


The People's Court: Engaging with the Community

Hon. Kyle Hartmann
Fayette County Pct. 1 Justice of the Peace

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Roadmap and Goals

- Understand how Justice Courts interact with the public every day
- Identify best practices for customer service while maintaining neutrality and ethics
- Distinguish between legal information vs. legal advice and avoid ex parte pitfalls
- Apply practical strategies to make courts more welcoming and understandable
- Recognize opportunity and risks regarding social media
- Feel more confident handling real-world interactions

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Why “The People’s Court”?

Justice Courts are frequently the only courts people ever encounter

We have a huge role in framing the perspective of the judiciary of hundreds of thousands of Texans

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What is the Court's Environment to an Outsider?

- High-volume
- High-emotion
- High-confusion

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Role of the Clerk in "The People's Court"



Information gatekeeper



Translator of court "language" and process



Representatives of the court's professionalism

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Find Your Why

- Why do you choose to be a justice court clerk?
- Think about this for a few minutes, and write down your why if you'd like to share it with the group, bring it up during the break

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Interacting With the Community

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Everyday Points of Contact



In-Person
Counter



Phone Calls &
Voicemails



Email &
Correspondence



Website
Content



Social Media
(Official)



Community
Events

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What Can We Do Better?

- Choose two of the “everyday points of contact” from the previous slide and come up with a way your court can improve how they are used to interact with your community.





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Best Practices for Public Education

- Clear court hours and procedures
- Payment options and deadlines
- What the court can and cannot do
- Explaining the process without giving advice

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Practical Examples

-  Plain-language signage
-  FAQ-style website content
-  Standard scripts for common questions
-  Resource handouts (legal aid, SRL packets)

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Customer Service vs. Legal Advice

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Where the Line Actually Is



Legal Information

Explaining the process, procedures, requirements, and deadlines



Legal Advice

Recommending strategy, predicting outcomes, or telling someone what to do

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Legal Advice vs. Legal Information Tips

Often, there is a very fine line between legal advice and legal information.

You can't provide advice, but can provide information that ends up helping them make a decision.

Whether you can answer a question or not, and what you can say sometimes comes down to how it is phrased.

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Example 1

If they say "I've been locked out, what should I do?", you can't advise them, because there are several possible options (writ of re-entry; sue the landlord for money; terminate the lease).

You could instead direct them to the Property Code, and TJCTC has a SRL packet on Tenant Rights available.

If they say "I've been locked out and need to get back in", you can explain what a writ of re-entry is and provide an application. They told you what they are trying to do, even if they don't know the words.

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Example 2

If someone says “I don’t think they should be able to sue me in this county.”

It’s OK to say “We can only transfer the case if a motion to transfer venue is filed. You can take a look at Rule 502.4 and decide if you want to file one. If you still aren’t sure, you could discuss with a lawyer, there is lawyer referral info at tjctc.org/SRL.”

It’s not OK to say “You need to file a motion to transfer venue.”

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Tricky Scenarios

For each scenario, ask yourself:

- **What can you say?**
- **What shouldn't you say?**
- **How do you redirect without sounding dismissive?**

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Scenario 1

"What should I say to the judge to get my ticket dismissed?"

Discussion: What can you say? What should you avoid?

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Scenario 2

"If I file this case, will I win?" or "Do I need to file an eviction in this situation or can I just kick them out?"

Discussion: How do you respond without predicting outcomes?

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Scenario 3

One party asks procedural questions while the other party is absent

Discussion: Is this appropriate? What are the risks?

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Scenario 4

A frequent filer who expects 'extra help'

Discussion: How do you maintain consistency and fairness?

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Ex Parte Concerns

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What Ex Parte Looks Like in Real Life



Counter
conversations



Phone calls



Emails



Community events

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Ex Parte Risk Areas

- One-sided conversations about pending cases
- Casual comments that sound harmless but aren't
- "Off the clock" interactions at community events
- Social media messages or comments
- Even just being at Dairy Queen or Whataburger!

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Ex Parte Scenario 1

A community member approaches you at a civic event about their pending case

Discussion: How do you handle this appropriately?

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Ex Parte Scenario 2

A friend messages you privately on social media asking about court procedures

Discussion: Where's the line between helping and creating problems?

