

CIVIL JUSTICE MESSAGING GUIDE

How to talk about civil justice to raise awareness and impact



Part of the
Justice
Narrative
Project



INSTITUTE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT
OF THE AMERICAN LEGAL SYSTEM

A Message to Readers & Civil Justice Champions

This guide grew out of a shared belief that the various people and organizations working to improve our civil justice system have more power when they work from a common foundation.

When we use consistent language, share compelling stories, and reinforce the same core ideas, our collective voice becomes something larger than any one organization's message or initiative. That matters when we are trying to reach policymakers, build public understanding, and make the case for investment and reform.

This guide offers shared language and framing you can adapt for your own audiences and goals. It is a starting point we can all build from together. We are grateful to the many partners who helped shape it, and we hope it serves as a resource you return to and share widely.

Learn more about the Justice Narrative Project at iaals.du.edu/projects/justice-narrative-project.

Your Role & Impact



Tell us how you use this guide.



Tell us what successes you see.



Tell us what further guidance and alignment is needed.



Please share this guide with your colleagues.



Connect with us to partner on this project at iaals@du.edu.



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Part of the
Justice Narrative Project

July 2026

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IAALS—Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System

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IAALS, the Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System, is a national, independent research organization that innovates and advances solutions that make our civil justice system more just.

Founded in 2006 at the University of Denver, IAALS believes that justice for all must be a reality for everyone. When innovation is rooted in finding common ground, questioning the status quo, and centering the people, we begin to craft solutions that transform our civil justice system. IAALS' unique approach depends on purposeful research, deep collaboration, and diversity of perspective, followed by evidence-based recommendations that take hold in courts and legal institutions across the country—jumpstarting the groundbreaking and achievable solutions that will clear a path to justice for everyone. Because justice for all will never be a reality if those seeking justice cannot access the system designed to deliver it.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 Introduction	1
2 Civil Justice System Overview & How to Use This Guide	3
3 Messaging Framework	9
4 Putting Your Messages into Practice	16
5 Knowing & Reaching Your Audiences	27
6 Choosing Your Messenger	34
7 Additional Resources	36



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There is power in numbers. When people collaborate toward a shared goal, we see greater impact than we can achieve from a single point of view. At IAALS, we bring varied perspectives together to co-create justice system innovations, because it takes a diversity of perspective to get better justice outcomes for more people.

This civil justice messaging guide—and the momentum underway in support of shared messaging, a common language, and a coordinated voice among justice partners and leaders—is the direct result of the engagement and collaborative efforts of our many partners. We extend our deepest gratitude to them for their contributions.

IAALS is committed to jumpstarting the groundbreaking and achievable solutions that will clear a path to justice for everyone. Change on this scale requires listening, research, collaboration, and national momentum that is only achievable through sustained connection and clear messaging.

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INTRODUCTION

Every day, millions of Americans face problems shaping the course of their lives—someone at risk of losing their home, a family embroiled in a custody dispute, a sudden loss of income, overwhelming debt, domestic abuse. These aren't abstract legal issues. They are challenges that affect where people live, how they support their families, if they feel safe, and their ability to move forward with stability and dignity.

In many cases, these problems end up in our justice system, more specifically our civil courts. A functioning civil justice system is not just a legal institution, **it is civic infrastructure as essential to a healthy society as good schools, hospitals, and roads.** Yet for all its importance, the civil justice system remains largely invisible to most people until a crisis forces them into it. And when they arrive, they too often find **a system that wasn't built for them.**

While many dedicated people have been working to make the system more equitable, change in complex institutions is hard and progress has been too slow. That work can be made easier when there is a broad understanding of what is at stake and a shared urgency to make improvements.

That is why IAALS, the Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System, in collaboration with stakeholders from across the civil justice ecosystem, has developed this messaging guide to provide a shared narrative that will help people understand why civil justice matters, the urgency to make improvements to a failing system, and the role they can play in building a system that works.

In this guide you will find sections covering:

- ▶ **Civil Justice System Overview & How to Use This Guide**
- ▶ **Messaging Framework**
- ▶ **Putting Your Messages into Practice**
- ▶ **Knowing & Reaching Your Audiences**
- ▶ **Choosing Your Messenger**
- ▶ **Additional Resources**

About This Guide

This guide is designed to equip a broad swath of stakeholders with a coordinated, compelling, and adaptable set of messages about:

- ▶ **The importance of the civil justice system** as a civic infrastructure that stabilizes families, strengthens communities, and supports economic opportunity.
- ▶ **The collective challenges** within the system that are stated in honest, human, and persuasive terms that connect to people's real experiences.
- ▶ **The urgent need for innovative improvement** framed around hopeful momentum, emerging solutions, and the opportunity for everyone to participate.

What This Guide is and What it Isn't

This guide is designed to help partners speak with greater clarity, consistency, and impact about civil justice, whether they are engaging policymakers, seeking funding, talking to the media, or mobilizing their own communities.

This guide does not prescribe a single script, but offers a foundation for your specific communications and messaging goals. The civil justice landscape is vast and varied. Effective messaging should be adapted to local contexts, specific issues, and distinct audiences. In line with that goal, this guide provides a two-layered messaging framework for users to build upon:

- ▶ **A universal, values-based frame** built on the concepts of fairness, dignity, participation, community impact, and economy—language that grounds the conversation in life problems people recognize and care about.
- ▶ **Tailored sub-messages** that can be adapted by sector (e.g. housing, health, labor, courts), by audience (e.g. funders, policymakers, the public, frontline workers, skeptics), and by local context.

Partners are encouraged to take and use these messages as presented or adapt them to their specific contexts. Local specificity, authentic storytelling, and voices from lived experience will always be more powerful than generic language.

CIVIL JUSTICE SYSTEM OVERVIEW & HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

2

The civil justice system is, at its core, a system meant to provide a floor of fairness. A place where people can seek a just resolution when life problems demand one. It is nonpartisan, and it serves people in every corner of our country.

Who is Part of the Civil Justice System?

The civil justice system involves a wide range of people and institutions:



People navigating life problems

Individuals, families, and business owners facing legal challenges that could impact their housing, income, safety, stability, and well-being.



Court personnel and judges

The judges, court administrators, clerks, and court staff who manage the resolution of civil disputes and oversee the administration of justice.



Legal services providers

Legal services organizations,¹ pro bono attorneys, private lawyers, legal practitioners, law school clinics, and community justice workers along with court-based assistance, self-help centers, and a range of other services that help people understand their rights and options.



Policymakers and regulators

Legislators, governors, state supreme courts, access to justice commissions, bar associations, and regulatory bodies that shape the rules and determine the funding and structure of the civil justice system.



Community organizations and frontline problem-solvers

Social service agencies, housing counselors, healthcare providers, community health workers, faith-based organizations, libraries, and others who support those navigating the legal system.



Funders and investors

Philanthropic organizations, government funders, corporate partners, business leaders, and impact investors who provide the resources to expand access and support innovation.



Researchers, educators, and innovators

Law schools, legal education providers, independent research organizations, and think tanks that study the system, train future legal professionals, and develop evidence-based solutions.



Government agencies

Relevant local agencies or government entities as well as federal agencies or federal organizations.

¹ The term “legal services” is used throughout and includes both legal services and legal aid.

Any meaningful improvements to the system will require coordination, shared purpose, and active participation of all these players in the civil justice ecosystem.

The Collective Challenges: Why the System Must Change

Despite its critical importance, the American civil justice system is failing to deliver on its core purpose of helping people resolve life problems in a way that is fair, accessible, and effective. The challenges are widespread, interconnected, and affect millions of Americans. IAALS' Justice Needs survey revealed that people in the United States experience approximately 260 million legal problems each year.² A considerable proportion of these problems—120 million—are not resolved or are concluded in a manner which is perceived as unfair by the people seeking resolution. These numbers reveal that access to justice challenges are significant and pervasive.³

► **Most People Don't Know What the Civil Justice System is or That it's for Them.**

Most people don't understand the difference between the civil and criminal justice systems. They don't understand their problem is a legal one, let alone know what the civil justice system does, how it works, or that it exists to help them with their problems.⁴ They don't understand that in the civil system, there is no right to counsel, like in the criminal system.⁵ For many, it is simultaneously distrusted and invisible, leading to apathy, avoidance, or the assumption that it simply isn't for them.

