

Local Courts, National Impact

A Roadmap to Equity

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Center
for
Justice
Innovation



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Dedication

We dedicate this report to the memory of Mark Myles (1982-2026) who passed away during the course of this project. His contributions to this initiative as well as to his hometown of Selma, Alabama, positioned him as a cornerstone in his community and as a devoted mentor, servant, leader, and tireless advocate for youth justice. His passing is a profound loss, but the legacy of his advocacy and his vision for justice continue to transform the systems he fought so tirelessly to change, both through this project and the many lives he touched.

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Introduction

Local courts, including more than 7,500 municipal courts, process nearly four out of every five criminal cases each year.^[1] Yet the courts that make up this network are more akin to individual territories than a coherent system of justice. This makes it hard to even name shared problems, let alone engage in coordinated reform efforts. Indeed, the magnitude of local courts is enough for some to advocate directing attention and resources elsewhere; the problems are too large and the solutions too localized to attempt systemic reform.

Others simply dismiss local courts as inconsequential. Despite the millions of Americans who cycle through these institutions every year, the stakes are deemed too “low” to justify significant investment. Or, as Blake Strode of ArchCity Defenders in St. Louis, Missouri, explains, there is an assumption “that municipal courts serve as a kind of harm mitigation to the defendants—that they would otherwise be subjected to more serious criminal penalties absent the lower risk setting of a municipal court.” By offering a supposed “lower risk” alternative, the system can escape examining factors such as the policing practices which may be driving local court involvement. As Strode cautions, “there’s a vast range of conduct that would otherwise be outside of the legal system altogether that is instead swept into the mechanism of municipal courts.”^[2]

Whether because they are deemed inconsequential, or at least “better than the alternative,” local courts—and especially municipal courts—have been largely left to

their own devices, in the process becoming a primary driver of racial and class-based inequity within both the legal system and local communities.

With this context in mind, the Center for Justice Innovation and JustLeadershipUSA (JLUSA) designed an inclusive national conversation about these courts, their impact, and their potential to advance, rather than set back, equity. In doing so, we engaged the people who know these courts best: those who have appeared before them, who work within them, and who study them.

The scale and diversity of local courts is an opportunity, not a liability.

What emerged from those conversations was a clear pathway to justice that could positively impact millions of lives. Local courts are diverse in structure, operations, and impact, yet communities nationwide are already advancing equity by embracing common values in their approaches to justice. By framing the scale and diversity of these courts as an opportunity rather than a liability, local advocates and their partners are demonstrating how meaningful reform efforts can be.

Methodology

Over the course of a year-and-a-half, JLUSA and the Center for Justice Innovation facilitated surveys and focus groups of people directly impacted by municipal courts; a series of webinars engaging court practitioners; and a national convening that brought together directly-impacted persons, court practitioners, community providers, and academics. These efforts were guided by a national steering committee with equal representation across system-impacted persons, judges, scholars, and advocates.

At the core of our methodology was a refusal to shy away from hard problems and hard truths. Accessing these meant centering the testimony of those who have experienced the impact of local courts first-hand. Too often these voices are either excluded from these conversations or only superficially acknowledged. This kind of approach generates incomplete, misinformed, or misdirected recommendations. These, in turn, become policies and programs which fail to realize the change they seek to target. To avoid this, the structure we built foregrounded the voices of all municipal court experts at every stage of the conversation. In that sense, the method was the message; how this conversation took place was as important as the recommendations it generated.

An important caveat: the discussions we hosted focused predominantly on what does—and *should*—happen when a person is already court-involved. Less time was spent exploring the factors which bring people to a local court in the first place—policing practices, most notably. Nor do we address

the economic pressures that can affect local courts—the extent to which being seen as important revenue generators can influence court practices and widen the net of court involvement. These critical issues lie outside the purview of what follows, but we urge those working on local court reform to continue to scrutinize the phenomena which drive local court involvement.

Foundational Lessons and Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Neither the problems, cases, nor people appearing in non-felony courts are “low-level.” We offer “local courts” as a more accurate, less value-laden term. Raising the profile of all non-felony criminal courts demands a collaborative effort to center both the individual and collective humanity of the people impacted by these courts.

