

INSPIRING **FUTURE-READY COURTS**

ANNUAL REPORT 2023



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Message from the NCSC President and the Chair of the Board

National and global events can force courts to “reimagine” their operations and role in society frequently. For example, virtual hearings — once a rare exception — have become routine for the courts during the last few years, a direct response not only to the fallout of the global pandemic but a reflection of public demand for more accessible judicial services.

Reimagining requires creating a culture of innovation, that not only looks outward towards improving justice systems but also inward and asks key questions: “What can we do better? How can we lead more effectively?” Over the last two years, we at NCSC have reimagined ourselves to better serve courts, provide vital leadership, and enhance public trust in our system of justice.

Leaders from across the organization took the time to reflect and analyze how we work. The result of this process has renewed a focus on cross-functional collaboration, helping us think more strategically and creatively. Our new vision statement also captures our daily purpose: ***Together, we advance just, free, and safe communities.***

Our Annual Report 2023 provides numerous examples of how reimagining is underway in key areas of NCSC’s work, including a dynamic access to justice portfolio, an expanded focus on leadership training, and developing new messages and strategies to support public trust and confidence.



Mary Campbell McQueen
President
National Center for State Courts



Anna Blackburne-Rigsby
Chief Judge
DC Court of Appeals

Eviction Diversion Initiative encourages collaboration to build stronger communities

NCSC and courts partner to achieve long-term housing and financial stability

When a Las Vegas senior citizen fell behind on her rent due to unexpected funeral expenses, court staff referred her to the Las Vegas Justice Court's eviction diversion program. An onsite social worker helped her apply for a one-time cash assistance program so she should become current on her rent — resulting in a dismissed and sealed eviction case.

Las Vegas is one of 22 courts participating in NCSC's Eviction Diversion Initiative (EDI), a national grant program that helps courts connect landlords and tenants with community resources to reduce preventable evictions and improve housing and financial stability. In a typical year, landlords file 3.6 million eviction cases nationally, according to the Princeton Eviction Lab.

Since 2022, NCSC has worked in 16 states and the District of Columbia to develop court-based eviction diversion programs that use the court process as an opportunity to connect landlords and tenants with stabilizing resources that can prevent or mitigate the harm of eviction. The Las

Vegas Justice Court was awarded \$1.25 million to implement a program that adopts a holistic, problem-solving approach that employs social workers who work alongside legal aid attorneys, mediators, and court staff to assist eligible landlords and tenants in resolving their housing disputes in the least harmful way.

The diversion program helps vulnerable tenants — including seniors, people with disabilities, and low-income community members — in housing crises and supports landlords by helping them access rental assistance, reach a negotiated agreement with their tenant, or recover property while giving tenants an opportunity to move out with dignity and without an eviction on their record. The program offers various forms of assistance, including rental and housing support, financial counseling, mediation, job training and placement services, and case management.

Additionally, the Las Vegas court reformed court processes to improve tenant engagement and reduce the number of default judgments. Changes

Houston/Harris County, Texas

Harris County (Houston), Texas, has seen a surge in eviction filings following the pandemic. In 2023, more than 81,000 eviction cases were filed in Harris County, amounting to over \$184 million in claims, according to data from January Advisors. To address this issue, Houston courts sought funding from NCSC's Eviction Diversion Initiative to hire two full-time eviction resource coordinators. Harris County Justice of the Peace Steve Duple, who presides over an eviction court docket, envisions transforming courts like his into hubs where citizens can connect with various legal, financial, and social services. While eviction diversion programs vary in design and structure, successful programs share a common goal: to create a better court process that provides landlords and tenants with the time, information, and resources necessary to resolve their disputes in the least harmful way possible.



A social worker in the Las Vegas Justice Court works with a tenant to apply for rental assistance.

included rewriting eviction notices in plain language, improving self-help and legal resource information, creating an online guided interview tool, and revising the tenant answer form. As a result, tenant response rates increased from less than 25% to over 50% within six months, making more tenants eligible for the diversion program and reducing the number of default eviction judgments.

