

Thoughts from the Bench: Judicial Participation in Community Outreach

Committee staff sat down with judges throughout the state to discuss judicial participation in community engagement. Their enthusiasm for the subject was contagious. “I could discuss outreach all day long!” said Judge Julia Alloggiamento.¹ We won’t take all day, but we do consider some of the highlights, below.

Standard 10.5 of the California Rules of Court envisions judicial participation in community outreach activities as “an official judicial function” and advances community engagement as a means “to promote public understanding of and confidence in the administration of justice.” Broadly speaking, how do you see the role of judicial officers as public-facing members of their communities?

“To me, being engaged in the community is to come out from behind the bench and the black robe; to demystify who we are, and show that we are only human,” says Judge Bunmi O. Awoniyi.² Expanding on this perspective, Presiding Judge Sonny S. Sandhu³ writes, “Courts are often unfamiliar institutions for many members of the public. When judges engage in outreach and education, we help demystify the judicial system and reinforce the principle that courts exist to serve the public fairly, impartially, and with integrity.” He continues, “This work [is] especially important in communities where individuals may have limited prior interaction with the court system or may historically feel disconnected from civic institutions. Outreach helps reinforce that courts are accessible, neutral forums committed to equal justice under the law. Access to justice must be emphasized and prioritized by all courts.”

On the subject of judicial outreach as a conduit for court accessibility, Presiding Judge Sergio C. Tapia II⁴ explains, “[T]he work of a judicial officer extends beyond the bench. We are not just judges, but members of th[e] same communit[ies] we serve. . . . This is why I believe that meaningful judicial engagement in the community is not supplemental to our work—it *is part of our work*.” Judge Michael Caves⁵ adds, “When we promote public understanding and confidence in the administration of justice, we aren’t just helping the communities that we

¹ Judge Julia Alloggiamento is chair of the Community Outreach Committee for the Superior Court of Santa Clara County and vice-lead of Chief Justice Patricia Guerrero’s Power of Democracy Civic Learning Initiative.

² Judge Bunmi O. Awoniyi is a judge at the Superior Court of Sacramento County and a member of the Judicial Council. In May, she was recognized by Chief Justice Guerrero in her tribute to public servants of California’s judicial branch. (Cal. Courts Newsroom, [Chief Justice, Judicial Council Honor Public Servants of California’s Judicial Branch](#) (May 4, 2026).

³ Judge Sonny S. Sandhu currently serves as presiding judge of the Superior Court of Stanislaus County, though he was recently nominated by Governor Gavin Newsom to serve as an associate justice in the Fifth Appellate District of the Court of Appeal.

⁴ Judge Sergio C. Tapia II is presiding judge of the Superior Court of Los Angeles County.

⁵ Judge Michael Caves is a judge at the Superior Court of Kern County.

serve; we are contributing to the rule of law. Public confidence in the judiciary is critical to the legitimacy of the branch.”

“I think it is imperative that judicial officers take standard 10.5 to heart,” asserts Judge Alloggiamento. “Judges and commissioners absolutely serve a vital function of promoting public understanding and confidence in the administration of justice. Judges should welcome the public into their courtroom where appropriate to better understand how a courtroom functions.” “Outside of the courtroom,” she continues, “judges should make efforts to engage with the community to provide insight into the role of a judge, the authority of a judge, but also the legal and ethical restrictions that limit judge’s discretion and decision making.”

“One of the reasons that I do the outreach is because it’s very fulfilling for me,” says Judge Julie Weng-Gutierrez,⁶ “and so I would encourage other judicial officers to go out and volunteer on their lunch hour, or one hour of their day, or week, or month, or year, to go talk to the youth, because the youth are our future, and the more we invest in them by sharing our perspectives and our experiences as judicial officers, I think the stronger we make our communit[ies].”

Are there any unique challenges or considerations for smaller, rural courts engaging in community outreach?

Assistant Presiding Judge Alicia Ekland⁷ serves in small, rural Glenn County. “Despite being a two-judge court, the court regularly partners with the Glenn County Office of Education to provide K-12 classroom presentations on the Constitution and judicial branch,” she explains. “In these efforts, we utilize the Chief Justice’s Power of Democracy Learning Initiative materials, including the Judges in the Classroom curriculum, to provide students with a tangible, age-appropriate look at the judicial branch. . . . While small counties may lack the resources of larger counties, we possess a distinct advantage: our outreach allows us to reach a far higher percentage of our population on a personal level. I believe this outreach is important for maintaining and building public confidence.”