Lesson Learned

Non-felony courts are the primary way most Americans experience the justice system. We heard repeatedly from people directly-impacted by these courts, from court personnel, and from advocates of reforming these courts, that labeling these courts “low-level” devalues the people connected to them. Shifting our language, and the focus of considerable reform energy, from exclusively municipal or “low” courts to “local” ones addresses two interdependent issues. First, it rejects the implication that local courts are less deserving of attention or investment than their counterparts within the American legal system. Second, it expands the coalition of community and legal advocates working to reform these courts, underlining their importance within the broader legal system. The unique structure of municipal courts brings its own challenges and opportunities, but for the directly-impacted people we talked to,



Professor Alexandra Natapoff delivers the keynote address at *Municipal Courts and the Promise of Community Justice*.

along with community members and even system-actors, the dysfunction shared across *all* non-felony criminal courts was the more urgent target for reform efforts.

The pathways to effective reforms we encountered in this project were generally aligned with what Alexandra Natapoff, writing specifically of municipal courts, calls the “fundamental reform”: that the American legal system must meaningfully acknowledge the significance of so-called “low-level” courts and their profound impacts on individuals, communities, and the criminal legal system writ large.^[3] In her presentation to the national convening, Dianna Kalandros told the story of one person who began crying when he learned about the reduction in court fees that was part of a misdemeanor community supervision program she had established in Tempe, Arizona. “The last time he was on



Convening participants discuss the impact of local courts.

probation,” Kalandros explained, “he had to sell his blood plasma to make those payments.”^[4] And if that account illustrates the individual toll of local courts, consider their scale: there are at least 3.5 million criminal cases filed in municipal courts each year. As Natapoff observed to convening participants of the system of local courts: “it is not a small phenomenon, it’s not niche. It’s central to the way we run.”^[5]

Recommendation 2

The people and communities most impacted by local courts must be included as equal partners in reform efforts and ongoing operations.

Lesson Learned

Local courts are most valuable when authentic partnerships exist among the people who make these courts run—judges, attorneys, and court personnel—and the people and communities most affected by that work. Yet too often these partnerships have broken down. As the historian Laura

Edwards explains in one of the webinars produced for this project, in the early decades of post-revolutionary America, community members, not legal professionals, were central to what were in effect hyper-local legal systems. These systems were integral to the enforcement of that era’s violent racial and gender hierarchies, and yet, surprisingly, they could also be forums for *opposing* such structures, in ways that would be difficult to access today. As Edwards explains, “one of the most important things that I found...is the amazing possibilities that people on the margins advocated in the context of these courts.”^[6]

As the conversations that made up this project uncovered, there are local courts today returning to a community-led justice model shaped by the people these courts have most directly-impacted. To ensure that reform efforts produce a fairer system and more equitable communities, justice at the local level must honor the expertise and input of these constituencies, in the same way it honors the experience of legal professionals. This joint effort must define every stage of the reform process: identifying problems, offering solutions, implementing reforms, evaluating their success, and developing local rule-making and ordinance processes.

Recommendation 3

Facilitate local courts’ access to additional case resolution tools and, in some cases, do not prosecute at all. The impact of court decisions can be starkly inequitable. Many factors influence the impact of court-based sanctions; in local courts, the nature of the offense was often the least salient.

Lesson Learned

It was repeatedly observed by participants across our project that *who* was coming to court—specifically their financial resources—and *where* they were appearing were often better predictors of a person’s experience with a local court than the legal matter itself. This is not to suggest that the instant offense is inconsequential; rather, that the “lesser” sentencing associated with local courts produces significant variability of sanction “severity” at the individual level. Executive Director of Alliance for Justice Rachel Rossi explained at the convening how fines and fees can create deep disparities in how people experience local courts, making the case for expanded case resolution tools at the local level: “When you talk about a \$100 fee or a fine for someone who’s affluent, that’s just an annoyance—got to go pay that ticket. For someone for whom \$100 means: ‘Will I be able to put food on the table for my kids tonight,’ or ‘Will I be incarcerated because I didn’t pay this fine or fee,’ that means justice isn’t equal. That means justice doesn’t look the same for all communities.”