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Ex Parte Scenario 3

A law enforcement officer who you engage with frequently starts telling you about how irritating a person was who got a ticket that is filed in your court

Discussion: Is this also ex parte? How to handle this situation?

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Table Discussion

- Share a situation that you found difficult involving either legal advice or ex parte and how you handled it (whether successfully or unsuccessfully!) and what, if anything, you'd do differently next time.

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Welcoming the Public

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Why Neutrality Protects Everyone

- Protects the clerk from liability
- Protects the court's impartiality
- Ensures fairness for all parties
- Maintains public trust



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Key Tools for Staying Neutral



Neutral Scripting

Use clear and understandable language that doesn't favor either party



Referrals to Resources

Direct people to self-help centers, legal aid, and other support



Consistent Language

Ensure all staff members use the same explanations and information

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Ways a Court Might Not Look Neutral

- Remember that it isn't just **being** neutral in processing cases, but **appearing** neutral that is critical in ethics.
- How might a court fail to appear neutral?
 - Do you feel like one side is more likely to be "right" in evictions? Criminal cases?
 - Do you treat parties differently if they have an attorney or not?
 - What if the clerk is chatting with a prosecutor or officer? Wearing a political button? Wearing a "POLICE" jacket?

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The Human Side of Court Experience

People come to court experiencing:



Stress & Anger



Fear & Confusion



Embarrassment

Plus language barriers and accessibility issues!

Also remember, you come to court every day, litigants have to get off work, secure childcare, secure transportation, figure out how to get to the court, and navigate unfamiliar waters.

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7 Qualities of Good Customer Service

- Problem-solving skills
- Patience
- Attentiveness
- Emotional intelligence
- Clear communication
- Product knowledge – what is the product in this example?
- Positive attitude

Pick one or two of these and share how you can be sure to improve the quality of your customer service.

Source: insidea.com

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Practical Ways to Improve Experience



Tone & Body Language

Use welcoming, professional communication



Explain the Process

Break down steps in plain language



Clear Signage

Make it easy to navigate the court



Manage Lines

Acknowledge frustration, set expectations

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CUSTOMER SERVICE TAKEAWAY

You can (and must!) be kind, patient, and professional without advocating or advising.

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Social Media

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Social Media Statistics

2019 Pew Research Center

- 2.7 Billion monthly active users (MAU)
- 500,000 new per day or 5 new per second
- 2.1 billion log on daily
- 70% of Americans
- 28 minutes per sign on
- 5 times a day times 28 minutes per sign-on
- 96% access via Mobile

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Social Media Statistics

2024 Pew Research Center

- Platform Popularity (percentage of adults using in the U.S.):
 - YouTube: 83%
 - Facebook: 68%
 - Instagram: 47%
 - Pinterest: 35%
 - TikTok: 33%
 - LinkedIn: 30%
 - WhatsApp: 29%
 - Snapchat: 27%
 - Twitter/X: 22%
 - Reddit: 22%
 - BeReal: 3%
- Adults under 30 are more likely to use platforms like Instagram (78%), Snapchat (65%), and TikTok (62%).
- News Consumption: Over half of U.S. adults (54%) say they at least sometimes get news from social media.

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Discussion:
Social Media

- What ways do you use social media for general office purposes?



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Policy and Training

- Every office should have policies and training to ensure that official posts:
 - Are on the desired topics and only the desired topics.
 - Do not give out any information that should not be shared.
 - Are useful and occur in a timely manner.
 - Are professional and courteous and reflect positively on the office.
- Be careful about what is posted on personal/private accounts as well, if those accounts can be associated with the office.

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Official vs. Private Accounts: Potential Liability

- A government official's decision to block citizens from their personal social media accounts implicate the First Amendment and risk liability if the public servant has:
 - 1) actual authority to speak on behalf of the governmental entity, and
 - 2) Purports to exercise that authority
- *Lindke v. Freed*

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Official vs. Private Accounts: Best Practices

- Can help protect against liability if you:
 - Add "This is the personal page of Peter Parker" or "The views expressed are strictly my own"... and then **don't** invoke the office.
 - Set personal profiles to not public, keep your personal social media accounts and official social media accounts separate, and do not ask any employees to post or maintain your personal accounts.

