

A REQUEST FOR LETTERS OF INTEREST

The Community Engagement in the State Courts Initiative

Background Information

The National Center for State Courts Advisory Board for the “Community Engagement in the State Courts Initiative” solicits letters of interest from individual or aggregations of trial courts or court systems willing to design and implement a public engagement project designed to (a) improve trust between courts and minority or low-income communities, and (b) make progress on eliminating a disparity and its impact in a specific problem area. Up to six pilot projects will be selected to receive funding and other support.¹

This request for letters of interest comes after the completion of a national Listening Tour sponsored by the Initiative’s Advisory Board. Listening sessions were held in three cities and broadcast under the title “[Courting Justice](#).” Eleven main issues surfaced from the listening sessions and through an online survey of court and civic leaders active in efforts to reduce racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and other forms of bias in the courts:

- *Issues based on how judges make decisions:*
 - Lack of awareness of the realities of minority communities
 - Implicit bias on the part of the judges
 - Lack of diversity on the bench
- *Issues based on unfairness in the court system:*
 - Financial and other barriers to accessing the courts and attorneys
 - Court funding dependent on the amount of fines, fees, bail, etc.
 - Bias in the plea-bargaining process
 - Lack of diversity in juries/jury pools
- *Issues based on the outcomes of judicial decisions:*
 - Bias in sentencing outcomes
 - Failure to hold police accountable
 - Impact of sanctions on employment opportunities
 - Bias in imposing legal financial obligations

The expectation is that each pilot project will do the following:

- aim to build court-community trust by focusing on one or more of the issues above (or other issue related to reducing disparities in the courts),
- measure their progress in addressing their chosen issue(s) of focus
- complete their project in 18-months or less,

¹The project is funded by the State Justice Institute and the National Center for State Courts as a strategic initiative carried out in collaboration with the National Consortium on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Courts and the Conference of Chief Justices. Its primary goal is to establish engagement strategies to bridge the gap between minority communities and court leadership through collaborative efforts able to increase court trustworthiness to the public, and public trust in the courts. Although some of the issues may seem more related to criminal courts, others (e.g., [issues related to fines and fees](#)) are clearly related to civil matters. This call for letters of interest is open to any issues which relate to disparities and public trust in the courts.

- use methods designed to broadly involve different publics in two-way or multi-way dialogue with the courts and any other relevant partners,
- incorporate evaluation tools developed by the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) and a group of academic advisors, and
- provide matching funds or in-kind support of the proposed project.

The evaluation process will require projects to provide periodic feedback on project progress and to administer and report standard measures. The aim of the evaluation is to help the Advisory Board use the collective experience of the pilot projects to design and provide the state court community with a “tool-kit” of ways to conduct successful engagement.

Representatives of selected “semi-finalist” pilot proposals will be invited to come together for a face-to-face meeting (likely in October or November), to refine their engagement strategies and build relationships based on mutual interests. Participants will have access to technical assistance from social scientists with expertise on designing and implementing successful engagement approaches. After the semi-finalist meeting, up to six proposals will be selected as pilot projects that will receive financial and technical support.

Support to Selected Pilot Projects

The selected pilot projects will be provided with these resources:

- Funding up to \$30,000, requiring a 1:1 in-kind or cash match.
- Technical assistance from staff of the National Center for State Courts and from a panel of experts on topics such as the science of public participation, disparities, and implicit and explicit bias and discrimination.
- An independent evaluation of the project to capture lessons learned from the projects, provide feedback to the project leaders, and monitor progress toward meeting the project’s objectives. Pilot projects must participate in the evaluation process.

Preparing a Letter of Interest

The following information must be provided in a letter of interest in becoming a pilot project. The letter should be about 2,000 words, inclusive of items 1-6 below, but not including references, letters of support, or your estimated budget request and budget justification. It is suggested that the letter be organized to provide reviewers with the following information:

1. Indicate who (individuals and organizations) will be the primary leaders of the pilot project both on the part of the court, the community, and any other partners (e.g., law enforcement, prosecutors, etc.), with evidence of their willingness to participate or otherwise indicating that the pilot project would have broader support beyond the applicants. If names cannot be provided at submission, describe the steps the court will take in attracting community interest and any incentives the court will provide to engage the community.
2. Describe the issue or problem to be addressed and explain why it is of importance to your court and community.

