



# COURT VOICES PROJECT

Using Court User  
Feedback to Guide  
Courts' Pandemic  
Responses

*August 2022*

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LAGRATTA CONSULTING, LLC

  
State Justice Institute



***We dedicate this resource to the community members from our pilot court jurisdictions who shared their feedback and to the court leaders who listened. Collectively, they are making huge strides in improving our nation's courts.***

- 4th Judicial District (Multnomah County, OR)
- 6th Judicial District (St. Louis County, MN)
- 19th Judicial District Court (East Baton Rouge, LA)
  - Birmingham Municipal Court (AL)
  - Boulder Municipal Court (CO)
- Calhan, Deer Trail, Hugo, & Limon Municipal Courts (CO)
  - Mecklenburg County District Court (Charlotte, NC)
  - San Antonio Municipal Court (TX)
  - Toledo Municipal Court (OH)

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Direct download: [www.lagratta.com/court-voices-project-user-feedback](http://www.lagratta.com/court-voices-project-user-feedback)

Project webpage: [www.lagratta.com/court-voices-project](http://www.lagratta.com/court-voices-project)

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# Project overview

As courts emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic and consider what’s working and which pandemic response practices to keep, some court leaders are taking a critical step asking for input from those closest to the situation: court staff and court users.

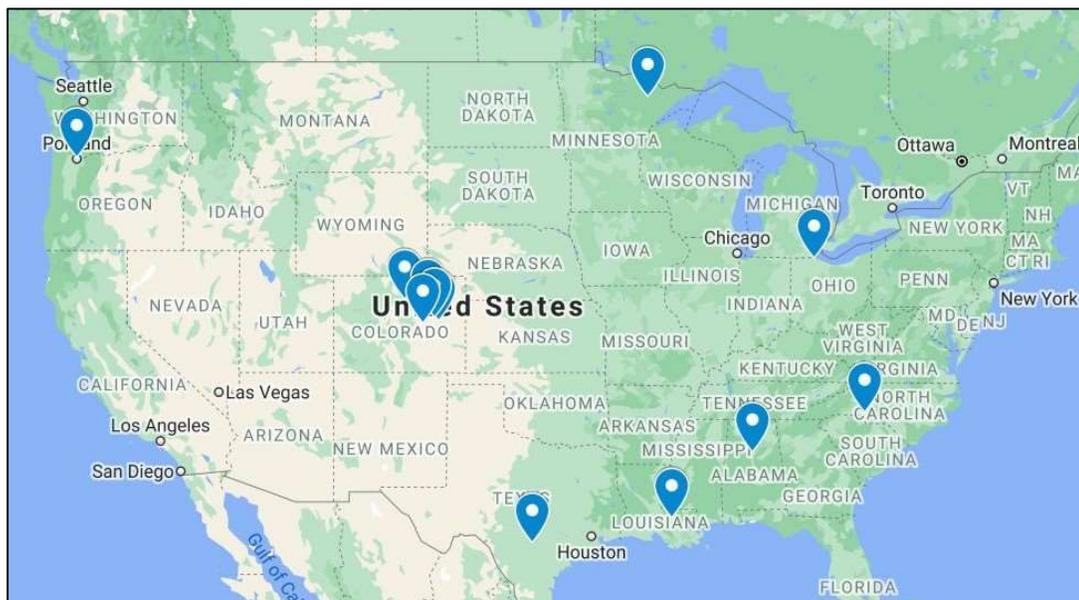
This approach is rooted in the concept and literature behind **procedural fairness**, which shows that giving voice to people helps to enhance trust and confidence in authority, like the courts. Inviting participant perspectives also yields cooperation and insights that can support the implementation of any forthcoming policy and practice changes. Research and practitioner tools on this topic are available at [www.proceduralfairness.org](http://www.proceduralfairness.org).

Unfortunately, most courts have limited mechanisms to get regular input from these audiences beyond the occasional paper or web-based survey or longer-term study, which tend to be labor-intensive and have lengthy turnaround times.