Because of NCSC's support of innovative eviction diversion strategies in Las Vegas and other cities across the country, fewer Americans are experiencing the negative impacts of eviction and its related consequences which can negatively impact employment, education, health, and other quality of life factors. Courts and communities are creating lasting change by effectively working together to safeguard housing stability.

LEARN MORE ► ncsc.org/eviction

What is an Eviction Diversion Program?

Eviction diversion programs provide landlords and tenants with alternatives to eviction. These programs resolve conflicts between landlords and tenants and connect community members to stabilizing resources with the goal of preventing evictions when possible and mitigating their harm when not.

NCSC's program funding is provided by the Wells Fargo Foundation.

BY THE NUMBERS

60,542

NUMBER OF EVICTION FILINGS IN 2022 IN CLARK COUNTY (LAS VEGAS), WHICH WAS AN **INCREASE OF 166%** FROM THE PRE-PANDEMIC AVERAGE

— Eviction Lab at Princeton University

A spotlight on the Vermont Judiciary Commission on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

By engaging with states like Vermont, NCSC assists courts in their efforts to promote racial justice through systemic change

Following a series of national events in 2020, the Vermont Supreme Court moved to organize and enhance its previous diversity efforts with a particular focus on data collection, operations, and community outreach.

Vermont and others have relied on guidance established by the Conference of Chief Justices, Conference of State Court Administrators, and Blueprint for Racial Justice to identify and address unconscious bias; collect, maintain, and report race and ethnicity data to identify and remedy racial disparities; develop career pathways to improve diversity of the bench, court staff and legal community; and engage in conversations with communities of color.

In establishing the Vermont Judiciary Commission on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, the court noted a 2022 analysis by the Council of State Governments that found Black people in the state were disproportionately represented in corrections populations at all stages, including pretrial detention, postconviction incarceration, parole, furlough, and probation.

The Commission's charge is "to advance racial and social equity in pursuit of equal justice under the law," with the "aim ... to broadly identify disparities in our justice system, understand the causes, evaluate solutions, and implement changes."

One way the court examined its operations was by piloting NCSC's Racial Justice Organizational Assessment Tool, which provides courts with a framework for self-assessment and guidance for next steps in organizational areas that include:

Judicial Commitment, Vision and Leadership; Capacity for Community-Based Learning & Data-Driven Decision-Making; The Bench & Court Workforce; and Court Services.

"The tool was very helpful to us as it provided structure in the early days of our work and alerted us to the full scope of considerations that need to be addressed as part of any serious DEI initiative," said Chief Justice and Commission Co-Chair Paul Reiber.

Chief Justice Reiber also chairs the Commission's Community Engagement Committee. The Committee conducted a series of community forums — at least one in each of the state's 14 counties — that drew more than 250 attendees who shared their experiences and feelings about the state's courts.

Commission member and Chief Superior Court Judge Thomas Zonay said a number of themes emerged from these forums, including:

- The Commission should consider the impact that poverty has on an individual's ability to access the courts.
- Rural communities are lacking in supports and services, including court-based services.
- A more diverse bench and Judiciary workforce is needed.
- Judge and staff training on implicit bias is needed; training on cultural sensitivity and trauma are key.
- Remote access to court proceedings and services is not equal access; the lack of internet access is a problem in Vermont.



From left: Commission members Scott Griffith, Justice Nancy Waples, and Justice William Cohen

- Some people feel unwelcome, intimidated, or confused coming to court; the Judiciary should consider using “Ambassadors” or “Navigators.”
- Better collection of race data is needed, as is the Judiciary’s use of it — especially with respect to sentencing.

