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Help Jefferson justice system by sharing your experiences, perceptions at listening session May 16 in Louisville

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Chief Justice Minton

In 2015, the National Center for State Courts conducted its annual “State of State Courts” poll to gauge public perception of the court system, with a focus on three main areas: customer service, inefficiency, and bias. The results of that survey indicated minorities have less confidence and trust in the court system, with only 32% of African Americans responding that they believe courts provide equal justice to all. Respondents also generally believed that African Americans and the poor receive worse treatment by the courts.

The survey prompted the NCSC to organize a series of town hall discussions between judges and members of their communities to address the issues that impact trust in the court system. The “Courting Justice” listening tour was held in Los Angeles, CA; Little Rock, AR; and Cleveland, OH; and was broadcast nationally on PBS stations as part of the “Tavis Smiley Show.”



Chief Judge Clayton

By all accounts, the listening tour was a success, providing a forum for an important dialogue between judges and the communities they serve. But it lacked what so many public conversations are missing: an end result.

In 2001, the Chief Justice’s Racial Fairness Commission was formed in Jefferson County to address complaints of unfairness from Louisville’s African American community in matters of jury selection, setting of bail, sentencing, and probation. The Commission, initially chaired by the late Justice William E. McAnulty, has been led by Judge Denise Clayton of the Kentucky Court of Appeals since 2005. Since its inception, the Commission has issued four reports: Sentencing, Bail, Jury Selection, and Courtroom Environment (Fairness and Access).

Surveys and focus groups conducted by the Commission indicate that the perception of the judicial system in Jefferson County is generally favorable. However, like the results of the NCSC poll, African Americans in Louisville have a less favorable impression of the courts. Remarks from the focus groups specifically highlight that African Americans believe both race and financial status impact how parties are treated.

After the release of the Courtroom Environment report, the Kentucky Court of Justice implemented some of the Commission's recommendations, including implicit bias and cultural competency trainings for judges, clerks, and Court of Justice personnel across the Commonwealth. But there is still much work to be done to address the concerns of the community and make the courts more accessible to everyone.

Following the lead of the NCSC – and building upon the important and ongoing community conversations started by the Racial Fairness Commission – the decision was made to organize a public listening session in Jefferson County. The purpose of this event is twofold: first, we want to educate the public regarding the different roles and responsibilities of participants in the court system; and second, we want to listen to community concerns and answer questions regarding experiences with and perceptions of the courts in Jefferson County.

The “Court Talks” listening session will feature a panel of speakers from the larger justice community including Pretrial Services, Court Designated Workers, Metro Corrections, Jefferson County District, Circuit, and Family courts; the Jefferson County Circuit Court Clerk's Office; the Louisville-Jefferson County Public Defender Corporation; the Jefferson County Attorney's office; the Commonwealth's Attorney's office; the Department of Corrections; Probation and Parole; and the Legal Aid Society.

Court Talks is scheduled for Thursday, May 16, from 6 – 8:30 p.m. at the auditorium in the University Center on Spalding University's campus. The session will be moderated by Jean West of WFPL.

A survey is being conducted by the Department of Sociology at the University of Louisville prior to the listening session to elicit feedback from the community. The survey can be found online at courts.ky.gov. A paper copy of the survey can be obtained by contacting Dr. Ryan Schroeder at ryan.schroeder@louisville.edu. The session will be followed by a series of focus groups to allow for more intensive discussion and feedback. The date, times, and topics for the focus groups will be announced at the program on May 16.

The information we receive from the survey, the listening session, and the focus groups will provide us with the tools we need to make measurable changes within the court system to address concerns regarding fairness and access. We want the court system to be a place where everyone receives, and believes they receive, equal justice.

As one of the previous focus group participants told us, “We are doing better, but we have a long way to go.” We hope the community will respond to the survey and attend the listening session on May 16 to help us get to where we need to be.

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