► **A System Built for Insiders, Not for the People it Serves.**

The justice system is built around the assumption that both sides have the knowledge, resources, and representation to navigate complex rules and procedures. Yet research consistently shows that this is not the norm in today's state courts.⁶ Legal help is

2 THE HAGUE INST. FOR INNOVATION OF LAW AND INST. FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF THE AM. LEGAL SYS., JUSTICE NEEDS AND SATISFACTION IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA 56-57 (2021) [hereinafter US JUSTICE NEEDS], <https://iaals.du.edu/sites/default/files/documents/publications/justice-needs-and-satisfaction-us.pdf>.

3 *Id.* at 222 ("The sheer number of unresolved legal problems and the negative impact of those problems are clear evidence of an access to justice crisis in the United States.... There is no income group, gender, race or ethnic group, age group, or geographic area that does not face a substantial number of legal problems."); LEGAL SERVICES CORP., THE JUSTICE GAP: THE UNMET CIVIL LEGAL NEEDS OF LOW-INCOME AMERICANS, PREPARED BY MARY C. SLOSAR, SLOSAR RESEARCH LLC (2022), [hereinafter JUSTICE GAP], <https://justicegap.lsc.gov> (noting that low-income Americans did not receive any or enough legal help for 93% of their civil legal problems, and that they "are often forced to 'go it alone' without legal representation in disputes where they risk losing their job, their livelihood, their home, or their children, or seek a restraining order against an abuser.") These challenges extend to the middle class as well. *Id.* (noting that people who earn between 125% and 400% of the federal poverty line did not receive any or enough legal help with 90% of their civil legal problems; for people who earn 400% of the federal poverty line and above, this figure is also 90%). Middle-class Americans face daunting challenges finding affordable legal help when they need it. They are "above the line" of income eligibility for the free legal aid reserved for the poorest Americans, but they also struggle to find quality and affordable legal services in the current legal market.

4 Rebecca L. Sandefur, Am. Bar Found., *Accessing Justice in the Contemporary USA: Findings from the Community Needs and Services Study* (2014), https://www.americanbarfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/sandefur_accessing_justice_in_the_contemporary_usa_aug_2014.pdf.

5 UNEQUAL AND UNJUST: PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF JUSTICE, EQUAL JUSTICE WORKS (2026), [hereafter UNEQUAL AND UNJUST], <https://www.equaljusticeworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Equal-Justice-Works-Survey-Summary-Report-for-Release-April-2026.pdf>.

6 PAULA HANNAFORD-AGOR ET AL., NAT'L CTR. FOR STATE COURTS, THE LANDSCAPE OF CIVIL LITIGATION IN STATE COURTS 33 (2015) (highlighting that 76% of cases in state courts include a self-represented litigant, and noting "The idealized picture of an adversarial system in which both parties are represented by competent attorneys who can assert all legitimate claims and defenses is an illusion.").

financially out of reach for many Americans,⁷ leaving those without help more likely to experience unfavorable results.⁸ Today's state court caseload is dominated by high-volume matters—evictions, debt collections, family law cases—where speed, simplicity, and proportionality matter. Yet the system has been slow to adapt, with procedures remaining overly formal, time-consuming, and expensive.

► **Even Those Inside the System Often Don't See the Full Picture.**

A significant obstacle to change has been the many people within the legal profession who have limited visibility into how the system is experienced by those who use it. Legal professionals within the system who have training, credentials, and familiarity rarely see the confusion, frustration, and helplessness that characterize the experience of most people who encounter it. While judges and court personnel regularly encounter unrepresented litigants, they remain insulated from the full scope of unmet legal needs because they mostly see disputes that reach the courthouse, leaving the larger universe of legal problems that never make it to court outside their view.

► **Trust in Fairness is Eroding.**

When people experience a system that feels inaccessible, confusing, or rigged against them in favor of those with more power and resources, confidence in the fundamental fairness of our institutions erodes. Trust must be earned through consistent delivery of fair, transparent, and equitable outcomes. For too many people right now, that trust is fraying.⁹

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- 7 US JUSTICE NEEDS, *supra* note 2, at 164 (14% reported not being able to afford a lawyer); UNEQUAL AND UNJUST, *supra* note 5, at 5 (about 30% of respondents cited lawyer's expense as a reason to not contact a lawyer); and JUSTICE GAP, *supra* note 2, at 64 (about 40% of middle income respondents reported low confidence in being able to find a lawyer they can afford).
- 8 See, e.g., The Pew Charitable Trusts, *How Debt Collectors Are Transforming the Business of State Courts* (2020), <https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2020/05/how-debt-collectors-are-transforming-the-business-of-state-courts>; Luke Grundman & Maria Kruger, *Legal Representation in Evictions – Comparative Study* (2018), <https://www.minnpost.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/2018-Eviction-Representation-Results-Study-with-logos.pdf>; Stout Risius Ross, Inc., *Economic Return on Investment of Providing Counsel in Philadelphia Eviction Cases for Low-Income Tenants* (2018), https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/4408380/PDF/Cost-Benefit-Impact-Studies/Philadelphia%20Evictions%20Report_11-13-18.pdf; Mary Spector & Ann Baddour, *Collection Texas-Style: An Analysis of Consumer Collection Practices in and out of the Courts*, 67 HASTINGS L.J. 1427 (2016), https://repository.uclawsf.edu/hastings_law_journal/vol67/iss5/9; Peter A. Holland, *Junk Justice: A Statistical Analysis of 4,400 Lawsuits Filed by Debt Buyers*, 26 LOY. CONSUMER L. REV. 179 (2014), <https://lawecommons.luc.edu/lclr/vol26/iss2/2>; D. James Greiner, et al., *How Effective Are Limited Legal Assistance Programs? A Randomized Experiment in a Massachusetts Housing Court* (Sept. 1, 2012), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1880078>; The Importance of Representation in Eviction Cases and Homelessness Prevention: A Report on the BBA Civil Right to Counsel Housing Pilots (2012), <https://legalaidresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/bba-crtc-final-3-1-12.pdf>.
- 9 NATIONAL CENTER FOR STATE COURTS, STATE OF THE STATE COURTS: 2025 PUBLIC OPINION POLL FINDINGS (2025), <https://www.ncsc.org/resources-courts/state-state-courts-2025-public-opinion-poll-findings> (reporting that, while overall confidence in the state court system has remained steady, “[m]ore Americans than ever see a two-tiered system of justice . . . the percentage of Americans agreeing that state courts provide equal justice has slipped from 62% in 2014 to 44% this year.”)

► **The Cost is Real—to Individuals and Communities.**

When people can't access help or effectively participate in their legal disputes, the consequences are devastating. Families lose their homes. Parents lose custody of their children. Workers go uncompensated for stolen wages. These failures create cascading costs for communities, including increased homelessness, greater reliance on public services, disrupted education for children, poorer health outcomes, and weakened local economies.¹⁰

► **The Case for Upstream Investment.**

The failings of our civil and criminal justice systems are deeply interconnected. When civil justice issues go unresolved, that can often lead to even more civil justice issues, eventually spiraling into criminal issues as well. Loss of housing, for example, can cause the kind of personal and financial instability often associated with increased criminal system involvement.¹¹ We have an opportunity to improve the outcomes of both systems by investing in civil justice. Recognizing that resolving civil justice issues can help prevent spillover into the criminal justice system, we can deepen the urgency for civil work even further.

The civil justice crisis is not just a legal problem. It is a social, economic, and civic problem with consequences that touch every sector of society.



¹⁰ The Economic Case for Civil Legal Aid: A Systematic Review of Economic Impact Studies, Office of Data Governance and Analysis Research Brief, Legal Services Corp.(2025), <https://lsc-live.app.box.com/s/0ldo54a34zc7s3dgp6ci2ra8r5qb61lf>.
¹¹ See, e.g., Aaron Gottlieb & Jessica W. Moose, *The Effect of Eviction on Maternal Criminal Justice Involvement*, 4 Socius 6-9 (2018); <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023118808965>.

The Need for Innovation and Improvement: A Moment of Opportunity

While these challenges are serious, they don't have to be permanent. They can be managed through intentional, evidence-based action. Across the country, a growing movement of innovators, courts, legal services providers, policymakers, community organizations, and funders is already demonstrating what a more responsive, people-centered system can look like.



Simplified court processes and multiple pathways to help are making it possible for people without lawyers to meaningfully participate in proceedings that affect their lives.



Technology-enabled tools are expanding access to information, enabling remote participation, and streamlining case resolution so that people don't have to choose between going to work and seeking help.



Community-based legal services are meeting people where they are—in healthcare settings, schools, social service agencies, and community organizations—connecting legal help to the places where people already go for support.



