

NCSC


Courts Celebrating
America @250



Free, to be fair

ncsc.org/america250





Why we've developed this handbook

Free, to be fair

Courts have a unique opportunity to engage their communities through education and outreach during America's 250th anniversary.

This handbook provides practical ways for courts to celebrate this milestone while strengthening public trust. It offers outreach and engagement ideas, along with messaging frameworks and examples that courts can tailor to local needs and existing programs.

Many of the approaches build on familiar civic education and community engagement activities. The handbook also features examples shared by courts nationwide to help inspire your own planning and implementation.

We look forward to hearing your stories and examples in the months to come.

Elizabeth Clement
President

National Center for State Courts

Who should use this handbook



**Court
communicators**



**Court staff involved
in community-building
& outreach activities**



Court leadership

Consider this guidance as:

- ★ A menu of ideas, not a checklist
- ★ A supplement to existing civic education, outreach, or public information efforts

Getting started



Choose engagement approaches based on available resources, community needs, and existing programming. Even a small, well-considered effort can make a meaningful contribution to public understanding and community connection.

When brainstorming ideas for activities, be honest about staffing and funding capabilities over the next few months.

Begin with activities that fit current capacity and expand over time as partnerships or resources allow.



1. Brainstorm

Are there opportunities to build on existing activities by incorporating the 250th anniversary?

Do you want to develop a new project just for the anniversary – and possibly longer term depending on your success?

Who is it that you want to engage and why? Students, general public, underrepresented groups, legal community, media, court staff, etc.

*Refer to our list of **potential ideas** and **spotlight courts** for inspiration.*



2. Communicate

Consider themes & messages that will resonate with your desired audience.

*See our tips and **suggested themes and messages**.*



3. Promote

How will people find out about your activity? Think about ways to get the word out to your intended audience.

This could be an opportunity to develop new channels to communicate.



1. Brainstorm

Here's a list of potential **community engagement activities** to consider.



- ★ **Place** op-eds or publish blog posts written by court leaders or staff
- ★ **Coordinate** essay or poetry contests, art exhibits, or themed educational activities
- ★ **Develop** one-page, state-aligned curriculum or explainer sheets for educators
- ★ **Establish** ongoing education programs for students or teachers
- ★ **Develop** traveling exhibits for schools, libraries, or government offices
- ★ **Produce** short explainer videos such as “*Why courts matter*” or “*How courts work*” (If you don’t have the resources to produce your own, you can link to NCSC explainer videos)
- ★ **Record** short videos of judges or court leaders answering one civic question
- ★ **Produce** podcasts or recorded conversations with judges or court leaders explaining legal concepts
- ★ **Update** existing web pages to improve access to court information
- ★ **Create** a dedicated America 250 landing page
- ★ **Launch** social media campaigns (e.g., “*Did You Know?*” court history facts or informational posts)
- ★ **Share** digital content that highlights court services, including access to justice, e-filing, public access to proceedings, and accessibility services
- ★ **Facilitate** moderated online town halls or question-and-answer sessions
- ★ **Host** local courthouse tours incorporating America 250 themes, allowing questions and interaction
- ★ **Install** courthouse or lobby exhibits highlighting court history or constitutional principles
- ★ **Organize** mock trials or oral arguments for students adapted to America 250 history or constitutional principles
- ★ **Offer** virtual courthouse tours for teachers and classrooms
- ★ **Highlight** major cases, judges, or milestones that shaped state or local courts
- ★ **Build** long-term partnerships with community institutions, including historical societies, museums, libraries, bar associations, and other civic organizations
- ★ **Coordinate** programming with state planning commissions or America 250 commissions
- ★ **Participate** in recurring local or statewide community events



2. Communicate



Once you've decided on your activity, consider how you will communicate about it.

