Last visited Jan. 7, 2021.

A few court websites, such as the District Court of Idaho, have used both a banner *and* a box on its homepage (Figure 7) to bring attention to its court’s daily operational status during the pandemic.<sup>21</sup> Note that the Idaho District Court also included operational status information (e.g., open or closed, gathering size) for its three court divisions.<sup>22</sup>

**Figure 7: Banner and Box on the U.S. District Court for the District Court of Idaho Homepage<sup>23</sup>**



The Central District Court of California also uses a box and banner on its website’s homepage (Figure 8) to direct website visitors to its COVID-19 information. Its COVID banner continually scrolls across the top of its homepage and the rest of the site’s webpages. Additionally, its coronavirus announcement information is prominently featured on its homepage.

<sup>21</sup> For the purposes of this report, if a court website used a box *and* banner on its homepage to display its COVID-19 information, it was recorded as a singular “yes” as to whether the website used a banner *or* box.

<sup>22</sup> As of January 2021, the U.S. District Court of the District Court of Idaho homepage no longer lists operational status information for its court divisions.

<sup>23</sup> U.S. District Court, District of Idaho, homepage, <https://www.id.uscourts.gov/clerks/Welcome.cfm> (image captured Sept. 23, 2020). Last visited Jan. 7, 2021.

**Figure 8: Scrolling Banner and Box on the U.S. District Court for the Central District Court of California**<sup>24</sup>



The New York Eastern District Court (Figure 9) has a category menu titled “COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Information” on its toolbar to display its COVID-19 court information, connecting the site visitor to its [coronavirus court information webpage](#). This toolbar category placement ensures that the information is constantly visible and accessible, no matter which webpage a site visitor navigates to on the website.

<sup>24</sup> U.S. District Court, Central District of California, homepage, <https://www.cacd.uscourts.gov/> (image captured Oct. 28, 2020). Last visited Jan. 7, 2021.

**Figure 9: Toolbar COVID-19 Category Menu on the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of New York Homepage<sup>25</sup>**



Other courts have chosen to display their COVID information elsewhere on their homepages.

For example, Michigan Eastern District Court’s COVID-19 information on its website’s homepage was originally accessible via a smaller box titled “Operational Status” located on the lower right side of its homepage (Figure 10). However, it has recently added a COVID-information banner near the top of its homepage which includes a weblink to its COVID-19 webpage.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> U.S. District Court, Eastern District of New York, homepage, <https://www.nyed.uscourts.gov/> (image captured Sept. 21, 2020). Last visited Jan. 7, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> As of October 12, 2020, the Eastern District Court of Michigan added ‘Coronavirus (COVID-19) Guidance’ banners with a weblink to its COVID-19 webpage to the top of its homepage (<https://www.mied.uscourts.gov/>).

**Figure 10: Small Operating Status Box for COVID-19 Information on the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan’s Homepage<sup>27</sup>**

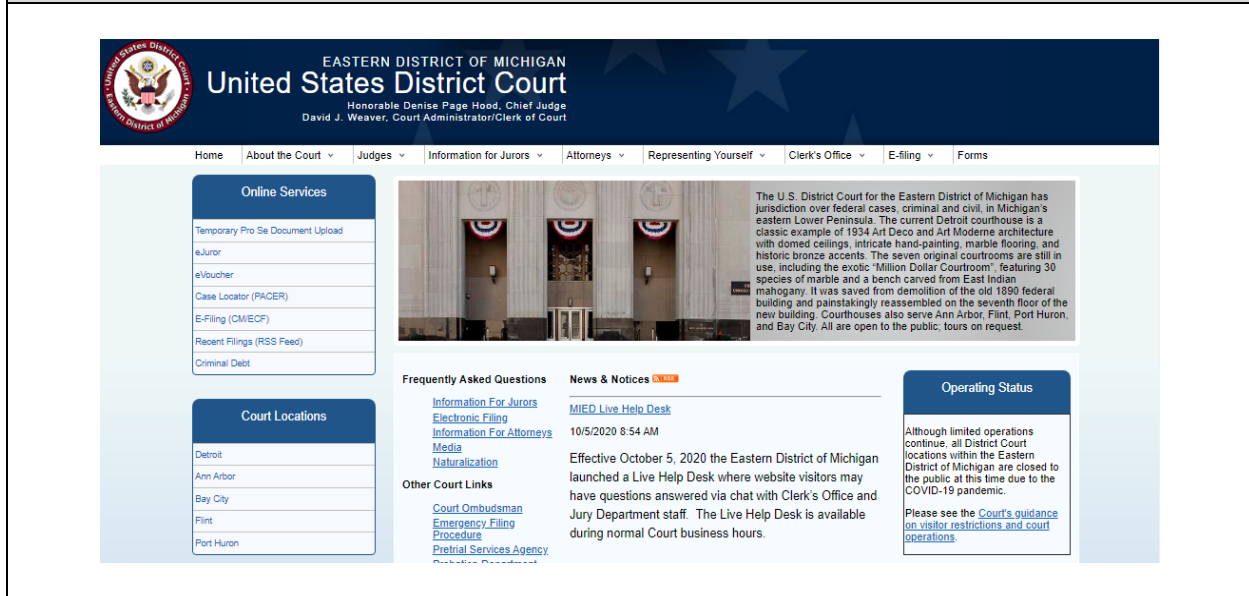


Table 1: Whether Court Homepages Have a Box or Banner for COVID Content by Court Type	District Courts (n=96)	Bankruptcy Courts (n=90)	Appellate Courts (n=14)	TOTAL Courts (n=200)
Yes	77.1%	66.7%	71.4%	72.0%
No	22.9%	33.3%	28.6%	28.0%