A growing ecosystem of helpers assisting people to understand their rights, navigate the system, and resolve problems by providing trusted, accessible help that doesn't require a law degree, while still operating with the proper training, oversight, and accountability.



Data collection and research are strengthening the evidence base, helping stakeholders understand what works and where to invest.



Regulatory reform is opening new possibilities for who can provide legal help and how, expanding the supply of trusted assistance through innovations such as regulatory sandboxes, new practitioner roles, and emerging technology.



This is not a story of a broken system with no way forward. It is a story of a system in need of renovation, where promising solutions exist and are ready for replication and scale. The way to accelerate and sustain this momentum requires a shared narrative, a common language, and a coordinated voice that elevates the urgency of civil justice improvement and inspires action across sectors.

MESSAGING FRAMEWORK

Effective messaging begins with shared values—not policy details, legal jargon, or institutional priorities. It is all the more important in politically divisive landscapes to identify values that will resonate with your audiences. Before any audience can engage with specific solutions, they need to understand why civil justice matters. The messaging in this guide is anchored in four core values that emerged from research and stakeholder input as the ideas that resonate most broadly and deeply across audiences.

► **Fairness**

Every person deserves a fair chance to resolve the problems that affect their life, their home, their family, their livelihood, and their safety. Fairness means the process for resolving disputes is transparent, understandable, and accessible to everyone, not just those who can afford a lawyer or who know how the system works. It means that the law is applied evenly, and that outcomes are determined on the merits, not by who has more power or resources.

► **Opportunity**

When people resolve their legal problems, they can move forward. They can stabilize their home, family, or income, and build toward a better future. A civil justice system that works is not just about resolving disputes; it is about preserving and creating opportunity. It is about ensuring that a single legal problem does not become a cascading crisis that derails a person's stability.

► **Community**

Civil justice impacts communities, not just individuals. When a family loses their home to an eviction, the entire neighborhood feels the ripple effects. When people can't resolve family disputes fairly, children and communities bear the cost. A functioning civil justice system strengthens the fabric of community life, and everyone has a stake in making it work.

► **Economy**

A functioning civil justice system supports a strong and stable economy. When people can resolve legal problems quickly and fairly, they are able to work, maintain housing, and contribute to their communities. When they cannot, the costs ripple outward, reducing productivity, increasing reliance on public services, and weakening local economies. Investing in civil justice helps prevent avoidable crises and delivers lasting economic value.

Anchor Messages

The following anchor messages form the foundation of a coordinated national narrative about civil justice. Each anchor message addresses one of three essential elements: why civil justice matters, what's not working, and what we can do about it. They are designed as a blueprint for you to use if they apply or adapt them for your specific goals and audiences.

ANCHOR MESSAGE 1: **WHY CIVIL JUSTICE MATTERS**

Civil Justice Helps People Solve the Problems that Shape Their Lives.

Every day, people face problems that threaten their stability—an eviction notice, a custody dispute, unpaid wages, an unfair debt, unsafe living conditions. The civil justice system exists to help people resolve these problems fairly. When it works, it stabilizes families, strengthens communities, and supports economic opportunity. It is part of the civic infrastructure that holds our society together, as essential as schools, healthcare, and safe housing.

Adapt this message when you need to:

- ▶ Introduce civil justice to audiences unfamiliar with the system.
- ▶ Connect civil justice to broader community and economic outcomes.
- ▶ Build the case for why civil justice deserves attention and investment.

ANCHOR MESSAGE 2: A SYSTEM NOT WORKING FOR THE PEOPLE IT'S DESIGNED TO HELP

The Legal System is Struggling to Help People Solve Their Problems.

Most people who face civil legal problems do not get meaningful help. The system can be confusing, expensive, and filled with jargon that makes it feel like it was designed for insiders. People are often expected to navigate complex procedures alone, sometimes against opponents with professional representation. The result is a growing gap between the promise of fairness and the reality that millions of people experience—a gap that costs families their homes, their safety, their income, and their futures.

Adapt this message when you need to:

- ▶ Describe the scope and human impact of the gap between need and reality in terms of both help and just resolutions to legal problems.
- ▶ Challenge assumptions that the status quo works.
- ▶ Build urgency for action without resorting to crisis-only framing.

ANCHOR MESSAGE 3: WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

There Are Solutions to Improve the System, and Everyone Has a Role to Play.

Across the country, innovators, implementers, influencers, and others are proving that a better system is possible. Lawyers and trained community helpers are guiding people through complicated processes. Technology is making information and services more accessible. Courts are simplifying procedures that make it easier for users and implementers. These approaches are working and ready to grow. Building a civil justice system that truly works requires participation from all of us: lawyers, legal services organizations, judges, community organizations, funders, business leaders, policymakers, and the public.

Adapt this message when you need to:

- ▶ Highlight innovation and progress.
- ▶ Inspire participation and investment from varied stakeholders.
- ▶ Counter narratives of hopelessness or inevitability.

Problem → Solution → Call to Action Messages

Often, these anchor messages will need to be adapted to address a specific problem or audience. The following are examples of how to adapt the anchor messages for specific issues using a Problem → Solution → Call to Action formula that moves from identifying a problem to presenting a solution to inviting action. These are just a few examples of possible calls to action for your audiences and the specific issues that you may be trying to address.

EXAMPLE 1: HOUSING

- ▶ **Problem:** Every year, millions of renters face eviction proceedings without a lawyer in a process most don't understand. Many lose their homes because they don't have the tools or resources to participate effectively.
- ▶ **Solution:** Trained community-based justice workers,¹² simplified court forms, and legal help hotlines are making it possible for renters to understand the potential of a legal issue earlier, understand their rights, respond to eviction filings, negotiate meaningfully, and present their case. In communities where these supports exist, outcomes are more balanced and families are more likely to stay in their homes.
- ▶ **Call to Action:** Invest in community-based legal help and court simplification so that no one loses their home simply because they couldn't participate in their own defense.

EXAMPLE 2: FAMILY STABILITY

- ▶ **Problem:** Parents going through custody and family disputes often face an overwhelming and adversarial process that can feel more damaging than the conflict itself. Without help, families struggle to reach resolutions that prioritize children's well-being.
- ▶ **Solution:** Family courts that offer mediation and access to support services are helping families resolve disputes faster, with less conflict, and with better outcomes for the whole family.
- ▶ **Call to Action:** Support family court innovation so that every family has access to a process that protects children and preserves dignity.

¹² Community-based justice worker models involve training and certifying individuals working on the frontlines at community-based or legal aid organizations to offer limited scope legal advice and services in certain case types. See Community Justice Advocates of Utah, i4J, and IAALS' U.S. Justice Worker Program Index to learn more about the diverse landscape of community-based justice worker models. The U.S. Justice Worker Program Index (2026), https://iaals.du.edu/justice_worker_program_index. Different jurisdictions use different titles for these professionals, such as community justice workers, community justice advocates, community legal advocates, etc.

EXAMPLE 3: ECONOMIC SECURITY

- ▶ **Problem:** Workers who are owed wages, consumers who face predatory collection practices, and small business owners caught in contract disputes often cannot afford a lawyer, and the cost of inaction can be devastating. Lost income leads to missed rent, mounting debt, and economic instability that ripples through entire communities.
- ▶ **Solution:** Legal services organizations, online tools, and trained helpers are providing affordable support that helps people recover what they are owed and protect their economic stability. Communities that invest in these services see recovered wages flow back into local economies and families stay on solid footing.
- ▶ **Call to Action:** Expand access to affordable legal help for working people and small businesses—an investment that pays dividends for families and communities alike.

EXAMPLE 4: GENERAL CIVIL JUSTICE

- ▶ **Problem:** The civil justice system was designed for a different era. Today, most people who face legal problems navigate the system alone, in a process they don't understand, against opponents who are often represented by lawyers. The result is a growing gap between the promise of fairness and the reality that millions experience, from those who are most economically vulnerable well into the middle class.
- ▶ **Solution:** A growing movement of courts, legal services organizations, community helpers, and technology innovators is proving that a more accessible, effective system is within reach. From simpler forms to redesigned court processes to new models for delivering legal help, the tools for change already exist.
- ▶ **Call to Action:** We need a civil justice system that works for people. Whether you are a lawyer, a funder, a community leader, or a neighbor, your participation matters. This is a moment of opportunity, and everyone has a role to play.

High-Trust Messaging: Reaching Audiences Through Relatable Experiences

Not all stories carry the same weight with every audience. Some experiences and populations resonate more broadly because they are widely understood, less politically polarizing, and strongly associated with fairness, service, and shared values. “High-trust” messaging refers to framing civil justice issues through these universally relatable experiences to build understanding and support across diverse audiences.