Commission Co-Chair Justice Nancy J. Waples noted that in 2024 the Commission will enter the final stage of the first phase of its work, which includes drafting a framework for sustaining community engagement; developing a juror video on unconscious bias; proposing a training curriculum to address equity, bias, diversity, customer service and other related topics; developing a form and process to voluntarily collect race, ethnicity, and gender information in civil, probate, and family cases; and engaging law enforcement and others to discuss the routine collection of similar information in criminal matters.

“The Commission created three committees,

which are focused on the collection and use of data, judicial branch administration and operations, and community engagement. A Supreme Court justice chairs each of the committees,” said Justice Waples.

Commission member Justice William Cohen said the Commission’s efforts have been generally well received and that the Supreme Court is especially grateful for the time and effort of all Commission members, which include more than one-third who represent interests outside of the judicial branch.

“The Commission’s work has benefitted from having a clear charge, a responsive and manageable committee structure, committed engagement from Commission members, and the support of key staff in the Court Administrator’s Office,” he said.

LEARN MORE ► npsc.org/racialjusticeassessment

Hybrid Hearings Improvement Initiative offers assistance to courts

Pairing courts with technology partners, NCSC supports the evolution of modern court proceedings

In the months and years following the height of the pandemic, courts have grappled with difficult questions related to remote and hybrid hearings. NCSC has worked alongside courts and vendors to examine the successes (and failures) experienced during the pandemic to inform best practices and new guidance for court processes and procedures.

Throughout, NCSC has shared its insights and expertise in many public presentations and webinars. A more concerted effort, the Hybrid Hearings Improvement Initiative, paired technology vendors with courts in a multi-year project that provided technical assistance, hardware, software, funding, and training.

The initiative reached courts in 28 states, two territories and one tribal jurisdiction. The five technology partners included Cisco, Logitech, Speech 2 Data, televic, and Zoom for Government.

The project identified several issue areas including facility and space planning; technology equipment, integration, staffing and training; due process protections; the digital divide; and funding. NCSC Project Director Lindsay Hafford noted that the central theme running throughout the initiative was that courts receive the best results when they can capitalize on existing systems and processes to achieve a minimum viable product.

The Salt Lake City Justice Court worked with justice system partners to repurpose an underutilized courtroom into a full-service,



customer-centric resource center. The center — which includes remote access booths, meeting space, and comfortable waiting areas — serves as a hub for court operations while providing customers with one-stop convenience for participating in court-sanctioned activities or justice-partner meetings.

“While we were fortunate to have existing technology and equipment at our disposal, we

BY THE NUMBERS

Hybrid Hearings Improvement Initiative

100

APPLICANTS

12

CASE STUDIES

12

PILOT SITES

11

COURTS RECEIVED
TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Creating a Customer-Centric Resource Center

Salt Lake City Justice Court

Salt Lake City, Utah — The Salt Lake City Justice Court worked with justice system partners to repurpose an underutilized courtroom into a full-service, customer-centric resource center that is flexible and adaptable to the evolving court service needs. The center — which includes remote access booths, meeting space, and comfortable waiting areas — serves as a hub for court operations while providing customers with one-stop convenience for participating in court-sanctioned activities or justice-partner meetings. Working closely with Salt Lake County and other justice partners, the court's innovative approach to space planning created a comprehensive, one-stop location that prioritizes the needs of its users.



FACILITY SOLUTIONS

- 1 Before: Courtroom prior to repurposing
- 2 After: Waiting area
- 3 After: Remote access booths

needed help connecting these components in a meaningful way that would benefit court users,” said Judge Clemens Landau, presiding judge of the Salt Lake City Justice Court. “By participating in the initiative, we gained tremendous support and technical assistance from NCSC and its partners that helped us open a much-needed community resource center in Salt Lake City.”

Another court, the 394th District Court in Brewster County, Texas, faced challenges with sound and audio quality during remote and hybrid court proceedings in its historic 1887 courthouse.