Note: If a court website used a box or banner on its homepage to display COVID-19 information, the website was coded as a “yes”.

As shown in Table 1, more than a quarter (28%) of the federal court websites did not have a box or banner near or at the top of their homepages for its COVID-19 information. Nonetheless, most of the courts did have coronavirus information posted on their homepages in some fashion (Table 2), whether the information was included in a COVID-19 box/banner, shown as normal-to-large font-size weblinks to its coronavirus-related general orders, or presented as embedded court notices (e.g., courthouse [informational signs](#) posted in buildings and/or at entrances).

<sup>27</sup> U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Michigan, homepage, <http://www.mied.uscourts.gov/> (image captured Sept. 21, 2020). Last visited Jan. 7, 2021.

<b>Table 2: Percentage of Court Homepages Containing COVID-19 Information by Court Type</b>	<b>District Courts (n=96)</b>	<b>Bankruptcy Courts (n=90)</b>	<b>Appellate Courts (n=14)</b>	<b>TOTAL Courts (n=200)</b>
Yes	78.1%	74.4%	78.6%	76.5%
No	21.9%	25.6%	21.4%	23.5%

Note: If a court website included COVID-19 information on its homepage, the website was coded as a “yes”.

### **B. Dedicated Webpage: COVID-19 Information/Guidance**

Most federal courts’ public websites have COVID-19 court alerts and information on their homepages (Tables 1 and 2 above). Almost 60% of the federal courts have a COVID webpage or an aggregated document (e.g., PDF file of the court’s COVID materials) exclusively dedicated to coronavirus guidance or information (Table 3). Such COVID-19 dedicated webpages use various titles (e.g., COVID-19 Announcements, Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) and Court Operations, and Coronavirus (COVID) Related Court Orders/Procedures).

These COVID-19 dedicated webpages<sup>28</sup> are primarily an aggregate of information concerning the courts’ pandemic operational procedures. The webpages frequently contain some or all the following information:

- general orders (e.g., civil and criminal proceeding extensions, courthouse closings)
- courthouse access updates (e.g., usage of face masks, operating hours)
- instructions (e.g., how to attend proceedings remotely)
- notices (e.g., event postponements or cancellations)
- health advisories (e.g., information from local and state agencies)

<b>Table 3: Percentage of Court Websites That Have a Dedicated COVID-19/Coronavirus Guidance or Information Page by Court Type</b>	<b>District Courts (n=96)</b>	<b>Bankruptcy Courts (n=90)</b>	<b>Appellate Courts (n=14)</b>	<b>TOTAL Courts (n=200)</b>
Yes	61.5%	56.7%	42.9%	58.0%
No	38.5%	43.3%	57.1%	42.0%

<sup>28</sup> The COVID-19 webpages on the federal court websites use various titles (e.g., COVID-19 Announcements, Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) and Court Operations, Coronavirus (COVID-19) Related Court Orders/Procedures).



The format of the federal courts' COVID-19 webpages varies from posting of weblinks to its coronavirus-related administrative orders to explanatory text with news, updates, and many COVID-19 court weblinks.

For example, as shown in Figure 11, Washington Western Bankruptcy Court's "Court Operations during the COVID-19 Outbreak: Information about Hearings, Filings and Operations" webpage posts its coronavirus information by date and with details such as weblinks, explanations, and contact numbers.

**Figure 11: Dedicated COVID-19 Court Operations Webpage for the U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the Western District of Washington<sup>29</sup>**

**Court Operations during the COVID-19 Outbreak: Information about Hearings, Filings and Operations**

**Release Date:** Mon, 08/31/2020  
**Updated October 2, 2020**

The District Court has entered *General Order 15-20* extending the closure of the courthouses until January 1, 2021. The Bankruptcy Court has the discretion to conduct a very limited number of emergency evidentiary hearings and trials in person; most trials and evidentiary hearings will proceed by telephone or video conference. All scheduled non-evidentiary hearings will continue telephonically.

**If you have an evidentiary hearing or trial scheduled prior to January 1, 2021**, please contact the assigned judge's chambers.

**Non-evidentiary matters scheduled through December 31, 2020** are to be noted as follows: The hearing information listed in the upper right-hand corner of the pleading, per LBR 9013-1(d)(1)(B), should state "telephonic" as the location. In ECF, the hearing should be set using the correct physical location for the assigned judge. A Notice of Motion, per LBR 9013-1(c), should state the place of hearing as "telephonic" and include the dial in information for the specific judge.