As for where your case is heard, as one focus group member explained, “You go to court in Clinton, Alabama... they don’t give you the option to do work or community service. Now, you go to the little town that I’m from—Jemison—and you do 40 hours of community service... Your fines are paid.”^[7] From town to town, factors such as the availability and accessibility of alternatives to fines and fees, the use of ability-to-pay assessments, court notification practices, and prosecutorial culture and practices all influence how people “experience” justice.

Take the question of court notifications. Missed court appearances are often viewed as an individual failing when the reality can be far more complicated. People appearing before local courts are juggling work schedules, childcare responsibilities, illness, transportation challenges, or other daily pressures. As JLUSA Regional Expert Tari Williams explained at our convening, “it’s not just that people aren’t showing up for court, but ‘I’ve got a court date, I’ve got a job, I have a sick kid...’” Mindful of these realities, Williams, who is system-impacted herself, would text supportive court reminders to people she worked with at Greater Birmingham Ministries in Alabama.^[8] It is a small, yet pivotal, action that could mean the difference between failing to appear and completing a program.



JLUSA Regional Experts Sheila Nared (left) and Tari Williams share their expertise as people with lived experience of the legal system.

The science backs what Williams knows from lived experience. Associate Managing Director Shannon McAuliffe at ideas42 demonstrated to convening participants how court reminder systems and clearly struc-



An example of court reminder notifications from ideas42.

tured court notices can increase appearance rates nationally by 20 to 40 percent, reduce court costs for both individuals and governments, and limit the time people must spend within the system itself.^[9] She also provided a step-by-step guide to implement these reforms in any court.^[10] Yet not everyone is fortunate enough to live in a community where they may easily connect with someone like Williams or appear in a court which has embraced the reforms advocated for by ideas42. For those individuals, the simple acts of daily life could cost them their money, at best, and their freedom, at worst.

Building an Infrastructure

There was consensus among project participants that the national conversation begun as part of this undertaking was effective in fostering relationships and there was an express desire to keep this conversation going. The following recommendations offer a vision to build a national infrastructure for local court reform coupled with ideas on how to get there.

Recommendation 4

Local courts require a level of concerted national attention and investment commensurate with their impact. An interdisciplinary Consortium dedicated to local courts—co-governed by system-impacted persons, system actors, and academics—is where we should start.

Lesson Learned

Across many of the experts we spoke to—those who have appeared in local courts, people whose families are court-involved, social workers and community providers, academics, and legal practitioners from attorneys to judges—a common wish took shape. That was for a space to continue what the convening had begun: relationship-building among system actors and community members; resource- and information-sharing; exploring opportunities for civic engagement; training and skill-building; and mentorship. Along with a shared space for people seeking to reform local courts, a national Consortium would elevate the profile of local courts across

the country. Designed in the image of this project and benefitting from its partners’ institutional leverage, a Consortium of this nature would center the voices of those historically excluded from reform conversations, all while legitimizing local courts—or more pointedly, local court reform—within the legal and civic landscape.

Examples From the Field

There are numerous national efforts to build community and lead change around specific areas of system reform:

- The Access to Justice Network (formerly the Self-Represented Litigants Network) has built a strong infrastructure. There are biannual convenings and an active virtual working group culture, as well as transparent governance guidelines.^[11]
- The National Center for State Courts facilitates a number of consortiums and membership groups dedicated to both issue- and professional role-specific content. Some are independently governed with their own by-laws (e.g. the Conference of Chief Justices),^[12] while others feature shared leadership structures with partner organizations (e.g. AI Policy Consortium for Law & Courts).^[13] The National Legal Aid and Defender Association does as well, including civil, client, and defender councils.^[14]

Recommendation 5

To improve public and institutional understanding of local courts, expand access to applied research for strengthened data literacy, collection, analysis, and dissemination.