“Admittedly [balancing community interaction with judicial ethics] is a difficult task,” shares Judge Kristen A. Lucena.⁸ “I was born and raised in Chico, attended local public schools and returned after law school to begin my legal career. My family and my husband’s family have deep local roots including owning a longtime hardware store in downtown Chico. We have raised our children here and have many close friends. These community connections are

⁶ Judge Julie Weng-Gutierrez is a judge at the Superior Court of Sacramento County.

⁷ Judge Alicia Ekland is assistant presiding judge of the Superior Court of Glenn County.

⁸ Judge Kristen A. Lucena is a judge at the Superior Court of Butte County.

wonderful but do create challenges for my work as a judge especially in rural Butte County. My copy of Rothman is dogeared and highlighted. I have requested numerous ethics hotline opinions, a service I highly value, [and] I carefully review [CJEO] opinions when issued. . . . I find openly communicating with those in the community when an inadvertent improper attempt to provide a gift or inquiry about a pending case comes up is the best practice. Gently providing them with the judicial conduct rule helps them understand the gravity with which I take my judicial obligations and cultivates further confidence in our impartial judiciary.”

In your personal experience, how has participation in community outreach activities influenced public understanding of, and confidence in, the judiciary?

“As the son of Mexican immigrants who was born and raised in Los Angeles County, I grew up in communities that had every reason to be skeptical of institutions like ours—communities that worked hard, followed the rules, and still viewed the courts with fear rather than confidence,” says Judge Tapia. “That experience did not leave me when I took the bench,” he continues. “That is the lens through which I approach this work. The courts have long been viewed as opaque and difficult to access. Institutions that speak in a language most people were never taught, operating through processes most people were never shown. And it falls disproportionately on the communities that are most vulnerable and have much at stake.”

“Direct engagement with judges often changes those perceptions by humanizing the judiciary and providing transparency about how courts operate,” adds Judge Sandhu. Similarly, Judge Alloggiamento observes, “Especially in more diverse areas of our communities, it is an enormous benefit for young people to also see the diversity on the bench—men and women, young and older, all races and ethnicities and sexual orientations. This not only allows the community to see that people like them are in court making decisions, but also adds inspiration to individuals from different backgrounds to realize they also have a pathway to the bench.”

“The public is not always informed about the guardrails on judicial decision making, . . . the legislative mandates, the constitutional constraints, the ethical rules, and certainly not the case law,” says Judge Awoniyi. “We are somewhat invisible to the public until there’s a crisis or story that brings a decision into the spotlight, and then we are already in a defensive posture, up against misinformation and sound bites from the media.” One example of this is when a judge releases a defendant on bail, and the defendant goes on to commit a serious crime. Judge Awoniyi continues, “If we can clearly communicate our judicial obligations to the public *before* an issue arises, they may have a better understanding of the constraints on judicial behavior and decision making.” Judge Weng-Gutierrez adds, “It’s important to interface with the public so that they know who we are and what we do; we aren’t just some anonymous black robe ruling from behind the bench.”

“[C]ompared to other elected officials, judges tend to be less visible,” agrees Judge Caves. “But that lack of visibility—coupled with a lack of information about the role of judges among the general public—makes the need for ethical judicial outreach all the more compelling,” he continues. “I think good outreach tends to humanize judges while also educating the public. The humanization aspect can be just as important as the substantive education, since most members of the public do not have regular contact with judges. In terms of the most effective form of community engagement, for me that has been presenting to local students. It is so rewarding to see kids light up when you tell them about your job and how you got to where you are. Or when a student stays behind to ask specific questions about your path to law school and the bench. You can see students begin to imagine a future for themselves that they might not have considered if a judge hadn’t taken the time to present.”

The consensus? Face-to-face interaction is key. It helps humanize judges and demystify the legal process. Increased legal literacy improves access to justice, which in turn fosters public confidence in the judiciary. This is why judges do the work.

What types of community engagement programs have you found to be most effective?

“I have found educational outreach and mentoring to be particularly effective,” writes Judge Sandhu. “Through programs such as the Stanislaus County Court Observer Program with California State University, Stanislaus, college students are provided the opportunity to observe court proceedings, interact with judges, and gain firsthand exposure to the judicial system and the legal profession. These experiences frequently increase understanding of judicial ethics, impartiality, and the role of the courts in maintaining stability and fairness within society.” Judge Alloggiamento provides a long list of official outreach programs in addition to speaking engagements, mock trial, courtroom tours, and more. “[In Santa Clara] we have a robust array of judicial outreach including, but not limited to, Constitution Month, . . . Read Across Santa Clara County, . . . and the Young Women’s Power Lunch.”⁹ These programs make the judiciary more accessible to the public and engender public trust in the system.