Why it matters:

In a complex and sometimes polarized information market, audiences are more likely to engage with and support civil justice when it’s grounded in situations that they recognize as fair and deserving of help. High-trust examples can cut through skepticism, reduce ideological resistance, and create common ground—especially with audiences who may be unfamiliar with or wary of the system.

What to do:

- ▶ Use examples that evoke broad empathy and shared values, such as:
 - ▷ Veterans navigating benefits they’ve earned through service.
 - ▷ Survivors of domestic violence seeking safety and protection.
 - ▷ Seniors facing fraud, housing instability, or threats to their independence.
 - ▷ Families recovering from natural disasters trying to rebuild their lives.
- ▶ Frame these examples around fairness and earned stability, not vulnerability alone. For example, emphasize that a veteran is seeking benefits they are entitled to, or that a survivor is seeking safety through a legal process designed to protect them.
- ▶ Pair high-trust examples with clear expectations of how civil justice helps—understanding rights, accessing benefits, securing protection, resolving disputes.
- ▶ Avoid overreliance on any single narrative. High-trust messaging should broaden understanding, not narrow it. Civil legal problems affect people across all backgrounds and circumstances.
- ▶ Use these examples strategically when engaging skeptical or unfamiliar audiences, including policymakers, funders, and the public.



QUICK REFERENCE: MESSAGING DO'S AND DON'TS

Do

- ✓ Lead with values like fairness, dignity, opportunity, and participation.
- ✓ Frame civil justice around “life problems” people recognize.
- ✓ Highlight progress, innovation, and momentum.
- ✓ Use plain, relatable language.
- ✓ Center people’s experiences and stories.
- ✓ Invite participation. Give stakeholders a role.
- ✓ Acknowledge the scope: civil legal problems affect everyone.
- ✓ Tailor your message to your audience.
- ✓ Repeat your message. Saturation is essential to understanding.

Don't

- ✗ Lead with legal jargon or policy details.
- ✗ Use abstract phrases or language like “access to justice” without explanation.
- ✗ Rely on crisis-only framing that makes the problem feel hopeless.
- ✗ Assume audiences know what the civil justice system is and how it works.
- ✗ Center institutional or process achievements.
- ✗ Use stigmatizing language that narrows audiences such as “low-income” or “marginalized” when describing the people systems should serve.
 - ▷ Precision matters in context, so when a specific audience is required for policy, funding, or focused service delivery, terms like low-income may be appropriate. The goal is to match language to audience and context.
- ✗ Present problems without actionable ways to correct or contribute.

PUTTING YOUR MESSAGES INTO PRACTICE

4

The messaging framework provides the foundation that you will use to put those messages to work in the documents you write, the conversations you have, the media you engage with, and the platforms you use. Effective messaging is not a one-time activity. It is a practice that should be woven into every aspect of your communications, from a fundraising letter to a social media post to a conversation with a policymaker.

Start with Your Goal

Before you write or speak with any of your audiences, you need to know what you are trying to achieve (e.g. expand support for a bill, win funding for a project.). To help you accomplish that goal, ask yourself three questions:

- ▶ Who am I trying to reach?
- ▶ What do I want them to understand or support?
- ▶ What do I want them to do?

Build from the Framework

You don't need to reinvent the wheel for every piece of communication. Use the anchor messages as your starting point and adapt them to your specific problem or issue, using the Problem → Solution → Call to Action format as a guide:

- ▶ **Opening/problem:** Lead with a value or a relatable life problem.
- ▶ **Middle/solution:** Connect that problem to the systemic challenge and present the solution or opportunity.
- ▶ **Close/call to action:** Tell your audience what they can do and why their participation matters.

This structure works whether you are writing a 280-character social media post or a 10-page policy brief.

Communications Collateral: What to Use and When

The most common types of communications materials are listed here, with brief descriptions of their purpose and tips for using them effectively.

PRESS RELEASES

What they are: Formal announcements sent to journalists, media outlets, and influencers to share news such as a new initiative, introduction of legislation, a report release, or an event.

When to use them: When you have a timely, newsworthy event or announcement that you want media to cover.



Tips:

- ▶ Utilize the media preparation resource included with this guide.
- ▶ Lead with the most important information in the first paragraph.
- ▶ Include a compelling quote from a spokesperson, ideally someone with lived experience or recognized authority.
- ▶ Keep it to one page.
- ▶ Include a clear, concise description of your organization and the broader context of the civil justice challenge.
- ▶ End with contact information for media follow-up.

Examples:

- ▶ https://iaals.du.edu/press_release_example1
- ▶ https://iaals.du.edu/press_release_example2

ONE-PAGERS AND FACT SHEETS

What they are: Short, visually clear or designed documents that summarize a key issue, policy, or set of data points to provide at meetings, attach to emails, or share digitally.

When to use them: When you need to quickly educate a policymaker, funder, partner, or journalist on a topic.



Tips:

- ▶ Use the Problem → Solution → Call to Action structure.
- ▶ Include two to three key data points or statistics.
- ▶ Use plain language, bullet points, and visual hierarchy (headers, bold text, pull quotes). If possible, add design elements.
- ▶ Include a real-world example or brief story if possible.
- ▶ End with a clear ask and contact information.

Example: https://iaals.du.edu/fact_sheet_examples

STATEMENTS

What they are: Brief, official communications from you, your organization, or your coalition responding to a news event, policy, or public moment relevant to civil justice.

When to use them: When news occurs that your organization should publicly respond to, such as a legislative proposal, a report release, or a public event that intersects with your mission.



Tips:

- ▶ Be timely. Statements lose impact if they come days after the news or event.
- ▶ Be concise. No more than a paragraph or two.
- ▶ Connect the event to the broader civil justice narrative using your anchor messages.
- ▶ Include a forward-looking call to action.

Example: https://iaals.du.edu/statement_example

OP-EDS, GUEST ESSAYS, AND BLOGS

What they are: Opinion pieces published in newspapers, magazines, or online that make a persuasive argument on a topic to shape public conversation.

When to use them: When you want to influence public opinion, elevate an issue, or respond to a current event with deeper analysis. These pieces are especially effective when they coincide with a news hook such as a legislative action, a report release, or a public event.



Tips:

- ▶ Lead with a story or a concrete, relatable example—not a policy argument.
- ▶ Make one clear argument and support it with two to three supporting points.
- ▶ Rely on evidence and human experience.
- ▶ Keep the length between 600 and 800 words for most outlets.
- ▶ End with a strong call to action.

Examples:

- ▶ https://iaals.du.edu/oped_blog_example1
- ▶ https://iaals.du.edu/oped_blog_example2

TALKING POINTS

What they are: Concise, prepared messages to keep spokespeople, staff, and partners on message during media interviews, public appearances, legislative testimony, and other communications.

When to use them: Whenever someone from your organization or coalition is speaking publicly or to key audiences.



Tips:

- ▶ Organize talking points around no more than three key messages, including your call to action.
- ▶ Write them in natural, conversational language—not bureaucratic prose.
- ▶ Anticipate tough questions and prepare responses grounded in your anchor messages.
- ▶ Update talking points regularly as developments occur.

Example: https://iaals.du.edu/talking_points_example

SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT

What they are: Posts across platforms (e.g. LinkedIn, Facebook, X/Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, Threads, and others) designed to engage audiences, share stories, amplify messages, and drive action.

When to use them: Continuously. Social media should be an ongoing channel for storytelling, education, engagement, and activation.



Tips:

- ▶ Utilize the social media guidance resource included with this guide.
- ▶ Keep language simple and direct.
- ▶ Use visuals such as images, short videos, infographics, and quote cards to increase engagement.
- ▶ Include a clear call to action: share, sign up, learn more, contact your representative.
- ▶ Use relevant hashtags and tag partners to extend reach.
- ▶ Amplify voices from lived experience, frontline helpers, and community partners—not just organizational accounts.
- ▶ Vary content: stories, data points, quotes, calls to action, event promotions, partner spotlights.

LinkedIn Examples:

- ▶ https://iaals.du.edu/linkedin_example1
- ▶ https://iaals.du.edu/linkedin_example2
- ▶ https://iaals.du.edu/linkedin_example3
- ▶ https://iaals.du.edu/linkedin_example4

NEWSLETTERS AND EMAIL COMMUNICATIONS

What they are: Regular communications sent to your members, partners, or supporters to share updates, stories, calls to action, and resources.

When to use them: On a regular schedule to keep your audience informed and engaged, and on an ad hoc basis for timely developments.

