

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

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY/OVERVIEW**

***The Problem***

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 cases over the past year 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 negatively affected the public trust and confidence in the judicial system, especially in African-American communities.

Most recently (April 2015), President Obama responded to the riots in Baltimore, Maryland, which were 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.

***The Goals***

The primary goal of this NCSC initiative, which has been funded by the State Justice Institute, 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 affect 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 include the following:

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

The initial phase involves the establishment of a national advisory board of no more than 15 members that will lead and guide this effort. The main focus is the engagement strategy that will consist of listening to and learning from minority and low-income communities about their perspectives on the issues affecting trust and confidence and what they think courts can do that would most improve trust and confidence. Based on this engagement strategy, tool kits for local and state action will be designed along with an evaluation plan.

In addition, the Conference of Chief Justices in partnership with the Consortium would host a Community Leader Convocation (“CLC”) consisting of 37 members from each of the jurisdictions representing the Consortium minority justice commission and a state minority community leader identified by the state’s Chief Justice. These leaders along with the Advisory Board would meet for 2 days to review the problems identified in the data gathering phase, consider best practices used by courts and the concept of engagement. The CLC would consist of plenary sessions and workshops designed to validate and expand upon both problems and solutions for improving minority community trust and confidence in the courts. The work of the CLC would be used to develop engagement strategies for application in state pilot sites (6).

Another element would include a national poll, environmental scan, and other similar public opinion surveys will be implemented to gather data. This data will be used to develop several pilot projects. Because of the diversity in communities within various states, a six state pilot program is being recommended. These pilots will need time to be implemented and tested. The Advisory Board and evaluators will determine how long each approach will require to obtain valid evaluation results.

Additionally, a National Summit will be held where the National Consortium on Racial and Ethnic Fairness network of state and minority commissions, task force, and bar associations along with other community leaders will meet to review and discuss the national poll findings and pilot program engagement results to develop a plan of action that will include the creation of toolkits and solution-based strategies that will be deployed on a national level to help with improving public trust and confidence in minority communities.

Once a strategy or strategies are identified, the project will test their usefulness and impact. Strategies that are shown to be successful then will be made available through training programs, tool kits, and, possibly, videos and Internet-based information.