



# COURT VOICES PROJECT

Staff Insights  
About Courts'  
Pandemic  
Responses  
Across 11 Pilots

*December 2021*



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

*This document was developed under cooperative agreement #SJI-21-P-026 from the State Justice Institute. The points of view expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the State Justice Institute.*

*We dedicate this resource to the hundreds of court professionals at our pilot sites for their thoughtful responses amidst their many existing job responsibilities and for their commitment to improving their field.*

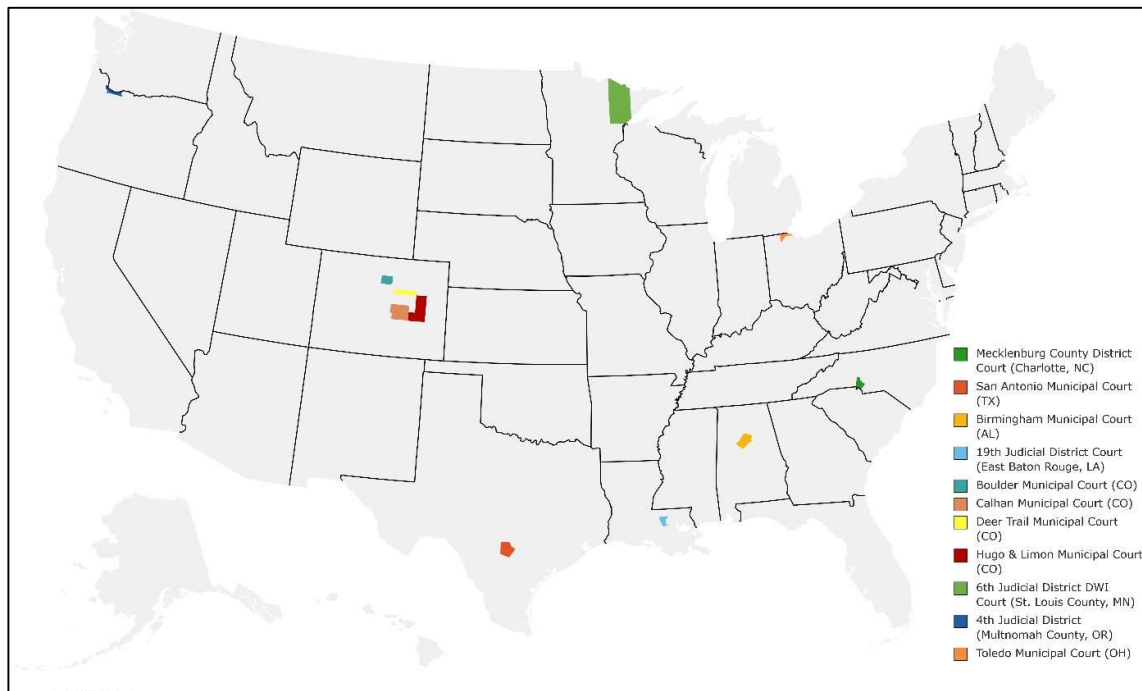
# Project Overview

As courts continue to adapt in response to the pandemic, some court leaders are taking the extra step to ask for input from those closest to the situation: court staff and court users. This approach is rooted in the concept and literature behind **procedural justice**, 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 will support implementation of any forthcoming policy and practice changes. 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 experiences those courts’ pandemic responses: court staff and court users. Project partners also 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. Funding is provided by the State Justice Institute 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 publication is the first of two major products of the pilot project. The second will be a national toolkit about feedback from court users collected from June 2021 through November 2021, forthcoming in early 2022.

Figure 1: Court Voices Project Pilot Court Sites



# About the Initial Staff Survey

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The Court Voices Project staff survey was distributed in June 2021 via a web-based platform, and staff were given at least two weeks to respond. Responses were anonymous. A total of 276 staff responded to the survey across 11<sup>1</sup> courts. Respondents included judges, clerks of courts, other court administration, and customer service staff. At one site, responding staff included external court stakeholders, such as local law enforcement.

