



*Engaging Communities  
for Equal Justice*



# Engaging Communities for Equal Justice

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*To help advance equal justice under law for all, the Maryland Judiciary hosts facilitated community forums for judges, court leaders, and justice partners to engage community members on issues of access, fairness, equity, diversity, and inclusion. We offer information and hopefully inspiration for reimagining court-community engagement strategies.*

## *Engaging Communities for Equal Justice*

After George Floyd’s murder and the summer 2020 national outcry, Maryland’s chief justice issued a [statement on equal justice](#) and created a [Judicial Council Equal Justice Committee](#) to “strengthen the judiciary’s commitment to equal justice under law for all.”<sup>1</sup> This unprecedented statement made by Maryland’s top jurist read in part:

We have been fortunate in Maryland to have had a longstanding commitment to a Judiciary that looks like the people it serves—and an equal commitment to access to justice. We must, however, recognize the economic and racial disparities that persist in our justice system. We cannot eliminate them until we make certain that all voices are heard and respected and that the perspectives and experiences of all realign our practice to make good on the promise of equal justice under law.

**Hon. Mary Ellen Barbera**  
Chief Justice, Supreme Court of Maryland  
2013-2021

The emphasis on making sure all voices are heard became a guiding principle in the Maryland Judiciary’s equal justice community outreach and stakeholder engagement.

### **Enhancing Our Commitment to Equal Justice**

Maryland’s judicial structure includes the Maryland Judicial Council, the primary policy advisory board for the chief justice. Following Justice Barbera’s equal justice statement, she created a permanent judicial council committee on equal justice to “build the knowledge and proficiencies of judges and judiciary personnel to strengthen the judiciary’s commitment to equal justice under law for all.” Specific tasks assigned to the committee include 1) increasing “knowledge and understanding of judges and judiciary personnel regarding ethnic disparities, discrimination and systemic racism, including implicit bias (both conscious and unconscious), micro-inequities, and micro-aggressions”; 2) recommending strategies “to educate and dismantle any discriminatory behaviors toward others in all aspects of the judiciary’s functions”; and 3) identifying “areas of improvement, resources, support services, educational opportunities, and training curriculum for on-going judiciary-wide engagement in the pursuit of equality, fair and impartial justice for all.”

<sup>1</sup> See the statement on equal justice at <https://perma.cc/F8MT-QUXG>. For the Equal Justice Committee, see <https://perma.cc/PV3J-FS6J>.

## Engaging Communities for Equal Justice

The Community Outreach Subcommittee organizes public forums, the focus of this article, and is part of the Equal Justice Committee (EJC). The subcommittee was initially chaired by Judge Vicki Ballou-Watts of the Circuit Court of Baltimore County, who is now the chair of the EJC. The subcommittee's charge is to provide opportunities:

For the public to interact with the judiciary through ongoing dialogue, in order to learn more about community concerns and enable the judiciary to gain a better understanding of the communities it serves. Through this continuing dialogue, the judiciary also has an opportunity to increase public awareness of court programs and services, which will in turn, promote trust and confidence in the judicial system.

Founding subcommittee members included judges from every level of the Maryland courts, clerks of court from major jurisdictions, and others in judiciary leadership. The priority for the subcommittee was to conduct public forums with neutral facilitators and community partners to better understand community concerns and help courts meet local needs more effectively.

The EJC structure was set up with five other subcommittees to address 1) access and fairness, 2) diversity and inclusion education, 3) court operations, 4) court rules, and 5) criminal sentencing. Additional stakeholder input to the EJC was achieved via a statewide anonymous employee survey, a court-user satisfaction study, and public listening sessions on court rules.

### Recognizing Regional Differences

Maryland enjoys significant regional identities. Maryland is a diverse state, with an estimated 117 languages spoken and less than half the population identifying as white. According to *U.S. News and World Report* in 2021, Maryland ranks fourth among states for overall diversity but remains largely segregated in housing patterns.

The Community Outreach Subcommittee recognized that issues of importance vary by region, so discussion at its first meeting focused on which areas of the state were represented. Subcommittee members formed regional work groups and agreed to reach out to judicial colleagues in each region to help. It is always important when engaging a new group—especially one doing diversity work—to take notice of who is not at the table. Since the subcommittee meetings were being conducted remotely, participation from any location was possible. Each regional work group was empowered to reach out to local officials, community leaders, and justice partners to participate in planning their forums.

