



Michigan  
**Justice for All Commission**

Welcoming Courthouse Guidelines

STEPS TO CREATING A WELCOMING COURTHOUSE

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## Introduction

Largely, people come into a courthouse to address matters that are not particularly enjoyable or pleasant and their lives could fundamentally change after they leave a courthouse. Layered on top of that underlying principle is the notion that courthouses have not historically been designed to be welcoming and inviting. Given these factors there is a heightened importance of taking intentional action to implement innovative and reformative processes that promote a space that is accessible to all and trusted by all. It is also important to note that not everyone who enters a courthouse is visiting to use the services of the court, they may simply be a member of the public visiting their local courthouse.

The Justice for All Task Force, which was the forerunner to the Justice for All Commission, explicitly cited in its final [report](#) the profound need to reform Michigan's civil justice system to embody characteristics of being welcoming, understandable, collaborative, adaptive, and trusted. This vision, coupled with the guiding principles of the Strategic Pillars, specifically Strategic Pillar 1, guides the Reimagining Courthouses Work Group. The Work Group was tasked with how to reimagine courthouses as spaces that are welcoming, safe places where people can easily find where they need to go and get the services they need.

Michigan courts have a unique opportunity to strategically engage with visitors to courthouses, so they feel welcomed, invited, and supported when entering a court space to address their legal needs. As an institution designed to serve the public, courts should make people feel valued and respected when leaving a courthouse, whether they were a court user or not. Eliminating barriers and gaps, both physical and social, can help remove the veil of discomfort surrounding a court experience and increase access to justice in our court system.

An integral component of creating a welcoming courthouse includes the foundational principle of procedural fairness. This practice is succinctly displayed in the Michigan Judicial Council's [Promise of Procedural Fairness](#).

A "Welcoming Courthouse" is a place where litigants and members of the public...

- Are greeted, without judgment, by someone who can help them find what they need;
- Are treated with dignity and respect;
- Can address legal needs;
- Can easily navigate the court space;
- Can receive additional community resources and referrals;
- Understand the outcome of their court proceeding and next steps.

Below are 12 strategies that a trial court can implement to help create a welcoming courthouse.

## 01 Mission Statement

**Strategy:** *Articulate the mission, vision, and values for the court while representing the community in which the court is located and reflecting the centrality of public service.*

One avenue to securing a culture of public service throughout the court is to ensure court staff can succinctly articulate the reason a court exists. A concise and coherent purpose establishes the guiding attitude for both court users and court staff. A simple, yet definitive way a courthouse can be more welcoming includes a **court-specific mission statement** which reflects and represents the community the court serves.

### Implementation Tips

- **Examples to Draw Inspiration.** Many courts around the state have inspiring mission statements, the following are a few samples to help illustrate this principle.
  - [Michigan Judicial Council](#)
  - [36<sup>th</sup> District Court](#)
  - [22<sup>nd</sup> Circuit Court](#)
  - [Kalamazoo County Probate Court](#)
  - [Berrien County Trial Courts](#)
- **Communication Channels.** It is important to promote and publicize the mission of the court, so everyone has similar expectations. The following are some ways to communicate the mission statement.
  - Court's website
  - Plaque / sign(s) located in various areas around the courthouse
  - Printed letterhead
  - Business cards

A simple line-art icon of a person's head and shoulders, wearing a collared shirt. A speech bubble is positioned above the head, containing the text "How can I help you?".

How can I help you?

## 02 Greeter

**Strategy:** *Establish a dedicated court greeter, located out of the security screening area, who promotes a welcoming, friendly, inviting, non-judgmental experience for users of the court.*

Litigants who are nervous about finding where they need to go might reasonably reach out to that first line of human contact upon arrival to the court. Currently, and often by design, the public's first contact with a courthouse is usually with a uniformed, possibly armed guard. Security guards play a vital role in courthouse settings, but placing security on the front line of customer service does a disservice to both visitors of the courthouse and security personnel. For the public, this presence at the outset could trigger a negative experience or reinforce that this experience is not welcoming, warm, or inviting. Visitors may also get a hurried or incomplete response from security, who are rightfully maintaining their primary focus on court security.