The Court Voices Project, led by LaGratta Consulting, worked with twelve pilot courts to better understand how two key audiences experience those courts’ pandemic responses: court staff and court users. Project partners included Tara Kunkel of Rulo Strategies, Dr. Brad Ray, formerly of the Center for Behavioral Health and Justice at the Wayne State University School of Social Work, and Dieter Tejada and Marc Ramirez of the National Justice Impact Bar Association. The State Justice Institute provided funding under its Emergency Response and Recovery initiative.

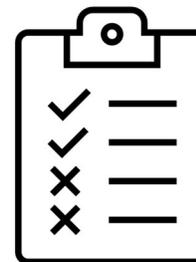
The twelve pilot courts are located in rural and urban settings and include limited and general jurisdiction courts. This second project publication documents the court user feedback component of the project. The first project publication was a report of court staff insights published in 2021, available at [www.lagratta.com/court-voices-project](http://www.lagratta.com/court-voices-project).

*Court Voices Project Pilot Courts*



# Why courts should ask for feedback

Most industries use customer feedback as a key measure of how they're performing and to identify opportunities for improvement. Courts may not be like most businesses but the same logic applies.



It should go without saying that court professionals' knowledge and experiences are vastly different from those of lay court users. What might seem convenient or fair or accessible to a court clerk or a judge may create a dramatically different experience for the intended end user. There is no substitute for hearing directly from court users to understand their experiences.

During times of change or growth, like in response to a pandemic, feedback can be particularly valuable to inform policy and practice. Real-time feedback adds further value by shortening the timeframe in which insights can feed back into the decision-making process.

Lastly, giving voice to court users helps build trust with the community members most impacted by the courts. The value of this benefit cannot be overstated. Public trust and confidence in the courts is at an all-time low: a public poll conducted in 2021 by the National Center for State Courts reported that just 64% of people responding have confidence in the state courts, the lowest rating since the NCSC began conducting the poll in 2012.<sup>1</sup>

Procedural fairness research adds nuance to the oft-heard claim that “no one is happy coming to court.” While likely that many court users would prefer not to come to court, court user experiences dictate whether or not they are satisfied with their experience and view the court as fair, regardless of what brought them to court or their ultimate case outcome. Thus, court leaders can promote court legitimacy and elevate court user perceptions of fairness by making targeted improvements to the user experience, including giving them a voice in the process.

In summary, when court leaders ask for and learn from feedback during periods of active policy-making and disruption – like a pandemic – the benefits are maximized.

## Applications of User Feedback:

- ✓ Measure Success
- ✓ Check Assumptions
- ✓ Use Lessons in Real-Time
- ✓ Build Trust & Confidence

**Watch a 5-minute video summarizing why and how courts should ask for feedback at [www.lagratta.com/why-get-feedback](https://www.lagratta.com/why-get-feedback).**

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<sup>1</sup> “State of the State Courts 2021,” National Center for State Courts, available at <https://www.ncsc.org/consulting-and-research/areas-of-expertise/court-leadership/state-of-the-state-courts>.

# How courts should ask for feedback

Many courts don't have efficient or effective means to get feedback from court users. Even among the twelve pilot courts for this project that had interest in the topic, only a handful had prior experience getting court user feedback. Of those with experience, most had used paper surveys, comment card boxes, or web surveys in the past.



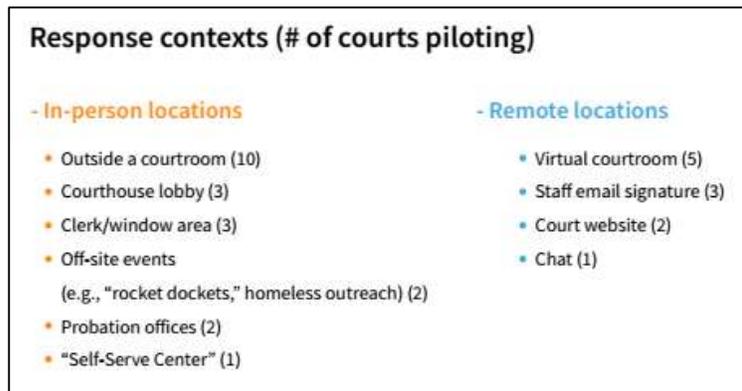
This project utilized brief feedback methods intended to be a low burden for staff and court users alike and yet effective at generating useful information. By asking only a few brief questions at a time within key, high-traffic contexts, the strategy was designed to generate lots of feedback in a short period of time. Asking only a few questions at a time also made the responses more manageable and easier to digest in real-time.