“Like many courts serving low-income communities in sparsely populated areas, we presumed that advanced technology and hardware were beyond our reach,” Judge Roy Ferguson said. “By making hybrid hearings a reality for our courts, this NCSC project enables us to provide higher quality justice for community members who were historically excluded by distance, work, family obligations, or low financial means. We are incredibly grateful for the support and resources provided through this initiative.”

LEARN MORE ► ncsc.org/hybridhearings

Court leaders benefit from trusted expertise

State courts and international justice systems become stronger through NCSC programming

NCSC has been a trusted source of education for court leaders for generations, imparting the foundational principles of court administration and cutting-edge, evidence-based court management strategies and techniques.

This is made possible through various initiatives such as the Judicial Branch Leadership Academy, Institute for Court Management, Executive Coaching, and International Programs. These programs build a strong foundation for professional court administration, leadership, and governance in state courts and abroad.

The professional development pipeline created by NCSC helps court leaders of all experience levels to manage complex, evolving, and sometimes volatile court environments. It also assists with succession planning and talent development, thereby preparing courts for their current and future employment needs.



45

ATTENDEES
IN 2023

Judicial Branch Leadership Academy

The Judicial Branch Leadership Academy was launched in 2019 to provide exclusive leadership training to chief justices, state court administrators, presiding judges, and trial court administrators. The program equips participants with core leadership skills that are essential in diverse judicial contexts. Attendees gain insight into the unique challenges of governing and leading courts and learn how to establish connections between governance and the effective administration of justice.

The academy cultivates a sense of community and prepares courts for the future by empowering leaders to navigate their roles with competence and confidence.

Institute for Court Management

The Institute for Court Management (ICM) has educated court leaders since 1970. These programs provide a comprehensive curriculum to equip court professionals with the knowledge and skills necessary to tackle the challenges and complexities of court administration in the 21st century. The Certified Court Manager and Certified Court Executive tracks cover various topics, ranging from the purposes and responsibilities of courts to leadership.

18

GRADUATING
FELLOWS
IN 2023

To respond to evolving needs, two new courses, Executive Decision-Making and Modern Court Governance, have been added to provide high-level training for court executives.

The ICM Fellows credential is the most advanced level of court leadership training available and is designed to demonstrate a court professional's extensive knowledge of court administration and leadership.

Executive Coaching

Launched in 2023, Executive Coaching combines NCSC's deep knowledge of state courts with certified coaching practices. The service offers personalized one-on-one coaching sessions, group workshops, and networking opportunities, all tailored to meet each participant's specific needs and goals. These sessions equip individuals with the tools and techniques to navigate the complexities of the workplace, enhance their interpersonal skills, and evolve into more effective leaders.

45

COURT
PROFESSIONALS
AND TEAMS
COACHED
IN 2023

One participant shared their positive experience, saying, "The coaching process was instrumental in helping me focus on strategic and operational plans. It provided dedicated time for my personal growth and development."

Executive Coaching provides a safe environment for executives to learn, grow, and thrive.

International Programs


Over 30 developing countries benefit from NCSC International's educational programs, leadership development, and management training. NCSC partners with courts to share knowledge and best practices and helps them plan, structure, and deliver courses to individual courts or a group of courts.

International Programs hosted several leadership delegations from different countries in 2023 to discuss judicial independence, fair judiciaries, restorative justice, child exploitation, and other topics. NCSC also launched JUSTconnect, an online training program for judges and judicial officers that promotes increased participation in education courses that will ultimately improve the delivery of justice in the Caribbean.



261

REGISTERED USERS ON
JUSTCONNECT PLATFORM
IN 2023

A photograph of Chief Justice Kate M. Fox standing in front of a large, ornate wooden door. The door features a circular seal in the center, which is the Great Seal of the State of Wyoming. The seal depicts a figure holding a scale and a sword, with the words "GREAT SEAL OF THE STATE OF WYOMING" and "EQUALE RIGHTS" visible. Chief Justice Fox is wearing a black and white striped long-sleeved top, black pants, and a multi-strand necklace of orange beads. She has short, grey hair and is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile.