With these considerations in mind, a trial court seeking to reinforce a welcoming courthouse should establish a **dedicated court greeter** who promotes a friendly, inviting, non-judgmental experience for users of the court. Where practical and safe, the dedicated greeter should be located outside of any court security screening area to establish a distinct court user experience and provide an opportunity to engage with members of public prior to security screening. When a greeter must be placed after security, there should be ample signage to reassure visitors that they will find a greeter after the security process. Security staff should be privy to this resource so they can accurately direct visitors.

### Implementation Tips

- **Identifying a Greeter.** While the best practice may be to have greeter services performed by court staff, we recognize that some courts may face staffing challenges implementing this strategy. Courts, who may be facing staffing challenges to carry out key operational activities, can look to alternative staffing sources for a greeter such as the following:
  - Volunteers / AmeriCorp
  - Local law students
  - Interns
  - Robotic / technology-based greeters
  
- **Scope of Greeter Activities.** The greeter's activities would include greeting visitors, assisting with directional navigation of the court, and answering general court-related

questions.

- **Training a Greeter.** An asynchronous training module should be used to facilitate consistency when onboarding new greeters. The module topic areas should minimally include:
  - Key locations within the courthouse (EX: Courtrooms, bathrooms, jury rooms, offices that interact with the public, self-help centers, zoom rooms, etc.)
  - Expected demeanor
  - Sample script when welcoming court users
  - Location of a check-in kiosk and other wayfinding resources (if applicable)
  - Basic functions performed by court clerks, self-help centers, and other resources in the court so that they can refer visitors correctly
  - Knowledge and awareness of 'I speak' cards, in conjunction with the court's Language Access Plan information for who or where to direct LEP court users
- **Additional Resources.** The following resources may be helpful in your implementation efforts for this strategy.
  - [Sample Volunteer Posting](#)
  - [Ottawa County CORA](#)



## 03 Technology Access Points

**Strategy:** *Leverage technology access points throughout a courthouse to facilitate a seamless wayfinding court experience.*

Leveraging various available technologies, such as kiosks, electronic docket boards, and other wayfinding systems, is an efficient way to provide access and limited services to court users. One example may include being able to pay a court fine or traffic ticket at a payment station, like those found at local Secretary of State offices, instead of waiting in line to pay at a clerk counter. In addition, using interactive wayfinding stations can help display the court layout so users may easily identify and locate various areas around the courthouse. A characteristic of a welcoming and inviting court includes multiple **technology access points** scattered throughout the courthouse. This will engage the public in user-friendly navigation of the space and aid in an efficient and timely court experience.

### Implementation Tips

- **Electronic Boards.** Electronic boards are an easy way to display and update information in a readily accessible manner.
  - Court dockets

- Important court announcements
- Subtitled general TV programming
- **Kiosks.** Freestanding kiosks in areas of high foot traffic offer court users an informal way of interacting with the court
  - Make payments for court fines / fees
  - Check-in for a court hearing
  - Schedule a court date
  - Interactive ‘you are here’ blueprint of courthouse
  - Access to court records / MiFILE
  - Access to Michigan Legal Help
- **Self-Help Centers.** Courts may want to consider adding a self-help center in the court. Self-help centers provide computer access with trained navigators to help people find legal information.
  - Michigan Legal Help has resources and training available for courts that would like to open a new self-help center.
- **Virtual Court Appearances.** Courts should reserve a private space and provide technology access for a litigant to participate in a virtual court proceeding.
- **Additional Resources.** The following resources may be helpful in your implementation efforts for this strategy.
  - [National Center for State Courts Space Planning](#)

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## 04 Check-In Process

**Strategy:** *Simplify the process for litigants to check-in for court hearings by implementing a user-friendly technology-based check-in system.*

Another area of confusion in many courts, especially in high volume courts, is the process of checking in for a court hearing. Courts can minimize this confusion and streamline the process by implementing a **simplified check-in system**. Courts should assess their needs and tailor the system in a manner that best fits their desires. Clear signage should be posted to direct court visitors where and how to check in for a hearing. Additionally, there should be a follow-up digital message or signage that provides the litigant with specific direction and next steps as to what they can expect and where they should go when being called into the courtroom.

