

Camera-in-Courts Checklist

There are two sets of cameras' rules affecting courtroom photography. The first was issued by the state Supreme Court in 1993 and sets general rules for judges and journalists. The other involves pooling and these were drafted separately by the S.C. Press Assn. and the S.C. Broadcasters Assn.

Photographers must remember that court coverage is different from most other assignments. Decorum and protocol are important.

Under the rules, photography is permitted in all state courts including the S.C. Supreme Court, S.C. Court of Appeals, Circuit Courts, Family Courts, Probate Courts, Master-in-Equity Courts, Municipal Courts and Magistrate Courts. Federal courts are not included, and do not permit cameras or recorders.

Here are the highlights from each set of guidelines:

Attire: "Business attire." Jeans, T-shirts and sneakers are often unacceptable. Check with the judge if you're unsure, or risk being kept out.

Camera positions: There can be one or two, if the judge approves. Both positions should be determined in advance in consultation with the presiding judge. One will be the primary position and will provide the best shots. One still and one video camera will be allowed in each spot.

Coming and going: Photographers must not be disruptive. Cameras can be set up only during a recess. Photographers should ask the presiding judge whether they can come and go during the session.

Contempt: News photographers and reporters can be expelled or cited for contempt if they do not follow the rules and observe decorum.

Family courts: Like other courts, these are open to the public and news media. However, both can be excluded if the judge seen fit. Be prepared to tell the judge why there is a compelling public interest in covering a given proceeding.

Juries and jury selection: Photography of jury selection is against the rules. Juries, once chosen, cannot be shot directly but may be in the background when panning or when cameras are focused on an attorney, witness or exhibit.

Juveniles: State law prohibits identifying them, but that law is probably an unconstitutional "prior restraint." Check with your news organization's attorney for guidance.

Lights: All photography must be done with available light. No strobes or camera lights are permitted.

Motor drives: Don't use one unless it's very quiet. Still photographers may need to have gear approved in advance by the presiding judge.

Pooling: If more than one print or more than one TV station requests coverage, then there will likely be pooling. The exception would be when two request coverage and agree to take pictures from the primary and secondary camera positions. Pooling disagreements must be decided by the media, not by judges.

Questions: Requests for assistance should be directed to the statewide media coordinators. For print: AP Bureau Chief John Shurr. For broadcast: WSPA-TV director Ken Elmore.

Requesting coverage: This may be done verbally, but some judges may want it in writing. The form is available on SCPA's website: www.scpres.org. Requests must be made as far in advance as possible.

Sound: This has to be arranged in advance with the judge in charge of each individual courtroom. Do not eavesdrop or record private conversations between attorneys and clients or between counsel and the presiding judge.

Tape recorders: Hand-held tape recorders are permitted (with the above eavesdropping restrictions). Sound recording for radio is permitted either through the TV sound system or through a separate tie-in. Advance approval required.

Witnesses: Some witnesses are off-limits for photography. Rape and child abuse victims, undercover officers and informants come under this heading. Judges will announce when pictures of such witnesses are prohibited. Cameramen must listen for instructions and abide by them.

In addition to this checklist, photographers should read both complete sets of rules carefully. Full guidelines are available from either group. Call the SCPA at 803-750-9561 or the SCBA at 803-732-1186, or www.scpres.org.