



IMPROVING COURT ATTENDANCE

The Essential Guide to Court Reminder Programs

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About ideas42

We are a non-profit looking for deep insights into human behavior—why people do what they do—and using that knowledge in ways that help improve lives, build better systems, and drive social change. Working globally, we reinvent the practices of institutions, and create better products and policies that can be scaled for maximum impact.

(Un)warranted is an ideas42 initiative that increases court appearance rates across the United States to significantly reduce warrants and jail for people with low-level cases—saving money, improving efficiency, and reducing the strain felt across the legal system. We work hand-in-hand with courts, law enforcement, district attorneys, public defenders, and community-based organizations to make court date notices clearer and easier to act on and to set up effective reminder programs. We also partner with advocates and policymakers to improve policy using this evidence-based approach. So far, our collaborations have prevented over 125,000 missed court dates and saved \$357 million.

Contact us at unwarranted@ideas42.org to learn more about this guide, our support for court date communications, or our proven low-cost, evidence-based strategies that drive fairer and more effective justice. Visit ideas42.org/unwarranted or follow us on [LinkedIn](#) to learn more about our work.

Acknowledgments

This guide is the culmination of over a decade of work, beginning in 2014 with our first project to improve court appearance rates with impactful reminders (and a redesigned citation). Since then, we've collaborated with many courts and are deeply grateful to the early adopters who have allowed us to guide them, while helping us understand all the nuances necessary to provide informed advice and define best practices.

We continue to learn from other researchers of court reminders, all of whom have made important contributions to our collective knowledge and the recommendations in this guide. This body of research together, combined with the increasing use of reminders and resulting operational experience in courts, has enabled us to create this guide.

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Reminders Work: Voices from the Front Lines

“ Following the introduction of text messaging reminders, the appearance rates for high-risk defendants have improved. Among our highest risk pretrial defendants who received text message reminders, appearance rates have increased by 15%.”

–CHIEF JUDGE JEFFREY R. PILKINGTON,
First Judicial District, Colorado

“ It's easy for judges to issue warrants but their consequences can devastate people's lives. Making courts more accessible through text reminders allows the Court to resolve more cases by increasing appearances and also reduces the burden on people who are already facing significant challenges. It's a win-win.”

–JUDGE COURTNEY WACHAL,
Kansas City Municipal Court, Missouri

“ We get and rely on text reminders for everything from school to a dentist appointment. Court attendance is critical to the justice process. When defendants forget to appear, warrants are issued. When victims and witnesses fail to appear, cases get dismissed. Supplementing current notification methods with text reminders is a no brainer.”

–STATE ATTORNEY KATHERINE FERNANDEZ RUNDLE,
Miami-Dade County, Florida

“ Thousands of warrants are needlessly issued every year, creating additional strains on an already strained corrections system. Using readily available technology to send court reminders can play a critical role in breaking the preventable cycle of re-arrest, incarceration and recidivism.”

–PRESIDENT SHAWN LAUGHLIN,
American Jail Association

“ When a person has a warrant solely because they forgot about their court date, a police officer's simple traffic stop becomes much more serious, complicated, and demanding than it needs to be. When reminders prevent these warrants, reminders help police.”

–PAST PRESIDENT LOUIS DEKMAR,
*International Association of Chiefs of Police,
Chief of Police (Ret.), LaGrange, Georgia*

“ Since implementing changes to court date notifications and reminders, we have seen a significant reduction in missed appearances and last-minute rescheduling. Our team spends far less time on failures to appear, and case processing has become much more efficient. Court users appreciate the changes, and our overall compliance rates have significantly improved. This solution has saved us time, reduced administrative burdens, and ensured smoother court proceedings. We are thankful for the partnership with the ideas42 team, which has become a game-changer for our court.”

—CHIEF DEPUTY EXECUTIVE OFFICER KELLY SULLIVAN,
Sacramento County Superior Court, California

“ In my experience, the inherent stress of being a justice involved individual often obscures the specific court date set. Court date reminders have proven critically helpful to these people—and everyone else who would be directly or indirectly impacted by their missed court appearance.”