Lesson Learned

System actors, directly-impacted persons, and advocates all expressed a keen desire for “data.” Some wanted data to advocate for more resources from government, others for policy change and community mobilization, and still others wanted datasets that shared stories, not numbers. Building or strengthening networks of data scientists and people with expertise within the system is mutually beneficial for all parties and may accelerate the kinds of reform explored during the project. For system actors and directly-impacted persons, data can illustrate a need or an impact, or bolster an argument in a world ever more reliant on “data-informed” decision-making. For data scientists, community and system connections add nuance and vitality to their research, refine hypotheses, and facilitate the application of findings to community problems. Put simply, data improves local court reform efforts and community input improves the data.

At the convening, Dr. Brandon Terry remarked of local courts, “there’s so much information out there that we still don’t know.”^[15] This can make it daunting to determine where to direct resources. To provide some guidance, we have assembled action items and helpful resources for strengthening data capacity and evidence-building at the local and systems level.

Resources & Investments for Local Capacity-Building

There are a variety of resources for courts and communities looking to build their data capacity.

- The National Center for State Courts’ National Open Court Data Standards projects offers comprehensive standards for data collection, sharing, and integration. These standards can improve court collaboration, increase transparency, minimize error, and increase the efficient use of court resources. Guides for criminal^[16] and traffic^[17] courts may prove most useful for local court reformers. The National Center for State Courts also released an interactive *Court Data Sharing from Scratch* guide about data-sharing for small- and medium-sized courts.^[18]
- The Center for Justice Innovation’s Data Analytics and Applied Research department assembled a similar introduction to court-based data.^[19] The guide features important data domains and practical tips for boosting program efficacy and community impact. For local courts and communities looking to design, analyze, and evaluate their programs, this resource can help key partners such as directly impacted community members, system actors, and practitioners talk through what data is important to them and build their system around those datapoints.
- Local courts may find examples from rural communities particularly helpful given the similarities in challenges related to limited resources and capacity.



Newark Public Safety Collaborative walks bring together community members, researchers, and government stakeholders to contextualize data findings in local spaces. (Photo: Newark Public Safety Collaborative)

The Center for Justice Innovation, along with the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform and the California Office of the State Public Defender, also published a guide for building data capacity in rural defense systems.^[20]

The data scientists behind these projects explain that implementing the tips or adhering to the standards above requires a “data culture” across institutions and communities. Strong data cultures are marked by multidisciplinary teams contributing to local court data and collaborative data-sharing (while respecting the need for privacy), with a focus on transparency around what is and is not possible. Models such as Data Informed Community Engagement (DICE) developed at Rutgers University^[21] or the “Hard Conversations” series facilitated at Harvard University’s Institute on Policing, Incarceration, and Public Safety illustrate how community and data scientists can work together to advance community change. The Newark Public Safety Collaborative utilizes

DICE to “democratize data” and empower community members to participate at every stage of data collection, analysis, and dissemination. As a result, the Collaborative supports the co-production of community safety to address the most complex social challenges at the local level.^[22] Investments in research and data projects that apply these models of collaboration can create pathways to meaningful evidence building and problem-solving.

Where to Focus

Local courts and the communities in which they operate vary widely. Accordingly, we offer areas of focus for them to consider rather than recommend specific actions. Identifying these areas has been in part the product of consultations with people directly impacted by local courts and they are intended to be of as much benefit to the directly-impacted as to courthouse personnel and operations. Indeed, this kind of reciprocal benefit must be the litmus test for any authentic reform.

Recommendation 6

Local courts generate “bad” or uncollectable debt. Support local courts in implementing alternative responses.

Lesson Learned

All project contributors agreed that local courts have an important role to play in their communities and can serve as spaces where actions that may jeopardize public safety or community wellness can be addressed. Yet, too often, local courts have come to represent a “system of last resort” where other systems have failed, tasked with handling social and public health crises like homelessness, substance use, and pervasive mental illness.

Fines, fees, and incarceration—often the default sanctions—cannot produce the community conditions and accountability that local courts are meant to instill and have been shown to have particularly harmful impacts on people of color and of reduced

means. During the focus groups with JLUSA, the majority of directly-impacted people reported experiencing financial hardship such as underemployment, housing instability, or food insecurity at the time of their court appearance and were forced to choose between meeting a basic need or satisfying a court obligation. People who failed to meet their court obligations reported facing additional penalties—including incarceration. Meanwhile, system actors such as judges, attorneys, and community providers expressed frustration at having to bear witness to and sometimes perpetuate these inequities by imposing fines and fees on those they knew would be unable to pay.