**Non-evidentiary hearings scheduled for January 1, 2021 and later** should be noted for the assigned judge's physical courtroom location, both in ECF and on the notice. If it becomes necessary to hold these matters telephonically, the parties will be notified by chambers.

**Vancouver hearings.** Matters scheduled for the October 6 and December 1 Vancouver calendars should include dial-in information for Judge Lynch; matters scheduled for the November 3 Vancouver calendar should include dial-in information for Judge Hepton.

**Updated August 31, 2020**

**U.S. TRUSTEE PROGRAM EXTENDS TELEPHONIC OR VIDEO SECTION 341 MEETINGS**

The U.S. Trustee Program has extended the requirement that section 341 meetings be conducted by telephone or video appearance to all cases filed during the period of the President's "Proclamation on Declaring a National Emergency Concerning the Novel Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Outbreak" issued March 13, 2020, and ending on the date that is 60 days after such declaration terminates. However, the U.S. Trustee may approve a request by a trustee in a particular case to continue the section 341 meeting to an in-person meeting in a manner that complies with local public health guidance, if the U.S. Trustee determines that an in-person examination of the debtor is required to ensure the completeness of the meeting or the protection of estate property. This policy may be revised at the discretion of the Director of the United States Trustee Program.

**Updated July 21 2020**

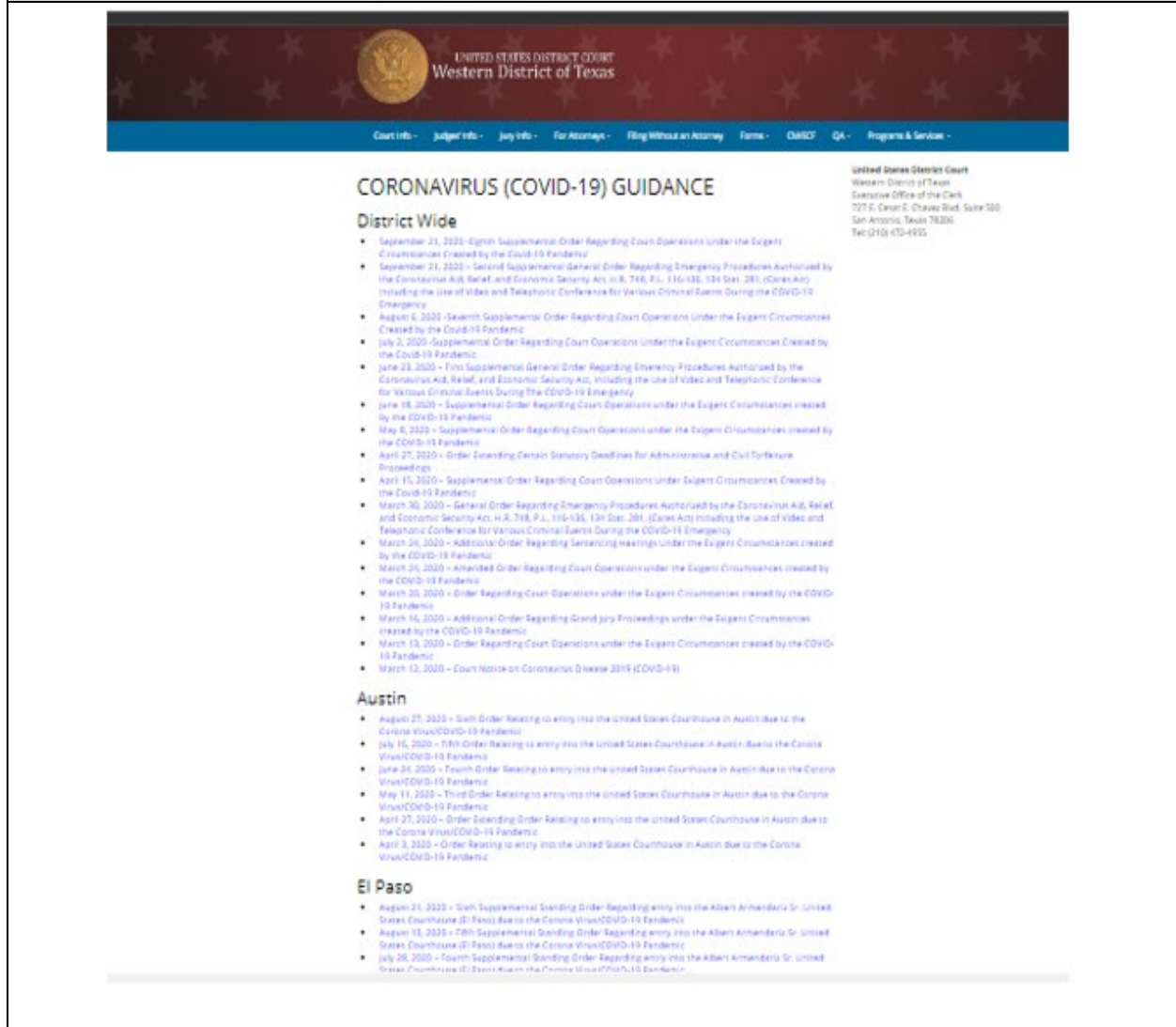
**Temporary Electronic Filing Option for Parties Without an Attorney**