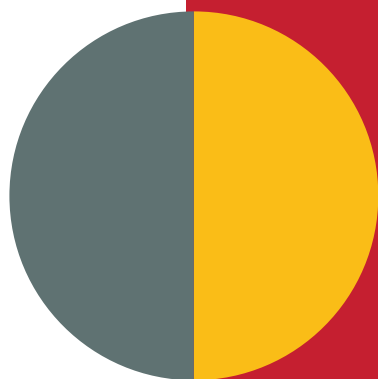


Tips:

- ▶ Use a compelling subject line that reflects the life problems framing.
- ▶ Lead with the most important or emotionally resonant item.
- ▶ Keep it scannable. Use short paragraphs, headers, and links for deeper content.
- ▶ Include at least one clear call to action per communication.

Examples:

- ▶ https://iaals.du.edu/email_example1
- ▶ https://iaals.du.edu/email_example2
- ▶ https://iaals.du.edu/email_example3



Effective messaging is not a one-time activity. It is a practice that should be woven into every aspect of your communications, from a fundraising letter to a social media post to a conversation with a policymaker.

Guidance on Addressing Communications Challenges

Communicating about civil justice is not always straightforward. The following guidance addresses some common challenges and how to manage them.

CHALLENGE 1: PUBLIC CONFUSION ABOUT WHAT CIVIL JUSTICE IS

Most people don't know what the civil justice system is, how it differs from the criminal justice system, or that it is relevant to their own lives. They often do not recognize the legal implications of problems they encounter in everyday life. **Do not assume your audience has a baseline knowledge.**

What to do:

- ▶ Avoid opening with the phrase “civil justice system” without grounding it in real life. Instead of “The civil justice system needs reform,” try “When a family faces eviction, a worker is denied wages, or when a parent fights for custody, they turn to the civil justice system—the part of our legal system designed to help people resolve these kinds of problems.”
- ▶ Use “life problems” as a grounding frame before introducing system-level language.
- ▶ When you must use terms like “civil justice system” or “civil legal problems,” define them briefly and conversationally.

CHALLENGE 2: DISTRUST OF INSTITUTIONS

Many people, particularly communities neglected or harmed by the legal system, carry a deep distrust of courts, lawyers, and government institutions. Messaging that sounds institutional, top-down, or dismissive of past experiences will not resonate.

What to do:

- ▶ Acknowledge distrust directly and honestly.
- ▶ Center the voices and experiences of people who have navigated the system, especially those who have been harmed by it.
- ▶ Emphasize accountability. A just system must be accountable to the people it serves.
- ▶ Highlight community-based and people-centered solutions, not just institutional reforms.
- ▶ Engage trusted messengers, including community leaders, frontline helpers, and people with lived experience, rather than relying solely on institutional spokespeople.

CHALLENGE 3: LEGAL JARGON AND INSIDER LANGUAGE

Legalese or legal terminology is a significant barrier to public engagement. Even well-intentioned communications can lose audiences when they use words that feel unfamiliar, foreign, or exclusionary.

What to do:

- ▶ Adopt a strict plain-language discipline in your public communications.
- ▶ Replace jargon with everyday language:

Instead of...

Access to justice

Litigants

Self-represented litigants

Pro se

Civil legal needs

Legal services delivery

Adjudication

Due process

Try...

Getting help you need to solve legal problems

People in court or people facing legal problems

People navigating court without a lawyer

On their own or without legal help

Legal problems that affect everyday life

How people get legal help

How cases are decided

A fair process or a fair chance to be heard

- ▶ When you must use technical terms, particularly in communications with legal professionals or policymakers, define it simply the first time it appears.
- ▶ Test your language with people outside the legal field. If they don't immediately understand, revise.

CHALLENGE 4: STIGMA AROUND SEEKING HELP

Many people feel shame or embarrassment about needing legal help, associate free legal services with poverty, or believe that “good” or “right” outcomes shouldn’t require assistance. Language that reinforces these dynamics—terms like “safety net,” “aid,” or “low-income”—can push people away rather than drawing them in.

What to do:

- ▶ Frame legal help as a routine part of navigating complex systems, like having a guide at a hospital or an advisor at a school.
- ▶ Emphasize tools, information, and support rather than charity or rescue.
- ▶ Use language that is inclusive and empowering, like “resources available to you,” “tools to help you navigate,” or “support to understand your options.”
- ▶ Avoid language that defines people by their income or circumstances. Instead of “low-income litigants,” try “people who can’t afford a lawyer” or simply “people navigating the system without help.”

When people experience a system that feels inaccessible, confusing, or rigged against them in favor of those with more power and resources, confidence in the fundamental fairness of our institutions erodes. Trust must be earned through consistent delivery of fair, transparent, and equitable outcomes. For too many people right now, that trust is fraying.



CHALLENGE 5: SKEPTICISM FROM WITHIN THE LEGAL PROFESSION

Some lawyers, judges, court personnel, and regulatory bodies may be resistant to calls for system change, particularly messaging that discusses expanding who can provide legal help or reforming long-standing procedures. This skepticism may stem from genuine concern about quality and consumer protection, unfamiliarity with the public's experience of the system, or a perception that it is a criticism of their role.

What to do:

- ▶ Avoid guilt-based framing that could be perceived to blame lawyers, judges, or court personnel for system failures.
- ▶ Acknowledge the expertise and good faith of legal professionals while making the case that the system needs to evolve to meet today's realities.
- ▶ Use data and evidence to demonstrate the scope of unmet needs and the effectiveness of innovations.
- ▶ Highlight how system improvements benefit legal professionals by reducing caseloads, improving courtroom efficiency, and enabling lawyers to focus on the cases where their expertise matters most.
- ▶ Enlist respected voices from within the profession, such as judges, bar leaders, and experienced practitioners, as validators and messengers.
- ▶ Broaden your circle of stakeholders to those outside of, but adjacent to, the legal system, such as health care providers, educators, and social service workers.

CHALLENGE 6: SKEPTICISM ABOUT GOVERNMENT FUNDING OR INTERVENTION

Some policymakers and regulators are wary of expanding funding or government involvement in the civil justice system. This skepticism may be rooted in concerns about government overreach, fiscal responsibility, or whether public investment in civil justice delivers measurable value.

What to do:

- ▶ Lead with efficiency and return on investment, not system expansion. Emphasize that addressing civil legal problems early reduces downstream costs in housing, healthcare, public benefits, criminal system involvement, and the courts.
- ▶ Frame civil justice as a stabilizing force that helps people stay employed, housed, and self-sufficient, reducing reliance on government services rather than increasing it.
- ▶ Avoid language that suggests bureaucracy or program growth. Instead, emphasize problem solving, cost avoidance, and better use of existing resources.
- ▶ Use credible, nonpartisan validators—judges, business leaders, law enforcement, and community institutions—to reinforce messaging.
- ▶ Highlight accountability and outcomes. Where possible, point to data, performance measures, and real-world results, including stories of real people impacted.
- ▶ Connect civil justice to broader priorities, such as economic stability, workforce participation, and efficient courts.
- ▶ Emphasize that this is not about creating new systems, but about making existing systems work more effectively for the people they are intended to serve.

KNOWING & REACHING YOUR AUDIENCES

5

The most compelling message in the world will fall flat if it is delivered to the wrong audience in the wrong way. Civil justice messaging must reach a wide range of stakeholders, each with different levels of familiarity, different motivations, and different roles in the system. A funder evaluating an investment opportunity, a legislator weighing a budget appropriation, a court clerk managing an outdated administrative process, or a person who just received an eviction notice all need different things from you.

One of the most common mistakes in communications is trying to reach everyone at once. The most effective communicators identify a specific audience first, then shape their message around what that audience already believes, what they care about, and who they trust.

That doesn't mean starting from scratch every time. The core message stays the same; what changes is how you frame it, what you emphasize, and whose voice you put forward. A legal services provider speaking to a legislative committee and a community organization speaking to neighborhood residents are working from the same foundation, they're just adjusting the entry point.

This section profiles the key audiences for civil justice messaging and provides tailored message examples for each.



IMPLEMENTERS

Who they are: Courts, judges, court administrators, legal services organizations, bar associations, access to justice commissions, civic leaders, policymakers, and others who operate within and administer the civil justice system.

What motivates them: Ensuring the system works for people. Efficiency, fairness, manageable caseloads, public trust, and professional purpose. They want practical solutions that can be implemented within existing structures or through achievable changes.

