

Judicial Outreach: Where Ethics and Extrajudicial Engagement Meet

Judicial officers enjoy the unique opportunity to positively impact their communities whether on or off the bench. Among the many benefits of judicial engagement beyond the bench is the chance it creates for the public to receive firsthand insights into the law and the legal system from those who understand them best.¹ The *California Judicial Conduct Handbook* (Handbook) acknowledges that benefit and suggests judicial officers, as public officials, have “a duty to help educate the public about the judicial branch.”² The Standards of Judicial Administration support this notion as well. Specifically, standard 10.5 provides that “[j]udicial participation in community outreach activities should be considered an official judicial function to promote public understanding of and confidence in the administration of justice.”³

Importantly, judicial outreach activities “should be performed in a manner consistent with the California Code of Judicial Ethics.”⁴ Resources that detail the ethical parameters of judicial participation in community outreach range from chapter 10 of the Handbook,⁵ to canon 4 of the Code of Judicial Ethics (Code),⁶ to numerous opinions prepared by the

¹ Cal. Code Jud. Ethics, Advisory Com. commentary foll. canon 4B [“As a judicial officer and person specially learned in the law, a judge is in a unique position to contribute to the improvement of the law, the legal system, and the administration of justice To the extent that time permits, a judge may do so, either independently or through a bar or judicial association or other group dedicated to the improvements of the law”].

² Rothman et al., *California Judicial Conduct Handbook*, 4th ed. (2017 & 2020 supp.), § 10:1, p. 673.

³ Cal. Stds. Jud. Admin., std. 10.5(a). The standard also provides the following list of encouraged judicial outreach activities: (1) providing active leadership within the community in identifying and resolving issues of access to justice within the court system; (2) developing local education programs for the public designed to increase public understanding of the court system; (3) creating local mechanisms for obtaining information from the public about how the court system may be more responsive to the public’s needs; (4) serving as guest speakers, during or after normal court hours, to address local civic, educational, business, and charitable groups that have an interest in understanding the court system but do not espouse a particular political agenda with which it would be inappropriate for a judicial officer to be associated; and (5) taking an active part in the life of the community where the participation of the judiciary will serve to increase public understanding and promote public confidence in the integrity of the court system.” (*Id.* at subd. (b).)

⁴ Cal. Stds. Jud. Admin., std. 10.5(a).

⁵ Rothman, *supra*, §§ 10:1–10:53, pp. 673–732 [discussing judicial officer involvement in governmental, civic, educational, and charitable community activities].

⁶ Cal. Code Jud. Ethics, canon 4A–4G [discussing the ethical guidelines that enable judicial officers to conduct their quasi-judicial and extrajudicial activities in a manner that minimizes the risk of conflict with their judicial obligations].

California Judges Association⁷ and the Committee on Judicial Ethics Opinions.⁸ As a pertinent example, the Terminology section of the Code guides judicial officers considering an outreach activity that relates to the law, the legal system, or the administration of justice to consider “whether the activity upholds the integrity, impartiality, and independence of the judiciary (canons 1 and 2A), whether it impairs public confidence in the judiciary (canon 2), whether the judge is allowing the activity to take precedence over judicial duties (canon 3A), and whether engaging in the activity would cause the judge to be disqualified (canon 4A(4)).”⁹

For outreach activities pertaining to the law, the legal system, or the administration of justice and beyond, the Code and related resources provide abundant guidance for evaluating prospective forms of community engagement. The examples below provide a nonexhaustive overview of activities deemed ethically appropriate for judicial outreach.

I. Activities that promote civic, community, and interjudiciary engagement

- Volunteering at a nonpartisan voter registration event for minority voters¹⁰
- Making a public service announcement to encourage foster parenting¹¹
- Participating in Inns of Court¹²
- Joining a specialty women’s bar association¹³
- Coaching a youth sports team¹⁴

II. Matters related to the law, legal system, or administration of justice

- Teaching citizenship classes that address U.S. history and laws¹⁵

⁷ E.g., Cal. Judges Assn., Formal Ethics Opn. 75 (June 2018) [discussing “the meaning of the phrase ‘the law, the legal system, or the administration of justice’ as it is used in the Code of Judicial Ethics and applied to judicial involvement in the community and judicial measures to improve the law”].

