



Thanks to our guests for an exciting On the Table conversation on May 15th, discussing our courts as part of our community. This year, On the Table hosts are producing a Memo to the Mayor and our guests particularly appreciate how a change in government can offer the best time to create a change in perspective.

We offer two suggestions to the Mayor’s office to better create a sense that courts are our community and to foster accountability, accessibility and trust. The courts are generally opaque to most people. We spoke about the many ways the courthouse may be unintentionally hostile to litigants and visitors and how this creates systems which serve the courts but may not serve people who need the courts.

We believe the Mayor’s Office has a role to play in opening the courts. By embracing this opportunity, the Mayor can drive help drive innovation in the courts by championing the programs which work, bringing a critical eye to those that do not, and engaging her constituents in oversight of the justice system.

1. Create a Mayor’s Liaison to the Office of the Chief Judge

The courts are, of course, state and county institutions—not part of City government. Nonetheless, courts have an enormous impact on residents and the intersection of City policy with court pilot programs and court discretion has incredible potential to improve the quality of justice, as well as address social problems in Chicago. The Office of the Mayor should be engaging with the courts as an important institution in her city in order to create trust and accessibility. Additionally, a strong relationship can help prioritize programs and policies which best serve residents—whether those are court programs and policies (like drug diversion courts or bond practices) or City programs and policies (like hiring programs for persons re-entering their communities after prison).

The Mayor’s Liaison to the Office of the Chief Judge (OCJ) would allow the Mayor to be able to review the impact of Circuit Court-based programs on the residents of Chicago. The Liaison position would allow the Mayor’s Office to work collaboratively with the OCJ to make the best of these programs as fair, effective and as far-reaching as possible, and to suggest ways to improve others.

County-level courts have a high degree of control over their institution: the Chief Judge and the Presiding Judges have discretion to create specialty courts or run court programs to meet the needs of both litigants and court resources. Some examples in Cook County include the Access to Community Treatment court in the Criminal Courts, which employ treatment alternatives in a variety of cases, and the Domestic Relations Early Resolution Program (Daley Center) and Hearing Officer Program (Branch courts) that speed resolution of simple or less contentious



cases. These programs—and others—are having a very positive impact in the courts. Specialty courts can improve outcomes in a variety of ways, but they remain largely unknown outside their courthouses.

The Administrative Office of Illinois Courts, likewise, drives innovation in courts at the County and State level. It is driving programs to improve public access to court data and make electronic filing and electronic access to one's own court records standard practice in Illinois.

The Mayor's office could help champion these programs and raise their profile as the innovations they are. Wider understanding of innovative court programs will promote trust in the courts by opening their workings to the public. It will foster the accountability necessary to sustain, improve and expand the programs which work to create equity and fair justice in the courts.

Reform requires community, and the Mayor's office leads our community. By creating a formal relationship with the courts, the Mayor's office will make sure the people of Chicago view the courts as their institution to ensure that the courts serve us all. In turn, that will foster partnerships necessary between community groups who do not consider the courts a place where they can have an impact and the legal aid or social justice reform organizations who cannot always reach the people they might best assist.

2. Assist with a Citywide Civics Program to Educate Residents about the Courts

The other side of creating a liaison between the Mayor's Office and the Office of the Chief Judge is building community knowledge about the courts and their impact on the City. We would like to see the Mayor partner with legal aid organizations and court reform groups to educate residents about their courts. These programs could start with Know Your Courts which explain where the courthouses are, what sort of cases are heard in which courthouses, and what to expect when individuals go to court. Programs could include education about specialty courts and how those further City goals, like crime reduction, employment or housing stability. Programs could help residents understand what self-help exists, what court-based legal services are offered, and how to access legal aid or private attorney services.

Importantly, citywide civics about the court could also better equip residents to be knowledgeable voters who understand the judicial selection process and can make informed ballot decisions in both the general election and retention elections. Activist interest in judicial elections is growing, especially among young voters, and it's critical that voters have skills to assess the information they receive about judicial candidates. Voters should learn what questions to ask judicial candidates, how to read bar association recommendations critically,



and what it means to have a representative bench. Nonpartisan, reliable voter education properly balances the judiciary’s need of independence in ruling on cases with the judiciary’s duty to provide equitable justice to all.

The Mayor’s office has the reach and cachet to raise the community’s understanding of our courts and the role they play in a thriving community. Done properly, civic education will improve access to court-services, raise the visibility of Chicago’s innovative court programs, and promote quality and diversity on the bench.

Chicago Appleseed and Chicago Council of Lawyers want to thank everyone who joined our discussion and shared thoughts on how our courts intersect with the community. This memo barely scratches the surface of your insights and concerns, but we appreciate them and will strive to keep them in our thoughts as we continue our court reform work.

We especially thank Latham & Watkins for providing meeting space and snacks to fuel our discussion and Meghan Paulas, of the American Constitution Society for facilitating. We look forward to hosting again.