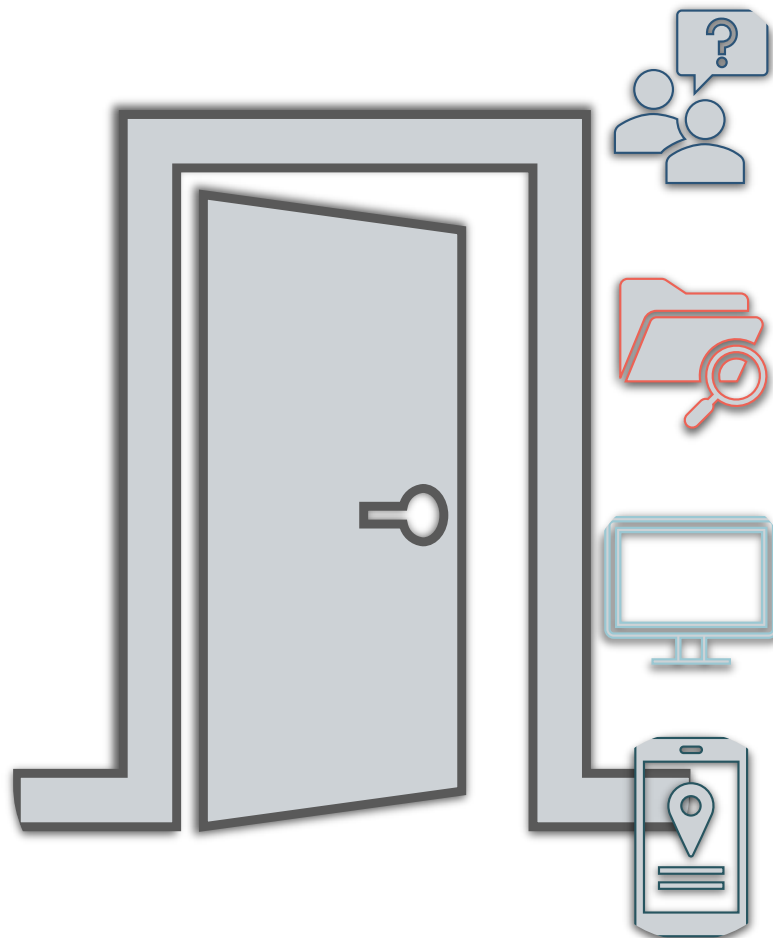




Michigan **Justice for All** Commission

Welcoming Courthouse Guidelines

Strategies To Creating a Welcoming Courthouse



Adopted December 2023

NOTICE OF DISCLAIMER:

The Michigan Supreme Court established the Justice for All Commission by Administrative Order 2021-1 to develop recommendations and projects to expand access to and enhance the quality of the civil justice system in Michigan. The opinions and recommendations contained in this document are those of the Justice for All Commission and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the Michigan Supreme Court or State Court Administrative Office.

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Introduction

Generally, people come into a courthouse to address matters that are not particularly 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, it is essential for trial courts to examine, through the lens of a court user, how their interaction with the court may impact their perception of the judicial system. Many trial courts have already taken an inventory of their processes and revolutionized the experience of their court users by modernizing some court practices. The implementation of innovative and reformative processes can help promote court spaces that are accessible to all and trusted by all. To fully embody this concept, it is important to remember that court users are not just individuals directly involved in a court case. Anyone who enters the courthouse, regardless of the reason for visiting, is considered a court user, including general members of the public.

In its final [report](#), the Justice for All Task Force, which was the forerunner to the Justice for All Commission, explicitly cited the profound need to reform Michigan's civil justice system to ensure it reflects the 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 Workgroup. The Workgroup was tasked to reimagine courthouses as spaces that are welcoming and safe places where people can easily locate where they need to go and get the services they need.

Michigan courts have a unique opportunity to strategically engage with courthouse users, so they feel welcomed, invited, and supported when entering the space to address their legal needs. Small, discrete changes in the environment over time can promote a shift in the how court users interact with and feel about the court system. The Court, as an institution is designed to serve the public, and therefore has a duty ensure people feel valued and respected when users leave a courthouse. Eliminating barriers and gaps, both physical and social, can help remove the discomfort surrounding a court experience and increase access to justice in our court system.