Given the limited access to the courthouses and other filing challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic, the court has made available the following temporary electronic filing option for parties without an attorney (debtors and

<sup>29</sup> U.S. Bankruptcy Court, Western District of Washington, Court Operations during the COVID-19 Outbreak, <http://www.wawb.uscourts.gov/COVID-19-Page> (image captured Oct. 5, 2020). Last visited Jan. 7, 2021.

Another example is Texas Western District Court’s “Coronavirus (COVID-19) webpage (Figure 12). Its webpage appears to list most, if not all, of its COVID-19 court news, information, and general orders. The weblinks are descriptive, grouped according to whether they are district-wide or court division-specific, and posted in descending order by date.

**Figure 12: Dedicated COVID-19 Guidance Webpage for the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Texas<sup>30</sup>**



### C. COVID-19 Information in Court News and Announcements Section

Most court websites have a sidebar or enclosed area on their homepages that announce upcoming events, new resources or rules, or other changes to court operations. Often these

<sup>30</sup> U.S. District Court, Western District of Texas, Coronavirus (COVID-19) Guidance, <https://www.txwd.uscourts.gov/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance/> (image captured Sept. 23, 2020). Last visited Jan. 7, 2021.

web sections are titled “News and Announcements” and the area is mostly a consolidated listing of court news, updates, and information (e.g., operational status, case alerts, notices, event listings).

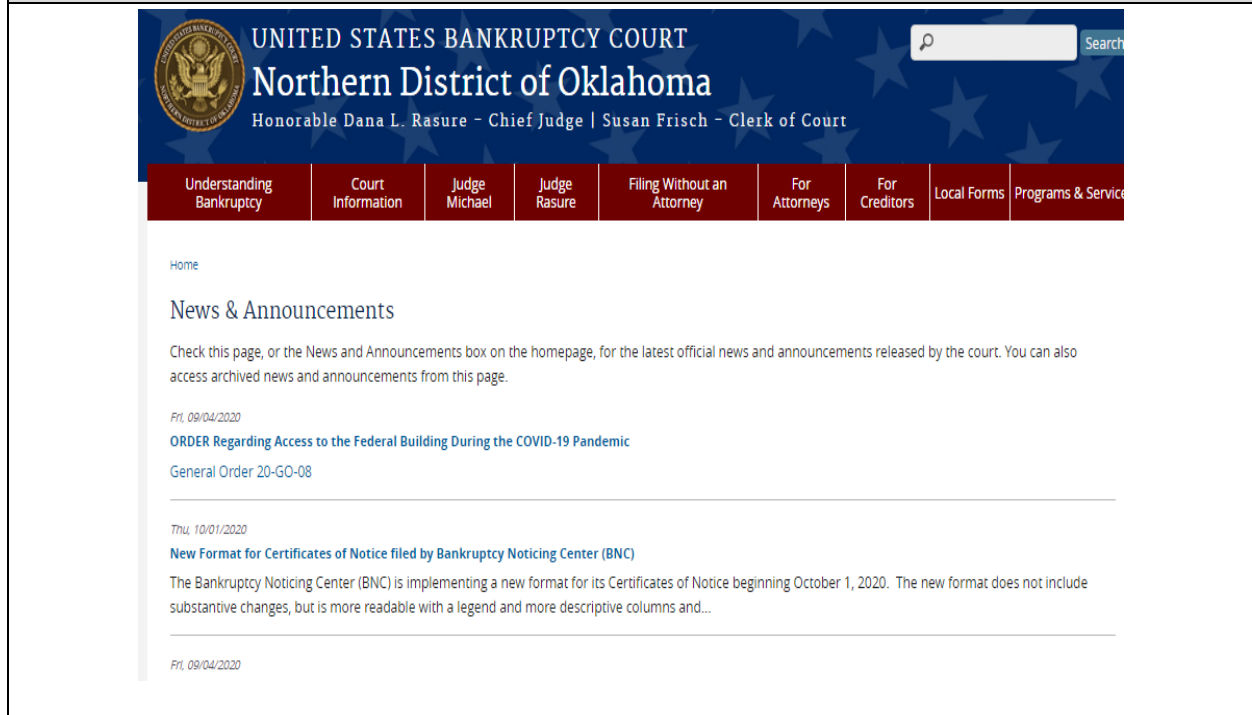
The ‘News and Announcements’ feature is normally displayed in the middle or lower part of a court’s homepage in an enclosed box or sidebar (Figure 13). This box or sidebar often includes a “view all” prompt which directs site visitors to a court webpage of recent, as well as older and archived announcements (Figure 14). Court websites almost always post information in its news and/or announcements section chronologically by the date of the posting.