## Engaging Community Partners

Work group chairs took time to get to know the community and included community members in setting agendas. Regional work groups reported on their progress during subcommittee meetings, enabling them to learn from each other. They also identified facilitators from within their communities, some of whom were already hosting race equity dialogues.

Since the work was a part of the judiciary's equal justice initiative, and in the context of Black Lives Matter, too, work groups reached out to partner with organizations that advance the interests of people of color. These include local NAACP chapters, Divine 9 Greek-letter organizations, local churches, the Association on American Indian Affairs, local grassroots community organizations, the Alliance of Black Women Attorneys, and numerous other specialty bars. It was also critically important to consider diversity when selecting moderators, facilitators, panelists, and other featured presenters for the forums.

## Creating a Blueprint for Productive Forums

Knowing that the issues would vary by region, the Community Outreach Subcommittee wanted uniformity on the overall framework for each forum. With input from the regional groups, the subcommittee collaborated on forum guidelines and a checklist. There was consensus for 90-minute forums titled "How Maryland Courts Can Work Best For Everyone: A Conversation Between Court and Community Leaders." The purpose was to increase community understanding of courts and the services offered, thereby developing trust and confidence in the judicial system, while providing the judiciary better knowledge of the communities it serves. Primary goals were to hear from the community, to understand people's needs, and to help courts provide better services. The forums were all to be facilitated by neutral third parties with local court panelists alongside community and justice partners. Regional work groups were given lead responsibility for planning and conducting the forums.

After its first forum, the subcommittee was able to develop a checklist for the regional workgroups. Lessons learned from that first forum were largely about the need to allow more time for advance work with community partners, as well as for publicizing the event. What follows are some key points from the checklist, which should prove useful for court leaders outside Maryland seeking to replicate this process.<sup>2</sup>

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2 Visit the Maryland Judiciary's equal justice website at [www.courts.state.md.us/equaljustice/events](http://www.courts.state.md.us/equaljustice/events) to view recordings of past forums.

## **1. Initial steps**

- Identify community partner organizations as soon as possible. Keep equal justice in mind when selecting community partners that will be credible, reliable, and supportive.
- Once community partners are determined, meet with a representative from each and identify a topic to be the forum focus. Juvenile justice, for example, was the focus of the first Maryland forum.
- Develop your own list of possible topics to discuss with community partners. They may like your suggestions or have their own. Ultimately, as a court initiative, the court leader/convener determines a specific court-centered topic.
- Identify some proposed dates to share with other organizers, and include those who provide technology and communications support.

## **2. Choosing panelists**

- Once community partners, a topic, and date have been selected, identify and recruit ideal panelists for the topic. Explain to them the forum's purpose and goal. Include one or two judges on the panel along with others who offer unique perspectives on the topic.
- Consider justice partners and staff who administer court programs, such as problem-solving courts and family services coordinators. The topic drives the choice of panelists.
- Partners may be panelists or make opening remarks.

## **3. Selecting a moderator**

- Identify a moderator with connections to the jurisdiction.
- The moderator welcomes attendees, identifies the purpose/topic, and introduces community partners and panelists.
- The moderator poses vetted questions submitted in advance and encourages attendees to raise questions during the forum.
- For remote forums, the moderator must be comfortable with technology and be able to screen questions appropriately using a Q&A/chat feature.
- A good moderator will help control the flow of discussion, so all participants can be heard.

## 4. Flyers and publicity

- Judiciary communications/media relations prepare event flyers, press releases, and other communications. Subcommittee staff also provide webinar platforms, handle registration, and arrange for interpreters and live closed captioning.
- Forum-planning teams submit, at least 45 days in advance, information about partner organizations, panelists, moderators, topics, dates, times, and headshots for all panelists and the moderator.
- The local planning teams coordinate with state-level communication staff and local partners on email blasts and event promotions via social media.
- When participants register, they have an opportunity to request an interpreter or other accommodations, as well as to submit questions for the panel.

## 5. Panelists' questions

- Develop potential questions for the panel and solicit questions from the community.
- Review questions that are submitted at registration.
- Reframe questions that are unclear or potentially inappropriate.
- Share vetted questions with the panelists so they can prepare.
- Discuss in advance who is best suited to respond to specific kinds of questions.
- Review all questions with the moderator to be sure they understand and are prepared for questions during the forum.