**Keep it short & simple.**

The two main types of feedback methods used were in-person and remote. In-person feedback was collected primarily via feedback software on a tablet locked into a sturdy tablet stand located in the courthouse or at an off-site court service location. Remote feedback was collected in a variety of ways, from links embedded within staff email signatures, Zoom or WebEx backgrounds, and court forms. The most effective remote feedback method was a “one-click” link where a hyperlinked emoji captured a response to an initial question, followed by additional questions on a landing page. Traditional feedback links, such as “click here to give feedback,” produced many initial clicks that never ended up as a submitted response to the landing page questions.



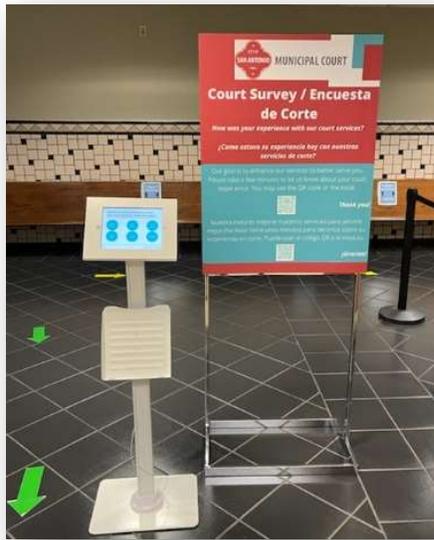
A chart of the feedback methods and topics at each pilot court is outlined in Appendix A.



Feedback methods and topics were selected based on the needs and interests of each site. One larger pilot court used several in-person tablet kiosks for in-person feedback throughout the courthouse and “one-click” links embedded in various virtual service contact points (e.g., staff email signatures, Zoom sessions). In smaller, rural courts that met only once a month, the judge carried a single tablet to each local court session and made it available to court users after their court appearance.

<a href="#">Sample in-person feedback contexts</a>	<a href="#">Sample remote feedback contexts</a>
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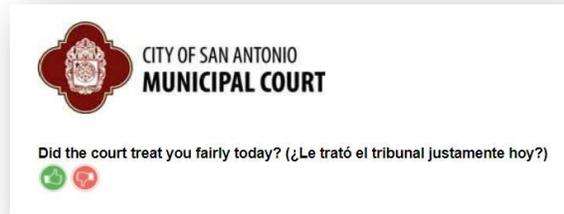
Courthouse lobby



Leaving a courtroom



Staff email signature



Court website



Within a virtual courtroom



Some courts tested QR codes on courthouse signs, palm cards, or remote contexts like Zoom backgrounds, but very little feedback was generated via QR code compared to clickable links.

QR code on palm card handout



QR code on court signage



# What courts should ask about

As noted above, each court aimed to ask approximately three questions at a time to ensure that the feedback experience was quick and easy for court users (and the feedback could be digested more readily by court leaders). Indeed, the data showed a steady drop-off in completion rates the more questions that were asked. But unlike traditional surveys that might yield all or nothing responses, in-person feedback on the tablets captured responses to each question along the way, even if court users decided not to answer the final question.

Many of the feedback topics were determined by the feedback received from court staff at the pilot courts during the planning phase of the project.

## Feedback topics:

- Court user preferences and satisfaction with their virtual and/or in-person experience
- Court user perceptions of fairness (e.g., respect, voice, understanding, neutrality)
- Court user perceptions of health and safety
- Wait times and perceptions of the court's respect for court users' time

Pilot courts that asked feedback questions in English and Spanish also captured data on what percentage of court users prefer to provide feedback in which language and how feedback responses varied by language.

A full list of sample questions asked by pilot courts is included as Appendix B.