### Implementation Tips

- **Check-in kiosk:** Designate a specific check-in kiosk in the main lobby, close to the entrance of the courthouse.
- **Mobile check-in:** Enable the option to check-in from a mobile device to mitigate congestion at a kiosk station.
- **Mobile check-in via QR code:** Print a QR code (or provide a supplemental attachment) on Notice to Appear paperwork to allow litigants to check in via mobile device upon arrival at the courthouse.
- **Juror Software:** Leverage specialized software for prospective jurors.
- **Additional Resources.** The following resources may be helpful in your implementation efforts for this strategy.
  - [Five Point Payments](#) (interfaces with JIS)
  - [Jury Management Software](#)



## 05 Signage

**Strategy:** *Ensure there is clear and accurate signage to help court users easily navigate through the courthouse to their desired destination.*

When an individual enters a courthouse, it may be their first time in the building. The uneasy feeling of walking into an unknown space, on top of the underlying anxieties of being inside a courthouse, can bring heightened nervousness and negatively impact the court user's experience. These emotions may be mitigated if the court user is able to easily navigate the courthouse. Easy-to-understand directions, information and communications should be posted to assist court users on where to go and how to get there. A court seeking to reinforce a welcoming courthouse can ensure there is **clear and accurate signage** that provides the court user a seamless navigation throughout the court space. This can be accomplished using printed material or electronic signage.

### Implementation Tips

- **Clear Signage:**
  - Avoid hand lettered signs, except as a temporary measure
  - Use multi-lingual signage with languages prevalent in regional areas
  - Use universally recognized symbols and icons



- **Areas of the courthouse that should be clearly labeled:**
  - Attorney-Client Rooms
  - Clerk’s Office
  - Courtroom(s)
  - Friend of the Court
  - Jury Assembly Room
  - Probation Area
  - Greeter
  - Security
  - Bathrooms
  
- **Additional Resources.** The following additional resources may be helpful in your implementation efforts for this strategy.
  - [Center for Court Innovation – Improving Courthouse Signage](#)
  - [National Center for State Courts – Language Access Signage](#)
  - SCAO Administrative Memorandum – [ADA Signage](#)

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## 06 Visual Experience

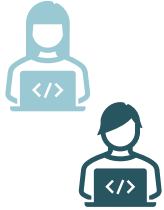
**Strategy:** *Carefully choosing the art and other visual experiences in a court is an important way to make the space feel more inclusive and welcoming.*

The visual aesthetic and physical environment can have an impact on a court user’s experience. To promote a sense of belonging, courts should intentionally consider the **visual experience** of the courthouse, including signage and art. Written materials should be printed large enough to read easily and written in plain language. Art should be inclusive and should reflect the diversity of the community. An inviting, non-institutional lobby or waiting area can offer litigants and visitors a space to convene as necessary, and also physically or emotionally prepare or decompress from a court experience.

### Implementation Tips

**Examples to Draw Inspiration.** Some courts around the state and other resources provide a few samples to help illustrate this principle.

- Washtenaw County [RE:CLAIM Project](#)
- Van Buren County [Art Contest](#)
- The Urban Institute: [How Public Art Can Improve Quality of Life and Advance Equity](#)
- National Assembly of State Arts Agencies: [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in State Arts Agency Public Art Programs](#)
- Western District of Pennsylvania: [Rotating Schedule of Art Displays](#)



## 07 Virtual Clerk

**Strategy:** Provide a clerk accessible to the public on a virtual platform such as Zoom.

The COVID-19 pandemic taught the courts many things, but one value that should remain in the post-pandemic era includes innovative ways to serve the community. Courts should not revert to traditional ways of operating court business in pre-pandemic fashion, but rather embrace technological advances to serve court users and the public more efficiently and effectively. Many courts pioneered new ways to serve the public, and one of those ways includes access to a **virtual court clerk**. Providing remote access to the Clerk's Office gives litigants an alternative way to conduct court business and ask questions face-to-face without needing to physically travel to the courthouse.