The main goals of the staff survey were to give voice to court professionals about their experiences and to solicit their recommendations for this pilot project specifically and future court improvements generally.

The questions were developed collaboratively by project staff and representatives from the pilot courts. Of the nine questions, six were open-ended and three were closed-ended (multiple choice or scale), as noted within. See the *Appendix* for a copy of the survey questions.

## Key survey topics included:

- Virtual appearances for certain case types
- Ratings of court communication with the public and corresponding tools and needs
- Topics on which staff want court user feedback

This report highlights response findings and key takeaways, paired with select quotes from staff members. Open-ended responses have been grouped and labeled by project staff for clarity. As noted below, responses to some questions varied considerably from court to court. These findings are not presented as representative of courts generally.

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<sup>1</sup> Three of the courts are rural courts that are presided over by the same judge, so feedback from their clerks are grouped together as one site for the purposes of this project. One of the twelve pilot courts opted not to collect staff feedback.

# Staff Feedback Findings

## □ Virtual appearances for certain case types

**QUESTION (closed-ended):** “For which types of cases do you think it would be most valuable for your court to use virtual appearances or hearings going forward?”<sup>2</sup>

- Staff at 5 of 6 courts that hear **traffic cases** rated that case type as the most valuable to use virtual appearances going forward. The only court that did not rate traffic cases as valuable for virtual court appearances does not hear any traffic cases.



- Support for using virtual appearances for **individuals in custody** ranged across sites who hear those case types, from 39% to 100% among staff at those courts.



- Similarly, support for using virtual appearances for **first appearances** varied from 25% to 89%.



- Only one in ten staff responding across all sites said that virtual hearings for **jury trials** would be valuable going forward.

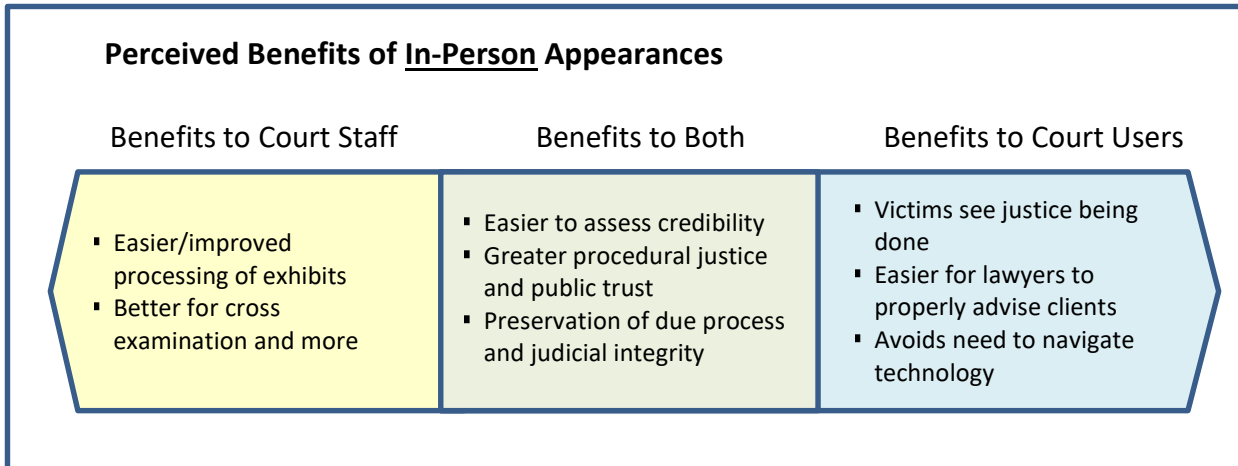
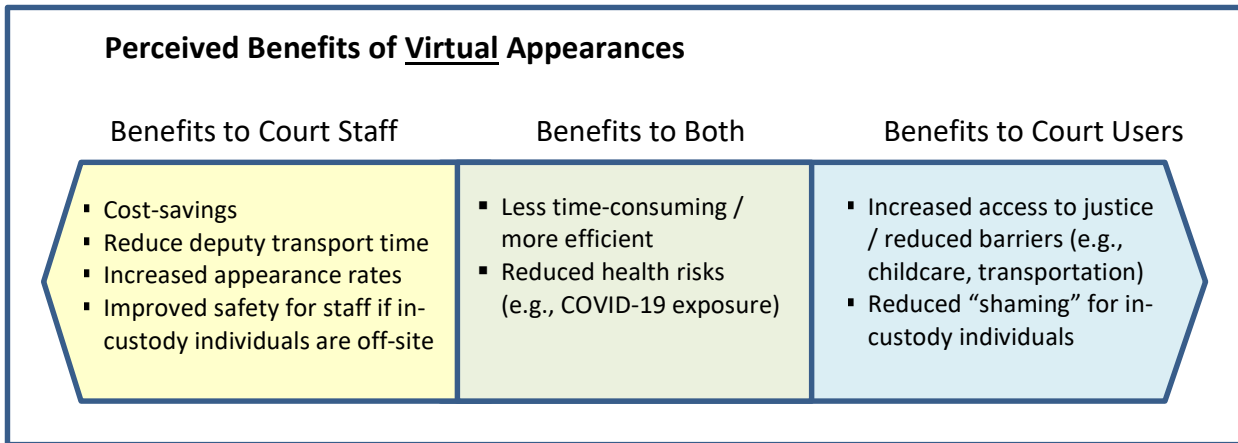


