

Texas Office of Court Administration

Public Engagement Pilot Project – *Virtual*

Introduction

As a continuation to the in-person public engagement events held in 2019 and 2020, the Texas Office of Court Administration (OCA) held two virtual public engagements, respectively, on Tuesday, October 27, 2020, and on Thursday, October 29, 2020, from 11:00 AM to 12:15 PM.

Methods

Participants

PEPP Team Leaders. The primary leaders of the TX PEPP team were OCA Research and Court Services Director Jeffrey Tsunekawa, OCA Project Manager Nitu Gill, and OCA Judicial Information Analyst Lisa Robles.

Engagement of Specific Publics. The TX PEPP team engaged previously recruited members of the public.

Procedures

Recruitment. To recruit participants for the virtual engagement events, we utilized the contact information of 45 individuals who participated in in-person engagement events in Alpine, Brownsville and Houston, Texas in late 2019 and early 2020. We offered participation in three different time slots, with two occurring in the morning and one in the evening. Out of those interested, no one selected to participate in the evening engagement, so we eliminated the evening option. As with our in-person engagements, we also offered the incentive of a \$75 electronic Amazon gift card.

Results

October 27, 2020 Engagement

General. Of the five people who RSVPed to the event, three participants attended the engagement. Two participated via video and one via phone. Individuals began the session with two poll questions and then an introductory video of the Texas Judiciary's response to the

pandemic. Group discussion lasted for approximately one hour, and the session ended with the original two polling questions.

High Level Summary of Discussion

- Participants were surprised and encouraged by the smooth integration of new technology into the Texas court system.
- Participants expressed that although virtual hearings can be efficient, efficiency does not equate to fairness. They also felt that there is some fairness to having in-person hearings where one can read body language and facial reactions. They distinguished a difference in quick court appearances versus lengthy trials where in-person hearings may be fairer for the defendant.
- Participants indicated that social inequality always existed, and those with less resources would have more barriers in this new environment.
- The “digital divide” was expressed as a concern.
- Language barriers were also expressed as a concern. For some participants, more education would not be enough if language barriers were not addressed.
- A computer room for people lacking high speed internet, computer hardware, or a physical space was suggested as a solution to make court appearances more accessible.
- Participants want to hear from their government and local courts more often, especially during the pandemic.
- Participants emphasized that communication needed to address language barriers and that outreach needed to be tailored to different demographics to earn trust.

Recording of Engagement

https://txcourts.zoom.us/rec/play/41vApplTd-474wGlzZwMn2mkJOZsTdTthBwEsLb9GG_jlccdHb5MYsgOeLV01fgqEAdYZsaLMi6xwUDM.wGVqQJhQiJE2nFu5

October 29, 2020 Engagement

General. Of the four participants who RSVPed to the event, three participants attended the engagement. All three participated via video. Individuals began the session with two poll questions and then an introductory video of the Texas Judiciary’s response to the pandemic. Group discussion lasted for approximately one hour, and the session ended with the original two polling questions.

High Level Summary of Discussion

- Participants recognized the limitations of a virtual court environment, including internet connectivity issues and participation size. For example, when there was a handful of people participating in a virtual hearing, it worked out well, but when there were many people, it was technically difficult.
- They were overall impressed with how the court system adapted to virtual services, including online translation services.
- Both Alpine (rural) and Houston (urban) participants saw many accessibility benefits of virtual hearings including less issues with parking, traffic, and childcare.
- Access to high speed internet was a concern for rural participants. Those lacking smart phones might have limited options/services.
- They that it is important for judges to recognize the human part of court participants which gets lost in the digital format.
- Participants continued to believe that judges should be visible in the community to enhance public trust.
- They also expressed how first interactions with the courts are important, with an emphasis on school and civics education for young students.