“The overarching challenge is...to make the judicial branch stronger internally and externally.”

— Chief Justice Kate M. Fox
Wyoming Supreme Court

Strategic planning strengthens court's ability to serve the public

NCSC helps states plan for the future

Charged with leading the Wyoming judicial branch, Chief Justice Kate M. Fox recognized the need for a new, more organized and centralized strategic direction for the state's courts and judges.

"If our goal is to function as a loosely coupled organization, we had the 'loose' part down," quipped Chief Justice Fox. "We were lacking organization, and even the 'coupled' part depended on the day. Our district courts are 'free of administrative and fiscal control by the supreme court,' but our circuit courts are subject to Supreme Court control."

For decades, NCSC has shared its authoritative knowledge and expertise to address current and emerging issues and trends in state court administration. Because of the organization's deep understanding of state courts, Chief Justice Fox reached out to NCSC for assistance.

Leading the judiciary in one of the nation's most rural states also presented Chief Justice Fox with unique challenges.

"The state's rural fabric and history of local authority only added to those challenges," she continued. "There's a long way between judicial districts, and many judges are isolated in their courts 100 miles from another judge. We learned that conversations within the court conferences needed to be developed for us to have productive conversations across conferences."

Starting in 2022, NCSC partnered with Chief Justice Fox to launch the Judicial Branch Innovation (JBI) task force. The task force

included several judges from across Wyoming and was chaired by retired District Judge John R. Perry. The JBI met several times during 2022 and 2023, with NCSC's Kristen Trebil-Halbersma serving as the project lead. The second phase of the strategic planning processes — which concluded with a final report in 2023 — offered five recommendations to the Wyoming Judicial Council:

- Strengthen the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC)
- Build capacity with new judges
- Make strategic planning a regular business of the courts
- Conduct annual listening sessions
- Adopt a communications plan

"Working with the judges and court leaders in Wyoming has been incredibly rewarding," said NCSC's Trebil-Halbersma. "They are a remarkable group of leaders; dedicated, innovative, and resourceful. During the project, they consistently focused on how they could improve the Wyoming judiciary and improve services for their court customers."

The collaboration between the Wyoming courts and NCSC continues, with both sides engaged in 2024 in a third year of strategic planning to build on the collaboration.

"The overarching challenge is how to achieve collaboration while maintaining independence, to make the judicial branch stronger internally and externally," said Chief Justice Fox.

Asking why?


NCSC digs deeper into public trust research

For the last ten years, NCSC has systematically measured public trust and confidence in the courts through an annual opinion survey — more commonly known as a poll. Conducted by the professional research firm, GBAO Strategies of Washington, D.C., these surveys offer substantial insights for state judicial leaders as they set strategic priorities. The series, the “State of the State Courts,” has become one of NCSC’s most anticipated annual products.

But in the last few years, the surveys revealed an alarming decline in public support for the courts. That downward slide prompted NCSC to move beyond just polling. In 2023, NCSC worked with GBAO to host a series of in-person and virtual focus groups with “regular” citizens to better understand public sentiment.

“Focus groups allow us to dig deeper into the viewpoints that Americans hold about the courts,” said Jesse Rutledge, NCSC’s Vice President for Public Affairs. “While a poll gives us a high-level perspective on trends, focus groups give us the time and space to explore issues in detail. We can ask people why they feel the way they feel.”

Participants in the focus groups were recruited from demographic groups that have shown the greatest skepticism about the courts in recent years. They were invited to small discussions with a facilitator from GBAO. The focus groups were held in Chicago, Phoenix, and Arlington, Virginia; two more were held by Zoom, which allowed input from citizens living in more rural parts of the country.



“They (the courts) don’t make it easy, because they don’t want you to figure it out.”

— Black woman
Arlington focus group

What did NCSC learn?

“There are definitely some troubling takeaways,” said Rutledge, noting that many Americans express a view that there are two systems of justice — one for the rich, the powerful, and the connected, and another for everyone else.