**Figure 13: News and Announcements Box for the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Louisiana**<sup>31</sup>



<sup>31</sup> U.S. District Court, Middle District of Louisiana, <http://www.lamd.uscourts.gov/> (image captured Sept. 21, 2020). Last visited Jan. 7, 2021.

**Figure 14: News and Announcements Webpage for the U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the Northern District of Oklahoma<sup>32</sup>**



Most federal courts (82.5%) are posting their coronavirus-related court news and information within their news and announcements web sections (Table 4).

<b>Table 4: Percentage of Courts that Include COVID-19 Information in Its News and Announcements Section<sup>33</sup></b>	<b>District Courts (n=96)</b>	<b>Bankruptcy Courts (n=90)</b>	<b>Appellate Courts (n=14)</b>	<b>TOTAL Courts (n=200)</b>
Yes	71.9%	92.2%	92.9%	82.5 %
No	28.1%	6.7%	7.1%	17.0%
No Identifiable Court News and Announcements Webpage <sup>34</sup>	0.0%	1.1%	0.0%	0.5%

*Note:* If a court website included COVID-19 information on its news and announcements section, the website was coded as a “yes”.

<sup>32</sup> U.S. Bankruptcy Court, Northern District of Oklahoma, <https://www.oknb.uscourts.gov/> (image captured Oct. 5, 2020).

<sup>33</sup> If a review of a court webpage resulted in at least one mention of COVID-19/coronavirus-related court information (e.g., administrative orders, news, notices) then the review was deemed successful (recorded as a “yes”). In other words, N-court’s webpage provided COVID-19 court information for its website visitors.

<sup>34</sup> Federal court websites in which we were unable to locate a webpage in which these N-courts’ general or administrative orders were listed on their court’s website. Therefore, we recorded these courts as “N/A” (not applicable) as to whether it had COVID-19 information on its webpage, since data (a recorded “yes” or “no”) could not be gathered for these courts.

Bankruptcy and appellate courts use their news and announcements sections for placement of COVID-19 court information at a higher rate than the district courts. To varying degrees, all three court types appear to prefer using their respective news and announcements sections, instead of a dedicated COVID-19 webpage to provide coronavirus court information to site visitors.

#### **D. COVID-19 Information on Court Administrative/General/Standing Orders Webpages**

Court websites generally list operational directives of the court (i.e., administrative, general or standing orders) on a dedicated webpage or on the same webpage as the court local rules. These court orders webpages are usually accessible via a court website's toolbar under menu items such as court information, local rules and orders, or for attorneys.

These court order pages usually include weblinks to their court orders listed in ascending or descending order by the order number or by the effective date (i.e., when the order was signed by the court's Chief Judge). A few court websites have distinctive features on their court orders webpages, including:

- a listing of an order's effective or superseded status ([Nevada Bankruptcy Court](#))
- a drop-down category menu ([Texas Eastern District Court](#), which includes COVID-19 as a category)
- a search bar ([Wisconsin Eastern Bankruptcy Court](#)), which allows website visitors to narrow their orders search by topic (e.g., coronavirus, judge's name)

As an example, the California Eastern Bankruptcy Court orders webpage (Figure 15) lists its most recent general orders first and uses the order number (GO.20.03) and a full weblink title for the order ("Notice of Forbearance Filed by Creditors, Debtors, or Debtors in Possession") to help a site visitor determine the content of the order without having to open the order's weblink.

**Figure 15: General Orders Webpage, Including COVID-19 Related Orders, for the U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the Eastern District of California<sup>35</sup>**



Approximately three-quarters of district and bankruptcy courts use their orders webpage to post coronavirus-related orders (Table 5), whereas less than half (42.9%) the appellate courts do the same.

Table 5: COVID-19 Related Orders on Court Orders Webpage	District Courts (n=96)	Bankruptcy Courts (n=90)	Appellate Courts (n=14)	TOTAL Courts (n=200)
Yes	72.9%	78.9%	42.9%	73.5%
No	27.1%	20%	57.1%	26.0%
No Identifiable Court Orders Webpage <sup>36</sup>	0.0%	1.1%	0.0%	0.5%

Note: If a court website included COVID-19 related orders on its orders webpage, the website was coded as a “yes”.

<sup>35</sup> U.S. Bankruptcy Court, Eastern District of California, General Orders, <http://www.caeb.uscourts.gov/Forms/GeneralOrders.aspx> (image captured Oct. 14, 2020). Last visited Jan. 7, 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

## E. Retrieval of COVID-19 Information Using Website Search Tools

Courts likely expect their potential website users to be able to locate and access relevant COVID-19 information via the homepage without needing to use the website's search tool. However, some users may overlook a court website's COVID-19 homepage displays, or simply prefer to search a court's website for their desired information.

COVID-19 has several official and unofficial sobriquets (e.g., COVID, COVID-19 pandemic, coronavirus, corona) used by government agencies, physicians, journalists, and the general public. Therefore, website users, especially members of the general public, may use a substantial number of terminology variations when searching for COVID-19 information on a court website.

