



**Judicial Branch of Arizona  
in Maricopa County**

**Contact:**

Vincent Funari, PIO

[vincent.funari@jbazmc.maricopa.gov](mailto:vincent.funari@jbazmc.maricopa.gov)

(602) 506-7032

## **Virtual Court Expanded for In-Custody Defendants**

### *Innovations help Superior Court in Maricopa County conduct hearings during pandemic*

PHOENIX (Jan. 24, 2021) – During the Coronavirus pandemic, virtual environments popped up all over the world, including Superior Court and the Maricopa County Jail.

At a time when courts across the country were trying to do more remote hearings, the Judicial Branch of Arizona in Maricopa County partnered with the Maricopa County Sheriff's Office to launch the Jail Tablet Initiative and the SMART (Sentencing via Mobile Access /Remote Technology) cart project. These two programs allow some in-custody defendants to participate in court without leaving the jail.

"The pandemic forced us to respond to problems and needs we have never encountered before as a judicial and law enforcement community," Deputy Criminal Department Administrator Chris Candelaria said. "We overcame setbacks, celebrated the small victories and stayed focused on the mission: providing access to justice while striving to keep staff, defendants and the public safe."

With these two technological innovations, the Court maintained health and safety protocols, while taking into consideration constitutional rights issues and public transparency.

"These two programs are worthy of recognition because multiple stakeholders came together to solve a series of problems. The Maricopa County Sheriff's Office, Court Technology Services and the Court worked tirelessly to take some big ideas and turn them into a successful reality," Candelaria said.



For a Jail Tablet hearing, an in-custody defendant is placed in a quiet, private location in their assigned pod or unit with access to a computer tablet, headphones and a separate telephone to have a private conversation with their defense lawyer. All Maricopa County jail facilities are equipped to conduct tablet hearings, which includes all hearing types except sentencings.

Through December 2021, the Court's Criminal Department has conducted more than 4,040 Jail Tablet hearings since the start of the pandemic.

The SMART cart pilot picks up where the Jail Tablet initiative leaves off. The SMART cart, which is being used in 18 judicial divisions and five jails, allows in-custody defendants to participate in remote sentencings. The cart is equipped with a laptop, signature pad, fingerprint reader and a printer. Through December, more than 387 SMART cart sentencings have been completed.

"In addition to the SMART cart, we also developed a virtual courtroom platform, Court Connect, that coupled with the SMART cart provided a turnkey solution for conducting remote hearings. We're really proud of the role technology has played in ensuring that we protect defendants' rights, regardless of their health status," Judicial Branch Chief Information Officer Charisse Richards said.

###