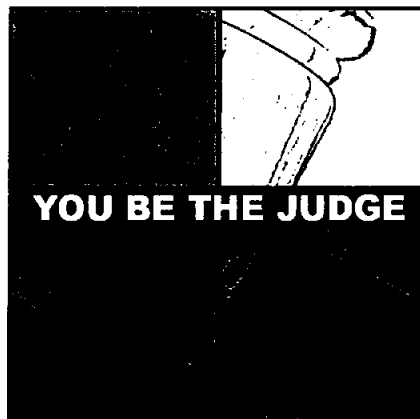


**Mesa County Justice Center
Public Access and Fairness Survey Pilot Project**



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Colorado Judicial Branch

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Introduction

The trial court leadership in the 21st Judicial District expressed their interest in soliciting public feedback on how court business is conducted in Mesa County. They agreed to become the first pilot district for a statewide CourTools Access and Fairness Survey effort beginning in Colorado. The Access and Fairness Survey was conducted at the Mesa County Justice Center, with assistance from staff at the State Court Administrators Office, Division of Planning and Analysis, starting at noon on Tuesday, June 12th 2007, and continuing through noon on Thursday, June 14th 2007.

Survey proctors and court staff were stationed at the only exit point of the Justice Center and approached each public member as they were leaving the building. Phrases like “would you like to be the Judge today” were used to catch the public’s attention. The volunteers would then explain more about the anonymous survey and offer participants candy and a pen for completing it. The information gathered through the Access and Fairness Survey was overwhelmingly positive. However the survey results did indicate areas of greater disapproval from the public than others. Those areas included:

- The court’s hours of operation, specifically the clerks office
- Scheduling for the first appearance center
- Getting court business done in a reasonable amount of time

These areas may be improved through exploring some suggested changes. These suggestions can be adopted wholly or in part, as resources permit, and do not have to be implemented simultaneously to be effective. The following suggestions for the Mesa County Justice Center are based on the Survey results (additional detail for each suggestion is located at the end of the report):

Suggestion #1: The District should explore extending the Clerk’s office hours to better accommodate the public.

Suggestion #2: The District should team up with the District Attorneys office to explore alternative scheduling practices for the First Appearance Center to determine the most efficient scheduling practice that will best accommodate the public.

Suggestion #3: Continue to develop improvements to existing case management practices for Judicial Officers and for the First Appearance Center that will aid the ability of the public to get their court business done in a reasonable amount of time.

The Mesa County Justice Center trial court leadership and court staff should be lauded for being the first in Colorado to take this proactive approach to soliciting public feedback on how court business is conducted. The Access and Fairness Survey results show that the public’s perception of how court business is conducted in Mesa County is overwhelmingly positive. The few suggestions mentioned in this report are intended to build on those positive perceptions and make them stronger.

The 21st Judicial District, Mesa County Justice Center serves a population of around 120,000 in Mesa County. The Mesa County Justice Center currently has five District Court Judges and 3 County Court Judges on the bench. In Fiscal Year 2006 (July 1, 2005 through June 30th, 2006), the 21st Judicial District received 6,263 new district court case filings and 16,477 new county court filings.

Survey Instrument and Project Overview

The survey instrument used for the Mesa County Justice Center project was developed and tested by the National Center for State Courts as part of their CourTools performance measures. CourTools are a set of ten trial court performance measures that were created to help local courts improve their current practices and measure outcomes considered valuable to the work of the courts. The Access and Fairness Survey, which is the first CourTools measure identified, is a tool used to obtain citizens' perspectives on the court's accessibility and how they were treated in court in terms of fairness, equality and respect. Research indicates that matters of procedural fairness and process are equally important, and in some cases more important, than outcomes for most public consumers. This especially applies to the justice system when examining how court users perceive their experience in the courthouse, not just the outcome of their case. The Access and Fairness Survey provides valuable information and feedback regarding the court users experience with the court, which can help courts to improve their management practices.

The 21st judicial district identified three days that would be considered typical days in the Justice Center. They chose to use two half days and one full day as their timeframe for conducting the survey.¹ The Access and Fairness Survey was implemented in the manner suggested by the National Center for State Courts—an exit survey approach. Everyone exiting the Justice Center was asked to fill out the brief self-administered survey. The volunteers were stationed at the only exit point of the Justice Center and approached each person as they were leaving the building. Phrases like “would you like to be the Judge today” were used to catch the public's attention. The volunteers would then explain more about the anonymous survey and offer participants candy and a pen for completing it. The Access and Fairness Survey was available in both Spanish and English languages.

Survey Results and Analysis

The information gathered through the Access and Fairness Survey was overwhelmingly positive. The National Center for State Courts recommends focusing on the results of any questions with a twenty percent or greater disapproval rating. For Grand Junction, the Access and Fairness Survey results showed a range of disapproval ratings between 5.17% and 21.71%. We feel that the low disapproval rate strongly validates the high

¹ The National Center for State Courts recommends choosing “a typical day” to conduct the Access and Fairness Survey. Feedback from other states who have conducted this survey suggests that one day is not enough and that two days of conducting surveys would be more beneficial. Thus, the Colorado SCAO recommends to interested districts a two day period for conducting the Access and Fairness Survey. Grand Junction elected to use two half days and one full day, which complied with that recommendation.