For every federal court, the Center staff conducted a COVID terminology website search. We entered common COVID-related terms into the website's search bar/function to determine whether each of these terms retrieved one or more coronavirus-related documents or other court information (Table 6).<sup>37</sup> The terms were entered without quotes around them as most users would do.

Table 6 shows the percentages in which COVID-related terms returned relevant information on the federal court websites. We found some minor differences between court type regarding their respective top COVID terminology search results: district (covid-19, coronavirus, pandemic); bankruptcy (covid-19, coronavirus, pandemic); and appellate (covid-19, covid-19 pandemic, pandemic).

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<sup>37</sup> We expanded our original list of terms after our initial, exploratory search of the federal court's public websites.

<b>Table 6: COVID-related Search Term Usage on Court Websites</b>	<b>District Courts (n=96)</b>	<b>Bankruptcy Courts (n=90)</b>	<b>Appellate Courts (n=14)</b>	<b>TOTAL Courts (n=200)</b>
covid-19	89.6%	96.7%	78.6%	92.0%
coronavirus	74.0%	87.8%	35.7%	77.5%
pandemic	71.9%	58.9%	64.3%	65.5%
covid-19 pandemic	67.7%	56.7%	64.3%	62.5%
covid	43.8%	40.0%	42.9%	42.0%
virus <sup>38</sup>	42.7%	52.2%	14.3%	45.0%
coronavirus pandemic	40.6%	50.0%	42.9%	45.0%
covid 19	28.1%	31.1%	28.6%	29.5%
corona	24.0%	12.2%	14.3%	18.0%
No search feature/function present on website <sup>39</sup>	6.3%	1.1%	21.4%	5.0%

Note: If a search for X-COVID term resulted in at least one search result for COVID-19/coronavirus-related court information, then the search result was recorded as a “yes” for N-court.

It was interesting to find that the term “virus” retrieved coronavirus information. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, court website visitors using the term “virus” would probably end up viewing information about computer viruses or “cold virus” health advisories, as our search returned such information.<sup>40</sup> However, the search term “virus” also retrieved at least one COVID-19 court-related document for many district (42.7%) and bankruptcy (52.2%) courts.

### III: CONCLUSION

Overall, the federal court websites provide various ways in which a site visitor can retrieve their COVID-related court materials, whether primarily through visible alerts and information posted on homepages or from other sections on their websites (e.g., COVID-19 webpage, news and announcements, administrative orders, information sidebars).

Courts have diverse regional audiences, different types of court users, and divergent views about their respective websites. As such, creating a definitive ranking of how well federal court websites provide COVID-19 court information for site visitors is not feasible. However, below

<sup>38</sup> If a court website search result for the term “virus” resulted in non-COVID material only (e.g., computer virus), that court was recorded as a “no” in Table 6.

<sup>39</sup> These federal district, bankruptcy, and appellate court websites do not have a search function/bar on their website. Therefore, COVID terminology search results data could not be gathered and recorded for N-court websites.

<sup>40</sup> If N-court’s website search result for the term “virus” resulted in non-COVID material only (e.g., computer virus), then N-court’s website response/data was recorded as a “no” as to whether the term provided a site visitor with COVID-19 court information.



are examples of court websites that presented its coronavirus information in an especially visible, comprehensive manner, which includes user-friendly search functions:

[U.S. Bankruptcy Court of the District of Nevada](#): 1) The district’s homepage has a noticeable and concisely-titled weblink to its coronavirus material (“Click Here for Coronavirus (COVID-19) Updates Impacting the U.S. Bankruptcy Court”); 2) Its dedicated COVID-19 webpage has a calendar of its COVID announcements, information weblinks grouped by topic, and other helpful weblinks, such as to the Clerk’s Office; 3) The general orders webpage is current, has status updates per order (e.g., remains in full effect, no longer in effect), and provides clear descriptions of its orders; and 4) The website’s search function returned results (e.g., COVID information from its court’s site) for all of the COVID terminology search terms.

[U.S. District Court of the Middle District of Pennsylvania](#): 1) The district’s homepage has a large important announcements box for its coronavirus information with a section titled “Click HERE for Orders, Guidelines, and video on how the Middle District of Pennsylvania is dealing with the pandemic”; 2) The website’s toolbar has a COVID-19 resources category; 3) The general orders webpage has a search function, and its orders are clearly described (e.g., IN RE: Administrative Order Concerning the Use of Face Masks/Coverings in Public Areas of the District’s Courthouses); and 4) Its search function returned successful results for eight out of nine of the COVID terminology search terms.

[U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Washington](#) 1) Their website has a clearly visible banner (“Information Regarding Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) and Court Operations”) on its homepage; 2) The court’s COVID webpage has a video message from its Chief Judge about the court’s “protective measures related to COVID-19.” The video’s tone is conversational while also instructive and makes use of a few visuals to emphasize its COVID court safety protocols; 3) Its local rules/orders webpage groups its general orders by topic and includes the order numbers and dates. Also, the general order weblink titles are concise, which makes it easier for site visitors to select and view those orders that are of interest to them; and 4) The website’s search function returned search results for seven out of nine of the COVID terminology search terms.