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Tips

- Assume everything you say & do can become public
- Educate yourself on policies and privacy controls
- Update security settings
- Monitor contents of page
- Be dignified in every comment, photograph, and status update
- Be aware of location sharing

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Official Court Communication



Informational posts about hours, deadlines, processes



Commentary on cases, opinions, or community disputes

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Personal Social Media Pitfalls

- Talking about cases (even vaguely)
- Speaking 'for the court' unintentionally
- Commenting on local disputes or community drama
- "Private" posts that aren't actually private

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Video

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"Why'd You Like It?" Game

- We'll review real social media posts and discuss:
 - Are these good examples?
 - What improvements would you suggest?


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WHY'D
YOU LIKE
IT?

Justice of the Peace Pct 4 Judge Clay Rankin 's Post ✕

 **Justice of the Peace Pct 4 Judge Clay Rankin**
February 3, 2025 · 🌐

Please see 2025 Magistraion Schedule and viewing instructions.
If anyone has any questions please contact the office at 903-356-2904.



HUNT COUNTY
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PRECINCT 4

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2025 SCHEDULE FOR JUDGE RANKIN'S MAGISTRATION

Please subscribe to Judge Rankin's YouTube channel (@judgeclayrankin) for Magistration viewing. Once you subscribe you will be notified when the Magistration will be. They will always start at 7:00 am.

Below is the 2025 Schedule:

January	25 - 31
February	No Magistration
March	1 - 7
April	5 - 11
May	10 - 16
June	14 - 20
July	19 - 25
August	23 - 29
September	27 - 30
October	1 - 3
November	1 - 7
December	6 - 12

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WHY'D YOU LIKE IT?

Judge McKenzie Chapa
January 16 · 🌐

As we begin our 4th year, I want to extend my appreciation to Orange Grove City Hall for allowing us to use the Council Chambers for our court proceedings, including truancy, debt claims, evictions, and more.

This partnership allows our office to hold court in a way that is efficient, dignified, and respectful of the public we serve.

The space is beautifully designed and offers ample seating, and we regularly receive compliments from those attending court!

We truly appreciate the continued partnership and support from the leadership at City Hall. Thank you!



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WHY'D YOU LIKE IT?

Judge Christopher "Chris" Gregory, Justice of the Peace - Precinct 4's Post

Judge Christopher "Chris" Gregory, Justice of the Peace - Precinct 4
January 22 at 7:53 PM · 🌐

The Precinct 4 Justice of the Peace Court recently hosted its third Landlord-Tenant Workshop, providing attendees with a comprehensive overview of new legislation that took effect on January 1st, 2026, including revised forms and filing procedures aimed at ensuring compliance with the updated regulations. I wish to express my sincere appreciation to my staff for their tireless efforts and dedication to serving the citizens of this community.



Eviction Law Comparison - Filed Before vs. On or After Jan. 1, 2026		Eviction Law Comparison - Filed Before vs. On or After Jan. 1, 2026	
Topic	Filed Before 1/1/2026	Filed On or After 1/1/2026	Changes to new law 1/1/2026
Notice to Pay or Vacate	This law requires a written notice.	It doesn't require a written notice. It can be done orally or in writing. It can be done by email or text message.	Changes to new law 1/1/2026 Written notice is required for all evictions.
Response to NTV	Must answer in person or by mail or by text message.	Must answer in person or by mail or by text message. It can be done by email or text message.	Response agreement, or a form set out in statute or a form approved by the court.
Continuance of NTV Period	The notice is given to the court in person.	The notice is given to the court in person or by mail or by text message.	Must appear in person to get a continuance of the court date.
Notice of Hearing	None.	Must appear in person or by mail or by text message.	Must appear in person to get a continuance of the court date.
Response to NTV	Must appear in person or by mail or by text message.	Must appear in person or by mail or by text message.	Must appear in person to get a continuance of the court date.
Response to NTV	Must appear in person or by mail or by text message.	Must appear in person or by mail or by text message.	Must appear in person to get a continuance of the court date.
What Happens	At court.	At court.	At court.
Time Before Trial by Hearing	At least 30 days.	At least 30 days.	At least 30 days.
Summary	Dismissal.	Dismissal.	Dismissal.
Remediation	Dismissal.	Dismissal.	Dismissal.
Procedural	Dismissal.	Dismissal.	Dismissal.
Procedural	Dismissal.	Dismissal.	Dismissal.
Procedural	Dismissal.	Dismissal.	Dismissal.

