

OFFICE OF THE ESSEX COUNTY PROSECUTOR

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Update from Acting Essex County Prosecutor Theodore N. Stephens, II

Dear Clergy Partners:

First and foremost, I pray that you and your loved ones are healthy. These past few weeks have presented a unique challenge for all of us as we deal with the "new normal" created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This letter is to bring you up to date on what we have been doing in the Essex County Prosecutor's Office and to share with you some suggestions regarding the support we need from you and your congregants.

While most of the members of my staff are working remotely, we are continuing to carry out the vital functions of the Essex County Prosecutor's Office.

Soon after it became clear that we would be required to stay home except for the most essential activities, New Jersey Supreme Court Chief Justice Stuart Rabner issued an order on Sunday, March 22. The order called for the release of defendants convicted of municipal court offenses, those serving time for violation of probation, and those sentenced for low-level 4th degree offenses or disorderly persons offenses.

The order called for these defendants to be released by Tuesday, March 24. That required our office to review hundreds of cases and determine whether we believed it was necessary to oppose any of the releases based on concerns that the person posed a danger to the community. Our assistant prosecutors rose to the occasion and quickly reviewed these cases and objected to the release of a few select defendants who we believed were dangerous.

Those cases were reviewed by judges and in many instances, we prevailed. While we share the Chief Justice's concern about inmates being exposed to the COVID-19 virus, we were equally concerned about public safety. Because of the hard work of everyone in the justice system, we were able to strike a balance between those two very important competing interests.

We have continued, on the limited basis, to handle arraignments, detention hearings, guilty pleas, sentencings and other matters. As I write this letter, virtually, all of these matters are being handled by virtual communications.

Among the most pressing duties we face is continuing to investigate homicides. We have had several homicides in Essex County since the start of the pandemic. We have responded and are investigating them as we would ordinarily with a few minor changes. Similarly, we continue to deal with domestic violence cases. With families sheltering in place, incidents of domestic violence continue to occur. One of our top priorities is protecting those victims during this crisis.

On other fronts, we have helped at the coronavirus testing centers and assisted law enforcement throughout the county as we deal with the crushing impact this is having on our community.

Like all of you, we are on the frontlines of this pandemic. You are providing spiritual support to people who are dealing with a medical and financial crisis. We appreciate the creativity you have used to keep temples, synagogues, mosques and church buildings closed even as these institutions continue to serve people. We all miss gathering for religious services, but it is critically important to comply with the restrictions imposed by Gov. Phil Murphy.

The state wants those of you who are using Zoom, the popular video teleconferencing platform, to know that it has been the target of security breaches. Because of weaknesses in its security system, unauthorized persons have gained access to this platform during worship services and displayed lewd, threatening and other inappropriate language or images. Zoom has made a number of recommendations to prevent this problem, including requiring a password for all meetings, creating a waiting room which requires participants to be invited into the meeting, lock meetings once they have been started and other measures. If you are going to use Zoom, we recommend that your tech staff apply these enhanced security measures.

The state of New Jersey welcomes offers from individuals and businesses. Specifically, the state is looking for volunteers who are either healthcare professionals, can provide personal protection equipment, have discount housing or technological talent. For further information go the New Jersey Department of Health website or the 24/7 New Jersey COVID-19 hub by calling 1-800-962-1253.

As you speak with your members, we urge you to remind them of the following:

- Stay home. Except to go to the store for essentials like groceries and medicine, stay in your home.
- When you must go out make every effort to stay six feet away from others.
- Wear a mask. Leave the medical masks for health care workers but wear a homemade mask or at least put a scarf over your mouth and nose.
- Check on family members and friends, particularly the elderly.
- Eat healthy. This virus hits the immune system. While we don't know exactly how it works having a fortified immune system can help us. So, eat fruits, vegetables and healthy snacks.

Last, but not least, we must all lean on our faith to get us through this time. We are open. We are here to serve you. Our commitment to do justice does not waver even in this crisis.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "T.N. Stephens II". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Prosecutor Theodore N. Stephens, II
Acting Essex County Prosecutor