- Many staff wrote in responses about the value of virtual appearances for more “**ministerial**” or “**informative**” matters, like scheduling new court dates or other non-substantive case updates
- A majority of staff at all courts rated four or fewer case types as valuable to be heard virtually. In other words, few staff reported broad support for most or all court types to be heard virtually.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, responses were pooled from all sites, regardless of whether their court had direct experience offering all case types. The feedback from individual staff is likely to reflect a mix of direct experience with certain case types, as well as indirect experience or opinions.

**QUESTION (open-ended):** “Please explain why you selected the choices you did (regarding which types of cases you think would be most valuable for your court to use virtual appearances or hearings going forward – or not).”

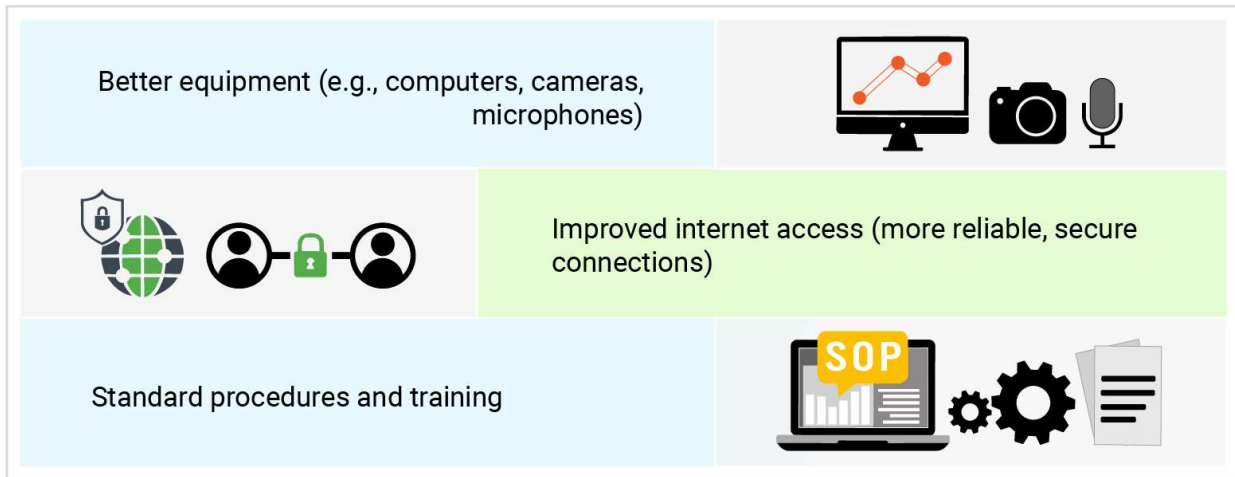
Figure 2: Staff Perceptions re: Benefits of Virtual Appearances and In-Person Appearances