In communities across the country, directly-impacted persons, system actors, and advocates have built local solutions to the injustices imposed by over-reliance on fines and fees. These innovations are as diverse as the communities themselves. Understanding local needs, in collaboration with the people most impacted by system-involvement, must always take precedence, but these are efforts that, with local tailoring, could be supported and expanded across much of the local court landscape.

Reform programs featured throughout the project included:

- **Early Case Resolution (Pre-Filing):** In New York City, two programs—Project Reset^[23] and RAPID Reset—have institutionalized diversion prior to court filing. The programs give people charged with minor offenses a chance

to reflect, take accountability, and strengthen their connection with their communities without ever appearing before a judge. A collaborative effort of the Center for Justice Innovation, the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice, and the District Attorneys and Public Defense offices across New York City, Project Reset provides brief and restorative opportunities to resolve legal matters before a person enters the court. For those who cannot be reached prior to their court date, RAPID Reset provides similar opportunities within the courthouse so that people can resolve their legal matters the same day as their first appearance.



Project Reset offers restorative justice circles as an alternative to traditional court processing.

- **Pre- or Post-Plea Diversion Programs:** In response to rising amounts of uncollectable supervision fees and the resulting reincarceration of people charged with misdemeanors, community supervision professionals in Tempe, Arizona, designed and implemented the Incentives Program to reduce local court

probation debt through incentive-based efforts. By pursuing free, community-based education, parenting, employment, recovery, and other wellness services, individuals on municipal supervision are able to reduce their probation fees by hundreds of dollars while simultaneously taking self-directed steps towards goal-attainment. The Incentives Program draws on principles from the Effective Practices in Community Supervision (EPICS)^[24] model as well as the Risk-Needs-Responsivity model.^[25] In 2024, the program was evaluated through a partnership with the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. The evaluation found that the program saved both the court and participants money: for every dollar invested in the Incentives program, the locality saved \$5 in costs associated with non-compliance management.^[26]

In addition to programs, the project surfaced procedural reforms that could improve equity:

- **Declination:** Electing not to prosecute—“declination”—was explored at the convening as an effective way for prosecutors to reduce inequity and relieve the burden on local courts. The Center for Justice Innovation recently identified declination as an “underutilized off-ramp” in misdemeanor reform.^[27]
- **Standardized Ability-to-Pay Assessments:** Throughout every focus group conducted by JLUSA, directly-impacted people raised the imposition of often unpayable fines and fees as a significant burden. Early on-the-record, ability-to-pay determinations, coupled with increased options for non-monetary

case resolutions, can create a court infrastructure which does not force the accumulation of unpayable debt. The Fines and Fees Justice Center offers a wealth of information on ability-to-pay tools in their research clearinghouse,^[28] while a brief^[29] by the Center for Justice Innovation offers practical guidance on their applications.

- **Local Directives, Ordinances, and Debt-Relief Policy:** In some communities, advocates and system actors used local policy reform to minimize or eliminate bad debt. During a “Tactics for Change” session at the convening, Alabama Appleseed Community Navigator Callie Greer recounted how community advocates worked with local government to forgive up to \$10 million in debt.^[30] Armed with survey data and testimony from people most directly impacted by these fines and fees, Greer and her colleagues helped convince Montgomery’s mayor to issue an executive order^[31] forgiving a

decade’s worth of traffic- and cannabis-related fines and fees owed to the local municipal court.^[32] The Fines and Fees Justice Center assembled a helpful guide for localities looking to implement similar policy reforms.^[33]

Recommendation 7

Assist courts in integrating directly-impacted people into local court teams and operations to create systems that are truly representative of the diverse communities they serve.

