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Federal courts in Kan., Mo. to experiment with cameras

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Federal trial courts in Kansas and Missouri have been chosen to participate in a three-year experiment with cameras in the courtroom.

The pilot study is set to start July 18 in 14 federal courts, including the U.S. District Court of Kansas and the U.S. Eastern District of Missouri.

Only civil trials will be recorded with the approval of the presiding judge and all parties.

Kansas has federal courthouses in Wichita, Topeka and Kansas City. But only the courtroom used by U.S. District Judge Julie Robinson in Topeka has been wired to allow recording, Kansas Clerk of Court Timothy O'Brien said.

The Eastern District of Missouri has courthouses in St. Louis, Cape Girardeau and Hannibal. Five of their courtrooms have video conferencing capability, with a portable system available that can be moved into any courtroom needed, Missouri Clerk of Court Jim Woodward said.

"It will be interesting to see how many times we'll have the opportunity to actually do the videotaping because of the limitations that are designed into the study and the requirements for consent and concurrence of the presiding courts," Woodward said.

Trials are relatively uncommon in federal courts, where civil cases are often settled. Last year, the Eastern District of Missouri had 87 trials, with about half of those in civil cases. There would have been just 40 opportunities for video recording, assuming all parties consented.

The recordings made by court personnel will not be simulcast. At the judge's discretion, the recordings would be available to the public within a few hours on www.uscourts.gov and participating local court websites, according to the guidelines.

The media will not be allowed to record proceedings or bring cameras into the courtroom.

More than 100 federal district judges, including those who favor cameras in court and those who are skeptical of them, are expected to participate in the test program.

Other trial courts participating in the program are located in Alabama, California, Florida, Guam, Illinois, Iowa, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Ohio, Tennessee and Washington.

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