⁸ E.g., Cal. Supreme Ct. Com. Jud. Ethics Opns., Formal Opinion 2018-012 (June 5, 2018) [discussing how judges may ethically give an educational presentation to a specialty bar association].

⁹ Cal. Code Jud. Ethics, Terminology, “Law, the legal system, or the administration of justice.”

¹⁰ Cal. Judges Assn., Formal Opinion 82 (Feb. 2026), p. 9.

¹¹ Cal. Judges Assn., Formal Opinion 75 (June 2018), p. 6.

¹² Cal. Supreme Ct. Com. Jud. Ethics Opns., Formal Opinion 2025-030 (Aug. 20, 2025), pp. 1–2.

¹³ Cal. Supreme Ct. Com. Jud. Ethics Opns., Oral Advice Summary 2014-006 (Mar. 17, 2014), p. 2.

¹⁴ Cal. Supreme Ct. Com. Jud. Ethics Opns., Formal Opinion 2022-019 (Sep. 2, 2022).

¹⁵ Cal. Judges Assn., Formal Opinion 82 (Feb. 2026), p. 9.

- Participating in an event celebrating judicial independence and rule of law¹⁶
- Testifying before a county legislative body about the need for indigent legal services in the county¹⁷
- Speaking at a local Court Appointed Special Advocates fundraiser, where the judge would not make any solicitation for funds¹⁸
- Writing a book recounting the facts of murder cases tried before the author in which all cases were finalized and the book respected the law and did not undermine public confidence in the judiciary¹⁹
- Using social media to make statements relating to the law, the legal system, or the administration of justice, provided specific cautions are taken²⁰
- Meeting with the board of a private foundation to discuss matters related to national and state civics education work²¹
- Giving a content-neutral educational presentation to a specialty bar association, provided it avoids bias or the appearance thereof²²
- Appearing in a documentary film being produced for public television regarding tribal justice systems in California²³

III. Support for disaster victims²⁴

- Donating money, with name and title on a donor roll if nonjudicial donors use similar titles, provided doing so would not lead to frequent disqualification

¹⁶ Cal. Judges Assn., Formal Opinion 82 (Feb. 2026), p. 10.

¹⁷ Cal. Judges Assn., Formal Opinion 75 (June 2018), p. 7.

¹⁸ Cal. Judges Assn., Formal Opinion 75 (June 2018), p. 8.

¹⁹ Cal. Judges Assn., Formal Opinion 65 (2010), p. 4.

²⁰ Cal. Supreme Ct. Com. Jud. Ethics Opns., Expedited Opinion 2021-042 (Apr. 28, 2021), p. 2 [advising as to social media use: (1) apply the same standards for judicial communications as used in face-to-face settings; (2) assume the widest possible audience and, therefore, exercise caution and restraint; (3) refrain from prohibited social or political commentary; and (4) carefully evaluate and continually monitor posts and communications to ensure public confidence in the integrity, independence, and impartiality of the judiciary].

²¹ Cal. Supreme Ct. Com. Jud. Ethics Opns., Oral Advice Summary 2013-002 (Sep. 10, 2013), p. 2.

²² Cal. Supreme Ct. Com. Jud. Ethics Opns., Formal Opinion 2018-012 (June 5, 2018), p. 2.

²³ Cal. Supreme Ct. Com. Jud. Ethics Opns., Informal Opinion Summary 2014-004 (Sep. 15, 2014), pp. 12–13.

²⁴ Cal. Judges Assn., Formal Opinion 81 (Feb. 2025), pp. 7–9. For guidance regarding the personal solicitation of funds, see e.g., Cal. Judges Assn., Formal Opinion 81 (2025), pp. 8–9; Cal. Code of Jud. Ethics, canon 4C(3)(d)(i); Rothman, *supra*, §§ 10:42, 10:44; and Com. Jud. Performance, *Public Admonishment of Judge Quall* (2008).