3. Describe the proposed method for engagement, including a description of what it would look like, why it is desirable for the target community, and why it is likely to help address the target problem.
4. Describe the capacity of the organizations and key personnel to successfully plan, implement, and complete this project, including prior engagement experiences or programs. Describe the commitment of resources that would be available through the court and other engagement partners or participants.
5. Describe the decision-making process that will guide the pilot project from the planning phase through to completion.
6. Describe your criteria for determining if your project is successful, how you will measure success, and how the benefits from your project will be sustained after the current support for the project has ended. Criteria for success should include measures of the specific disparity issue(s) upon which the project is focused (e.g., see earlier list of 11 issues). As an example of such criteria and measures, applicants may find it useful to look at the performance measures at <http://www.courttools.org/>. Describe your willingness to participate in the cross-site evaluation.
7. In addition to the letter of intent (1-6 above), please submit the following as supplementary documents:
 - a. A budget estimate that describes projected needs (e.g., for staff, materials, participant support, and so on) and a narrative justifying budget items.
 - b. Letters of support or commitment from project partners and sponsors

Evaluation Criteria:

The following general criteria will be used to select pilot projects for financial and other support:

1. A clearly stated problem the pilot project would address and its potential for addressing that problem
2. Potential for improving trust between the judiciary and the community at large
3. Demonstrated commitment by key members of the court and the community (individuals or representatives of local organizations) to in-depth bidirectional dialogue and engagement with communities
4. Capacity to complete the pilot project as described based on potential collaborators, local resources that can be tapped, and evidence of community openness to engaging with the courts and other partners
5. Commitment by both the court and initial community representatives to make the changes necessary for success in meeting the project's disparity-related objectives
6. Commitment to participate in an evaluation process for the pilot project through interviews with court and community leaders, surveys, making available required data, and following the protocols established by the evaluators
7. Potential for sustainability beyond the pilot period

In addition to the criteria above, projects will be selected in light of their fit with other selected pilot projects. A primary goal of the current effort is to advance the use of public engagement for addressing bias and building trust. Therefore, negotiations prior to selecting projects are likely to involve discussions concerning the ability of the projects to adapt their proposed methods to fit with specific goals as these are developed among the semi-finalists.

Deadline

Letters of interest and supplementary materials must be submitted on or before August 31, 2018 to Konstantina Vagenas of the National Center for State Courts.

Send applications to: commengagement@ncsc.org

For questions, please use the email above, or call: (703) 841-5624

Selected semi-finalist pilot projects will be notified by October 12, 2018.

Definitions of Terms

Community is a geographically or socially defined group. The community that is targeted should be one that is—or believed to—be estranged from the court system.

Engagement is an ongoing two-way dialogue between courts and a minority or low-income community. The engagement should be established to design and carry out activities that address one or more issues related to disparities in the judicial system (see [Toolkit](#), especially [Appendix A](#), for examples). Such disparities are believed to reduce trust in the courts by the community, trust in the community by the courts, or both. As defined in this call for letters of interest, engagement needs to extend beyond educational efforts to push information from the courts to the community and beyond soliciting information from the community through surveys or similar methods (although surveys, focus groups, or other data collecting techniques may play a role in the overall engagement effort). Engagement methods that have the potential to be used at larger scales and that could be used beyond their proposed context of use will be prioritized above others.

Methods of engagement include the examples described in [Appendix B](#). These methods of engagement may be modified to fit the target community and the purposes of the project; other forms of engagement may also be proposed for a pilot project if adequately described and shown to be of likely effectiveness with the target community.

Objectives for an engagement pilot project are to increase trust between the courts and target communities and make demonstrable progress in reducing a specific source or kind of disparity or bias-relevant problem in the courts. Examples of such problems are listed in [Appendix A](#).

Success for a pilot project is an increase in trust between the courts and the target communities and a reduction in the problem or issue the project intends to address. Sustainability of engagement, trust, and progress on the identified issues beyond the 18-month pilot project period is another example of success.