### *Suggestions for Presenting COVID-19 Information on Court Websites*

Below are suggestions for federal courts seeking to enhance website visitors’ ability to effectively locate their COVID-19 court information:

1. **Create a COVID-19 Information Webpage:** Website visitors looking for information about a court’s pandemic operations (e.g., courthouse access, Clerk’s office hours, how to attend proceedings remotely, file paperwork, or check their jury duty status) might

assume that there is a single webpage on which they can find this information. Since most court websites have COVID-19 court information posted in various sections (e.g., homepage, news and announcements, orders webpage), creating a dedicated webpage that aggregates their coronavirus information may be a relatively simple, but very helpful resource, especially for the general public and pro se litigants.

2. **Increase the Number of Search Terms That Effectively Return Relevant Court Information:** Court website visitors may attempt to locate COVID-19 court information and documents using various COVID-related terms. A court website should ideally ensure that its COVID-related information can be adequately retrieved using a comprehensive range of search terms, both in abbreviated and formal forms. This might be possible by tagging and categorizing posted information beyond the usual COVID terminology (e.g., “covid-19” and “coronavirus”) to abbreviated and less formal terms (e.g., “corona” and “covid”). Depending on the court website’s host or platform (e.g., Windows, MacOS, Drupal, WordPress) the tagging could be done by adding terms or keywords to documents and webpages via a keyword function in order to increase the number of retrieved COVID-19 court materials.
3. **Make Use of Descriptive Hyperlinks, Captions, and Supplemental Information:** While some court websites visitors (e.g., attorneys) will be familiar with the format of short-titled weblinks such as “G.O. 20-03” and understand this means that the third general order for the court was enacted in 2020 (and thus possibly a COVID-related order), less frequent court website visitors, such as members of the general public may not. In addition, short or truncated titles usually require site visitors to open the document to determine the exact date of the court order and its subject matter, which may impair their ability to quickly identify relevant materials. Adding a brief description (e.g., General Order 20-03: Reduction in Clerk’s Office Hours), date (e.g., January 31, 2020), or posting other detailed information next to the weblink, whether it is a general court order or some other court document, may be helpful to court website users in identifying what is likely to be relevant to them.
4. **Search Function Installation:** Although most court websites do have a search bar/function, ten federal courts (approximately 9.6%) do not have a search bar on their website. On dense or content-heavy websites a “search box is often the most frequently used design element. If a website’s content is not organized properly, an efficient search engine is not only helpful but crucial, even for basic website navigation.”<sup>41</sup> Given the variety and amount of information on federal court websites, providing its site users with a search function for its website overall, and ideally, an additional search

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<sup>41</sup> György Fekete, *Designing the Holy Search Box: Examples and Best Practices*, smashingmagazine.com (Dec. 4, 2008), (<https://www.smashingmagazine.com/2008/12/designing-the-holy-search-box-examples-and-best-practices/>).

bar/function within specific webpages (e.g., COVID-19 information, general orders) would efficiently assist users with locating their desired information.

#### IV. APPENDIX: Data Tables

This section includes augmented versions of the six data tables presented in this report. They include counts of courts in addition to percentages of courts.

As described in the report, in February 2021, Center staff reviewed 200 federal court public websites of the district (n=96), bankruptcy (n=90), and appellate courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court (n=14).<sup>42</sup> We examined whether each public website provided court-related COVID-19 information in the following areas of the website: 1) the website’s homepage; 2) a dedicated COVID-19 webpage; 3) a news and announcements section; and 4) a general orders webpage. We also explored whether a site visitor would be able to retrieve the court’s posted COVID-related information using a court website’s search function with a range of pandemic-related search terms.

For simplification of presentation, we categorized the territorial courts, the Court of Federal Claims, and the Court of International Trade as district courts, and the Supreme Court, as well as the thirteen courts of appeals, as appellate courts.

<b>Table 1: Whether Court Homepages Have a Box or Banner for COVID Content by Court Type</b>	<b>District Courts (n=96)</b>	<b>Bankruptcy Courts (n=90)</b>	<b>Appellate Courts (n=14)</b>	<b>TOTAL Courts (n=200)</b>
Yes	77.1% (n=74)	66.7% (n=60)	71.4% (n=10)	72.0% (n=144)
No	22.9% (n=22)	33.3% (n=30)	28.6% (n=4)	28.0% (n=56)

*Note:* If a court website used a box or banner on its homepage to display COVID-19 information, the website was coded as a “yes”.

<b>Table 2: Percentage of Court Homepages Containing COVID-19 Information by Court Type</b>	<b>District Courts (n=96)</b>	<b>Bankruptcy Courts (n=90)</b>	<b>Appellate Courts (n=14)</b>	<b>TOTAL Courts (n=200)</b>
Yes	78.1% (n=75)	77.4% (n=67)	78.6% (n=11)	76.5% (n=153)
No	21.9% (n=21)	25.6% (n=23)	21.4% (n=3)	23.5% (n=47)

*Note:* If a court website included COVID-19 information on its homepage, the website was coded as a “yes”.