—DIRECTOR JAMES M. RETALLICK,
Weber Public Defender Group, Weber County, Utah

“ As a judge, I want people to get to court and avoid warrants and suspended licenses. Let's stop people from missing court dates in the first place because that is better for the court and the community. If my mechanic can send a message about my upcoming oil change, it's crazy for a court not to send a message about a court date, especially when the consequences are so serious.

Before the [municipal] court automated reminders, I would send messages to anyone who missed a court date or had a warrant for not appearing with Google text but before I pressed send, I would have to go alert the clerk's office because they would get so many calls right then with people saying, "I forgot—when can I come in?"

—JUDGE RYAN HOPE,
State Court Athens-Clarke County, Georgia

“ Our mission as sheriffs is to protect public safety, maintain secure facilities, and help reduce recidivism. Chasing and processing nonappearance warrants wastes valued resources better spent on real public safety priorities. Reminder programs are a powerful tool that keep eligible people where they belong pretrial—on the street, instead of unnecessarily clogging our jails.”

—SHERIFF STEVEN W. TOMPKINS,
Suffolk County, Massachusetts

“ In Harris County, reminders have significantly increased court appearance rates. As a result, our criminal courts, law enforcement, and jails dedicate more focus on serious offenses—and taxpayers get the break they deserve.”

—COMMISSIONER ADRIAN GARCIA,
Harris County, Texas

Introduction

Anthony had every intention of appearing for his court date next month. Then, life got complicated. His sister got into a car accident and spent a few days in the ICU. Anthony had to navigate her stay with the insurance company, while also visiting her and arranging for a rehab facility. He fell behind on his work, sleep, laundry, mail. Although a month ago he could never have imagined forgetting his court date, when the time came, he did.

Nationwide, millions of people miss their court date—despite their genuine intent to attend. This issue is so widespread that, in areas across the United States, more people are booked into jail for missing court than any other reason.¹ Yet research shows that a primary driver of nonappearance is that people *simply forget or struggle to plan properly* for their court date—a problem that reminders solve.²

This report is a complete guide to setting up an effective court reminder program, thereby preventing missed appearances, reducing warrants, and unlocking massive savings—in both resources and dollars—year after year.

The high cost of missed appearances

Missed court dates create case backlogs, overburden dockets, waste financial and human resources, and lead to jail overcrowding. We conservatively estimate each missed court date costs the government \$1,496 in staff time and other resources.³ This includes rescheduling hearings, issuing warrants, locating individuals, and possible jail time.

Yet this figure likely underestimates the true financial impact on courts, attorneys, law enforcement, and jails, not to mention the burdens placed on those with outstanding warrants.ⁱ When this figure is multiplied by the *millions* of missed court dates each year, the expense to taxpayers comes into dramatic focus. Altogether, missed court dates likely cost local government millions of dollars annually—and tens of millions for many state governments.

Recognizing this hefty price tag, courts are increasingly turning to reminders as a cost-effective, proactive solution, rather than relying solely on costly, reactive punitive measures like warrants. It's a classic case of “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

Why reminders work

We are all human, and missing appointments happens to everyone. In fact, doctor appointments are missed at rates similar to, or even higher than, court dates.⁴ This is why reminders are accepted and widely used by businesses and governments—and increasingly by courts: they help bridge the gap between intention and action, and they work. They're practical, effective, and inexpensive.

ⁱ We conservatively estimated each missed court date costs individuals \$1,394 based on our probabilistic model (see above footnote). Individuals incur at least 1 day lost income if arrested or held in custody, potential fines to clear warrant or arrest, loss of bail, and delays to license renewal, delays to new employment, and avoidance of social services and benefits until warrant is cleared.

Reminders work because they address the widespread, yet often overlooked, behavioral reasons people miss court. Sometimes people miss court for logistical reasons (no transportation, inflexible work schedules, childcare duties), but many miss for reasons related to poverty and its effect on mental bandwidth, simple forgetfulness when life gets overwhelming, and "present bias"—where people focus more on the immediate costs of attending court (like fear or missing work) than the larger, long-term consequences of missing court, such as warrants and arrest.⁵

Court reminders address these issues by helping people remember their court date, understand the consequences of missing court, proactively plan to attend, and reduce their fear or confusion. Moreover, the effectiveness of reminders is well-established and backed by extensive research. Rigorous evaluations consistently show that court reminders reduce nonappearance by 20 to 40%.⁶ Studies show they are even more effective for people who have previously missed court.⁷

A small initial investment in a reminder system, with minimal per-reminder costs thereafter, will significantly improve appearance rates. This, in turn, will lead to massive savings for governments and taxpayers, while also reducing the negative consequences for individuals who would otherwise miss court.

