

ILLINOIS SUPREME COURT COMMISSION

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ILLINOIS SUPREME COURT  
COMMISSION ON ACCESS TO JUSTICE

# Welcoming Courthouse Guidelines

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A resource to help courts create and  
maintain welcoming physical spaces

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## A Message from the Illinois Supreme Court Chief Justice, P. Scott Neville, Jr.

Where justice takes place influences how it is received and understood. Even before a case is called, the atmosphere, the experience, and the accessibility of a courthouse shape how justice is seen, felt, remembered, and trusted.

These guidelines respond to that reality. Developed through the leadership of the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice, they provide practical and achievable steps to help create welcoming, user-centered spaces responsive to the people they serve.

This work depends on continued effort and shared learning. We encourage courts and staff to offer feedback and contribute ideas. For questions or to offer input, please contact: [accesstojustice@illinoiscourts.gov](mailto:accesstojustice@illinoiscourts.gov).

When courthouses make it easier for people to find their way, to access services, and to take part in court proceedings, the courts function as they should. In turn, this reinforces public confidence in our legal system.

## Introduction

**Going to court can be scary.** Many court users attend court not by choice, but due to a life-changing event or because they have been ordered to be there. Court users are expected to follow unfamiliar and exacting procedures, and to do so in spaces that can feel imposing. Additionally, court users are often asked to share personal and embarrassing details in open court. This combination of circumstances can make it difficult for court users to effectively engage in the court process, particularly court users who have experienced trauma.

**Courts must take intentional and affirmative steps to ensure that courthouses are welcoming spaces**

**that support court users and anticipate their needs, advance the mission, vision, and values of the Illinois Judicial Branch, and reinforce the role of courts as trusted public institutions.** While e-filing, electronic access to court records, and remote court appearances allow court users to conduct certain court business without stepping foot in a courthouse, in-person court appearances remain, and brick and mortar courthouses continue to play an important role in our communities.

The guidelines outlined here are intended to offer **practical and simple steps** courts can take to make their physical spaces more welcoming, without requiring a significant outlay of financial or personnel resources.

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## Visible, Plain Language Signage

**Visible and plain language signage** will help court users **navigate the courthouse** and convey **helpful information**, such as the availability of fee waivers and interpreters. Clear signage will support a more successful court experience for court users and reduce time staff spend providing directional assistance.

Effective signage begins **outside the courthouse**, with parking, accessible drop-off areas, entrances, and the building itself clearly labeled. Signage at entrances should welcome court users and list courthouse hours and entry information.

**Inside the courthouse**, public spaces should be clearly labeled with visible, plain language signage. A building directory and map can help court users navigate the courthouse without staff assistance. Where available, electronic screens can be used to display docket information and important announcements such as courtroom changes. Signage should provide helpful information, rather than simply telling court users where they are not allowed. (Note that certain signage is required by law or Supreme Court policy.)

### CLEAR SIGNAGE SHOULD:

- Be visible (e.g., positioned where it can be easily seen, including for people who use mobility devices, and in a sufficiently large font)
- Use plain language
- Use English and other languages prevalent in the area
- Use universally recognized symbols and icons and
- Be accessible, with braille or large print options

## AREAS OF THE COURTHOUSE THAT SHOULD BE CLEARLY LABELED:

- Courtrooms
- Clerk's Office
- Meeting Rooms
- Jury Assembly Room
- Restrooms (including all gender, accessible, and family-friendly restrooms)
- Entrance/Security (if there are different entrances or security lines for the public and court staff/lawyers, or for people who need accessible routes, these should be clearly labeled and distinguished)
- Exit
- Zoom & e-filing stations
- Elevators
- Law Library, Self-Help Center, records room, and other self-help resources (like forms)
- Lactation/Nursing Parent's Room
- Children's waiting area/childcare drop in
- Water fountains and vending machines
- Attorney Resource Center
- Court adjacent offices such as CASA, domestic violence advocates, probation, public defender, and state's attorney