Key considerations:

- ▶ Many implementers are deeply committed to justice but may be cautious about language that feels like an attack on the system they serve or manage.
- ▶ For other implementers, it will be important to articulate the urgency of the crisis in the system, motivating them toward solutions.
- ▶ Use “improvement” and “modernization” rather than “reform” when speaking with this audience.
- ▶ Lead with evidence, data, and examples from peer courts or organizations.
- ▶ Acknowledge their expertise and the difficulty of their work.

Example message:

Courts across the country are finding that simplified procedures, trained court navigators, and court-implemented technology tools are making the process more efficient and fair, reducing case backlogs while improving outcomes for the people courts serve. These innovations support the mission of courts to deliver justice. The question is not whether to modernize, but how fast we can scale what’s already working.



INFLUENCERS

Who they are: Elected officials, legislative leaders, governors, editorial boards, high-profile advocates, community leaders, nonprofit partners, prominent legal scholars, and other individuals and institutions that shape public conversation and policy direction.

What motivates them: Credibility, leadership, impact, and being on the right side of an important issue. They want to be seen as champions of fairness and effective governance.

Key considerations:

- ▶ Influencers respond to clear, compelling narratives backed by data and human stories.
- ▶ They want to know that their advocacy will be seen as reasonable, well-supported, and relevant to their position or brand. Influencers are uniquely positioned to amplify the challenge as a pervasive, yet mostly invisible one.
- ▶ Local data and constituent stories are especially powerful for elected officials.
- ▶ Frame civil justice as a bipartisan, common sense issue—not an ideological one.

Example message:

Every community has people facing the loss of their homes, fighting for custody of their children, or struggling with debt they don't know how to resolve—and most of them have nowhere to turn. Investing in community-based legal help and court simplification isn't just the right thing to do. It reduces downstream costs in housing, healthcare, and public benefit, and it delivers essential help to the people who need it most.



INVESTORS AND FUNDERS

Who they are: Philanthropic foundations, government funders, corporate giving programs, impact investors, and business leaders who provide resources for civil justice work.

What motivates them: Return on investment (ROI), measurable impact, solving real problems, and being part of a credible, growing movement. They want to know that their dollars will make a tangible difference and that the field is ready to use them well.

Key considerations:

- ▶ ROI is among the strongest frames for this audience. Provide concrete examples of economic return.
- ▶ Connect civil justice to the outcomes funders already care about, like housing stability, health, economic mobility, education, and community resilience.
- ▶ Highlight momentum. This is a field with growing innovation, cross-sector partnerships, and emerging evidence of what works.
- ▶ Do not rely solely on moral arguments. Pair the human story with the business case.

Example message:

When people get help resolving civil legal problems, the returns are concrete and measurable. Legal services programs that help families access benefits they're entitled to, like SNAP or housing assistance, generate dollars that flow directly back into local economies. Eviction prevention programs reduce homelessness and the enormous public costs that follow. Wage recovery efforts put money back in workers' pockets and stabilize households.

Civil justice is not just a moral imperative; it is one of the most cost-effective investments a funder can make in community stability and economic mobility. And right now, the field is at an inflection point because innovations are proven, momentum is building, and the infrastructure for scale is in place.



IMPACTED PEOPLE

Who they are: Individuals and families who are facing, have faced, or at risk of facing civil legal problems such as eviction, custody disputes, wage theft, consumer fraud, debt collection, denial of benefits, unsafe housing, and more. This audience is vast and diverse, spanning every income level, race, geography, and life stage.

What motivates them: Trust, protection, dignity, and the ability to achieve their resolution. They want to know that help exists, it is accessible, and the process will treat them fairly. Many have been harmed or ignored by institutions in the past, and distrust can run deep.

Key considerations:

- ▶ This audience is not a monolith. “Impacted people” includes a single mother facing eviction, a small business owner in a contract dispute, a retiree dealing with predatory debt, and a domestic violence survivor seeking a protective order. Messaging must be adaptable to different circumstances.
- ▶ Do not define people by their problems or their income. Use empowering, respectful language. People want to know what they can do, not just what has been done to them.
- ▶ Avoid jargon. Use plain, conversational language that mirrors how people describe their experiences.
- ▶ Trusted messengers, like community leaders, neighbors, frontline helpers, and people who have been through similar experiences, are far more effective than institutional voices.
- ▶ Meet people where they are through social media, community spaces, healthcare settings, schools, houses of worship, and trusted civic organizations.

Example message:

If you’re dealing with an eviction, a problem at work, or a debt that doesn’t seem right, you’re not alone—and you don’t have to figure it out by yourself. There are people in your community trained to help you understand your options, navigate the process, and stand up for what’s fair. You deserve a system that treats you with dignity and works for you. Help is closer than you think.



EDUCATORS

Who they are: Law schools, law professors, continuing legal education providers, and those shaping the pipeline of future legal professionals. Also includes educators in adjacent fields like social work, public health, and public policy who train the professionals who will encounter civil legal problems in their work.

What motivates them: Preparing students and professionals for the realities of practice, advancing knowledge, contributing to systemic improvement, and institutional relevance.

Key considerations:

- ▶ Educators are key to shifting the culture of the legal profession over time.
- ▶ Emphasize how the civil justice landscape is changing and why training must evolve to match.
- ▶ Connect civil justice innovation to career opportunities for students in legal services, court innovation, legal technology, community lawyering, and interdisciplinary practice.
- ▶ For educators in adjacent fields, emphasize the intersection of legal problems with the situations their students will encounter in their work, such as health, housing, economic stability, and family well-being.

Example message:

The civil justice system that law students will practice in looks fundamentally different from the one their professors trained for. Most people in civil courts have no lawyer. Technology is transforming how legal help is delivered. New categories of trained legal helpers are emerging. If we want to prepare the next generation of legal professionals to serve the public effectively, our training must evolve to equip students not just to practice law, but to participate in a system that is being redesigned around the needs of real people.



THE GENERAL PUBLIC

Who they are: Everyone. The broadest and most diverse audience. People who may or may not have personal experience with the civil justice system, who may or may not understand what it is, and who come from every background, geography, and political perspective.

What motivates them: Fairness, security, family well-being, economic stability, and the sense that the systems around them are working, or at least trying to. The public is motivated by stories they can relate to, language they understand, and a sense that their participation can make a difference.

Key considerations:

- ▶ Assume no prior knowledge of the civil justice system.
- ▶ Always ground messaging in life problems before introducing system-level language.
- ▶ Use storytelling as the primary vehicle. Data supports stories; it doesn't replace them.
- ▶ Tone matters enormously. Be hopeful, relatable, and inviting. Avoid alarm, guilt, or abstraction.
- ▶ Messengers matter. The public trusts community voices, people with lived experience, and frontline helpers far more than institutional spokespeople.
- ▶ Avoid language that sounds political, ideological, or partisan. Frame civil justice as a common sense, shared concern.

Example message:

Almost everyone will face a moment when they need the civil justice system to work, whether it's a problem with a landlord, a dispute over money owed, or a family situation that requires a court resolution. Right now, most people who face these moments have no clear path to help. That's not how it should be. A fair and effective system for resolving life problems benefits all of us because when families are stable, communities are stronger. Building that system is something we can all be part of.

CHOOSING YOUR MESSENGER

Knowing what to say and who should say it are different strategic decisions. The right messenger can make the same message significantly more—or less—effective, depending on the audience you’re trying to reach.

The core question is credibility. Who does this audience already trust, and why? A state legislator may be more moved by a local judge or business leader than by an advocacy organization. A community member may respond more readily to a neighbor who has navigated the system than to an institutional voice.

Many organizations have more messenger options than they currently use. Consider the full range available to you:

- ▶ **People with lived experience**, who bring authenticity and moral authority that no institutional voice can match.
- ▶ **Judicial and court partners**, who carry credibility on questions of how the system works and what it needs.
- ▶ **Legislative champions**, who signal that reform has political support and can bring other legislators along in ways outside advocates cannot.
- ▶ **Board members and organizational leaders**, who signal institutional legitimacy and commitment.
- ▶ **Business and civic leaders**, who can reframe civil justice as an economic and community issue.
- ▶ **Peer organizations and coalition partners**, who extend your reach and reinforce that this is a broad, shared concern.

Match the messenger to the message, not just the audience.

You can have the right person for the audience but the wrong person for the specific argument. A judge is credible on how the system works and what it needs, but they may be less effective making an economic case than a business leader would be. A person with lived experience carries moral authority on what the system costs real people, but they may not be the right voice for a technical policy argument. Think carefully about what you are asking your messenger to say, not just who they are speaking to.

Authenticity often outperforms polish.