About this guide

We designed this resource for those seeking to use proven, cost-effective practices to create or improve a court reminder system, including court administrators, policymakers, IT teams, clerks, judges, legislators, public defenders, district attorneys, pretrial agencies, and others. The goal is to provide a clear roadmap for system stakeholders to understand and implement this low-cost, high-impact solution to increase court appearance rates and improve overall court efficiency. While we focus on the criminal court system (most studies are based on offenses with warrant consequences—felony, misdemeanor, and some traffic cases), the principles outlined here can also be applied in civil or family courts, helping courts achieve better outcomes in all case types.

This guide is grounded in evidence, operational best practices, and the science of human behavior. It breaks down the fundamentals of building a successful reminder program into achievable steps and demystifies the process. We'll show you proven strategies for content and timing, system options for creating and sending reminders, and technology platforms and their basic costs. Plus, we'll explore crucial elements like collecting contact information and the importance of auto-enrollment for broad and impactful reach.

By reading this report, you'll discover how simple changes can dramatically enhance the quality, efficiency, and impact of court operations in your jurisdiction. With these tools at your disposal, you can start boosting court appearances—benefiting the court, its partners and stakeholders, the people attending, and their communities. Let's get started.

SECTION 1

ENROLLMENT: BUILDING THE FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESS

A When to collect contact information?

Topline recommendation:

*Collect contact information early and often—this is an essential requirement of an effective reminder program. Phone numbers, and email addresses if possible, should be collected on initial citations or at booking (to ensure reminders can be sent **before** the first out-of-custody hearing) and updated throughout the case to ensure accuracy.*

Working with court partners to ensure early collection of contact information is essential. Typically when courts collect phone numbers and emails, they do so only from those who have already appeared, excluding those who do not appear. Ironically, this is the very population who needs reminders most. A study has shown that **reminders are even more effective among people who have previously missed court.**⁸

Therefore, to ensure reminders are sent before the first hearing, collect phone numbers and other contact information at the **initial point of contact**. Reminders are important for all hearings, and **especially critical for the first out-of-custody hearing, as it is often the most missed for expected reasons.**ⁱⁱ there are often long delays between arrest and the first out-of-custody hearing,⁹ and people fear going to court without an attorney (assignment usually occurs at this hearing). Reminders keep the court date top-of-mind and can advise people that an attorney will be available or assigned to help with their case.

To collect accurate contact information early and often, we recommend the following:

1 System actors should collect and share contact information with the court.

Courts will need to partner with law enforcement, jail staff, and/or pretrial services to identify where and when contact information can be collected during the initial arrest. This will depend on whether the person is cited and released or booked into jail prior to release:

ⁱⁱ Courts have shared this anecdotally, and we have seen this to be true in the limited number of court datasets to which we have access. Further research could document the extent of this discrepancy in support of case resolution.

► **Cited & Released:** For people who are cited and released (no booking), look to the local or uniform citation (also called ticket, summons, etc.) to ensure it includes phone number and email fields. Determine how this is transferred into the court's case management system.

Reminders reduce nonappearance warrants, saving time for law enforcement and allowing them to focus on the most important public safety issues.

For jurisdictions with a citation that does not include at least a phone number field, revising the current citation will be necessary to reach a large volume of people with cases. Depending on the jurisdiction, this change may require legislation, approval from the state's highest court or law enforcement, or state/local rules change. *An example of a behaviorally redesigned citation can be [seen here](#) on pp. 10-11. For assistance redesigning citations to further improve appearance rates, contact unwarranted@ideas42.org.*

► **Booked & Released:** For people who are booked, look to the entities booking (sheriff/jail) and bonding (sheriff/jail, at times pretrial services) to collect contact information and share it with the court. The data can be shared through direct transfer to the court case management system or another mechanism, such as booking or bonding documents that will be filed with the court.