## RESOURCES:

- [Interpreter Sign for Courthouses](#)
- [Fee & Assessment Waiver Sign](#)
- [How Can We Help You Sign](#)
- [Illinois Supreme Court Policy on Plain Language](#)
- [National Association for Court Management Plain Language Guide](#)
- [A Compilation of Illinois Access to Justice Programs, Policies, Rules, and Resources](#)



## Security

**Courthouse security** is usually a court user's first stop in the courthouse. Strong courthouse security is essential, but a security line may not convey a warm welcome. **Courts should be mindful that the interaction with security sets the tone for the remainder of the user experience.** Security staff must be courteous and equipped to provide basic information to court users (such as directions to courtrooms) and to direct court users to the appropriate person (e.g., courthouse greeter, Court Disability Coordinator, circuit clerk) for further assistance.

### COURTS SHOULD CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING:

- Add signage near the security area **welcoming court users** to the courthouse, so that court users are greeted first with a positive and welcoming message instead of, for example, a list of prohibited items.
- **Clearly label security entrances.** This is especially important where there are separate security entrances for the public and court staff/lawyers.
- If **cell phones or other electronic devices** are not allowed in the courthouse, communicate this to court users as early in the process as possible. For example, include this information prominently on the court website and post

multi-lingual signage in the parking area, outside of the courthouse, and near the security area. Provide space for court users to store prohibited items free of charge.

- Provide **dedicated spaces** where court users can collect their belongings and sit to remove and put on shoes, etc. before and after going through the metal detector.
- Ensure that all security staff have training and information about their obligations under Title II of the **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)** regarding access for people with disabilities, including mobility devices, service animals, emotional support animals, and food and medication that may not usually be allowed.



### RESOURCES:

- [Supreme Court Policy on Portable Electronic Devices](#)
- Cell phones [allowed](#) and [not allowed](#) signs
- [Supreme Court Policy on Access for People with Disabilities](#)
- [A Compilation of Illinois Access to Justice Programs, Policies, Rules, and Resources](#)



## Courthouse Greeter

A designated courthouse greeter or concierge can help court users feel **welcome, supported, and respected**. It can also **increase court efficiency** by providing court users with accurate and timely information and freeing up other staff to perform their specific job functions.

The courthouse greeter should be located in a prominent, accessible, and clearly labeled (e.g., “Courthouse Information” or “May I Help You?”) area of the courthouse. At a minimum, a courthouse greeter should be able to help court users get to the right place in the courthouse (e.g., direct them to the clerk’s office to file documents or identify the correct courtroom). Depending on resources, a courthouse greeter may also escort court users to the appropriate office or courtroom and connect court users to widely available legal information resources, including statewide standardized court forms, Illinois Court Help, Illinois Legal Aid Online, and community resources, such as shelters and food pantries. Busy courthouses may consider having multiple greeters, and some courthouses may benefit from multi-lingual greeters. Because people process information in different ways, a courthouse greeter is important even in courthouses equipped with clear signage, electronic message boards/screens, and interactive kiosks.

At first glance, a designated courthouse greeter may seem unattainable for many courts. **But a courthouse greeter position does not necessarily need to be paid or full-time.** Students, retirees, and even local bar association members may be

great sources of volunteers, and this position can be performed with minimal training. (In some courthouses, AmeriCorps Illinois JusticeCorps volunteers fill this role.) If it is not feasible or necessary to have a courthouse greeter during all hours when the courthouse is open, consider staffing this position just during the busiest times (e.g., early morning and immediately after lunch).

For some courts, minor adjustments to existing practices or resources may be sufficient to establish a designated courthouse greeter. Some courthouses may already have staff serving as a de facto greeter and may find it beneficial to add appropriate signage so that court users know where to go for assistance. Specifically assigning the courthouse greeter function to a staff person (or multiple staff on a rotating basis) can empower the designated staff to prioritize this role and provide high quality customer service to court users, while ensuring staff coverage for other essential court functions.