**QUESTION (open-ended):** “If your court were to continue using virtual appearances or meetings, what supports or resources would help you and your colleagues to improve this practice?”

## □ Key resource needs for court staff

Figure 3: Staff Perceptions re: Key Resource Needs for Staff



### Select staff responses by theme:

#### 1. **Better equipment** (e.g., computers, cameras, microphones)

“ [P]roviding the court with the proper equipment and creating a standardized process on how to handle the different types of cases virtually will be good in improving this practice.

#### 2. **Improved internet access** (including more reliable and secure connections)

“ Better quality for connectivity through broadband, wireless access

#### 3. **Standard procedures and training**

“ [We] need a clear understanding of the process that court users are going through

#### 4. **Adapted staffing structure**

“ Dedicated staff to monitor and maintain the various systems needed for virtual court

5. **Improved internal communication**

“ We need the ability to share documents and evidence electronically. E-filing and online case management systems would resolve this issue.

6. **Improved external communication** (e.g., process for obtaining email addresses from court users)

“ I think having a completely functional website with all of the information we know [and] the public needs is essential, and we should 100% make this a priority.

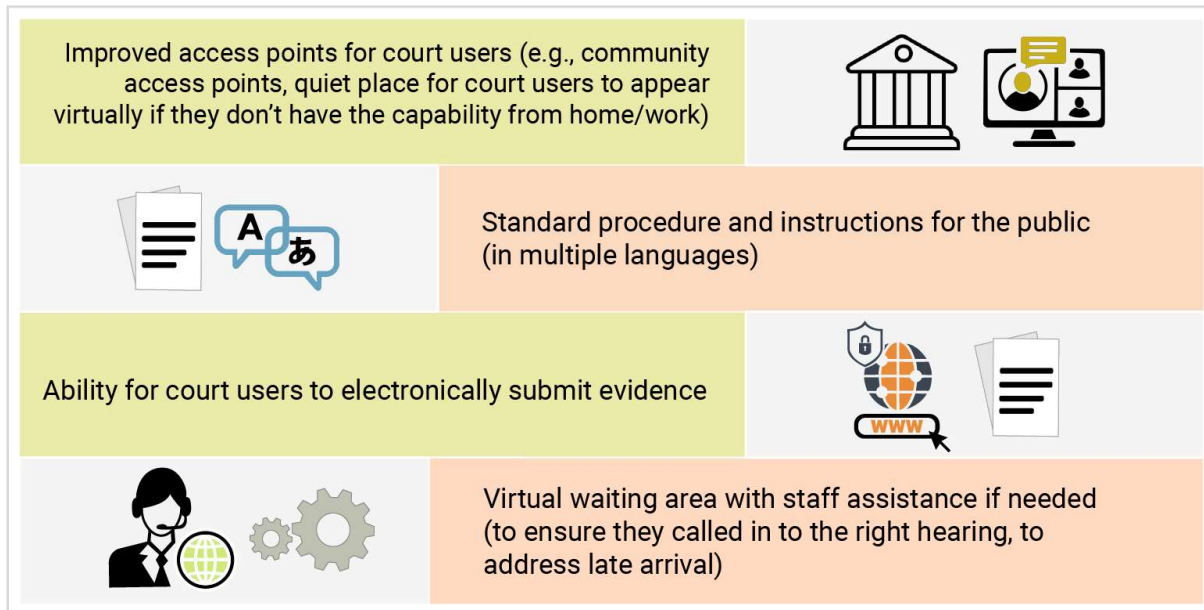
Figure 4: Staff Perceptions re: Key Resource Needs for Staff, continued





## □ Key resource needs for court users

Figure 4: Staff Perceptions re: Key Resource Needs for Court Users



### Select staff responses by theme:

#### 1. **Improved internet access** (including more reliable and secure connections)

“ We need much better internet infrastructure across the board. When someone’s appearance is dependent on the weakest link in the bandwidth/internet connection, and that weakest link is poor, it’s hard to conduct a productive hearing.