**For additional guidance on what to ask and how, download the “We Want to Hear From You” user feedback toolkit at [bit.ly/user-feedback-toolkit](https://bit.ly/user-feedback-toolkit).**

# What we heard from court users

A primary goal of this project was to inform court leaders' decision-making about pandemic response and other court practices from the court user perspective. As such, this project was not conducted as a formal evaluation, but rather to be supportive of local program improvement efforts. Readers are advised against drawing summary conclusions between or across courts given that respondent totals and response rates varied across courts. Note also that most of the findings are reported in the aggregate and/or anonymously. All site-specific findings here have been pre-authorized by local court leaders.

## Feedback total:

**4,300**

court users from 12 courts shared feedback over approximately 6 months

Most of the feedback collected (85%) came from two large urban pilot courts that solicited feedback at five or more touchpoints of the court process (in-person and virtual). Most other pilot courts used one or two feedback methods, averaging approximately 100 court user responses throughout the pilot. Court leaders at nine out of the twelve pilot courts reported receiving about as much, if not more, feedback than they expected to.

In general, the project did not track response rates given the difficulty of estimating the total number of people who might have given feedback in various contexts (e.g., the number of court users who walked by a tablet kiosk near the clerk's window). But at five of the smallest pilot courts, court staff were able to calculate response rates, which ranged from 70% to 100%. Response rates were higher in in-person contexts than remote contexts.

## Feedback contexts & topics:

**6** courts asked for feedback in **both in-person *and* virtual contexts**

**5** courts asked for feedback in an **in-person context only**<sup>2</sup>

**1** court asked for feedback in a **remote context only**

**9** courts asked about **perceptions of fairness**  
(e.g., fair treatment; respect for time; respect for health and safety)

**8** courts asked about **court users' preferred modes of service (and why)**

<sup>2</sup> Four of these five courts were rural courts presided over by the same judge.

This section highlights specific lessons gleaned from the court user feedback the pilot courts received.

## 1. Offer choices in how to access the court

One of the biggest questions of the past two years has been: which is better, virtual court or in-person court? The answer is, of course, “it depends.” It depends on what we mean by better. It depends also on who you’re asking and how. Asking staff or judges may yield a different answer than asking court users. When asking members of the public, NCSC’s State of the State Courts poll in 2021 revealed that age was a significant variable as to whether poll respondents would like to see courts continue holding video hearings: 64% of people under 50 years old would like to see them continue, compared with only 34% of people over 65.<sup>3</sup>

Court user feedback collected via this project affirmed that the locality, court appearance type, and settings in which court users appear all produced different preferences with regard to how court users want to access the court. This feedback covered preferences about court appearances and other court services, like being helped at a clerk’s window or getting a question answered by staff via email.

### Sample question:

*“Would you have preferred to handle your court business differently today?”*

Would you have preferred to handle your court business differently today?

Yes, by phone

Yes, by video

Yes, by email

No, I prefer in-person

ESPAÑOL

When asking court users leaving an in-person court appearance whether they prefer in-person court appearances:

- In one pilot court, the preference rate for in-person was **as low as 18%**.
- In two pilot courts, the preference rate for in-person was **greater than 75%**.

The lowest percentages of court users preferring in-person court appearances came from two of the larger jurisdiction pilot courts, whereas the remaining pilot courts of varying sizes produced a range of preference levels for in-person court appearances at or above 50%.

<sup>3</sup> “State of the State Courts 2021,” National Center for State Courts, available at <https://www.ncsc.org/consulting-and-research/areas-of-expertise/court-leadership/state-of-the-state-courts>.

By comparison, however, three of those courts also asked the same question of court users who appeared in virtual court; their preferences were distinct from individuals appearing in person. If courts had only collected feedback in one context or the other, they would have received a misleading picture of court user preferences.

By using digital feedback tools, it was easy to sort responses by date or day of the week, allowing court leaders to glean additional insights based on their docket schedules or other operational variables. At the Boulder Municipal Court, for example, 40% of court users appearing in person for the court's general docket prefer remote appearances, whereas only 10% of court users appearing in person for the traffic docket another day of the week prefer remote appearances.

### When asking court users what remote alternative they would have preferred (among court users appearing at an in-person court appearance but who prefer remote):

- **Video was the top remote alternative** preferred by court users who prefer a remote alternative.
- **Phone was the second most-cited preference** for a remote alternative.