Lesson Learned

Elevating directly-impacted people as key players within court operations creates direct linkages to community members, increases the court’s credibility, and improves procedural justice outcomes. How local courts and communities achieve this will vary based on the needs, resources, and capacity of the court itself as well as the entrenched harms already shouldered by court-impacted members of the community. Pathways can include:

- **Partnering with community-based organizations which employ peers or system-impacted people with lived-expertise in recovery, reentry, housing instability, or other relevant subject matter:** Therapeutic Court Coordinator Sarah Thompson shared with the convening how Washington’s Spokane Municipal Court leverages partnerships with local organizations to incorporate directly-impacted persons into their community justice work. The community court team hosts weekly



Flanked by community advocates, Montgomery Mayor Steven Reed signs an executive order forgiving municipal fines. (Jake Crandall/Montgomery Advertiser)

meetings within the community with select partners who employ people with lived experience to orchestrate outreach, provide service updates for program participants, and ensure people do not fall through system gaps.

- **Creating peer positions within the court designed to support individuals in the court system:** The Jersey City Municipal Court in New Jersey created a dedicated Peer Specialist position through the Jersey City Community Solutions community court, institutionalizing lived experience and expertise as a core component of their community court model. During a convening session, program director Stacey Dix-Kielbiowski said she had observed positive program outcomes since bringing a peer specialist onboard: "We definitely have noticed an increased engagement on the individuals that we had a harder time engaging with initially."^[34]
- **Hiring people who have been system-involved to fill positions within the local court:** Courts and diversion programs do not need to limit system-impacted hiring practices to dedicated "peer" positions. Where possible, courts and diversion programs within courts can build up recruitment practices for system-impacted people to join their teams. Newark Community Solutions, a community justice program in the Newark Municipal Court, partners with the New Jersey Scholarship and Transformative Education Program within Rutgers University, creating a pipeline of talented, system-impacted



A Jersey City Community Solutions peer specialist conducting outreach in the community.

Bachelors- and Masters-level job candidates and interns to fill a variety of vacancies across the program. Expanding partnerships among prison-based education programs and local court reform programs can both develop and fortify educational and employment opportunities for people with lived experience working within the justice sector.

- **Integrating people with lived experience into regional professional networks:** Criminal Justice Coordinating Councils are nationally recognized bodies which promote reform at the local level. Putting directly-impacted people in leadership roles helps ensure that local decision-making reflects their expertise and experience. For more than a decade, the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council in Ohio's Lucas County has been staffing committees focused on issues such as reentry and the impact of courts with a mix of justice-system actors alongside directly-impacted residents and experts. Through their collaboration,

the Toledo Municipal Court has established a reentry docket serving individuals with old warrants, fines/fees, and other localized legal issues as they return to their community.

Helping courts, programs, and communities strengthen the support and recognition of the directly-impacted workforce through resources, training, and mentoring can expand these models into other localities and courthouses looking to improve operations. Not only does this investment enhance economic mobility for people with lived experience, it increases community trust and improves public safety.

Recommendation 8

Teach the principles of human-centered justice such as procedural justice, trauma-informed approaches, person-centered language, and authentic partnership.

Lesson Learned

Developing the core practices of human-centered justice is essential to building equitable local courts. As our conversations revealed, court administrators, judges, and chief judges are actively seeking training and support in these areas. Community members and judges with experience in these practices can serve as champions, helping to strengthen courtroom culture and expand meaningful engagement with impacted communities.

There is an abundance of training programs, curricula, and technical assistance for people interested in this vital area of reform. For example, JLUSA previewed the person-first language and authentic engagement

training modules from their Leadership in Action Initiatives for convening attendees. Additionally, Policy Research Associates^[35] and the GAINS Center^[36] have developed a deep portfolio of training and technical assistance support for criminal legal systems wishing to take a trauma-informed approach and to advance other reforms.



JLUSA teaches convening attendees about person-first language.

Yet, as this project made clear, becoming human-centered is about more than just training. JLUSA Regional Expert Sheila Nared is the director of the Seven Hills Neighborhood Houses Trauma Recovery Center in Cincinnati. She is also system-impacted herself. As she explained during a convening panel, *how* these trainings are offered is as important as the content itself. At the trauma center where she works, the community brings “different departments together in the same space, not just to hear, but to experience what it's like [to be system impacted].”^[37] By learning together, people working in systems and who live in impacted communities develop relationships and learn to see one another differently.

Recommendation 9

Justice can happen anywhere. Help communities and local courts bring justice outside of the courtroom.