### RESOURCES:

- [Supreme Court Policy on Assistance to Court Users by Circuit Clerks, Court Staff, Law Librarians, and Court Volunteers \(Safe Harbor Policy\)](#)
- [Court Personnel Card: What Information Can I Provide to Court Users?](#)
- [A Compilation of Illinois Access to Justice Programs, Policies, Rules, and Resources](#)

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## Accessibility

**Courthouses should evaluate** their physical spaces to ensure that all essential pathways to court activities and services are barrier free, including entrances, hallways, elevators, restrooms, and courtrooms. Courts must offer **reasonable accommodations**, which are modifications to policies, practices, or procedures needed to make courthouses accessible for people with disabilities.

All courts must have a designated **Court Disability Coordinator (CDC)** and prominently display the CDC's contact information throughout the courthouse. Training staff on this topic and common reasonable accommodation requests will help to create a welcoming environment for people with disabilities, who frequently face barriers and skepticism when entering new spaces. All staff should know who their CDC is and how to connect people with the CDC. Likewise, staff, including courthouse security and greeters, should be familiar with their ADA obligations and well-versed in providing responsive and unbiased customer service to court users with disabilities.

### **ADDITIONALLY, COURTS SHOULD CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING:**

- Implement a **designated “drop-off” area** for people with disabilities to support access to the courthouse upon arrival and departure.

- Doorways should be wide enough for wheelchairs, ramps should be available where there are steps, and accessible seating should be provided in waiting areas and courtrooms. If physical spaces or routes are inaccessible, **proactively identify alternatives**, such as designating a first floor space to hold court when needed if all courtrooms are on the second floor and there are no elevators.
- Use prominent and clear signage to identify **accessible entrances and routes**. For example, if the main courthouse entrance requires stairs, include signage at the main entrance that identifies the location of the accessible entrance.
- Adopt an **emergency preparedness plan** that accounts for people with different types of disabilities. Be sure to communicate these procedures to the public, first responders, and frontline staff.



### **RESOURCES:**

- [Supreme Court Policy on Access for People with Disabilities](#)
- [Reasonable Accommodation Flowchart](#)
- [A Compilation of Illinois Access to Justice Programs, Policies, Rules, and Resources](#)



## In the Courtroom

**Many case participants** (including lawyers) are unsure what to do when they enter a courtroom, and for good reason. Depending on the courtroom, case participants may be required to check in with the clerk (either upon arrival or only once all parties are present), they may be expected to know their docket “line number,” or they may simply need to be seated and wait for their case to be called. Similarly, it may not be obvious where to sit or stand to address the judge once the case is called.

Courts must clearly **communicate these procedures** to court users. This may be accomplished through prominently placed and easy to read plain language, multi-lingual, accessible signage outside of and inside the courtroom, as well as an announcement in the courtroom. (For high volume courtrooms and lengthy dockets, an announcement may need to be repeated several times throughout the court call.) Courts should consider using public facing Zoom screens (when not in use for Zoom court) to display courtroom procedures, the docket, and similar information. Courts might also consider options to allow case participants to check in electronically without needing to interrupt the clerk, such as at a kiosk or through a mobile app. While standing orders can be helpful in establishing courtroom procedures, most court users are unfamiliar with the concept of standing orders and will not know to look for and review these orders before attending court.

During the proceedings, judges must introduce themselves and treat case participants respectfully, using inclusive language. Judges should support

case participants in understanding the proceedings and required next steps.

Courtroom **lighting, noise levels, temperature, and ventilation** can all impact a proceeding and a case participant’s ability to participate effectively. These should be assessed regularly and adjusted as needed.

Courts should consider providing pencils, scratch paper, future court date reminder slips, or referrals to text message reminder programs (where available) in the courtroom, particularly when case participants are not given hard copies of written orders in court. Courts may also consider developing case-type or courtroom specific “**prescription pads**” or **information sheets** to help case participants prepare for their next court date. Tissues should be available throughout the courtroom.



