

Community Engagement Talking Points and Tips

How is Community Engagement Different Than Community Outreach?

Community engagement is a process that promotes relationship building between courts and community members which serves as an active partnership working toward achieving a common goal or desired change. To further help you reach target populations for engagement, there must be a well-defined/specific operationalization of the type of community engagement that will occur.

Community outreach is a function of communicating to engaged partners to build awareness and share information about the court and available resources.

Why Should Courts Participate in Community Engagement Events?

- Judicial participation in community engagement activities and initiatives provides a safe and open forum for community members to express their voice.
- Stakeholders can be beneficial in encouraging communication and collaboration around system improvements and disparate outcomes.
- Judicial participation shows a willingness to listen and learn from the community.
- Community engagement opportunities build attendees' knowledge of the court system while also increasing public trust and confidence.
- Bringing people together with varying points of view, enables productive conversations and recognition of varying viewpoints.

Community Event Example:

Expungement workshops are events hosted in communities across the state where citizens can attend and staff from the Kentucky Administrative Office of the Courts provide preliminary statewide criminal background checks to assist in determining individual case/charge expungement eligibility. Attorneys from the Department of Public Advocacy or other legal aid services provide the consultation. This allows citizens with criminal convictions the opportunity to proceed with an expungement and clear barriers that can prevent them from gaining employment, housing, volunteer work and voting rights. Even when some people are not eligible for an expungement at the time of the event, the

workshop/consultation can provide them with a goal to work towards for an expungement in the future. To date, the Kentucky AOC has completed over 9,300 background checks for Expungement Workshops.

How Can Courts Effectively Invite Community Members?

- Consider various recruitment strategies for different populations. Use social media efforts to invite younger populations, mailings to older individuals, and posting flyers at specific community locations for harder to reach members.
- Involve faith leaders, community partners and/or someone trusted in the community to help plan and host events.
- Reach out directly to vulnerable populations, including low-income neighborhoods, to describe the upcoming event and invite them to attend.
- Formalize community partnerships, such as through policies and practices, that include communities of color as key stakeholders.
- Engage people who have prior experiences with court proceedings (in a non-juror context) into recruitment efforts.
- Use thoughtful ways to compensate community members for their valuable time.

Community Event Example:

A Rhode Island Superior court partnered with a local community organization to offer community forums with stakeholders to learn about outstanding court fines and fees. The Court later staged a debt review program to address the burden that court costs place on the formerly incarcerated in re-establishing their life and allowing them to move forward. Through this process, the Court reduced over \$360,000 in fines and fees.

How Can Courts Plan for an Effective Community Engagement Event?

- Be clear about the purpose of the engagement effort and the targeted community audience.
- Solicit feedback from community members regarding topics of discussion prior to the event.
- Ensure that the meeting space is accessible to the community in terms of transportation and proximity to the community.
- Involve court staff in roles such as check-in, refreshments, and note taking. This gives court employees an opportunity to engage with the public and take ownership of the project.
- Ensure enough time for participants openly discuss concerns and ask questions during the community event. This will help everyone feel heard and involved in the discussion.

- Serve refreshments. It provides a common ground and opportunity to socialize over food.
- Try to narrow discussions from broad concepts of access, fairness, and trust to more specific topics about court functions and fairness.
- Involved facilitators who do this kind of work on a regular basis and are well versed in the issues facing the targeted communities.
- Frame engagements around solutions to help ensure that discussions are productive.
- Frequently offer community engagement events to address various topics of discussion throughout the year.
- It may be beneficial to schedule an engagement event over the weekend or after business hours to reach different populations who may be at work during those standard days/hours.
- Use a polling technique such as iClicker to obtain real-time feedback on issues and proposed changes.
- Evaluate community engagement efforts to determine effectiveness and impact. This information will help to inform future community engagement processes and can be done through feedback and self-assessment from the stakeholder/community and court team, respectively.

Community Event Example:

Court facilitated public meetings in Royal Oak, Michigan identified that driving without a license was the first most common reason people went to jail and that the majority of licenses were suspended due to inability to pay fines and fees. Judge Meinecke of the 44th District has since restored more than 900 licenses by holding individuals accountable and giving specific guidance to address any underlying issues that led to the suspended license and encouragement to work toward regaining the license.

For more examples of community engagement events, visit ncsc.org/racialjustice.

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