There is a tendency to default to the most prepared or senior spokesperson. But for many audiences, particularly legislators hearing from constituents and community members, someone who has lived the experience and tells it plainly will land more effectively than a seasoned advocate. Credibility comes in different forms, and for many of the audiences that matter most in civil justice work, lived experience is among the most powerful forms it takes.

Consider coalitions.

A single messenger is rarely enough when the stakes are high. A coordinated group of voices, such as a judge, a business leader, and someone with lived experience all making the same case, signals breadth of concern and is harder to dismiss than any one voice alone. A legislative hearing, a major funding ask, or a public campaign is an opportunity to show that this is not a narrow interest but a broad, shared priority.



Any meaningful improvements to the system will require coordination, shared purpose, and active participation of all players in the civil justice ecosystem.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Communications Planning Checklist

A strong message without a plan behind it rarely moves the needle. This resource gives you a practical framework for turning your messaging goals into organized, executable communications activity. Use this checklist to prepare for any communications campaign, event, or plan.

Civil Justice Message Map

This one-page reference distills the anchor messages into a quick-reference format.

Media Preparation and Working with the Media

This resource offers guidance on preparing spokespeople, developing press materials, and building relationships with journalists who cover civil justice and related issues.

Social Media Guidance

This resource offers practical guidance on adapting civil justice messages for social platforms, engaging your audiences where they are, and amplifying the work of partners.

Supporting Those Directly Impacted When Sharing Their Stories

People with lived experience of civil legal problems are among the most powerful voices in this work. This resource offers guidance on how to engage them ethically and effectively.

Communications Planning Checklist

A strong message without a plan behind it rarely moves the needle. This resource gives you a practical framework for turning your messaging goals into organized, executable communications activity. Use this checklist to prepare for any communications campaign, event, or plan.

Section 1: Set Your Goal

- ☐ My goal is specific enough and success is definable.

Example: Secure passage of an SB 123 amendment expanding civil legal aid funding by the May legislative session.

Section 2: Define Your Audiences

- ☐ I have identified my primary audience (the people I most need to reach).

Example: State legislators on the judiciary committee who are undecided on the funding bill.

- ☐ I have identified any secondary audiences.

Example: Local business associations who benefit from stable communities and can influence legislators.

- ☐ I understand what my audiences believe and what I need to say to persuade them on the issue(s).

Example: Many think the court system is already fair and accessible; cost concerns dominate.

- ☐ I know who and what my audience trusts.

Example: Local judges, small business owners, and constituent stories.

Section 3: Sharpen Your Message

- ☐ I can state my core message in two sentences or less.

Example: When people can't access legal help, they lose homes, jobs, and safety—and communities pay the cost. Funding civil legal aid is an investment in stability.

- ☐ My message reflects the language guidance in this document.

Tip: Use "legal problems that affect everyday life" not "civil legal needs." Frame as problem-solving infrastructure, not entitlement.

- ☐ Everyone on my team is working from the same message.

Tip: Share the message map one-pager at every planning meeting; have staff repeat the core message back.

- ☐ I have a clear ask (I'm not just raising awareness; I'm moving my audience toward a position).

Example: Vote yes on SB 123.

- ☐ I am aware of possible negative reactions to my messages and am prepared to respond.
Example: This is not about expanding the civil justice system, it's about making it better for everyone involved in it.

Section 4: Choose Your Messengers

- ☐ I have identified the best messenger(s) for my audience(s).
Example: A small business owner whose employee dispute was resolved through legal aid (speaks to economic framing). A local judge or court administrator speaking to legislators.
- ☐ If working with someone with lived experience to share their story, I have supported them and they understand how their story will be used.
Example: Prep sessions, talking points, and a debrief afterward.

Section 5: Select Your Communication Channels

- ☐ I know where my audience gets information.
Example: Legislators read local newspaper editorials, constituent emails, and caucus briefings. A social media campaign reaches the public, advocates, and others.
- ☐ I have prioritized the channels I can sustain.
Example: Op-ed in state's largest paper, targeted email to 12 key legislative offices, and one coalition sign-on letter.
- ☐ I have considered earned media, social media, community outreach, partner networks, email or newsletters, and testimony or public comment.
Note: Each channel requires different capacity so choose based on where your audience is over what is familiar.

Section 6: Build Your Calendar

- ☐ I have mapped out my communications activity to my policy or advocacy goals.
Example: Op-ed publishes the week before committee vote; client story drops the day hearings begin.
- ☐ I have identified anchor events (legislative sessions, awareness days, news hooks).
Example: Equal Justice Week (May), state legislative session opening, local court anniversary.
- ☐ I know the internal process to follow before anything goes public.
Example: Prep for client story, develop media list, approval of messaging, team responsibilities assigned.
- ☐ I have a simple calendar in place that is functional.
Tip: A shared spreadsheet with date, deliverable, and staff owner is enough.

Section 7: Assess Your Resources and Timing

- ☐ I have mapped out staff time, capacity, and resources.

Example: One comms staffer at 50% equals 1–2 major deliverables per week. Use Canva templates instead of separate design budget. Focus on earned media and partner amplification.

- ☐ I have planned out the internal process.

Example: Client story development (five days), legal review (three days), ED sign-off (two days) = 10 days to complete before publishing. Build this into your calendar.

Section 8: Define Success

- ☐ I have decided how I will measure whether I have achieved my goals.

Example: Bill passes committee, three legislators supported, 500 constituent emails sent.

- ☐ My measures of success are meaningful.

Example: 3–5 legislative meetings secured and votes changed vs. number of social media impressions.

- ☐ I have a plan for tracking and reviewing results.

Example: Weekly 15 minute check-in against goals; post-campaign debriefs within two weeks of conclusion.

Before You Launch: The Final Check

- ☐ Does all my content reinforce my core message?
- ☐ Am I reaching my audience(s) where they are?
- ☐ Do my messenger(s) match my audience(s)?
- ☐ Is everyone involved aligned on what our desired outcomes are for this campaign?
- ☐ Do I have capacity to complete this campaign?

Civil Justice Message Map

This one-page reference distills the anchor messages into a quick-reference format.

Message 1: WHY IT MATTERS	Message 2: WHAT'S NOT WORKING	Message 3: WHAT WE CAN DO
Civil justice helps people solve the problems that shape their lives.	The legal system is struggling to help people solve their problems.	There are solutions to improve the system, and everyone has a role to play.
Every day, people face problems that threaten their stability—an eviction notice, a custody dispute, unpaid wages, unsafe living conditions. The civil justice system exists to help people resolve these problems fairly. When the civil justice system works, it stabilizes families, strengthens communities, and supports economic opportunity. It is part of the civic infrastructure that holds our society together, as essential as schools, healthcare, and safe housing.	Many people who face civil legal problems do not get meaningful help. The system can be confusing, expensive, and filled with jargon that makes it feel like it was designed for insiders. People are often expected to navigate complex procedures alone, sometimes against opponents with professional representation. The result is a growing gap between the promise of fairness and the reality that millions of people experience—a gap that costs families their homes, their safety, their income, and their futures.	Across the country, innovators, implementers, influencers, and others are proving that a better system is possible. Lawyers and trained community helpers are guiding people through complicated legal processes. Technology is making information and services more accessible. Courts are simplifying procedures that make it easier for users and implementers. These approaches are working and ready to grow. Building a civil justice system that truly works requires lawyers, legal services organizations, judges, community organizations, funders, business leaders, policymakers, and the public.

Media Preparation and Working with Media

This resource offers guidance on preparing spokespeople, developing press materials, and building relationships with journalists who cover civil justice and related issues.

Working with Media

- ▶ **Know who they are.** Build a list of journalists who matter to you and your issue. Identify 10–15 reporters who cover civil justice or adjacent beats (e.g. economy, health care, state/municipal government, etc.). Create a list that contains their outlet, contact info, recent coverage, and any notes to make your outreach tailored and effective.
- ▶ **Invest in relationships before you need them.** Reporters covering courts, legal affairs, or social justice are more likely to call on you as a source if they already know you and your work. Introduce yourself, share relevant reports or data, and make yourself available as a background resource—not just when you have something to announce. If you have other ideas for them, be it another source or resource, offer that up.
- ▶ **Do your homework.** Reporters like to know that they are reaching people. Follow them on social media and track their coverage consistently. You'll pick up on their angles, recurring themes, and what kinds of stories they gravitate toward. It will make your pitches sharper and more relevant to their work.
- ▶ **Reporters need a hook.** They are looking for issues and topics that matter to people, are new and timely, and include a conflict and/or a human element.
- ▶ **Be mindful of deadlines.** Reporters live by the news cycle and are constantly facing deadlines—some are non-negotiable and some may be flexible. If the window they provide is too short for you to respond, still engage and see if there is flexibility. If not, being upfront and letting them know you can't meet it is better than ignoring it.