Sheriffs typically understand the cost and burden of jailing people solely for a missed hearing and will work with courts to facilitate reminders proven to reduce nonappearance in the first place.

In jurisdictions where hearings are held prior to release, court staff can collect contact information at the in-custody hearing for ease of upload into its system.

Law enforcement officers should be required to *ask* for phone numbers and accurate contact information at citation or booking. (While people have the right to decline, asking for contact information should be mandatory.) If officers are not currently required to ask for it, meet with relevant officials to encourage increased collection. This small step saves them time and costs in the long run and is vital to a robust reminder program.

2 **Courts should update contact information at every touchpoint during the case.**

Whenever court staff interact with people in relation to their case—at hearings, in the clerk's office, by phone, a form, or website—they should always collect or confirm contact information. The more reminders that are successfully delivered, the greater efficiency for the court and all involved in the case.

Key considerations

- ▶ **People are more likely to provide contact information when they know it will be used for reminders.** While people may hesitate to share contact information with law enforcement and related agencies, explaining the benefits of sharing this information fosters transparency and encourages participation. Officers share that when people hear their phone number will be used for helpful purposes (reminders of court dates/changes/closures), they are more likely to provide this information. When soliciting contact information, the collector should always explain: “Your phone number will be used for reminders of upcoming court dates or court closures.” For contact information captured on forms, the form should state: “Your phone number will be used for court reminders to help you remember court and avoid arrest.”
- ▶ **The decision to disclose one’s contact information always lies with the person.** While we suggest that asking for contact information be mandatory for law enforcement and court officials, people must always have the right to decline.
- ▶ **Contact information should be safeguarded.** Ensuring the privacy of contact information, and informing court users about privacy protections, encourages participation in reminder programs. This includes limitations on use by law enforcement or for marketing purposes.
- ▶ **Addresses on driver’s licenses or ID cards are often outdated and should be confirmed, in addition to collecting phone numbers and emails.** Often, a huge volume of mail sent by the court is returned,¹⁰ resulting in costs without any benefits. Accurate addresses for reminders increase compliance and resolution of cases.
- ▶ **Apply the contact information collected for one case to all cases, past and future.** Ensure that any contact information collected is attached to the person’s main identifier in the CMS and will be used (and updated as needed) for reminders in all cases past, present, and future.

B How to enroll people to receive reminders?

Topline recommendation:

*Courts should automatically enroll people into reminder programs and allow them the option to opt-out because **requiring people to sign up on their own creates unnecessary hurdles and leads to low participation. Automatic enrollment is the simplest and most cost-effective way to maximize participation and impact.***

Most people want to receive reminders, and the best way—by far—is to enroll them automatically in the program. Many people are simply unaware that reminders exist and when courts require people to sign up, they are choosing to take on a costly, ongoing public education campaign. In addition, data shows that sign-up processes are burdensome and drastically limit participation, even among people who wish to receive reminders. When courts automatically enroll people into reminders, everyone benefits. More people participate, appearance rates increase, and staff time and costs significantly drop. **Automatic enrollment is simply the smartest decision and best use of resources for any reminder program.**

1 **Automatic enrollment leads to higher participation and thereby greater appearance rates.**

The Colorado state court reminder program switched from required sign-ups to automatic enrollment (with the ability to opt-out) and increased reminders from about 56,000 to 224,000 in one month, a jump of 300%.¹¹ Appearance rates have been consistently higher since switching to automatic enrollment.