## 6. Technology and final preparation

- For virtual forums, have a technology expert available during the forum.
- Have at least one practice session with panelists, moderators, and staff/technology liaisons.
- For webinar events, panelists and team members should receive personalized links enabling them to be admitted early and to join in unlimited practice sessions. Have everyone involved, including interpreters, join 30 minutes early so everyone knows they are in place with their devices working properly.
- Non-panelist team members should be assigned other roles, such as spotlighting panelists, monitoring the Q&A, and distributing information via chat.
- The meeting host's welcoming remarks should include a disclaimer to identify any topics that might be off limits. The Maryland forums all included the same disclaimer, which was vetted with legal staff.<sup>3</sup>
- Toward the end of the forum, push out a link in the chat to a post-forum survey. Be sure the moderator reminds attendees to complete it and send the link to all participants in a follow-up email thanking them for attending. The survey should allow participants to provide feedback and submit additional questions, if desired.
- Have a post-forum hosts' survey to capture lessons learned and memorialize important areas of discussion.

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3 “The goal of the judiciary in sponsoring these community forums is to hear from you. We want to know what concerns you, what can we answer for you, what should we improve upon, what is working? We want to have open, honest dialogue. This is vital to developing, maintaining, and strengthening trust and confidence in the judicial system, while enabling the judiciary to gain a better knowledge of the community it serves. While we want to answer questions and concerns of the community, some questions we cannot answer due to ethical restrictions. For example, we cannot discuss individual cases. We cannot offer opinions or comments that tend to reflect bias against or for individuals or groups, as this tends to erode the trust and faith vital to the fair administration of justice. Additionally, we cannot offer views on politically charged topics. Please know that if there is a question or topic to which we cannot respond, it is because of those ethical constraints and our professional obligations. And one final note: this community forum will be recorded and made available on the Maryland Judiciary's Equal Justice Committee webpage.”



## Addressing Issues that Matter Most to Community Members

Local-level forum planning helps to address issues that matter most to the community. In Maryland, fairness in sentencing and equal treatment under the law were consistent concerns expressed by attendees. Our forums offered community members—along with members of the bench, the bar, and justice partners—an opportunity to discuss such concerns in depth, as well as to hear different perspectives on selected topics.

Through the forums, court leaders provided information about existing services, programs, and recent changes in the justice system, including bail reform; substance use and mental health disorders; services for youth in foster care, domestic violence victims, and vulnerable adults; juvenile justice reform; intimate partner violence; and sentencing alternatives. An overall impression has been that many attendees, even those working within the system, are not fully aware of programs and services developed by the judiciary, such as problem-solving specialty courts, which address mental health, substance abuse, family recovery, veterans, and truancy issues; family support services; mediation; and child welfare.

One important observation from all the Maryland forums has been a consistent concern about racial disparities and the desire for equitable treatment in the criminal and juvenile justice systems, whether related to sentencing, access to services, or eligibility for diversion, and community programs. Forum panelists, for example, have fielded questions about the demographic breakdown of problem-solving court participants and how judges guard against racial or gender bias when deciding on a defendant's eligibility for services.



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## Next Steps

The Maryland Judiciary will continue hosting virtual equal justice forums, as well as in-person and hybrid forums. The Community Outreach Subcommittee will also support its ongoing commitment to equal justice at the local courthouse level. Our hope in the coming year will be to receive funding to award grants to courts that want to create diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) positions and local community advisory panels. The local DEI staff will work with the judiciary's statewide DEI coordinator to form a vibrant DEI network. Maryland Judiciary representatives also participated in the National Center for State Courts' 2022 [DEI convening](#), "Creating a Culture of Belonging," and will continue to stay connected to this national coordinating initiative.<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusion

Effective community outreach should be part of any judiciary's equal justice strategy. Maryland's experience collaborating on the forums has been of great benefit to the court and its stakeholders. Our process helps judges connect with community members at a more personal level than is possible in courtroom settings, and it helps demystify the court. Panelists have appreciated the opportunity to share unique perspectives on equal justice and hear from the community. Ninety-five to 100 percent of those who complete post-forum surveys agree or strongly agree that "forums like this can help promote the interests of justice," increase "understanding of court services," and "included a productive conversation with court and community leaders."

We hope readers will visit the Maryland Judiciary's [equal justice webpage](#) for more information and the forum recordings and contact us with any questions or feedback.<sup>5</sup> Doing equal justice work is an honor, and we are eager to connect with others who share in this calling.

4 Online at <https://perma.cc/T3VM-9A83>.

5 Online at <https://mdcourts.gov/equaljustice>.