



# CIVICS FIRST

Advancing Democracy & Law Education in Connecticut

## MEMORANDUM

To: All Registered High School Mock Trial Coaches

From: Jonathan Weiner, Civics First Board President

Re: Mock Trial Update for 2020-2021

Date: December 18, 2020

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Thank you all for your patience and courtesy as we reinvent High School Mock Trial to fit COVID-19. Here's an update on what to expect this season. As always, please do not hesitate to let me know if you have any questions, concerns, or suggestions.

### **UPDATED CASE AND TEAM Q/A:**

I've attached a list of answers to questions received over the last month or so, along with page/line citations for some minor changes made to the problem. Both will be posted to the Civics First website shortly.

### **INVOICING:**

With registration having closed, invoices will go to teams that have not paid. As a reminder, this year's fee is \$250 per team. Checks can be mailed to Civics First, c/o Connecticut Bar Association, 30 Bank Street, New Britain, CT 06051.

### **TOURNAMENT FORMAT:**

As a result of a combination of very unbalanced registrations for the regional dates, and unexpectedly high vendor/staffing costs for the virtual trials, we're going to organize the competition differently this year. Instead of regional rounds followed by a statewide playoff tournament, we're going to follow the competitive format used by major mock trial tournament organizers such as Empire, Nationals, and college/law school tournaments, and run a single statewide tournament. This means that all teams will try the case four times (twice as prosecution, twice as defense) over two tournament days. The first set of trials will be randomly drawn; from there, our vendor's software will do power matching, with future pairings dictated by your team's performance in previous

rounds relative to the field (as calculated by win/loss record and trial scoring). At the end of the four trials, the two highest scoring teams as calculated by the software will advance to the finals for the Connecticut state championship.

Ordinarily, this format wouldn't work with our in-person trials, as we don't have the space in any courthouse around the state to hold the requisite number of trials simultaneously, and we are committed to having our mock trials in real courtrooms as an essential part of the learning experience. With a virtual format, physical space isn't an issue, and volunteers can be drawn from a larger pool. So, we'll give this a try this year. The major advantage of this format is that it gives every team the competitive equivalent of advancing deep into the playoffs.

The first day of the two-day tournament will be Friday, January 29, 2021. Consistent with previous years' playoff schedules, the second day will be Friday, February 5, or Friday, February 26, TBA very shortly. Please let me know ASAP if your school has any major conflicts on those days.

## **RULES CHANGES:**

We have made numerous changes to Civics First's Connecticut Mock Trial Rules of Competition, most of which are stylistic. They are attached in both redline and clean copy, and have been posted to the website. None of the changes are substantive and will not affect your preparation for this year's trials with respect to the merits of the case. To summarize the major changes:

- The material previously contained in the Rules Addendum, namely, provisions governing the form objections, constructive sequestration, and costuming, is now integrated into the main rules document as Rules 6.0, 6.4, and 7.0, respectively.
- Certain provisions reflect operational changes over the last few years, including the use of jury trials with large scoring panels in playoff rounds (Rule 2.2), and the crediting of a win for teams that win if they compete in an additional round to resolve an uneven number of teams (Rule 3.5)
- We added a rostering rule emphasizing gender neutrality and preferred pronouns (Rule 2.4).
- Several new provisions have been added to facilitate virtual trials. They include resolution of emergencies, including lost internet/video connections (Rule 1.3a); a requirement that rosters be submitted on the Monday before the virtual trial (Rule 2.4); setup of virtual courtrooms (Rule 5.0a); timekeeping procedure (Rule 5.4); sitting/standing (Rule 5.8); exhibits/case material procedure (Rule 6.2a); communications among teammates (Rule 7.1); recording permission (Rule 7.2); and elimination of the electronic device restriction (Rule 7.3).

## **VIRTUAL MOCK TRIAL GUIDANCE:**

With respect to virtual mock trials, here are a few high points to consider as you prepare consistent with the new rules. More guidance will come, but to start, please bear in mind the following:

- This year's trials will be hosted on the Zoom platform.
- Every student must compete using their own device. We anticipate, but do not require, that students will compete from their own homes. If you meet as a team and try to compete from one location (with masks, etc.), all students must still have their own devices.
- In the interest of equity, please use only an ordinary web cam or the device-integrated camera. Setting up a professional grade studio would confer a competitive advantage.
- A laptop or desktop computer with webcam will provide the best possible Zoom performance and functionality. If one is not available, a tablet is the next best alternative. A smartphone will work in a pinch, but is not ideal.
- Each participant will use a screen name to identify themselves and their role in the competition; the format will be announced.
- During the trial, only the presiding judge and the participants actively competing in a segment (such as giving an argument, testifying, or questioning a witness), will have their camera turned on. Anyone not speaking must mute their device. Judges will be counseled to give a brief grace for objections, given mute delays.
- The use of the chat function is restricted to (1) the display of timekeeping messages, and (2) the communication of emergencies.
- During a virtual competition, only the six participating team members may communicate with one another. The six participating team members may use computers, cellular telephones, or other devices to facilitate this communication.
- Time posting will occur via the chat function or through the use of Time Remaining cards on camera. As always—and given the limitation of screens—it is advisable for participants to keep track of their own time while arguing or questioning witnesses.
- Any exhibit or document being used must be made available to all participants via screen sharing.

- Students will remain seated at all times except for opening and closing arguments, where they have the option to stand. Judges will be instructed not to take sitting/standing into account when scoring arguments.
- If a participant loses their connection to the trial, the rules provide for a brief recess to allow that participant to reconnect. If they cannot reestablish an internet/video connection, the rules provide for that participant to dial into the trial and compete using audio only. If an audio connection is unavailable, that participant's team may make an emergency substitution to assume that student's role.