#### 2. **Improved access points for court users** (e.g., community access points, quiet place for court users to appear virtually if they don’t have the capability from home/work)

“ Remote stations at libraries, community centers and other community spaces, where the public could come for their remote appearance/hearing and have help with equipment or with linking into their event.

#### 3. **Standard procedure and instructions for the public** (including in multiple languages)

“ It might be helpful to create an easy to read “cheat sheet” for new participants about how to access and participate in Zoom court, who to contact when having technology challenges, what courtroom decorum is expected, etc. Something fast and easy to understand like a flyer with images and as few words as possible.

#### 4. Ability for court users to electronically submit evidence

“ The ability to upload evidence to a program that would allow us to share it to all parties. [The office of court administration] currently blocks access....”

#### 5. Virtual waiting area with staff assistance if needed

“ Having a message for call-in users that states what courtroom they’ve called into and that explains that they are currently on mute but to stay on the line. I feel that by not informing call-in users that they are on mute when they initially call in causes confusion for them and can result in them disconnecting which will cause them to be cited with (a failure to appear).”

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### □ Court communication with the public

**QUESTION (closed-ended):** “What do you think are the most effective ways your court kept court users informed during the pandemic?”

✓ Staff at four out of seven courts said that their **court’s website** was the most effective way their court kept court users informed during the pandemic.



✓ At two out of seven courts, **text messaging** was noted by 100% of responding staff as being the most effective means of communication.