### RESOURCES:

- [Sample Judge Opening Remarks](#)
- Judicial Bench Cards:
  - [Self-Represented People in the Courtroom](#)
  - [Promoting Gender Inclusivity at Court](#)
  - [Transgender People at Court](#)
  - [Courtroom Interpreting for In-Person and Virtual Proceedings](#)
- Prescription Pads: [Next Court Date](#) and [Self-Help Center](#)
- [Courtroom Signage About Checking In](#)
- [A Compilation of Illinois Access to Justice Programs, Policies, Rules, and Resources](#)

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## Waiting and Meeting Areas

Courts should make clearly labeled and accessible **meeting spaces, waiting areas, and seating** available throughout the courthouse. Some courthouses may be able to establish designated waiting and meeting spaces, including areas for families with children and spaces for lawyers to speak confidentially with clients. Courthouses with limited space may find it helpful to add chairs in hallways or lobbies. Seating may be particularly beneficial near high volume courtrooms and courtrooms that are not open to the public.



## Jury Spaces

**Jury service is often the public's most direct interaction with the courts**, and jurors may spend many hours or days in courthouse spaces. Courts should consider juror access to restrooms, Wi-Fi, power outlets, and water and food (including food storage) before, during, and after jury selection. Court should also consider separation of jurors from the case participants, and ensure that jurors are able to safely enter, exit, and move throughout the courthouse.



## Self-Help Resources

**Courts should make self-help resources available at the courthouse.** These resources help self-represented litigants navigate the court process, while also saving time for court staff. In some courthouses, self-help resources may include staffed or unstaffed self-help centers, law libraries, or computer stations that allow court users to access statewide standardized court forms, e-filing information and assistance, Illinois Legal Aid Online, and similar resources. Courthouses with limited space or staff can offer print resources. Self-help resources should be clearly labeled.

Additionally, public education or informational displays explaining the roles of the courts, jury service, or the judicial system can help court users better understand the legal system.



### RESOURCES:

- [Statewide Self-Help Resources and Referrals](#)
- [Checklist for Self-Represented Litigant Computer Stations](#)
- [Statewide Standardized Court Forms](#)
- [A Compilation of Illinois Access to Justice Programs, Policies, Rules, and Resources](#)



## Remote Access Considerations

These guidelines focus on welcoming and supportive *physical* spaces. However, courts must not overlook the **increasingly important role of virtual spaces** and electronic services, including remote court appearances, e-filing, the ability to schedule court dates online, remote access to court records, automated court date reminders, and local court websites. Courts must prioritize making both physical and virtual spaces welcoming and user-centered, and many of the physical space considerations addressed here apply equally to virtual spaces.



### RESOURCES:

- [Information for Filers Without Lawyers](#)
- [Remote Appearance Resources](#)
- [Judicial Bench Card: Remote Appearances in Circuit Court](#)
- [Supreme Court Remote Access Policy](#)
- [A Compilation of Illinois Access to Justice Programs, Policies, Rules, and Resources](#)

## Conclusion

Creating and maintaining a welcoming courthouse is not a one-time endeavor that will be accomplished overnight or by a single person. Rather, it is an ongoing process that requires the involvement and collaboration of all partners responsible for a courthouse's operations, and consistent messaging to all courthouse personnel. (An outside perspective and a fresh set of eyes can help, too.)

**Small changes can have a big impact.** Physical spaces that welcome and support court users create a better and more effective experience for court users and staff and increase trust and confidence in the courts. For additional resources and assistance, contact the Access to Justice Division of the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts at [AccessToJustice@illinoiscourts.gov](mailto:AccessToJustice@illinoiscourts.gov).

*Approved in 2026.*

As a separate and co-equal branch of government, the Illinois Judicial Branch is committed to serving the people of Illinois through its mission, vision, and values.

## Illinois Judicial Branch Mission

To serve the people of Illinois and safeguard the rule of law by delivering justice that is fair, impartial, and accessible to all; upholding the state and federal Constitutions; and earning public trust by treating every person with dignity and respect.

## Illinois Judicial Branch Vision

A judicial branch that sustains our democracy by exemplifying excellence, equity, impartiality, and accountability.

## Illinois Judicial Branch Values

### **FAIRNESS**

Independent, impartial, and free of bias in actions, decisions, and treatment of all.

### **ACCOUNTABILITY**

Transparent and responsible for our conduct, performance, and use of public resources.

### **INTEGRITY**

Honest, trustworthy, and committed to excellence and the highest ethical and professional standards.

### **RESPECT**

Serve all with dignity, courtesy, compassion, and understanding.