- Volunteering and being “an active part” of a nonprofit setup to help disaster victims, including planning fundraisers so long as the judicial officer does not personally solicit funds; assisting with disaster cleanup; and collecting nonmonetary donations from other judges, justices, and family members
- Soliciting disaster relief funds, including through a GoFundMe, and nonmonetary assistance from family members and other judges or justices, provided the solicitation does not extend to staff, retired judges sitting on assignment, subordinate judicial officers, or members of the public
- Asking other judges or justices (excluding subordinate judicial officers and retired judges sitting on assignment) to help in the abovementioned efforts

IV. Service, or consultation, with a government task force or public organization

- Accepting appointment to the executive committee of a city youth and gang violence prevention task force that is composed of a large cross-section of the community²⁵
- Participating in a court’s domestic violence task force to address issues related to domestic violence cases alongside a diversity of stakeholders²⁶
- Serving on an ethics advisory committee of the state’s Workers’ Compensation Appeals Board if membership would not interfere with performance of judicial duties²⁷
- Sitting on a judicial selection advisory committee²⁸
- Serving as members of the California Access to Justice Commission or the Child Welfare Council²⁹
- Serving on an advisory board of a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving criminal justice, provided the judicial officer determines on a continuing basis that ongoing service is appropriate³⁰

²⁵ Cal. Judges Assn., Formal Opinion 80 (June 2022), p. 5.

²⁶ Cal. Judges Assn., Formal Opinion 80 (June 2022), p. 6.

²⁷ Cal. Judges Assn., Formal Opinion 61 (2008), p. 3.

²⁸ Cal. Judges Assn., Formal Opinion 61 (2008), p. 4.

²⁹ Cal. Supreme Ct. Com. Jud. Ethics Opns., Expedited Opinion 2021-043 (May 18, 2021), p. 2.

³⁰ Cal. Supreme Ct. Com. Jud. Ethics Opns., Oral Advice Summary 2019-027 (Jan. 29, 2019), p. 4.

V. Advisory service to a nongovernmental organization³¹

- Joining a parents' advisory committee of a private school to assist in the selection of a new school principal or a new teacher³²
- Serving on an advisory committee of the Youth Law Academy, an organization dedicated to encouraging high school students to enter the profession of law by providing scholarships and training in legal issues³³
- Sitting on an alcoholism advisory board to advise county officials on prevention and treatment of alcohol abuse problems³⁴

The preceding examples of ethically appropriate judicial outreach activities provide a mere glimpse into the myriad ways judicial officers can engage with their communities as encouraged by standard 10.5.³⁵ Although judicial officers must carefully and continually examine their extrajudicial engagements to ensure adherence to the Code, that effort is worthwhile as a means not only to comply with standard 10.5, but also to remain meaningfully, and rewardingly, connected to the communities they serve.³⁶

³¹ For additional information regarding whether a judge may serve on a governmental or organization's board, see Cal. Judges Assn., Formal Opinion 46 (July 1997, revised 1998), pp. 2–3.

³² Cal. Judges Assn., Formal Opinion 61 (2008), p. 5.

³³ Cal. Judges Assn., Formal Opinion 61 (2008), p. 5.

³⁴ Cal. Judges Assn., Formal Opinion 22 (Apr. 19, 1975), p. 1. “However, it would not be proper for a judge to serve on an advisory board of an alcohol treatment program, whether for profit or not for profit, if the court refers defendants to the program because, among other things, it would appear to exploit the judicial office and compromise impartiality.” (Rothman, *supra*, § 9:4, p. 588.)

³⁵ Cal. Stds. Jud. Admin., std. 10.5(b).

³⁶ Cal. Code Jud. Ethics, Advisory Com. commentary foll. canon 4A “[c]omplete separation of a judge from extrajudicial activities is neither possible nor wise; a judge should not become isolated from the community in which the judge lives”].