



INSIGHT

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OUR VIEW

Cellphone ban is the right move

Despite a lot of handwringing before it even took effect, the ban on cellphones at the Cook County Criminal Courts Building in Chicago has gone smoothly during its first two weeks.

Visitors to the massive courthouse at 26th Street and California Avenue aren't happy with the new rule, but they've adapted to the inconvenience, justifying Circuit Court Chief Judge Timothy Evans' decision to impose the restriction.

Evans did so for safety after getting reports from judges and bailiffs about a growing incidence of spectators in courtrooms, including some street gang members, using cellphones to take photos of witnesses, judges and jurors in criminal cases or texting testimony to pending witnesses outside the courtroom.

Such conduct cannot be condoned in the criminal justice system, and we support Evans' decision to impose the ban not only at the Criminal Courts Building but soon at the suburban courthouses where criminal cases are also heard.

Visitors to the West Side courthouse are denied admission if they have a cellphone on them. They have the option of storing the phone in a limited number of lockers for a \$3 daily fee. Attorneys, existing and prospective jurors and reporters are exempt from the ban.

It's common these days for a criminal case to be disrupted because of someone using a cellphone in court, either by talking or taking pictures, according to some judges. Two days after the ban began at the Criminal Courts Building, an ex-convict, in court on a probation violation, was arrested after taking photos of the judge in his case at the courthouse in Bridgeview.

Some complain that the ban is excessive, that judges and bailiffs can confiscate a phone from anyone misusing it, but why should courthouse personnel have to bother keeping watch for cellphone violations? And considering the cost of the phones, is it fairer to permanently seize them than just prohibit them?

You don't need to bring a cellphone to court. It's a convenience, not a necessity (heresy for some, we know). Considering the potential danger from their misuse, as the old saying goes, better to be safe than sorry.