Lesson Learned

Impacted persons, community organizations, and court personnel noted the power and benefits of conducting traditional “court activities” within the community. Across the country, communities and local courts have developed innovations such as community-driven warrant clinics, special calendars in community spaces such as libraries or drop-in centers, and “mobile courts.” These types of initiatives both engage the community and improve outcomes.

Communities tailored their innovations in response to local needs and resources. In some instances, events took place on weekends. Court personnel might come to the community in person, or the option of a virtual court was used to increase access.

Regardless of format, everyone benefits when the court literally “meets people where they are.” Impacted people can attend to their legal issues in spaces where they may feel safer and more comfortable, and where they can more easily connect with critical community resources and support. For their part, along with strengthening community connections, local courts can engage individuals who may be at a higher risk of failing to appear because they lack a stable address, reliable transport, or have other restrictions which make court appearances particularly costly.

Below are some of the innovative ways in which justice has been delivered outside of courthouses across the country:

- Growing Real Alternatives Everywhere is a community-led initiative which partners with courts across the country to arrange “warrant clinics.”^[38] Led by community with input from the courts, these warrant clinics are tailored to each locality with the express purpose of engaging community, promoting safe case resolutions, and delivering justice outside the walls of the courthouse.
- In Boulder, Colorado, the local community court utilizes technology to conduct court sessions in the community. Court sessions are held outdoors in collaboration with a local “clothing closet” event sponsored by a faith-based institution. Court navigators and prosecutors are present in the community while the Judge appears remotely via Zoom.



Colorado's Boulder Community Court brings court services directly to the community.

- The Austin Community Court in Texas has a dedicated clinical case manager who works in partnership with an Austin Police Department officer, an Austin/Travis County EMS community health paramedic, and multiple staff from their local mental health authority as part of a Homeless Outreach Street Team^[39] to conduct proactive outreach to build trust with the unhoused community and connect people to services and basic needs. Additionally, the Community Court created a Mobile Court program which provides geographically dispersed options throughout the community at trusted service partner locations for people to resolve cases and outstanding warrants, while providing onsite connections to a clinical case manager and social service resources.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Endnotes

- [1] Agan, A. Y., Doleac, J. L., & Harvey, A., Misdemeanor Prosecution, National Bureau of Economic Research, Mar. 2021, Rev. Aug. 2022, at 2, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w28600>
- [2] Watch the full webinar, *The Importance of Municipal Courts: An introduction*, where Strode discusses the harms of net-widening here: <https://www.innovatingjustice.org/resources/series-municipal-court-reform/the-importance-of-municipal-courts-an-introduction/>
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- [4] Kalandros, D. (2025) at the October 2025 *Municipal Courts and the Promise of Community Justice Convening* hosted by the Center for Justice Innovation and JustLeadershipUSA.
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- [38] To see the GRAE program in action, watch this video from PBS: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/innovative-warrant-clinics-help-people-take-care-of-legal-issues-without-risking-jail-time>
- [39] To see the Austin Community Court in action, watch this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8pMZchIKWL4&t=2s>

Appendix

Below is a summary of the articles, videos, and resources referenced throughout the report.

AUTHOR	TITLE	TYPE AND LINK
Introduction		
Blake Stroud	<i>The Importance of Municipal Courts: An introduction</i>	<u>Full Length Webinar</u>
		<u>Short Version Webinar</u>
Recommendation 1		
Professor Alexandra Natapoff	<i>Criminal Municipal Courts</i>	<u>Law Review Article</u>
Recommendation 2		
Professor Laura Edward	<i>The Importance of Municipal Courts: An introduction</i>	<u>Full Length Webinar</u>
		<u>Short Version Webinar</u>
Recommendation 3		
ideas42	<i>Court Reminder Systems Improve Justice: A cost-effective solution, proven by research</i>	<u>Fact Sheet</u>
ideas42	<i>Improving Court Attendance: The essential guide to court reminder programs</i>	<u>Guide</u>

Recommendation 4

The Access to Justice Network at Stanford University	<i>Access to Justice Network: Community and Governance</i>	<u>Website and Governance Guidelines</u>
National Center for State Courts	<i>Conference of Chief Judges Mission Page</i>	<u>Website</u>
National Center for State Courts	<i>AI Policy Consortium for Law & Courts</i>	<u>Website</u>