Two of the pilot courts sought feedback about remote alternatives that are not yet available in their courts (e.g., video hearings, case resolution by phone). In both cases, the alternative preferred most by court users was one of the options the court does not yet offer, providing valuable feedback to court leaders about a possible return on investment if those options were added.

### When asking court users appearing in-person at court service windows or in the courthouse lobby:

During the pilot, many pilot courts offered counter services in-person *or* remotely, versus both, so there was minimal feedback on this distinction compared to perceptions about different forms of court appearances. But the courts that asked court users about various experiences within the same court noted an interesting dynamic.

For example, in one pilot court, 55% of court users accessing in-person counter services said they prefer in-person services. In contrast, only 18% of court users leaving a high-volume courtroom at the same courthouse said they prefer in-person services. So while remote services were preferred in one setting, they weren't in another setting in the same court.

Court user preferences about court services vary  
*within courts and between courts.*

The widespread variation within and across courts suggests wisdom in letting court users opt into the mode of service most valuable to them, for whatever reason. Through a procedural fairness lens, this offer of choice might also boost perceptions of respect, a key dimension of building public trust and confidence in the courts.

## 2. Make clear what court service options exist

Of course, choice is most meaningful when people are aware of their options and feel equipped to make an informed decision. One pilot court, the San Antonio Municipal Court, collected court user feedback directly on this issue by asking whether court users were aware of alternate modes of service in situations where court users had choices. Asking directly helped test the court's efforts to make court users aware of the options that did exist.

Another pilot court heard that about **20% of in-person court users would have preferred a remote alternative where the court *did* offer that option**, suggesting that those court users were not aware of the alternative. Some court user write-in comments also identified that they didn't know they had an alternative to appearing in person. This feedback spurred court improvements to promote awareness and education about available options for court users whose only barrier may have been a lack of understanding of the choices.

Courts' investments in making clear the available choices go a long way to making choices meaningful, while also promoting public trust and confidence through enhanced respect and understanding.

## 3. "Helpful staff" and "convenience" are the top-cited reasons court users prefer in-person court

In addition to knowing what mode of service court users prefer, pilot court professionals were also interested in *why* court users preferred what they did. There's an oft-referenced assumption that remote hearings are more convenient for most court users, and that in-person appearances – while less convenient – may deliver better quality.

Court user feedback at several pilot courts confirmed that general premise but also added nuance to this discussion. While it was true across all pilot courts that the top-cited reason for preferring remote court services was convenience, in-person services, too, were viewed by many court users as the more convenient route.

### Sample question:

***"Why would you have preferred to handle your court business (differently today)?"***

Why would you have preferred that option instead?
More convenient
Easier to understand
Faster or more efficient
More helpful
Other (please explain on the next screen)

Among the pilot courts that asked why court users prefer in-person or remote services:

#### For court users giving feedback in person who said they prefer in-person court

- **Helpful staff** was the top-cited value for in-person court at three pilot courts (as high as 78% at one pilot court)
- **Convenience** was the top-cited value of in-person court at two pilot courts

#### For court users giving feedback in person who said they prefer remote court

- **Convenience** was the top-cited value at four pilot courts
- **Speed/efficiency** was the other top-cited value

The results were similar among court users responding remotely after a remote court appearance: the top value cited was convenience. So while remote court was consistently associated with convenience for many court users, for others, so was appearing for court in person.

## 4. Court professionals care about measuring fairness – and so do court users

Among the pressing questions court leaders wanted to ask court users about during the pilot, most opted to include questions about court users' perceptions of fairness or their experience generally. In fact, asking about court users' experience and treatment was the topic judges and court staff at the pilot sites, too, named as a top interest area when collecting court user feedback.

It's understandable that court professionals would worry about low approval or satisfaction ratings. But procedural fairness research shows that people form distinct opinions about how they were treated and whether the process felt fair, independent of what brought them to court or the outcome of their case.

Like other feedback topics, court user perceptions of fairness varied by court and within courts. For court users leaving a courtroom, **perceptions of fairness ranged from 75% to 100%**. Pilot courts also explored individual components of perceived fairness, such as the court's respect for court users' time. At the three pilot courts that asked, **more than 84% of court users said the court showed respect for their time**. Another court asked court users whether they felt the court showed respect for their health and safety, perhaps a particularly apt question during a pandemic: **more than 75% of court users said the court showed respect for their health and safety**.



