

Quarterly Research Update

Q1 2026 | January–March 2026

This update highlights new resources, research, and tools released during the first quarter of 2026 that are relevant to procedural justice, legitimacy, court-user experience, and adjacent justice-system practice. This quarter's materials were notably practical: many of the strongest items focused on concrete ways courts can improve user experience, reduce participation barriers, and make fairness more visible in everyday operations.

Top takeaways

- **Implementation dominated Q1.** The strongest materials this quarter were guides, pilots, and applied analyses showing how courts can improve fairness through specific routines, communications, and system-design choices.
- **Participation barriers were a major theme.** Several items converged on a practical point: missed appearances, confusing paperwork, and inaccessible digital systems are central fairness issues because they determine whether people can meaningfully take part in their cases.
- **Courts are getting more explicit about measuring user experience.** The quarter's most significant report paired procedural-justice training with direct litigant feedback, while other resources pushed courts to communicate more clearly about AI and to improve digital accessibility.

Featured resource

Judicial and Litigant Experiences: The Fairness Challenge Pilot National Report (LaGratta Consulting, March 2026) is the standout publication of the quarter. The report describes a pilot across four jurisdictions spanning six counties in four states, with participating judicial officers engaging in six months of monthly remote training, peer observation, and litigant-feedback collection aimed at improving observable fairness practices. By the pilot's midpoint, participating judges had increased their use of six of seven studied practices, and the project paired those implementation measures with direct litigant-experience data.

What makes the report especially valuable is that it does not stop at aspiration. It reports feedback from nearly 1,700 litigants and shows high topline results across the pilot sites, with averages hovering around 90% for general fairness, understanding, and voice. For a field that often discusses fairness in broad terms, this report offers something more useful: a model for treating procedural justice as a set of concrete, measurable practices that can be taught, observed, and refined.

New practical tools and guidance

Putting consumer debt reforms into practice (NCSC, Feb. 6, 2026) translates reform principles into operational choices on filing requirements, default review, service, and scheduling, explicitly framing those

changes as ways to improve access and procedural fairness in debt cases. Its practical value lies in specificity: better data practices, checklists, improved forms, judicial review before defaults, and appearance-support measures are all presented as steps courts can take now.

How to talk to your court users about AI (TRI/NCSC AI Policy Consortium, Mar. 12, 2026) addresses a fast-moving problem courts are already facing at the counter and in self-help settings. Aimed at clerks, librarians, and self-help staff, it recommends that courts educate users about AI's limits and risks, explain local rules and policies, and direct people to trusted resources. Procedural fairness today increasingly includes whether court users receive accurate, comprehensible guidance about tools they are already using.

What courts need to know about the DOJ digital accessibility rule & compliance deadline (NCSC, Mar. 26, 2026) explains that the new rule requires state and local governments, including courts, to make websites, mobile apps, forms, PDFs, and other digital services accessible under WCAG 2.1 Level AA, with compliance dates beginning April 24, 2026, for larger jurisdictions and April 26, 2027, for smaller ones. When forms, notices, and case information are not accessible, access to justice becomes uneven before anyone reaches the courtroom.

New research findings

Investments in Text Reminders Bring State Courts Big Gains (Pew Charitable Trusts, Jan. 15, 2026) synthesizes evidence on a simple intervention with outsized potential. Reminder systems increased appearance rates in 11 of 12 reviewed studies, and missed appearances are often unintentional rather than willful. The article goes beyond a generic endorsement of texting to identify design details that matter: automatic enrollment, plain-language wording, and timing recommendations.

People With Disabilities Are More Likely Than Those Without to Have Court Experience (Pew Charitable Trusts, Jan. 20, 2026) reports that 49% of adults with disabilities live in households with a court case, compared with 29% of adults without disabilities, and that respondents with disabilities expressed lower confidence in fair treatment and more skepticism about courts' use of technology. This is exactly the kind of finding courts should read alongside accessibility and user-experience guidance.

How Paperwork Prevents Consumers From Participating in Lawsuits (Pew Charitable Trusts, Mar. 16, 2026) shows how procedural-paperwork rules can suppress meaningful participation in consumer-debt cases. Only four states allow people to appear in all debt cases without first filing a written answer. Answer-optional systems are associated with lower default rates and higher agreement rates. The piece is especially useful when read together with NCSC's consumer-debt implementation guidance.

Also of note this quarter

Free, to be fair: Courts celebrating America @ 250 (NCSC, Feb. 3, 2026) provides a handbook for courts to engage their communities during the nation's 250th anniversary, with messaging frameworks emphasizing transparency, fairness, and public trust. Courts looking for outreach ideas that connect procedural-justice values to a broader civic moment will find this especially timely.

What Courts Can Learn From Package Delivery Companies (Pew Charitable Trusts, Feb. 4, 2026) argues that service of process remains one of the least standardized parts of civil-case administration and highlights emerging use of GPS verification, time-stamped photographs, and better documentation as ways to reduce disputes about notice and improve participation.

Earlier publications worth noting

Missing In Actions: How low appearance rates impact courts (NCSC, report dated December 2025; NCSC feature page posted January 2026) examines the scope and consequences of missed court appearances across case types, showing how low appearance rates strain court resources—particularly in traffic and consumer-debt cases, where missed appearances can trigger defaults, warrants, and other cascading consequences. The report gained wider attention this quarter through the January web feature and a February 2026 webinar, making it useful background for several Q1 items on reminders, service, and participation barriers.

Beyond civics education: A health & wellness guide for public trust (CCJ/COSCA Public Engagement, Trust, and Confidence Committee via NCSC, August 2024) offers courts a four-part framework for rebuilding public trust through community engagement, transparency, and proactive communication—moving beyond traditional civics-education programs to active demonstration of courts' role in addressing local issues. A strong companion to this quarter's public-trust and user-experience themes.

Suggested actions

- **Start a peer observation for fairness at your court.** Appendix A of the *[Fairness Challenge Pilot National Report](#)* includes the peer-observation instrument and a note-taking sheet used by judicial officers across four states in the pilot. Pair up with a colleague, observe a session, and use the instrument to give each other structured feedback on voice, respect, neutrality, and understanding practices.
- **Review NCSC's consumer-debt reform toolkits against your court's current practices.** NCSC's *[consumer-debt reforms page](#)* links to two downloadable toolkits: a *[reform-implementation toolkit](#)* covering filing requirements, default-review processes, and service verification, and a *[supporting-appearance toolkit](#)* with guidance on scheduling, docketing, and hearing practices that encourage participation. Even courts in jurisdictions that have not enacted formal debt-collection reforms can use these as a benchmark for identifying gaps in their own processes.

The Procedural Justice Hub is a project of the Procedural Justice Project, founded by Emily LaGratta, Judge Kevin Burke, and Steve Leben. | proceduraljustice.org