Effective community engagement goes beyond sharing information. Courts can strengthen public understanding and trust by focusing on how they communicate — not just what they communicate. When planning outreach or engagement efforts, courts are encouraged to:

- ★ **Explain** why they do what they do, not just what they do
- ★ **Engage** in two-way conversations with community members
- ★ **Tell** stories about everyday justice, rather than focusing only on high-profile cases
- ★ **Emphasize** fairness, transparency, accountability, and service in all communications
- ★ **Show** how courts help solve real community problems

Messaging Guidelines

Do

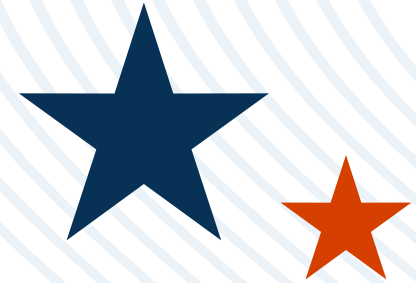
- ★ Use plain language
- ★ Focus on the court-community connection
- ★ Emphasize service to the public

Avoid

- ★ Political framing
- ★ Abstract language
- ★ Unnecessary legal jargon



Sample messages



Theme

Judicial Independence

Due Process

Courts Protect Rights and Liberties

Courts Are Local Community Institutions

Courts Serve the Public

Courts Are Accessible

Courts Are Accountable

Courts Strengthen Community Trust

How we talk about it

Courts must have the independence to deliver fair, impartial, and accountable justice.

Courts are designed to ensure fairness by giving people the opportunity to be heard and following procedures that protect legal rights.

Courts protect rights and liberties, ensure access to justice, and resolve disputes peacefully through the rule of law.

Courts are rooted in the communities they serve and are part of everyday civic life. Court staff live and work in the communities they serve.

Courts exist to serve the people and help resolve legal matters fairly and efficiently.

Courts are open and accessible.

Courts are ethical, accountable, and transparent.

Courts help communities function by resolving disputes fairly and earning public trust.

How to use messages

Messaging can be used in a number of ways.
Be sure to tailor your message so it represents
your court and its voice.

Incorporate messaging in:

- ★ Talking points, speeches, scripts & other formal statements
- ★ Press releases
- ★ Website & social media copy
- ★ Brochures, flyers, and other promotional materials
- ★ PowerPoints & other presentations
- ★ Op eds & other authored content





3. Promote



Once you've identified your activity, you'll need to think of ways to promote it. Does your audience get information from the local newspaper, social media, websites, podcasts, friends & family (word of mouth), etc.?

Don't assume that an announcement on the court website or newsletter will reach your intended audience. Think about where your audience already goes for information to get the word out. Consider finding new community partners to help deliver your message.

If your 250th plans will result in new outreach and communications efforts, make sure they are realistic and durable, so you can continue your engagement beyond July 4.





Resources

Existing examples and materials that may support court engagement efforts related to America's 250th anniversary.

As courts celebrate America's 250th anniversary, these resources may also support ongoing efforts to strengthen public understanding, improve access to court information, and enhance service in the years ahead.

NCSC resources available at ncsc.org/america250

- ★ Highlights of 250th anniversary celebrations being developed by state courts systems
- ★ [Beyond Civics Education: A Health and Wellness Guide for Getting Our Public Trust and Confidence Back in Shape](#)
- ★ [NCSC Civics Education Resources](#)
- ★ [NCSC explainer Videos](#)
- ★ A list of recommended speakers

More resources

- ★ [America 250](#)
- ★ [American 250 State Commissions](#)
- ★ [iCivics](#)
- ★ [Center for Civic Education](#)
- ★ [National Constitution Center](#)
- ★ [Library of Congress](#)



Share your activity

We're gathering examples of court engagement activities as they develop.
Share your approach at communications@ncsc.org — your ideas may inspire other courts.



Court of Appeals of Indiana

Traveling oral argument conducted in partnership with the Indiana Historical Society, followed by museum tour and historical exhibits.

Contact: Anne Fuchs,
anne.fuchs@courts.in.gov



New Jersey Courts

Producing a series of short videos that highlight connections between the New Jersey courts and key figures of the American revolution.

Contact: Peter McAleer,
peter.mcaleer@njcourts.gov



Kentucky Judicial Branch

Connecting America 250 with a yearlong campaign celebrating the 50th anniversary of unified courts: videos, public events, educational partnerships

Contact: Jim Hannah,
jimhannah@kycourts.net



Ohio Supreme Court

Daily U.S. history facts posted to court website and employee intranet since July 4, 2025. Dedicated America 250 webpage. Foundational documents exhibits. Evening public tours of the Ohio Judicial Center.

Contact: Andy Ellinger,
publicinformation@sc.ohio.gov



*Free,
to be fair*

NCSC

Courts Celebrating
America @ 250