



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN THE STATE COURTS INITIATIVE

Engaging with Minority and Economically Disadvantaged Communities to Enhance Public Trust and Confidence in the Nation's State Courts

Over the past several years, there has been a sharp and tangible decline of the public trust and confidence in the justice system as a whole and by inclusion, the court system. In particular, minority and economically disadvantaged communities have been vocalizing their concerns through public stance, social media, and protests. Over the past four decades, polls and research have shown that minority views reflecting trust and confidence in the courts are less favorable than those of white, non-Hispanics. Even more powerful, however, have been the highly-publicized recent cases such as Michael Brown in Missouri, Trayvon Martin in Florida, Eric Gardner in New York City, Antonio Zambrano-Monte in Washington, and similar cases that have demonstrated the discontent that exists, and also, has impacted the public trust and confidence in the judicial system, especially in African-American communities.

In April 2015, President Obama responded to the riots in Baltimore, Maryland, which was set off by the police custody death of Freddie Gray, condemning the violence and looting, *but also calling upon communities and the nation as a whole "to do some soul searching" to address the underlying trust issues between the community and the justice system.* This calls for a new approach that does not simply evaluate the problem, but rather devises a strategy that reaches deeply into the community to begin to resolve these issues and to heal relations.

Initiative Goals

The primary goal of this project is to establish an **engagement strategy** to bridge the gap between minority communities and court

leadership through collaborative efforts to reach out and dialogue through a partnership that will lead to an increase in the public trust and confidence in the courts.

Unlike previous outreach efforts, (which largely focused on educational outreach geared toward judges and attorneys) an engagement approach involves a **two-way dialogue** to generate outcomes that the communities recognize as needed and helpful. This is an outreach approach that brings the community leaders to the courts to establish a meaningful relationship built upon trust, respect, and understanding.

Multi-Phase Approach Strategy

This project offers a new way to explore building public trust and confidence in courts at all levels. It represents a long-term effort to complement and expand the efforts made to date - not replace them - in hopes of improving understanding and connecting better with the public in each community, which then will positively impact perceptions of trust and confidence across the country.

The project consists of a multi-phase approach with various elements over a three year period. Some of the elements proposed may include the following:

- Community Leader Convocation
- National Public Trust and Confidence Summit
- Pilot Sites
- National Town Hall
- Informational Meeting
- Measurement Assessment

Mission Statement

The mission of the Community Engagement in the State Courts' Advisory Board is to develop effective tools and resources that assist state court leaders in engaging marginalized and disenfranchised communities to ensure equal access to justice for all, and to improve the trust and confidence those communities have in state courts to protect their individual rights and liberties and resolve disputes fairly.



A Project of:

**State Justice Institute
Conference of Chief Justices
National Consortium on Racial
and Ethnic Fairness in the Courts
National Center for State Courts**

UPDATE ON ACTIVITIES

The inaugural meeting of the Advisory Board was held on October 16, 2015, in Washington DC. Advisory Board members present and several participating by phone convened for a thought provoking meeting, which primarily focused on building an engagement strategy and the continual goal of outreach with presentations by Dr. Joseph Hamm, Associate Dean Jonathan Smith, and David Rottman. Since the Advisory Board meeting, we have been working on next steps and outreach on a number of levels which are summarized below in this newsletter.

Survey

As we continued to work on refining our engagement strategy work plan, as an initial data-gathering step, NCSC conducted a comprehensive public opinion survey to closely examine persistent concerns involving bias, inefficiency, and customer service that are undermining the public's confidence in the courts. The survey, which was administered by GBA Strategies, was conducted by telephone of 1,000 registered voters between October 26-29, 2015. The poll was administered to an oversample of 200 African Americans over the same period.

The survey revealed that there is a disturbingly pervasive belief that the justice system is unequal and systemically produces different results based on race, income, and other socio-economic factors. The survey also found that confidence in the court system varies greatly based on those factors. Most strikingly, there is a massive racial gap on most measures, including bias, equal justice, and customer service, with African Americans much more distrustful of the courts and the broader justice system. For more information on the survey findings visit, <http://www.ncsc.org/2015survey>.

Roundtable Discussion

A Roundtable Discussion on Racial Equity and the Role of Local Governments was held on October 14, 2015 at Georgetown University, McDonough School of Business, with Chief Judge Washington in attendance. Among others, Julie Nelson, Director of Government Alliance on Race and Equity, Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive

Society, University of California-Berkeley presented on the responsibility and opportunity for local governments to advance racial equity in partnerships with the community.

National Symposium in Washington, DC

On December 4, 2015, Chief Judge Washington spoke at a National Association for Civilian Oversight of Law Enforcement and the University of the District of Columbia David A. Clarke School of Law. He informed attendees of the importance of the Community Engagement in the State Courts Initiative. Associate Dean Jonathan Smith, the Reporter to the Advisory Board, is involved with the work of this group and invited Chief Judge Washington to present. His keynote speech was an opportunity to test out our outreach message and was very well-received.

National Task Force on Fines, Fees, and Bail Practices

The Conference of Chief Justices (CCJ) and the Conference of State Court Administrators (COSCA) have formed a National Task Force on Fines, Fees, and Bail Practices to address the ongoing impact of court fines and fees and pretrial bail/bonds on communities across the United States. The Task Force will be comprised of national judicial and legal leaders, legal advocates, policy makers from state, county and municipal government, academics, and the public interest community. It will be co-chaired by Ohio Chief Justice Maureen O'Connor and Kentucky State Court Administrator Laurie K. Dudgeon. The Task Force will coordinate with other key stakeholders, including the Department of Justice and the State Justice Institute.

Panel Presentation

In addition to these activities, we have been invited to conduct a session at the **Loyola Law School for Journalists on June 10, 2016**. Our session would focus on reporting on the National Town Hall and our work in community engagement.

Advisory Board Members

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