2 **Sign-up requirements create hassles, leading to low follow-through and participation.**

- ▶ Signing up for any program is a hassle. Humans prefer to avoid friction—hassles irritate us, induce stress,¹² and often delay or halt action.^{13,iii} Requiring sign-up for reminders is a hassle-filled process, from finding the time to sign up to navigating the often-complex portal and then completing the tasks required (which often require a case number or an account with a password). This also assumes that everyone knows about the reminder program and understands its benefits. At each stage of the process (awareness, intention, action), significant drop-off will occur. In sum, the more steps in a process, the more hassles and the less engagement.
- ▶ Many modern technologies aim to diminish hassles: face-recognition for passwords, fingerprints to open our computers, and even an old-fashioned self-addressed stamped envelope for a reply. Removing hassles helps us get to the actions we want to take. For

ⁱⁱⁱ For examples on how hassles limit take-up of government programs: Bertrand, M., Mullainathan, S., and Shafir, E. (2006). “Behavioral Economics and Marketing in Aid of Decision Making among the Poor.” *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 25(1), 8-23. DOI: [10.1509/jppm.25.1.8](https://doi.org/10.1509/jppm.25.1.8); O’Brien, D., Prendergast, K., Thompson, E., Fruchter, M. and Torres Aldeen, H. “The Red Tape Divide”. America’s Second Harvest. <https://www.issuelab.org/resources/95/95.pdf>.

example, when states started automatic voter registration, the number of registered voters increased, by amounts ranging from 9% to 94%, across states.¹⁴ One report projects that if the automatic voter system from Oregon were extended to all 50 states, more than 22 million new voters would be registered in the first year alone.¹⁵ This shows that automatic enrollment has precedent beyond court reminders and is broadly effective.

3 Automatic enrollment also lightens the load on court staff and can reduce costs.

Automatic enrollment does more than dramatically increase participation; it also lightens the load on the court staff. Courts will not need to continually fund and implement extensive advertising for the reminder program (signs, cards, forms at the court and other local sites), nor use precious staff resources to tell people about the program, encourage sign ups, or take the time to sign people up in a portal. In addition, with more people showing up, less time is spent calling cases, rescheduling, issuing warrants, and completing other administrative tasks resulting from nonappearance.

4 Few people opt-out of automatic enrollment, as most want to receive reminders.

Evidence on opt-out rates shows that people want to receive reminders, and that automatic enrollment helps them overcome the hassles of signing up:

- ▶ In [Lake County, Illinois](#), a study of people detained for missing court showed that 90% want court reminders.¹⁶ Among them, 97% were comfortable with automatic enrollment.¹⁷
- ▶ In Colorado, over 99% of messages have been successfully delivered without a request to opt-out (with “wrong number” as the most reported reason).¹⁸ In Santa Clara, California, 96.3% of people stayed enrolled in the program.¹⁹

5 When automatically enrolling people into reminders, offer the option to opt-out.

Always provide the ability for people to opt-out of the reminder program and include instructions on how to do so in the first reminder. For example: “You may reply STOP to end texts, but most people find reminders helpful!”

Note on the Telephone Consumer Protection Act (“TCPA”)

Two forms of reminders—text messages and phone calls—are governed by a federal law, the TCPA.^{iv} The TCPA prohibits “any person” from making any call using any “automatic telephone dialing system” or “artificial or prerecorded voice” to “any telephone number assigned to a ... cellular telephone service ... for which the called party is charged for the call.”^v The TCPA *expressly exempts* any calls “made with the prior express consent of the called party” from the law.²⁰

Court reminders by text or phone should fall outside the TCPA prohibitions (based on current law) for the following reasons:

- Reminders **are not sent via “automatic telephone dialing systems”** (aka robocalls using a random or sequential number generator), but rather to specific phone numbers belonging to, and provided by, court users. Though courts do not send reminders to randomly generated numbers,²¹ confirm that the platform sending the text messages does not have the capacity to store or produce a number using a random or sequential generator; if so, it is not an “automatic telephone dialing system.”^{vi}
- Text reminders and live phone calls **do not use a prerecorded voice.**^{vii} For courts that use phone calls with a prerecorded voice for reminders, “prior express consent” should render the TCPA nonapplicable (see below).
- **Prior Express Consent:** According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), providing a phone number “constitutes their ‘prior express consent’ to be contacted at that number regarding information closely related to the purpose for which they provided the number, absent instructions to the contrary.”^{viii}

Therefore, giving one’s phone number to a citing officer, booking/jail/bonding staff, and/or the court should suffice as “prior express consent” for reminders. Regardless, as long as courts are not using an “automatic telephone dialing system” nor an “artificial or prerecorded voice,” the inquiry need not reach the consent issue.