Recommendation 5

National Center for State Courts	National Open Court Data Standards Project <i>Criminal Cases: Recommended data elements</i>	<u>Guide</u>
Center for Justice Innovation	<i>An Introduction to Court-Based Program Data</i>	<u>Guide</u>
Alejandro Gimenez Santana	<i>Empowering Community Organizations to Co-Produce Public Safety</i>	<u>Journal Article</u> (pages 22-25)
Newark Public Safety Collaborative & Data-Informed Community Engagement at Rutgers University	<i>NPSC Process for Data-Sharing and Problem-Solving</i>	<u>Video</u>

University of Kansas	Community Toolbox: Chapter 2, Section 1 <i>Developing a Logic Model or Theory of Change</i>	<u>Guide</u>
National Center for State Courts	<i>Court Data Sharing from Scratch</i>	<u>Guide</u>
Center for Justice Innovation	<i>A Guide for Building Data Capacity in Rural Defense Systems</i>	<u>Guide</u>
Jonathan Puente and Dylan Hayre	<i>Municipal Courts as Potential Sites of Racial and Socio-Economic Disparity</i>	<u>Full Length Webinar</u>
		<u>Short Version Webinar</u>
SchoolHouse Connection Clearinghouse	<i>SchoolHouse Connection: Tools & Resources</i>	<u>Website</u>
The Eviction Lab	<i>The Eviction Lab</i>	<u>Website</u>
National Center for State Courts	<i>Treatment Courts Resource Page</i>	<u>Website</u>
National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers' Learn Page	<i>NACDL: Learn</i>	<u>Website</u>
The Municipal Courts Project	<i>Municipal Court Project</i>	<u>Website</u>

Recommendation 6

Project Reset A Program of the Center for Justice Innovation	<i>Project Reset</i>	<u>Website</u>
RAND	<i>A Process and Outcome Evaluation of Project Reset</i>	<u>Evaluation</u>
Effective Practices in Community Supervision (EPICS)	<i>Program Profile: Effective practices in community supervision</i>	<u>Guide</u>
Center for Justice Innovation	<i>Risk-Need-Responsivity: Recommendations for community courts</i>	<u>Guide</u>
Dianna Kalandros and the Incentives Program		<u>Full Length Webinar</u>
		<u>Short Version Webinar</u>
Center for Justice Innovation	<i>A Moment for Misdemeanor Policy Change</i>	<u>Policy Brief</u>
The Brennan Center for Justice & Fair and Just Prosecution	<i>Principles for the 21st Century Prosecutor</i>	<u>Guide</u>
Fines and Fees Justice Center	<i>The Clearinghouse</i>	<u>Website</u>
Center for Justice Innovation	<i>A Snapshot of Ability-to-Pay Tools for Fines and Fees</i>	<u>Guide</u>

The City of Montgomery	<i>Fact Sheet: Mayor’s Executive Order No. 2024-0220 Remission of Fines, Fees, and Costs for Municipal Court Convictions</i>	<u>Factsheet</u>
Mayor Stephen Reed, City of Montgomery	<i>Executive Order No. 2024-0220</i>	<u>Executive Order</u>
Southern Poverty Law Center	<i>Alabama City Offers People Fresh Start by Forgiving Minor Municipal Fines</i>	<u>Website Post</u>
Fines and Fees Justice Center	<i>Local Policy Guides: Fee elimination and debt relief</i>	<u>Guide</u>
Recommendation 8		
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration GAINS Center	<i>Trauma Training for Criminal Justice Professionals</i>	<u>Website</u>
Equal Justice USA	<i>Trauma to Trust Training</i>	<u>Video</u>
Recommendation 9		
Growing Real Alternatives Everywhere (GRAE)	<i>Innovative warrant clinics help people take care of legal issues without risking jail time</i>	<u>Video</u>

Boulder Community Court	<i>City of Boulder: Community Court Video</i>	<u>Video</u>
Austin Community Court	<i>Downtown Austin Community Court</i>	<u>Video</u>

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