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WHY'D YOU LIKE IT?

Judge Christopher "Chris" Gregory, Justice of the Peace - Precinct 4's Post



Judge Christopher "Chris" Gregory, Justice of the Peace - Precinct 4

January 24 at 1:56 PM · 🌐

Good afternoon: Justice of the Peace Court 4 at the JD Johnson Northwest Courthouse. All school districts in the JP #4 Precinct have cancelled school for Monday.

The JP4 docket for Monday is cancelled and will be rescheduled.

All JP4 personnel will work remotely.

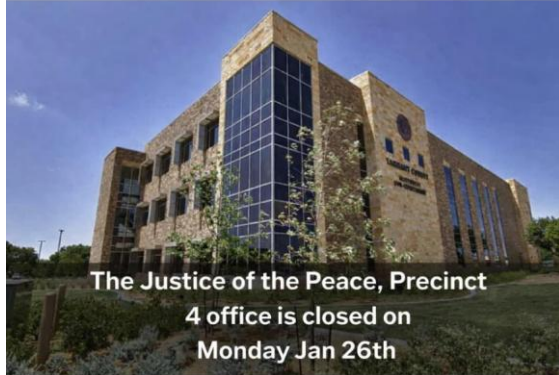
In-person court services will not be available on Monday.

Telephone, eFile, and email services will remain available unless the county experiences a complete shutdown.

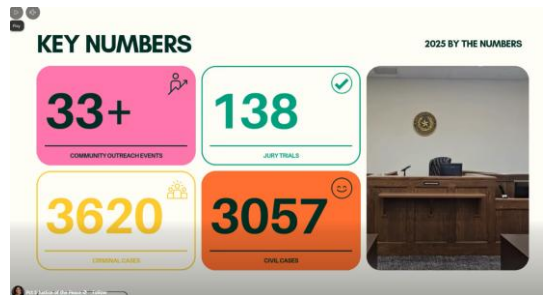
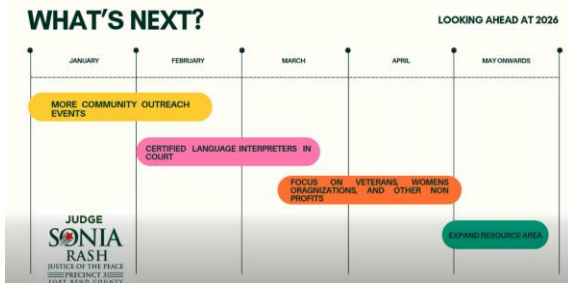
The JP4 court will provide updates as circumstances change throughout the weekend.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Judge Christopher Gregory



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Building Relationships

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Who Do You Work With?

Group Discussion

- Name examples of offices and community partners your court works with regularly and how those relationships are working.




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How to Find & Foster Relationships

-  Always look for opportunities — be involved in civic organizations
-  Minimize courthouse drama or gossip
-  Foster a positive work culture

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Why It Matters

-  **Better resources for the public**
-  **Fewer frustrated litigants**
-  **Stronger public trust in the court**

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Role Play!

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Wheel of Emotion

Let's assign each table a number:

- 1) Nervous
- 2) Confused
- 3) Angry
- 4) Scared
- 5) Rude

For each scenario, roleplay with one person being a customer displaying your table's emotion and another person being a clerk who is attempting to help the situation. If you have extra time, choose another emotion!

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Scenario 1

- A litigant failed to appear for their scheduled criminal court hearing.
- Clerk skills – neutrality, explaining next steps, calming fear

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Scenario 2

- A litigant is struggling to read or complete court paperwork.
- Clerk skills – accessibility, patience, avoiding legal advice

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Scenario 3

A party begins telling their story and/or arguing their case at the window.

Clerk skills – setting boundaries, redirecting to resources or procedures, allowing a person to “be heard” within the rules

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Wrap Up

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Key Takeaways

- Clerks shape the public's trust in the justice system
- Consistency and neutrality protect everyone
- Clear communication prevents conflict
- Professionalism extends beyond the courthouse walls
- Talk to your judge about procedural concerns
- Stay grounded by your why

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Stay Grounded By Your Why

There is a lot we cannot control, but we can control what motivates us

Nothing can save you forever, but a lot can save you today

Discussion of previously-shared "why" statements!

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