

Mesa County Justice Center Public Access and Fairness Survey Pilot Project

Executive Summary

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.

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. The Access and Fairness Survey was implemented in the manner suggested by the National Center for State Courts—an exit survey approach. The 21st Judicial District identified three days that would be considered typical days in the Justice Center. They selected two half days and one full day as their timeframe for conducting the survey.¹

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. Overall the 21st Judicial District had a high response rate for this pilot Access and Fairness Survey project.² A total number of 634 surveys were collected over the three day period with a total response rate of 43%.³

There were 15 opinion items in the survey, grouped into two areas of court operations:

- Ten items on access to court services, and
- Five items related to procedural fairness (generally aimed at those who were party to a legal proceeding).

Opinions could be expressed on a five point scale from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree,” with a “Not Applicable” choice available.

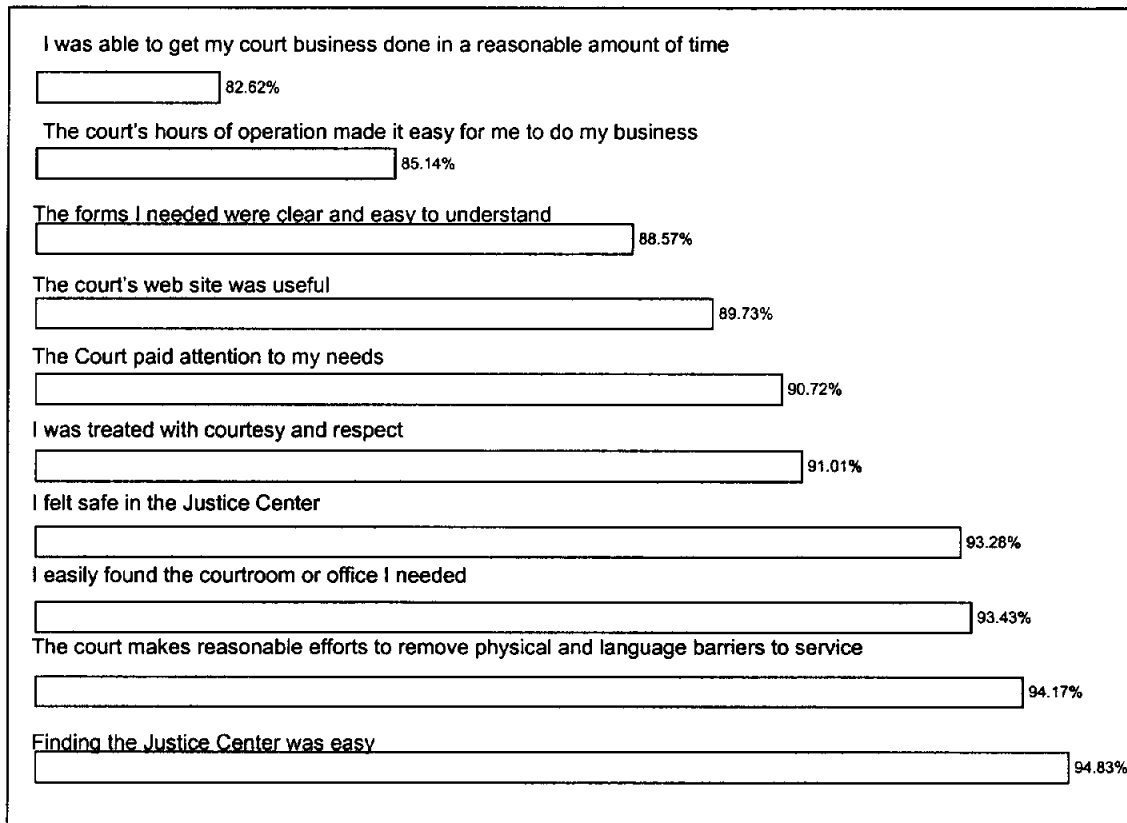
¹ The National Center for State Courts recommends choosing “a typical day” to conduct the Access and Fairness Survey. Feedback from other states who have conducted this survey suggests that one day is not enough and that two days of conducting surveys would be more beneficial. Thus, the Colorado SCAO 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.

² In order to obtain a response rate, SCAO staff counted the total number of people who exited the Justice Center over the entire three day period the survey was being conducted.

