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National News

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Allegheny County Courthouse Will Ban Camera Cell Phones

The Legal Intelligencer
By Daniel Casciato
August 31, 2007

Camera cell phones will soon be banned from the third and fifth floors of the Allegheny County Courthouse. In fact, the ban could start as early as today.

The ban nearly took effect last week after Court of Common Pleas Judge Donna Jo McDaniel, the administrative judge of the Criminal Division, issued an order banning all camera cell phones from the entire building.

Later in the day, McDaniel issued a new version of the order allowing exceptions for government employees and attorneys. She issued yet another version later in the day allowing the media and anyone reporting for jury duty to carry cell phones with a camera.

However, she rescinded the order and lifted the ban completely the next day.

"Judge McDaniel said that she wanted to hold implementation until she had an opportunity to sit down with officials from the sheriff's office, [which] . . . handles the courthouse security, and the county building guards, who do the screenings at the front door," said Raymond Billotte, district court administrator.

Billotte said that McDaniel sat down with officials from the sheriff's office and the building guards Tuesday afternoon to discuss various scenarios to see if they can come up with a reasonable plan to address this concern of having camera phones in the courtrooms and on the courtroom floors.

Billotte said that other judges in the criminal division raised some concerns to McDaniel recently about the use of camera cell phones in

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and around the courtrooms.

"She didn't tell me about any specific instances," said Billotte. "But she had a number of judges come to her and tell her that this is something that needs to be looked at and to be aware of."

They hope to determine a new policy and issue another order this week, according to Billotte.

"If everyone can agree on a policy, it will hopefully be implemented by the end of the week. If not, we should see something by early next week," he said.

The ban would apply only to the third and fifth floors of the courthouse, which are controlled by the courts. There will be no restrictions to the rest of the floors which contain county offices, often visited by residents to meet with county officials, pay taxes and perform other county-related functions.

Billotte said he thinks the ban on camera cell phones would be a good idea in the courtrooms.

"Anyone can take a picture with a cell phone and nobody would even know," he said. "I think the concerns of the judges are real. There's a law banning the taking of photographs inside the courtrooms and the surrounding areas. We just want to make sure that the order will comply with that rule."



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