

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.