³ Due to the high number of repeat court users and employees that were counted as they exited the Justice Center on the second and third days of the project, it is estimated that the actual response rate may be a higher rate than the rate presented.

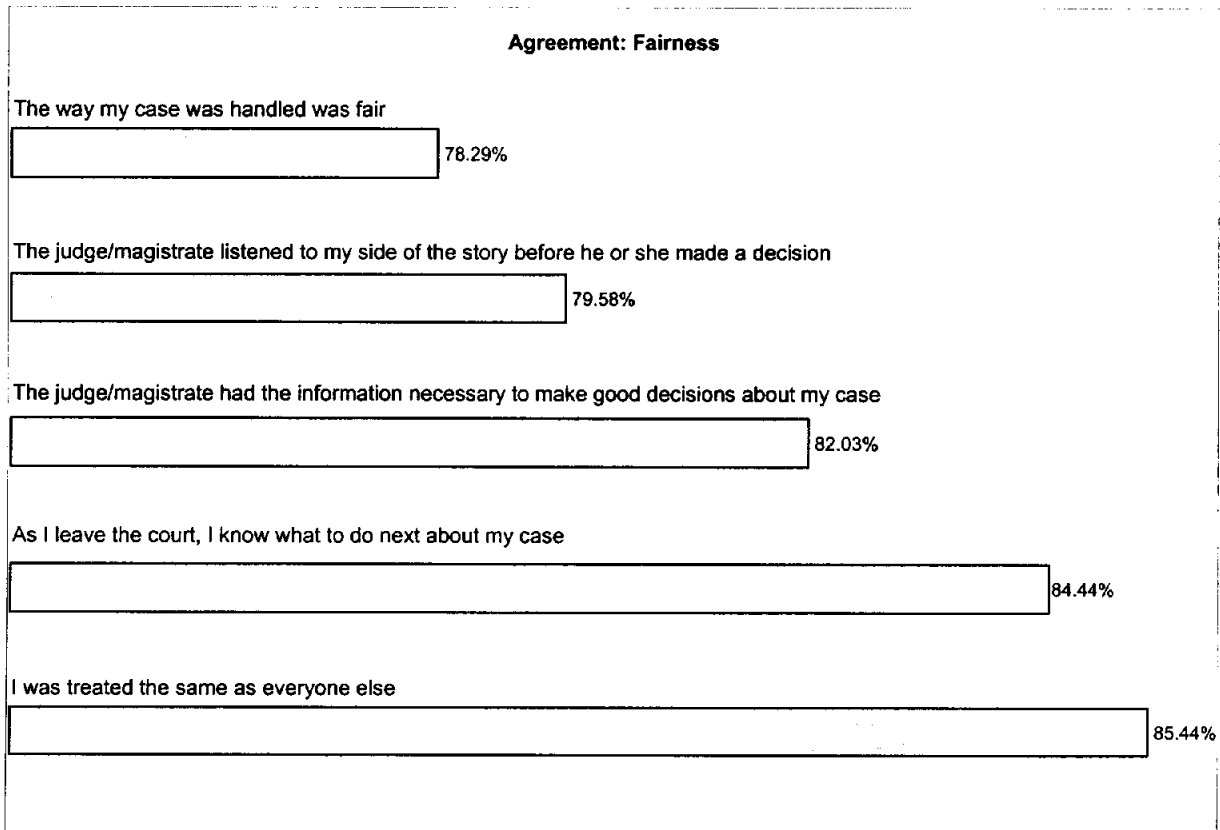
Access to the Court:

Agreement Percentage: Access Questions



This graph shows the percentage of total responses with an agreement response. The National Center for State Courts suggests in its CourTools literature that an 80% approval rating on each item might be considered a high-end performance goal. As can be seen, agreement percentages were high: no item had less than 80% positive responses.

Fairness:



As can be seen in the graph above, fairness items tended to score lower in agreement compared to access items. This is to be expected, given the subjective nature of “fairness.” The two items that fall below the 80% criteria are “The way my case was handled was fair,” and “The judge/magistrate listened to my story before he/she made a decision.” Approximately half of the respondents who filled out the survey filled out the questions regarding fairness. The two items that fall below the 80% criteria are still very small values in terms of the number of respondents compared to the bulk of the participants filling out the survey.

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 full 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.