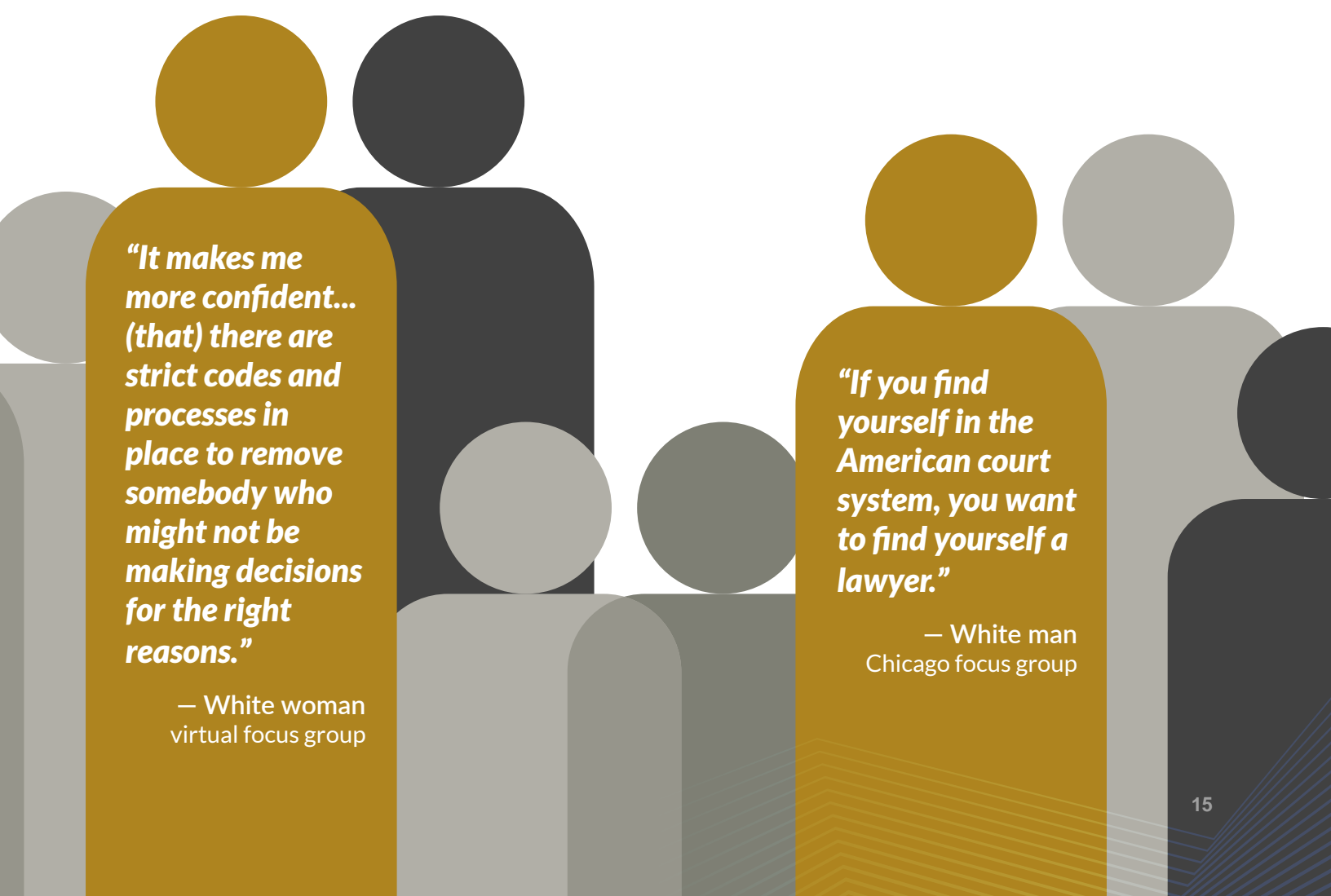
But NCSC is just as focused on identifying pathways to improving messaging, and the focus groups were eye-opening on that front also. While the research continues and NCSC will produce tangible resources in 2024, early findings suggest that even the skeptical are excited when they hear arguments about how courts are community-based institutions that help citizens solve problems that no one else is helping them solve.