The Superior Court of Butte County focuses on student engagement through programs like Judges in the Classroom. Judge Lucena explains, “With each of our court’s various outreach activities I strive for K-12 students to understand that at the core of the judicial branch is the idea of fairness. . . . Often in my presentations to 5th graders I ask them, ‘What qualities would you want in someone deciding your case?’ Inevitably, the list of qualities are those contained within our canons. They want judges who are ‘good listeners,’ ‘knowledgeable,’ ‘unbiased,’ ‘thoughtful,’ ‘wise,’ ‘will listen to both sides,’ ‘calm,’ ‘courteous,’ ‘open minded,’ ‘humble,’

⁹ See Santa Clara County Superior Court, Community Outreach Committee, [2025 Outreach Report](#).

‘firm,’ and ‘patient,’” to name a few. When judicial officers embody these traits, public trust improves.¹⁰

Judge Tapia believes “[t]he programs that have proven most effective are those that go beyond awareness and deliver something tangible.” The Superior Court of Los Angeles County has “brought judges, court staff, Justice Corp fellows, and legal aid providers directly into communities through Court Commons, [their] mobile resource center. The Court has [also] hosted on-site self-help workshops in the San Fernando Valley and Compton to provide immediate, practical assistance. . . . People leave those workshops having made real progress on real legal problems. That kind of direct service does more for public confidence in the judiciary than any informational campaign, because it demonstrates in concrete terms that the Court is not indifferent to the barriers people face in accessing it.”

Does your court gather feedback from the public about access to justice, public understanding of the court system, and the court’s responsiveness to the public’s needs? If so, what benefit to the court and/or judicial officers does that information provide? And what role, if any, do individual judges play in those efforts?

The Superior Court of Los Angeles County “recently commissioned its first countywide public opinion poll to gather public feedback on access to justice, public understanding of court process, and trust in the judicial branch,” notes Judge Tapia. “The poll provided insights into the Court’s strengths and areas for improvement and has been a significant tool to shaping the Court’s 2025-2028 Strategic Plan. Judicial officers benefit from this information because it highlights where barriers persist and where deeper engagement or explanation of court processes is needed.”

One encouraging illustration of courts responding to the public’s needs is the Dawn to Dusk pilot program implemented at the Carol Miller Justice Center by the Superior Court of Sacramento County during Judge Awoniyi’s tenure as presiding judge. Judge Awoniyi explains, “This court handles small claims, traffic, and unlawful detainer matters, which together account for our largest footprint of cases outside family law. The court received feedback that the limited court hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. posed serious challenges, especially for self-represented litigants, including having to take time off work, find and pay for parking, arrange for childcare, and the like. Based on this input, the court was able to extend court hours from 7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. four days a week.” It also improved availability and accessibility of self-help options. “The court sent out a survey. . . . The results were overwhelmingly positive, and it

¹⁰ Judge Lucena finds the video [Fair and Free](#) featuring Justice Sandra Day O’Connor by the National Association of Women Judges and the Informed Voters Project to be a valuable resource when presenting on the role and responsibilities of the judiciary.

demonstrated sustained support [for the program],” says Judge Awoniyi. This is an example of turning negative feedback into positive change through increased access to the court.

Another example is Sacramento’s William R. Ridgeway Family Relations Courthouse, which handles family law and probate matters. “[Approximately] 83% of these court users . . . are self-represented,” says Judge Awoniyi. “So our services can’t just be geared toward the 17% that retain attorneys. We realized we needed to change our self-help center to better support those without counsel,” she continues. “We now put on these high-level workshops where you can make a reservation, sit in the classroom with others, and talk it through ‘You need this form, you fill out this part,’ things like that. Of course there have to be boundaries; we cannot provide legal advice. But hopefully this demystifies the process.”

Can you describe any initiatives your court has undertaken to improve public access to and understanding of our judicial system? What challenges or successes have you observed in implementing those initiatives?