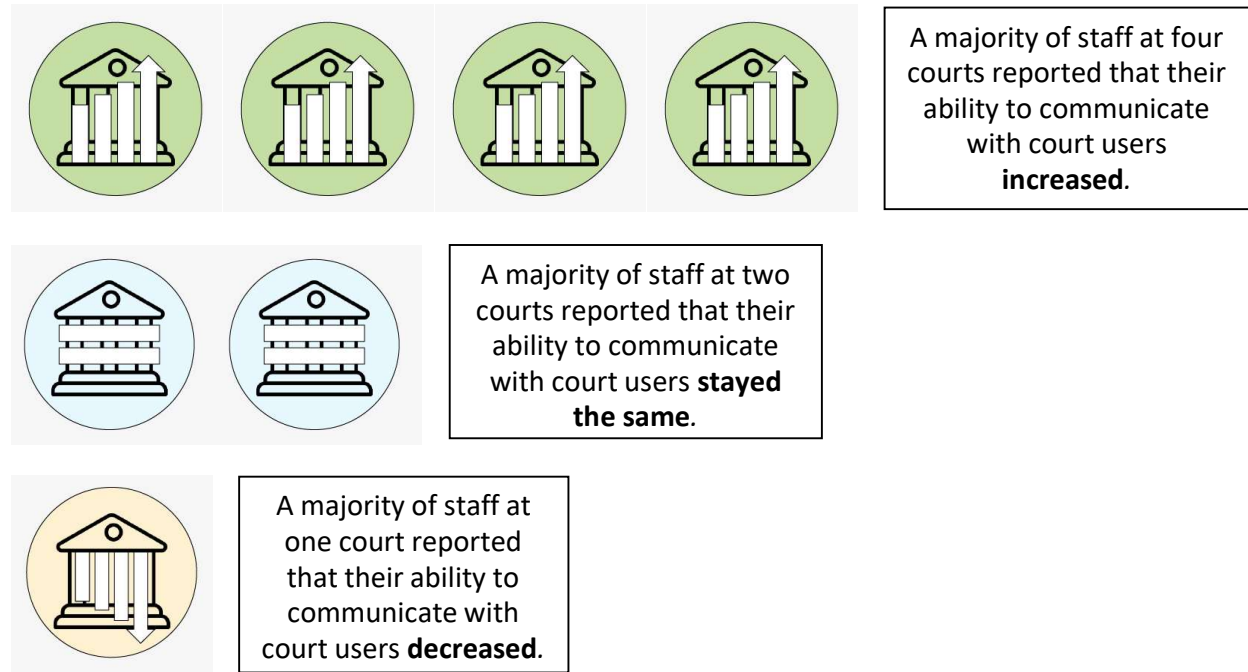


✓ **Email** was rated among the top two most effective means of communication at six out of seven courts. Email was the top choice at the two smallest courts.



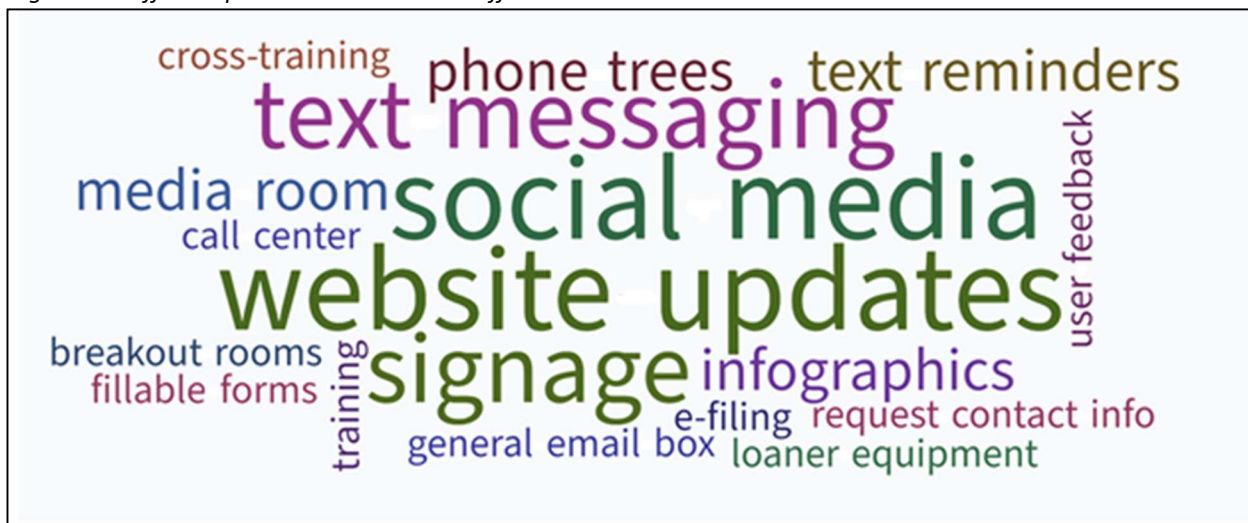
**QUESTION (closed-ended):** “Do you think your court improved its ability to communicate effectively with the public as a result of the pandemic?”

Figure 5: Staff Perceptions re: Courts’ Ability to Communicate with Court Users



**QUESTION (open-ended):** “What do you think are the most effective ways your court kept court users informed during the pandemic?”

Figure 6: Staff Perceptions re: Courts’ Most Effective Communication Tools



The word cloud above highlights the most common responses from staff about effective tools to communicate with court users during the pandemic. The more frequently a particular response was given, the larger the font appears in the word cloud.

## □ Court user feedback topics

**QUESTION (open-ended):** *“What are you most interested in learning from court users about their experience with virtual appearances offered during the pandemic?”*

*Select staff responses by theme:*

1. **Court user preferences, satisfaction with, and assessment of the quality of the virtual experience**

“ Were the instructions for accessing video hearings helpful? What advantages (did) they feel they experienced from having video hearings?