Most Americans are also unaware of the myriad ways in which courts are accountable, suggesting there could be a pathway to restoring more trust by highlighting how judicial ethics and transparency are hallmarks of the system.

BY THE NUMBERS

50+

CITIZENS WHO PARTICIPATED IN NCSC'S 2023 NATIONWIDE FOCUS GROUPS



“It makes me more confident... (that) there are strict codes and processes in place to remove somebody who might not be making decisions for the right reasons.”

— White woman
virtual focus group

“If you find yourself in the American court system, you want to find yourself a lawyer.”

— White man
Chicago focus group

Awards



Sandra Day O'Connor Award for the Advancement of Civics Education

For decades, the **Court of Appeals of Indiana** has conducted traveling oral arguments to help bring civics education to life in the state's 92 counties. Residents of all ages have observed oral arguments in settings ranging from school auditoriums to sports arenas. The Court and its Appeals on Wheels program were recognized with the 2023 **Sandra Day O'Connor Award for the Advancement of Civics Education**. Named for the late associate justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, the honor recognizes an organization, court or individual(s) who have promoted, inspired, improved, or led an innovation or accomplishment in the field of civics education relating to the justice system.

William H. Rehnquist Award for Judicial Excellence

District Court Judge **James E. Doyle, IV**, of Nebraska received the 28th Annual **William H. Rehnquist Award for Judicial Excellence** during a recognition ceremony at the Supreme Court of the United States. Judge Doyle was recognized for using technology to ensure Nebraskans living in rural communities had access to justice and programs like problem-solving courts. One of the highest judicial recognitions in the country, the Rehnquist Award honors a state court judge who demonstrates the outstanding qualities of judicial excellence, including integrity, fairness, open-mindedness, knowledge of the law, professional ethics, creativity, sound judgment, intellectual courage and decisiveness.



James E. Doyle, IV

G. Thomas Munsterman Award for Jury Innovation

Maricopa County (Ariz.) Superior Court Judge **Pamela Gates** was awarded the 2023 **G. Thomas Munsterman Award for Jury Innovation** for her efforts to change jury service by improving the juror experience and alleviating financial obstacles. Named for the founder and former director of NCSC's Center for Jury Studies, G. Thomas Munsterman, the award recognizes states, local courts, organizations and individuals that have made significant improvements or innovations in jury procedures, operations and practices.



Pamela Gates

Warren E. Burger Award for Excellence in Court Administration

Retired Maryland State Court Administrator **Pamela Q. Harris** has been awarded the 2023 **Warren E. Burger Award for Excellence in Court Administration**. Named for the NCSC visionary and former U.S. Supreme Court chief justice, the Burger Award recognizes an individual, other than a sitting judge, whose service, over a career or substantial period of time, has significantly contributed to improving the administration of state courts. Harris was Maryland's state court administrator for 10 years before her retirement in 2023. She previously spent 24 years as the trial court administrator for the Montgomery County Circuit Court. In addition to her work in Maryland, Harris is a past president of the National Association for Court Management and has held leadership positions in a number of regional, national and international court organizations.



Pamela Q. Harris

WARREN E. BURGER SOCIETY

The National Center for State Courts' Warren E. Burger Society honors those who have volunteered their time, talent, and support to NCSC in exceptional ways.

The Burger Society is named for the former Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court who helped found NCSC in 1971. We are proud to recognize the following society members.

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R. BYRON ATTRIDGE
STEPHEN H. BAKER
S. JACK BALAGIA, JR.
ROBERT N. BALDWIN
CURTIS H. BARNETTE
LUTHER J. BATTISTE, III
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