The principle of procedural fairness is an integral component of creating a welcoming courthouse. Court users should see the courthouse as a place that is fair and impartial, regardless of where in Michigan they may be interacting with the court system. This practice is succinctly displayed in the Michigan Judicial Council's [Promise of Procedural Fairness](#).

The Workgroup recognizes and commends many Michigan trial courts and their staff who provide exceptional customer service to those who visit their courthouse. It is the Workgroup's goal to ensure each court user has a similar experience no matter what trial court they interact with, and proliferate the various strategies outlined in this document. Additionally, the Workgroup's vision for this document is to serve as a living

resource for trial courts to easily pull from as they look to reimagine their own courthouse. Moreover, the Workgroup encourages trial courts, who have already embraced new and innovative access to justice concepts, to submit their strategies for the Commission to consider adding to this document.

A Welcoming Courthouse is

a place where court users...



GREETED

are greeted without judgment, and treated with dignity and respect



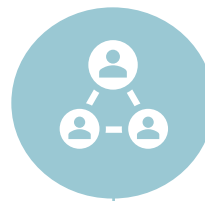
LEGAL

can have their legal needs met and addressed



NAVIGATION

can navigate the courthouse easily



RESOURCES

can receive additional community resources and referrals



COMPREHEND

understand the outcome of their court proceeding and next steps

Below are several strategies, many of which are no-to-low-cost implementation, that a trial court can voluntarily implement to help create a welcoming courthouse.

01 Mission Statement

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 strategy for promoting 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 expectations and guiding principles 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](#)
 - [36th District Court](#)
 - [22nd 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

02 Concierge

Establish a court concierge 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 individual encountered upon arrival to the court. Currently, and often by design, the public's first contact with a courthouse is usually with a uniformed, and possibly armed, security guard. For the public, this initial encounter 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 **courthouse concierge** who promotes a friendly, inviting, non-judgmental experience for users of the court. Where practical and safe, the concierge 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. If the concierge is placed after security, there should be ample signage to reassure visitors that they will find a concierge assistance after the security process. Security staff should be aware of this resource so they can accurately direct visitors.

Implementation Tips

- **Identifying a Concierge.** While the best practice may be to have concierge 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 such as the following:
 - Volunteers / AmeriCorp
 - Local law students
 - Interns
 - Robotic / technology-based
- **Scope of Concierge Activities.** The concierge's activities would include greeting visitors, assisting with directional navigation of the court, and answering general court-related questions.
- **Training a Concierge.** An asynchronous training module should be used to facilitate consistency when onboarding new concierges. 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

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](#)

04 Check-In Process

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.** If applicable, 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

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](#)

06 Visual Experience

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 acceptance, courts should intentionally consider the **visual experience** of the courthouse, including the display of signage, art, and the even the color of the walls. 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 the court serves. An inviting lobby or waiting area can offer litigants and visitors a space to convene and provide a reprieve before or after 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

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

The COVID-19 pandemic taught the courts many things that should remain in the post-pandemic era including 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](#)
 - [40th District Court](#)
 - National Center for State Courts - [Tiny Chat](#)

08 Scheduling Software

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 considering 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.
 - 36th District Court Traffic Civil Infraction [Online Scheduling Service](#)
 - Salt Lake City Justice Court – [Book your Arraignment](#)

09 Time Certain Scheduling

Eliminate, to the extent possible, the practice of bulk scheduling court cases.

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 virtually. Bulk scheduling does not promote a welcoming courthouse. 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 minimize wait times, **cases should be scheduled in a time-certain manner** to the extent possible. This practice also helps maintain a balanced and predictable schedule for court operations.

Implementation Tips

- **Clustering.** To the 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 to consider 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

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](#)

11 Training

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 List

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 referrals to community resources to help address their non-court related issues. Court staff can decrease the trauma of some legal outcomes by maintaining a **resource list**, 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 list 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.
- **Coordinator.** Having a point person whose responsibility it is to maintain, collect, and update this information, at least annually, may help ensure the resource list is accurate and up to date.
- **Topic Areas.** The list could include:
 - Crisis and suicide lifeline
 - Temporary and emergency shelters
 - Mental health resources
 - Michigan Legal Help
 - 211
 - Local Housing Assessment and Resource Agency
 - Local food pantries
 - Local domestic violence agencies and shelters
 - 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](#)