<sup>42</sup> United States Courts, Court Website Links, <https://www.uscourts.gov/about-federal-courts/federal-courts-public/court-website-links> (visited Oct. 12, 2020).

<b>Table 3: Percentage of Court Websites That Have a Dedicated COVID-19/Coronavirus Guidance or Information Page by Court Type</b>	<b>District Courts (n=96)</b>	<b>Bankruptcy Courts (n=90)</b>	<b>Appellate Courts (n=14)</b>	<b>TOTAL Courts (n=200)</b>
Yes	61.5% (n=59)	56.7% (n=51)	42.9% (n=6)	58.0% (n=116)
No	38.5% (n=37)	43.3% (n=39)	57.1% (n=8)	42.0% (n=84)

<b>Table 4: Percentage of Courts that Include COVID-19 Information in Its News and Announcements Section<sup>43</sup></b>	<b>District Courts (n=96)</b>	<b>Bankruptcy Courts (n=90)</b>	<b>Appellate Courts (n=14)</b>	<b>TOTAL Courts (n=200)</b>
Yes	71.9% (n=69)	92.2% (n=83)	92.9% (n=13)	82.5% (n=165)
No	28.1% (n=27)	6.7% (n=6)	7.1% (n=1)	17.0% (n=34)
No Identifiable Court News and Announcements Webpage <sup>44</sup>	0.0% (n=0)	1.1% (n=1)	0.0% (n=0)	0.5% (n=1)

Note: If a court website included COVID-19 information on its news and announcements section, the website was coded as a “yes”.

<b>Table 5: COVID-19 Related Orders on Court Orders Webpage</b>	<b>District Courts (n=96)</b>	<b>Bankruptcy Courts (n=90)</b>	<b>Appellate Courts (n=14)</b>	<b>TOTAL Courts (n=200)</b>
Yes	72.9% (n=70)	78.9% (n=71)	42.9% (n=6)	73.5% (n=147)
No	27.1% (n=26)	20.0% (n=18)	57.1% (n=8)	26.0% (n=52)
No Identifiable Court Orders Webpage <sup>45</sup>	0.0% (n=0)	1.1% (n=1)	0.0% (n=0)	0.5% (n=1)

Note: If a court website included COVID-19 related orders on its orders webpage, the website was coded as a “yes”.

<sup>43</sup> If a review of a court webpage resulted in at least one mention of COVID-19/coronavirus-related court information (e.g., administrative orders, news, notices), then the review was deemed successful (recorded as a “yes”). In other words, N-court’s webpage provided COVID-19 court information for its website visitors.

<sup>44</sup> On these federal court websites, we were unable to locate a webpage in which these N-courts’ general or administrative orders were listed. Therefore, we recorded these courts as “N/A” (not applicable) as to whether it had COVID-19 information on its webpage, since data (a recorded “yes” or “no”) could not be gathered for these courts.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<b>Table 6: COVID-related Search Term Usage on Court Websites</b>	<b>District Courts (n=96)</b>	<b>Bankruptcy Courts (n=90)</b>	<b>Appellate Courts (n=14)</b>	<b>TOTAL Courts (n=200)</b>
covid-19	89.6% (n=86)	96.7% (n=87)	78.6% (n=11)	92.0% (n=184)
coronavirus	74.0% (n=71)	87.8% (n=79)	35.7% (n=5)	77.5% (n=155)
pandemic	71.9% (n=69)	58.9% (n=53)	64.3% (n=9)	65.5% (n=131)
covid-19 pandemic	67.7% (n=65)	56.7% (n=51)	64.3% (n=9)	62.5% (n=125)
covid	43.8% (n=42)	40.0% (n=36)	42.9% (n=6)	42.0% (n=84)
virus <sup>46</sup>	42.7% (n=41)	52.2% (n=47)	14.3% (n=2)	45.0% (n=90)
coronavirus pandemic	40.6% (n=39)	50.0% (n=45)	42.9% (n=6)	45.0% (n=90)
covid 19	28.1% (n=27)	31.1% (n=28)	28.6% (n=4)	29.5% (n=59)
corona	24.0% (n=23)	12.2% (n=11)	14.3% (n=2)	18.0% (n=36)
No search feature/function present on website <sup>47</sup>	6.3% (n=6)	1.1% (n=1)	21.4% (n=3)	5.0% (n=10)

*Note:* If a search for X-COVID term resulted in at least one search result for COVID-19/coronavirus-related court information, then the search result was recorded as a “yes” for N-court.

<sup>46</sup> If a court website search result for the term “virus” resulted in non-COVID material only (e.g., computer virus), that court was recorded as a “no” in Table 6.

<sup>47</sup> These federal district, bankruptcy, and appellate court websites do not have a search function/bar on their website. Therefore, COVID terminology search results data could not be gathered and recorded for N-court websites.