“[Butte County Court] has a deeply engrained culture of judicial participation in outreach,” says Judge Lucena. This culture was made official through then–Chief Justice Tani G. Cantil-Sakauye’s 2013 California Task Force on K–12 Civic Learning. The task force is overseen by the Power of Democracy Steering Committee. “Butte County was one of six pilot counties selected to create a local Civic Learning Partnership committee to develop and implement a plan for promoting civic learning in their county [back in 2015]. . . . The institutionalization of our outreach programs has been exceptionally rewarding to me personally as a judge.”¹¹

“Our court [works] closely with justice partners and community stakeholders to improve services for self-represented litigants and individuals involved in collaborative or treatment courts. Recently, our court implemented a collaborative court model that consolidated several treatment-oriented calendars before one judicial officer in an effort to improve coordination, consistency, and outcomes for participants,” remarks Judge Sandhu. “Another important area has been efforts to improve public access to information and court services through self-help resources, community partnerships, and procedural improvements. These efforts recognize that many litigants interact with the court system without attorneys and may struggle to navigate complex procedures.” Similarly, Judge Tapia notes, Los Angeles County has a dedicated Community Outreach Committee that manages “a broad portfolio of initiatives designed to improve public access to and understanding of the judicial system, spanning youth education, community engagement, and direct legal service.”¹²

¹¹ See Superior Court of California, County of Butte, [Outreach – Civil Learning Partnership](#) for more details.

¹² See Superior Court of California, County of Los Angeles, “Community Outreach,” for more details (www.lacourt.ca.gov/pages/lp/community-outreach).

The Superior Court of Glenn County “serve[s] a rural county of approximately 30,000 residents spread across over 1,300 square miles with limited public transportation. To ensure access to justice, the court implemented a sophisticated audiovisual system that allows court users to attend hearings remotely and seamlessly,” says Judge Ekland. “Additionally, to serve our large, monolingual Spanish speaking community, both our Self-Help Center and Clerk’s Office are staffed with bilingual personnel.”

“[O]ne of the greatest challenges with outreach currently is simply a time and bandwidth factor for judges. Most judicial officers are feeling overworked. The lack of resources (with staffing shortages including clerks, court reporters, interpreters, and research attorneys) makes it more challenging to efficiently move cases through court and manage a calendar, which makes it in turn more difficult to add in other important judicial functions, such as outreach, to the day,” reasons Judge Alloggiamento. “I think judicial officers continue to do it because they understand the importance and value of our community understanding the work of the branch and the role of a judge and trusting in what we do.”

Standard 10.5 encourages judges to take an active part in community life “in a manner consistent with the California Code of Judicial Ethics.” How do you personally balance meaningful community engagement with the ethical boundaries and expectations of judicial integrity and impartiality?

“A judge can be fully present in their community *and* fully faithful to their oath,” contends Judge Tapia. “There is considerable space for community engagement within ethical boundaries – more than might be appreciated,” he continues. “Where I would offer caution is at the margins.” Judge Lucena recognizes that need for caution and states, “Judicial officers walk a careful tightrope in our public communication. Our local communities thirst for interaction with judges but as we engage with our communities our ethical duties should guide our conduct.” The benefits of striking that balance are substantial. Judge Sandu explains, “[T]ransparency regarding the ethical limitations placed on judges can itself strengthen public confidence in the judiciary. Community members often appreciate understanding why judges must remain impartial and avoid commenting on certain issues.”

“We love living and working in our county, but the reality of a small community means we frequently encounter court users or their families in our day-to-day lives and outreach activities,” notes Judge Ekland. “To maintain strict ethical boundaries, we have become exceptionally adept at proactively avoiding conversations involving court-related matters. When a conflict arises, our two-judge court is structured to reassign cases swiftly, ensuring the administration of justice is not delayed.”

The consistent theme of each of these conversations is unmistakable: Judicial outreach is not merely an aspirational ideal enshrined in standard 10.5, but an essential and ever-evolving practice that strengthens the foundation of public trust in the justice system. Whether serving a sprawling rural county of 30,000 residents or a densely populated urban courthouse where the overwhelming majority of court users arrive without counsel, judges across California are finding creative, ethical, and deeply personal ways to step out from behind the bench and meet their communities where they are. They are visiting classrooms, extending court hours, building bilingual self-help centers, and patiently explaining to a room full of fifth graders, and to the rest of us, that fairness, humility, and impartiality are not abstract legal concepts but human commitments. The challenges are real: strained resources, ethical tightropes, and the quiet difficulty of being a public servant who must remain, in a meaningful sense, publicly reserved. Yet the judges who spoke with us returned again and again to a shared conviction that when the public understands the judiciary, they are more likely to trust it; and when they trust it, the rule of law endures. Community engagement, in its essential form, is how courts earn that trust, one conversation at a time.