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

“ If they feel that they are heard, if they fully understand what happened in the hearing, and if they feel that they were treated as a real person rather than an unknown person on a screen

3. **Court user feelings of safety, including by avoiding in-person contact with the court**

“ I’d be interested in hearing whether calling in by phone made their court appearances more or less stressful

4. **Perceived efficiency of the court process**

“ Were they able to more efficiently handle cases in the virtual setting, rather than a crowded courtroom?

5. **Court users’ technology barriers to virtual services**

“ How hard was the initial process of connecting to the court? Did they have the appropriate equipment, or did they have to borrow hardware or go somewhere to access Wi-Fi? What kind of training or prep materials did they find useful (e.g., videos, written instructions, or someone on the phone)?



# Conclusion & Next Steps

No two sets of court professionals answered these questions the same, and yet there were many common themes as noted above. Further, the volume and quality of these responses showcase the dedication and professionalism of the judges and court staff who participated. They focused not just on their own needs but also their commitment to delivering on core court purposes like access and fairness. Court leaders will be wise to heed the advice of these experts in determining how pandemic response practices should be adapted going forward.

Within the Court Voices Project, this feedback was used to inform the development of short court user feedback surveys that were implemented at all twelve pilot sites in both in-person and remote contexts. Feedback topics include court user preferences for in-person versus various remote services (and why) and perceptions of fairness across various service contexts. Court user feedback findings will be available online at [www.LaGratta.com/court-voices-project](http://www.LaGratta.com/court-voices-project) in early 2022.

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# Appendix

## Staff Survey Questions (June 2021)

On behalf of this court and the Court Voices Project team, thank you in advance for your anonymous input today and going forward. This will be one of a few opportunities to provide feedback and insights through the project this year.

Your court is one of 12 courts selected as a pilot site for the Court Voices Project. The goals of the Court Voices Project are to:

1. To assess the value of pandemic-response practices and policies from the perspectives of court users and court staff
2. To improve public trust and confidence in the courts

To learn more about this project, please visit [www.lagratta.com/court-voices-project](http://www.lagratta.com/court-voices-project) or email [Emily@lagratta.com](mailto:Emily@lagratta.com).

The purpose of this initial questionnaire is to get feedback on some pandemic response practices that have been identified as common across most of the 12 pilot courts. We also want to hear from you about other pandemic response practices and concerns unique to your court. We thank you in advance for your time and candor.

1. **For which types of cases do you think it would be most valuable for your court to use virtual appearances or hearings going forward? Please check all that apply. (Note: the next question will ask for more details about your responses)** [MULTIPLE CHOICE: First appearances and/or bond hearings, Appearances for individuals in custody, Evidentiary hearings, Pretrial conferences, Bench trials, Jury trials, Small claims or other high-volume civil dockets, Traffic, Criminal, Landlord/tenant, Family court, Other]
2. **Please explain why you selected the choices you did in the previous question.** [WRITE-IN]
3. **What are you most interested in learning from court users about their experience with virtual appearances offered during the pandemic?** [WRITE-IN]
4. **If your court were to continue using virtual appearances or meetings, what supports or resources would help you and your colleagues to improve this practice?** [WRITE-IN]
5. **On a scale of 1-5, do you think your court improved its ability to communicate effectively with the public as a result of the pandemic?** [SCALE]
6. **What do you think are the most effective ways your court kept court users informed during the pandemic?** [MULTIPLE CHOICE: Court website, Phone, Email, Text messages, Social media, In-person counter service, Courthouse signage]
7. **What are you most interested in learning from court users about the communication options the court used during the pandemic?** [WRITE-IN]
8. **What would help you and your colleagues to improve the court's options to communicate effectively with the public going forward?** [WRITE-IN]
9. **What questions or concerns do you have about this project? (We'll do our best to follow up with answers.)** [WRITE-IN]

Thank you for your insights today! We'll report back soon with a summary of your peers' responses.