Recording of Engagement

https://txcourts.zoom.us/rec/play/wAIR3mMM33IRNqonfE5Sa_mlzTaWXzGpJCixl4dzUeVMHMx4iw_PyQQqLS2Yjm-TNg75YdIIQMyABpdl.04_8_N5123lYcRmX

Table 1: Virtual Engagement Poll Question Responses

	Answers	Oct. 27 Pre-Event	Oct. 27 Post-Event	Oct. 29 Pre-Event	Oct. 29 Post-Event
Poll Question #1	1: Trust a lot				2
	2: Trust some	2	3	1	1
	3: Trust slightly			1	
	4: Neutral, neither trust nor distrust				
	5: Distrust slightly				
	6: Distrust some				
	7: Distrust a lot				
Poll Question #2	1: How fairly the court treats people of different races, genders, ages, wealth, or other characteristics.	1	1	2	3
	2: Whether the court acts with integrity and honesty.		2	2	1
	3: Whether the court personnel (staff and judges) treat people with respect.		1	1	2
	4: How well the court helps me understand how it works. (e.g., the charges/fines against me, my rights, how I can obtain help, what I'm allowed to do or not allowed to do, etc.).	1	2	1	2

Office of Court Administration

PEPP Virtual Engagements

AGENDA

Tuesday, October 27, 2020: 11:00 AM – 12:15 PM

Thursday, October 29, 2020: 11:00 AM – 12:15 PM

11:00 AM

Welcome and Introductions

Members of the OCA PEPP Project will introduce themselves, as well as any other guests. Community members will introduce themselves. (Note – discussion will be recorded)

11:05 AM

PEPP Project Re-Introduction

Jeffrey will summarize the PEPP project, and the extended virtual component. Explanation of e-gift card delivery will also be explained.

11:10 AM

Polling Questions – Pre

Poll Questions 1 and 2 conducted.

11:15 AM

Discussion

Moderators will have general discussion with the participants.

11:45 AM

Polling Questions – Post

Poll Questions 1 and 2 conducted.

12:15 PM

Thank You & Adjourn

POLL QUESTIONS

Poll Question #1:

How much do you trust or distrust the Texas courts? (Single Choice)

- Answer 1: Trust a lot
- Answer 2: Trust some
- Answer 3: Trust slightly
- Answer 4: Neutral, neither trust nor distrust
- Answer 5: Distrust slightly
- Answer 6: Distrust some
- Answer 7: Distrust a lot

Poll Question #2:

Which factor(s) below have the most substantial impact on how much you trust or distrust the Texas Courts? (choose all that apply) (Multiple Choice)

- Answer 1: How fairly the court treats people of different races, genders, ages, wealth, or other characteristics.
- Answer 2: Whether the court acts with integrity and honesty.
- Answer 3: Whether the court personnel (staff and judges) treat people with respect.
- Answer 4: How well the court helps me understand how it works. (e.g., the charges/fines against me, my rights, how I can obtain help, what I'm allowed to do or not allowed to do, etc.).

EXAMPLE QUESTIONS AND TALKING POINTS

COURT AWARENESS & COMMUNICATION

- Do you know where the courts in your city, precinct, and district are located?
- Have your judges, clerks, court staff 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
- Have you heard about how your local court has adapted with the pandemic? *
- Have you dealt with your local court system during the pandemic?
- Do you understand the impacts on the judicial system by the pandemic? (Explain)

FAIRNESS & EQUAL TREATMENT

- 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?
- Do you feel if you were to interact with the court virtually, that you would be treated fairly and equally than in person? What are your concerns, if any?

*Pandemic-related questions in red were added to the original engagement questions.

INVITATION EMAIL

Good morning,

If you are receiving this, you previously participated in a public engagement event, with the Texas Office of Court Administration, held in Alpine, Brownsville, or Houston. We are excited to announce that we are bringing together previous Texas Public Engagement Pilot Project (PEPP) participants to discuss if and how your opinions of Texas courts have changed in the time of COVID.

The **1 hour and 15-minute** discussions about the Texas court system will use Zoom video/phone conferencing. While the moderator will lead discussion via video, participants may choose to participate via video, via video but not on screen, or via phone.

For your participation (one session only), you will receive a \$75 Amazon electronic gift card. If you are interested, please let us know which session(s) you are available to attend.

- Session 1: Tuesday, October 27, 2020, from 11:00 AM to 12:15 PM (CST)
- Session 2: Wednesday, October 28, 2020, from 6:00 PM to 7:15 PM (CST)
- Session 3: Thursday, October 29, 2020, from 11:00 AM to 12:15 PM (CST)

For all questions and responses, please email PEPP@txcourts.gov. We look forward to hearing from you!

Texas Public Engagement Pilot Project (PEPP) Team
Office of Court Administration
205 W. 14th Street, Suite 600
Austin, TX 78711
www.txcourts.gov/oca