### Implementation Tips

- **Necessities.** Below are some resources that will help a court stand up a virtual clerk counter.
  - Exclusive Zoom license
  - Dedicated staff schedule for coverage
  - Market availability of virtual clerk on website and signage throughout courthouse
- **Additional Resources.** The following resources may be helpful in your implementation efforts for this strategy.
  - [54-B District Court](#)
  - [40<sup>th</sup> District Court](#)
  - National Center for State Courts - [Tiny Chat](#)

## 08 Scheduling Software

**Strategy:** Use scheduling software for a subset of hearing types, where court users can pick a court date and time from a predetermined list as a means of promoting litigant preference.

One way that courts can become more welcoming and inviting includes offering litigant preference when scheduling court hearings where it is practical and feasible. Allowing litigants to choose a time that works for their schedule increases the likelihood of appearances and helps to reassure litigants that the court values litigant needs and preferences. To streamline this possibility, a service of a welcoming courthouse may include **scheduling software** where litigants can choose from a list of available dates and times for court hearings. Courts should examine the possibility of scheduling software for hearing types where court dates are automatically set to accommodate and encourage litigant preference. Implementing this technology, especially in high volume courts, may also alleviate some of the burden clerks feel when inundated with scheduling hearing dates, such as that of traffic informal hearings.

### Implementation Tips

- **Software Programs.** Below are some scheduling software programs that could help you implement this strategy.
  - [Calendly](#)
  - [Doodle](#)
- **Additional Resources.** The following resources may be helpful in your implementation efforts for this strategy.
  - 36<sup>th</sup> District Court Traffic Civil Infraction [Online Scheduling Service](#)
  - Salt Lake City Justice Court – [Book your Arraignment](#)

## 09 Time Certain Scheduling

**Strategy:** *Eliminate, to the best extent possible, the use of scheduling court cases in a bulk fashion.*

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the need to modernize docket management and shift away from conventional docketing styles, such as “cattle calls”. The ineffective nature of these scheduling styles was highlighted when courts transitioned to operating on a virtual platform. “Cattle calls” did not promote a welcoming courthouse as it was not unusual, prior to the pandemic, for a court user to wait many hours between the hearing time on a notice to when their case was called. To promote a more positive user experience, and a welcoming courthouse, **cases should be scheduled in a time-certain manner**, to the best extent possible, to minimize constituent wait

time. This also helps maintain a balanced and predictable schedule for court operations.

### Implementation Tips

- **Clustering.** To the best extent possible, courts should consider clustering similar type cases together. Clustering should not be exclusive to case types. Courts should consider identifying other types of characteristics or themes that make cases similar and cluster based on what works best for the trial court.
  - **Characteristics for possible clustering:**
    - In custody cases
    - Type of hearing (motions, review hearings, etc.)
    - Lawyers vs. self-represented litigants
- **Scheduling Process.** Some trial courts in Michigan are already using a scheduling process. Judges or administrators should consider reaching out to other courts or judges to learn more about efficient and effective scheduling practices.
- **Additional Resources.** The following resources may be helpful in your implementation efforts for this strategy.

Post-Pandemic Lessons Learned 2021 [Report](#)



## 10 Court Reminders

**Strategy:** *Send notifications for court hearings and other court related reminders to encourage litigant participation*

Appointment reminders are a great way to provide consumers with prompt notice of an upcoming obligation, like reminder messages that various medical offices employ. Leveraging a reminder system that sends notices to a user's cell phone is another way to promote a system that welcomes users to meaningfully participate. A way to encourage court appearance is to offer **text message reminders** for litigants. Automated text messages can be easy to implement and may increase the appearance rates in civil cases.