The Toledo Municipal Court collected feedback about perceptions of fairness across several touchpoints within the court process (e.g., clerk’s office, probation, Domestic Violence advocate), allowing comparison within a courthouse across agencies and experiences. Perceptions of fairness ranged from 63% to nearly 100% positive. Court users providing feedback in the probation office reported the lowest perceptions (write-in comments emphasized frustrations with the wait time), while court users visiting the Domestic Violence Advocate’s Office reported the highest perceptions of fairness. It’s noteworthy that most user groups in this court felt they were treated fairly, regardless of what brought them to court that day.

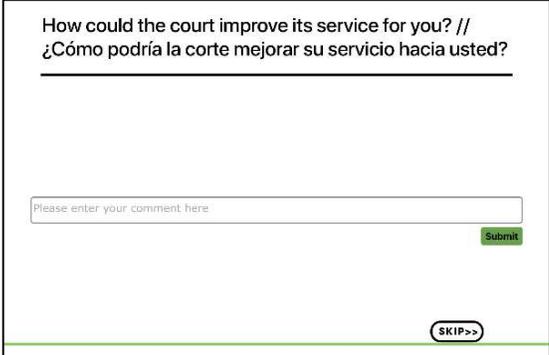
## 5. Invite open-ended feedback from court users

Anyone who has filled out a survey knows that closed-ended questions tend to be quicker to complete than open-ended ones that might require a bit more thought in addition to writing in a response. But even if people choose not to respond, procedural fairness theory suggests there’s value in giving voice to court user perspectives that aren’t targeted by the other questions.

All of the pilot courts opted to ask for open-ended feedback in one way or another to capture insights beyond the scope of the closed-ended questions and identify additional issues that might need attention.

Contrary to what court leaders anticipated, many court users provided comments and suggestions when prompted – and much of it was positive. Specifically, at pilot courts that included a simple open-ended question, such as “How else could we improve our service for you?,” **between 10% and 33% of court users left a comment.**

### Sample open-ended question



How could the court improve its service for you? //  
¿Cómo podría la corte mejorar su servicio hacia usted?

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Please enter your comment here

Submit

SKIP>>

Some court leaders worried that comments would only show the extremes (very bad or very good), but pilot courts received a range. In fact, most comments were positive, commending the court’s staff and/or services. The second most common type of comment was constructive feedback about service options, suggesting opportunities for improvement. Positive write-in comments that called out individual staff members for their extra effort and quality service also served a performance review function for managers and morale booster for staff.

### Common types of write-in comments:

- How court users felt they were treated
- Questions or recommendations about the process or service options
- Issues concerning speed or wait time
- General comments or compliments

**Note:** Few comments were both general and negative, meaning most negative comments were constructive or focused. Also, very few people made comments or complaints about the outcome of their case.

Open-ended feedback provided other insights for court leaders. One court received several comments about the conditions of the courthouse – the smell and the overall condition. It's valuable for court leaders to know what may be detracting from the court user experience in this way. Feedback may suggest ways to mitigate those challenges, even if addressing them fully might be difficult or impossible (e.g., building a nicer courthouse). User-driven comments can also help court leaders advocate for needed improvements.

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This pilot demonstrated how courts can use court user feedback to make better-informed policy and practice decisions, including during a pandemic. In this ever-evolving landscape, feedback should be ongoing to capture changing conditions and the evolving needs of those involved. In these twelve pilot courts, feedback yielded local insights for court leaders about their paths forward and how they might measure improvements.

We hope these practices become commonplace in our field. As encouragement and guidance, we conclude with three main take-aways.

## 3 Main take-aways

### 1. Court user needs and preferences are inherently local.

The variation in feedback received between pilot courts affirms that findings in one jurisdiction or context likely vary from one another. Jurisdiction size and type, geographical region, and other factors likely influence what court users need and prefer.

