



Texas Public Engagement Pilot Project

Breakout Session Talking Points

COURT AWARENESS & COMMUNICATION

Almost half (47%) of respondents were familiar with the Texas courts.

Women are more likely to get their information on Texas courts and judges from news media than men, 44% vs. 22% respectively.

74% of respondents believe that courts should offer technology that allows people to interact with the courts without going to the courthouse.

- Do you know where the courts in your city, precinct, and district are located?
- Have your judges, clerks, court actors met with you or your community groups?
- Would you like more interaction with judges, clerks, and court actors through events outside the courthouse?
- How easy is it to find general court information?
- How do you usually contact courts or county offices? By phone? Email?
- For those of you have dealt with the court system, are there any tools, tips, or resources that would have helped you with the process?
- Are there community resources outside the courts that can help? [Moderator can mention resources, e.g., Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid.]
- How would you like to interact with the courts or clerk offices? Is this possible?
 - Social media
 - Public forums
 - Meet and greets with local judiciary/court actors

JUDICIAL OUTCOMES & LEGISLATIVE JUDICIAL REFORM

About two thirds (64%) disagree with the statement that the average person can afford court costs and filing fees.

Moderator brings up examples of recent legislative changes, e.g., court cost and filing fees, driver repeal, community service initiative.

- Did you know about this change? How does it make you feel knowing that changes to the court system are being made to address people's concerns?
- How do you hear news about changes to the courts, if you hear news, about changes to the courts and court services? How would you like to hear about changes?
 - Radio or TV news
 - Community bulletins
 - Court office
- Do you feel comfortable sharing your opinions of court services, positive or negative? Do you feel heard? What are ways of communicating your opinions?



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85th Legislative Update

Increasing Compliance with Court Costs and Fees

In his 2017 State of the Judiciary speech, Texas Supreme Court Chief Justice Nathan L. Hecht discussed what is commonly known as “debtors’ prisons,” the practice of jailing criminal defendants for being unable to pay their fines and court costs. He said debtors’ prisons are not only illegal under the United States Constitution, they also keep people “from jobs, hurts their families, makes them dependent on society and costs taxpayers money.” The Legislature agreed and passed **SB 1913**.

The bill makes statutory changes to improve the assessment and collection of criminal court costs including:

- Requiring judges handling cases in open court to ask about a defendant’s ability to pay when imposing the sentence and to use existing tools of installment plans, community service, full or partial waiver, or any combination of those, if a defendant has an inability to pay in full;
- Expanding community service options a judge may impose;
- Increasing the minimum amount of credit for jail or community service from \$50 to \$100 for each day; and
- Prohibits the posting of a monetary bail in a fine-only offense unless the defendant fails to appear and the judge finds that the defendant can post bail.

Addressing Mental Health

More than 20 percent of the inmate population in Texas needs mental health services. With that sobering statistic in mind, the Judicial Council made several legislative recommendations to improve the administration of justice for those suffering from or affected by mental illness. While several bills were filed that addressed mental health, the Judicial Council’s recommendations passed both chambers in **SB 1326** and **SB 292**. The bills make several statutory changes including:

SB 1326

- Revises the process of gathering and assessing information about an arrestee who may have a mental illness in the magistration process;
- Streamlines the competency restoration process; and
- Authorizes counties to establish jail-based competency restoration programs.

SB 292 – Jail Diversion Grant Programs

- The grant program was created for the purpose of reducing recidivism, arrest, and incarceration of individuals with mental illness. The program is funded by matching funds from the state and counties.

Source: <http://www.txcourts.gov/media/1438072/85th-legislative-report.pdf>



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Improving the Guardianship System

During the 84th Legislative session, lawmakers made several improvements to the guardianship system in our state and the 85th Legislature continued to build on that work. With the senior population in Texas expected to triple by 2050, the Judicial Council made recommendations to the Legislature to protect some of our most vulnerable citizens. SB 1096 and SB 36 contain those recommendations. They include:

SB 1096

- Requires all guardians other than attorneys, corporate fiduciaries, and certified guardians, to receive training, undergo a criminal history background check and register with the Judicial Branch Certification Commission (JBCC); and
- Authorizes the creation of a statewide guardianship registry available for query by law enforcement.

SB 36

- Expands Judicial Branch Certification Commission's authority to regulate guardianship programs.
- OCA anticipates less than 30 programs will be registered with the commission.

FAIRNESS & EQUAL TREATMENT

66% of respondents disagree that Texas courts treat poor people and wealthy people alike.

Almost half, (47%) agree that courts treat all people alike regardless of race and just over half (51%) feel the same about gender.

Slightly less than three in ten (29%) agree that Texas courts treat people alike regardless of socio-economic status.

- In general, do you believe your local and state court systems are fair for all people regardless of race? What about gender? What about income level?
- What are the courts doing well in terms of fairness for all people?
- What are some examples in which you feel like you were represented well or not represented well?
- How can the courts or court offices improve to make people feel represented fairly and equally?