Tips for a Successful Interview

- ▶ **Have your three points and stick to them.** Regardless of the interview format, identify your three most important messages in advance and return to them, often. Repeating simple and direct concepts is a winning recipe.
- ▶ **Lead with people, when possible.** Journalists covering civil justice reform need stories, not policy arguments. Understanding that there is usually a process or policy undergirding your story, it is best when pitching or responding to media to anchor your message in a specific person's experience before introducing systemic analysis. "Here's what happened to Maria when she tried to fight an eviction without a lawyer" will land before "47% of civil litigants are unrepresented."
- ▶ **Prepare your bridging phrases.** Interviews rarely go exactly where you want them. Practice moving from a reporter's question back to your core message. "That's an important context and what it points to is..." or "The deeper issue here is...."

- ▶ **Always establish attribution terms before the conversation begins—not at the end, and not after you’ve said something.** A reporter is under no obligation to honor attribution terms applied retroactively. When in doubt, assume everything is on the record. Every conversation with a reporter carries attribution implications, and assumptions on either side can damage trust. The three main modes are:
 - ▷ *On the record:* Your name and affiliation are attached to everything you say. This is the default unless you establish otherwise before speaking.
 - ▷ *On background:* Your information can be used, but you won’t be named directly. Reporters may identify you as “a court reform expert” or “a source familiar with the process.” Agree on that description in advance.
 - ▷ *Off the record:* The information cannot be published at all and exists only to help the reporter understand context. Note that not all reporters interpret this the same way, and some will not accept off-the-record conversations.
- ▶ **Anticipate hostile questions.** Prepare for questions that challenge the premise of reform such as “Isn’t the system working fine for most people?” or that shift the discussion in a partisan way that undermines your own goals, and practice answers.
- ▶ **Don’t repeat the negative.** If asked “Isn’t this a sign our courts are failing?”, don’t say “Our courts aren’t failing.” Shift to a more positive statement that you would want quoted, rather than repeating and reinforcing the negative. Say, “There are simple solutions to help courts face current challenges.”
- ▶ **Correct the record carefully.** If a story gets something wrong, address it promptly and professionally. Offer the reporter a chance to correct it before escalating to an editor.
- ▶ **Know the format.** A pre-recorded TV segment, a live radio segment, a print interview, and a recorded podcast require slightly different approaches. For some, what you wear matters, but for others, being prepared to respond in detail to follow-up questions will be a priority. Having notes in front of you for a radio interview over the phone is fine, but not for a live TV segment. Asking if you can provide written answers to a print reporter can be a way to participate on your own terms and timeline. Make sure you know the format, length, topic, and any other people being interviewed.
- ▶ **Do your homework.** Look up the reporter and outlet to understand their coverage, audience, and track record. It is also entirely reasonable to ask for more details before committing to participate in an interview. That can include what the piece is about, what questions they plan to explore, and who else they are speaking with. Most reporters will share this willingly. The answers will help you assess whether the opportunity is the right fit and give your spokesperson a head start on preparation.

Social Media Guidance

This resource offers practical guidance on adapting civil justice messages for social platforms, engaging your audiences where they are, and amplifying the work of partners.

Social Media Platforms

Choose your platforms strategically because they each have differing goals, formats, and audiences. As a general guide, below are brief descriptions of each channel and their users:

- ▶ **LinkedIn** is effective for reaching stakeholder and professional audiences interested in data as well as policy and regulatory issues.
- ▶ **YouTube** is made for videos and visual content, allowing both long- and short-form video content with a growing number of independent journalists making this their platform of choice.
- ▶ **Instagram** and **TikTok** are better suited for visual storytelling and graphics while reaching broader public audiences, particularly younger people.
- ▶ **Bluesky** is ideal for short-form content and community discussions on a variety of topics.
- ▶ **Facebook** is a go-to for longer-form content, event promotion, and growing your community.
- ▶ **X/Twitter** is ideal for quick news, reactions, and monitoring messages from influencers and experts such as journalists, policymakers, and legal professionals.

Tips: Using Social Media Effectively

Focus your energy on one to two platforms rather than spreading thin across all of them. Below are some best practices to consider when developing your content:

- ▶ **Make it human.** The most shareable justice system reform content connects systemic problems to recognizable human experiences. A short story about someone navigating the system alone, with a clear takeaway, will outperform a thread of statistics.
- ▶ **Visuals matter.** Posts with images, short video, or designed graphics consistently outperform text-only posts. Simple stats turned into graphics, short testimonial clips, or even well-designed quote cards can significantly extend your reach. There are free online tools available to help develop these, including Canva.
- ▶ **Engage, don't just broadcast.** Social media works best as a conversational channel. Respond to comments, amplify allies, and participate in relevant conversations rather than simply posting and moving on.
- ▶ **Be consistent.** Irregular posting undermines credibility and can compromise reach if you don't keep the conversation warm. A realistic cadence of two or three posts per week is more effective than bursts of activity followed by silence. You can do that by creating a social media content calendar ahead of time and using third-party tools to schedule posts.

- ▶ **Prepare for criticism.** Your work could attract pushback, and social media criticism can escalate quickly. Decide in advance what you will and won't engage with. Correcting inaccuracies and responding to good-faith disagreement is worthwhile, but engaging with bad-faith attacks rarely is. The best way to be prepared for these situations is to create a social media guideline policy.
- ▶ **Track what works.** Most platforms offer basic analytics. Pay attention to what content gets shared and engaged with, not just liked, and let that inform your approach over time and set future goals for each platform.

Supporting Those Directly Impacted When Sharing Their Stories

People with lived experience of civil legal problems are among the most powerful voices in this work. This resource offers guidance on how to engage them ethically and effectively.

Start with dignity and choice

- ▶ People with lived experience should have full agency over how, when, and whether their story is shared.
- ▶ Always get informed consent and make sure they understand how their story will be used and shared. Utilize plain language for informed consent to ensure understanding. At any point people have the choice to change their mind and withdraw consent, even when permission was previously given.
- ▶ Let them set limits and respect their boundaries without requiring explanation. They may want to share some parts of their story but not all of it, or they may not want to be identified. Make sure to discuss these options and their comfort level with the information they want to share in advance.
- ▶ Make participation optional at every stage of the process.

Prepare them thoroughly

- ▶ Explain the full context, including who will be in the room, what the goal is, and how the story will be used and shared. Make sure to provide clear information for each situation, whether it involves simple one-to-one retelling of their story in individual conversations, audio or video recordings, live interviews, or some combination.
- ▶ Share talking points and likely questions in advance. Never put someone in front of an audience without preparation.
- ▶ Practice together. A prep conversation helps people feel confident and in control of their own narrative. This practice will lead to a more comfortable experience and yield a better outcome.

Support before, during, and after

- ▶ Assign a person to support them throughout the process so they always have a point of contact.
- ▶ Sharing a difficult experience publicly can be emotionally demanding. Check in with them after the interview.
- ▶ Interview participants sometimes do not have an overwhelming or emotionally demanding reaction and that is a normal response as well.
- ▶ Be transparent about outcomes. Let them know how their participation was used and what it helped achieve.

Compensate and credit fairly

- ▶ Their expertise has value so compensate people for their time.
- ▶ Ask how they want to be identified (e.g. full name, first name only, or anonymous).
- ▶ Never use a person's story to raise funds without their explicit permission.

Frame people as problem solvers, not victims

Lead with agency, not suffering.

DO

- ✓ Center what they did, tried to do, or could do with proper support.
- ✓ Use their own words when possible. Authentic language is more compelling than polished messaging.
- ✓ Name the system failure, not the personal failure. The problem is a gap in access, not in the person.

DON'T

- x Lead with suffering or helplessness.
- x Define people by their legal problem (e.g. "the evicted," "the unrepresented").
- x Imply they couldn't help themselves. Show what is possible with the right help or improvements.

Pair story with solution

- ▶ Identify what changed when help was available.
- ▶ Identify what's possible with the right investment or policy change.
- ▶ Include a specific ask your audience can act on, like supporting a bill, signing a petition, or participating in an event.



Your Role & Impact



Tell us how you use this guide.



Tell us what successes you see.



Tell us what further guidance and alignment is needed.



Please share this guide with your colleagues.



Connect with us to partner on this project at iaals@du.edu.



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