### 2. Courts should explore the nuances of court user perspectives in various court contexts.

Even within each court, court user feedback varied based on the context in which it was invited – for example, people attending a virtual court appearance versus getting assistance at a service window in the courthouse. Distinct feedback channels in multiple contexts will help paint the full picture for interested decision-makers.

### 3. There is no substitute for the court user perspective.

Historically, court users have not had an active voice in planning or improvement projects in the courts. New tools and technologies are helping to make this easier than ever – and the need to improve waning levels of trust and confidence make it all but imperative. Court leaders would be wise to tap into the experiences of court users to help inform practice and policy. By giving voice and assessing their progress from the user perspective, they'll build trust and confidence along the way.

## Appendix A: Feedback Methods and Topics for Court Voices Project Pilot Courts

		June	July	August	September	October	November	December
Calhan, Deer Trail, Hugo, and Limon Municipal Courts (CO)	In-Person Feedback	Perceptions of fairness, understanding 	Preferred service type and why 			Perceptions of respect, wait time 		
	Remote Feedback							
6th Judicial DWI Court (MN)	In-Person Feedback			Preferred service type and why 		Perceptions of respect, wait time, quality of engagement 	Perceptions of understanding 	
	Remote Feedback							
Boulder Municipal Court (CO)	In-Person Feedback			Preferred service type and why 				
	Remote Feedback							
Birmingham Municipal Court (AL)	In-Person Feedback			Preferred service type and why 		Perceptions of respect, wait time, "first time in court?" 		
	Remote Feedback							
19th Judicial District Court (LA)	In-Person Feedback				Preferred service type and why 			
	Remote Feedback							
Toledo Municipal Court (OH) Courthouse	In-Person Feedback		Perceptions of fairness, understanding 	Perceptions of health & safety, fairness 				
	Remote Feedback							
Courtroom	In-Person Feedback				Perceptions of respect, wait time 			
	Remote Feedback							
Clerk's Office	In-Person Feedback			Perceptions of fairness, understanding 				
	Remote Feedback							
DV Advocate	In-Person Feedback		Perceptions of fairness, understanding 					
	Remote Feedback							
Probation	In-Person Feedback		Perceptions of fairness, understanding 			Perceptions of respect for time 		
	Remote Feedback							
Website	In-Person Feedback			General website feedback 				
	Remote Feedback							
Mecklenburg County District Court (NC)	In-Person Feedback			Preferred service type and why 				
	Remote Feedback							
4th Judicial District Court (OR)	In-Person Feedback		Preferred service type and why 					
	Remote Feedback				Preferred service type and why 			
San Antonio Municipal Court (TX)	In-Person Feedback		Preferred service type and why 		Perceptions of respect, wait time + choice of service 			
	Remote Feedback							

Note: three courts continued collecting court user feedback beyond the pilot end.

## Appendix B: Sample feedback questions

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### *Court user preferences and satisfaction with virtual and/or in-person court experiences*

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- Would you have preferred to handle your court business differently today? [multiple choice]
- Why would you have preferred that option instead? [multiple choice]
- What did you value most about today's court experience? [multiple choice]
- Would you have preferred to receive self-help services differently today? [multiple choice]
- Did you have a choice in how you handled your court business today? [multiple choice]

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### *Court user perceptions of fairness (e.g., respect, voice, understanding, neutrality)*

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- Did the court treat you fairly today? [thumbs up/thumbs down]
- Did you understand what happened in court today? [thumbs up/thumbs down]
- Do you know who to contact if you have questions? [yes/no]
- Did our advocates treat you with respect today? [thumbs up/thumbs down]
- Did the court respect your health and safety today? [thumbs up/thumbs down]

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### *Wait times and perceptions of the court's respect for court users' time*

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- Did the court show respect for your time today? [thumbs up/thumbs down]
- How long did you wait for your case to be called today? [multiple choice]
- How long did you wait to be helped today? [multiple choice]
- Did you feel your time in the Probation Department was respected today? [thumbs up/thumbs down]

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### *Other*

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- How could the court improve its service for you? [open-ended]
- How could the court serve you better? [open-ended]
- What else could we do to assist you? [open-ended]
- Can you tell us more about your experience? [open-ended]
- Is this your first time in Municipal Court? [yes/no]