### Implementation Tips

- MiCOURT Text Message [Reminders](#)
- National Center for State Courts – [Text Reminders](#)

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## 11 Training

**Strategy:** *Ensure court staff receive robust ongoing training to meet the needs of court users and deliver outstanding customer service.*

Court staff who are rooted in the understanding that each interaction with the public can influence someone's idea of our justice system is essential to promoting positive court interactions. Court staff exist to serve the public and court users. Providing an excellent customer experience is integral to maintaining an environment where court users feel that they can freely interact with the court system. Therefore, a court seeking to strengthen a welcoming courthouse should support ongoing **customer service training** for court staff to meet the needs of court users and deliver outstanding customer service. In coordination with the JFA Training and Outreach Committee training recommendations, this type of training may include, but is not limited to, interpersonal customer service training, trauma-informed training, technology training, legal information vs. legal advice, etc. When court staff interact with court users, they should feel confident in their ability to meet the customer's needs. Equipping staff with the knowledge and skills to meet the technical challenges of their job, as well as the various needs of court users, is critical to building staff assurance.

### Implementation Tips

- **Michigan Judicial Institute Court Support Staff Certification.** The purpose of court support staff certification is to assure that front-line clerks, deputy clerks, clerks/typists, receptionists, and other support staff have the knowledge and specialized skills necessary to perform their jobs with a high degree of competence. *For more information, visit the [MJJ website](#).*
- **Michigan Judicial Institute Resources.** Michigan Judicial Institute has many recorded webinars to provide asynchronous training opportunities, which staff can watch at any time. *For more information, visit MJJ's [videos and webinars page](#).*
  - [Verbal Diffusion](#)
- **National Center for State Courts Webinars.** The National Center for State Court is continuously releasing updated training videos for court staff that may be relevant to the everyday work of staff. *For more information, visit NCSC's [webinar website](#) as well as [NCSC's proceduralfairness.org website](#).*

## Specific Training Topic Areas

- **Providing Legal Information.** Court staff are often inundated with court users inquiring about various legal questions, including, sometimes without realizing, asking for legal advice. Court staff should be trained on providing a high level of public service, including providing legal information whenever possible. Court staff should be trained on the difference between information and advice, including how to provide information when a visitor asks for legal advice, and various resources available to help connect a court user with legal assistance.
  - [Employee Guide to Legal Advice](#) | [Quick Reference Guide](#)
- **Court Records.** Court staff should understand what court records are considered public information. Conversely, staff should be aware of what records are restricted, to what degree are the records restricted, and the authority to which allows for restriction. This awareness will help promote consistent messaging when users may be denied access to case information.
  - [Nonpublic and Limited-Access Court Records Guide](#)
  - [Trial Court Case Record Management Standards](#)
  - [Administrative Order 2006-2](#) – Privacy Policy and Access to Court Records
- **Personal Identifying Information.** Similar to that of court records, court staff should be appraised of what personal identifying information is, and how to ensure they are not releasing information that is protected.
  - Michigan Judicial Institute PII [Webinar](#)



## 12 Resource Repository

**Strategy:** *A robust resource repository is necessary to meet the needs of court users, even for issues that did not bring them to court.*

In many cases, court users are often dealing with issues outside of what brought that person to court. These individuals could benefit from a warm hand off to community resources to help address their non-court related issues. Court staff should be cognizant and acutely aware of this ever-present phenomenon. Thus, a holistic approach to operating a welcoming courthouse is established by maintaining a **resource repository**, where court staff can connect individuals with resources that could assist court users. Resources should be expanded beyond those related to domestic violence.

### Implementation Tips

- **Method of Communication.** Maintaining a central robust repository of resources that any court staff could refer to if they encounter a court user in need of additional community resources. An infographic of highly requested information is one way to easily disseminate information to court users.
  
- **Minimum Topic Areas.** The repository list should minimally include:
  - Crisis and suicide lifeline
  - Local homeless shelters
  - Mental health resources
  - Michigan Legal Help
  - 211
  - Local Housing Assessment and Resource Agency
  - Local food pantries
  - Local domestic violence agencies
  - Local personal protection order and victim services offices
  
- **Additional Resources.** The following resources may be helpful in your implementation efforts for this strategy.
  - Example of a [court food pantry](#)