- **Opt-out:** Courts must honor requests to opt out from the text messaging program. Such a request would be viewed as a withdrawal of consent.^{ix} Therefore, reminder programs should include language regarding how the recipient can opt out (for example, “Reply STOP to end messages”).
- **State Law:** Some states have enacted, or are in the process of enacting, “mini-TCPA” laws that are analogous to the federal TCPA.^x As a general matter, many of these states restrict messages that are sent for a commercial purpose and thus would not apply to court reminders. For example, the Arizona, Florida, and Oklahoma state laws only apply to calls or messages sent for the purpose of soliciting a sale.

^{iv} While the statute’s text specifically refers to “calls,” the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has clearly stated that a text message constitutes a “call,” and courts have followed suit. See 2003 TCPA Order, 18 FCC Rcd at 14115, para. 165; see also *Satterfield v. Simon & Schuster, Inc.*, 569 F.3d 946, 954 (9th Cir. 2009) (noting that text messaging is a form of communication used primarily between telephones and is therefore consistent with the definition of a “call”).

^v See 47 U.S.C. 227(b)(1)(A)(iii).

^{vi} See *Facebook, Inc. v. Duguid*, 141 S. Ct. 1163 (2021).

^{vii} See *Trim v. Reward Zone USA LLC*, 76 F.4th 1157 (9th Cir. 2023) (interpreting the phrase “artificial or prerecorded voice” to mean a literal voice that comes from a person speaking, thus excluding text messages). While the Ninth Circuit is not binding in all jurisdictions and it is not guaranteed that all circuit courts will rule similarly, this interpretation is consistent with both lower court rulings and the statute’s plain meaning. See Guidry, T. (2022). “Not Frivolous but Wrong: Text Messages Are Still Not Voices.” *National Law Review*. Nov. 29. <https://www.natlawreview.com/article/not-frivolous-wrong-text-messages-are-still-not-voices>.

^{viii} See 2023 HHS Declaratory Ruling, 38 FCC Rcd 404 (citing 1992 TCPA Order, 7 FCC Rcd at 8769 and other rulings concluding the same). <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DA-23-62A1.pdf>; see also Stevens, J. (2024). “TCPA Requirements FAQ.” MS Law Group. Jan. 26. <https://mslawgroup.com/tcpa-requirements-faq/>.

^{ix} See 47 CFR 64.1200(a)(10).

^x See Brown, B.R., Tayman, W.K., and Hennecken, C.L. (2023). “Mini-TCPA Laws You Should Know and That May Be Coming Soon in 2023.” *Goodwin Law*. Feb. 28.

C Who receives reminders, and for which hearings?

Topline recommendation:

Everyone with a criminal case should receive a reminder for every court hearing. It's especially important that reminders are sent before the first out-of-custody hearing, which is the most frequently missed hearing, and when someone misses a court date, to get them back on track.

- ▶ **Who:** Court reminders should include everyone with a pretrial case and can also be sent to other relevant parties.
- ▶ **Which hearings:** Reminders should be sent before all hearings ("pre-court") as well as after any missed appearances ("post-nonappearance").

1 **WHO: Court reminders for all**

- ▶ **Send reminders for everyone with a pretrial case.** While many pretrial offices send reminders to their clients, it is important to ensure reminders are extended to everyone, not just those on supervision. In fact, people on supervision, with related reporting requirements, will likely have court more top-of-mind than someone without any other prompts related to their case and court dates.

Additionally, sending reminders to the entire pretrial population ensures that everyone with a case can benefit from them. This is especially important for people who experience more hardship in attending court. For example, data shows that demographics such as income and race can play a role in court attendance,²² as communities with less access to resources are more likely to experience common barriers to appearance.²³ Therefore, sending reminders to everyone with a pretrial case will be most effective in increasing appearance rates. (See [Appendix: Challenges and limitations](#).)

While most research and implementation of reminders have focused on criminal cases, they can and should be used in civil courts as well. Missing a court hearing for a civil case can result in a default judgment and lead to serious consequences for people's families, housing situation, and other matters.

- ▶ **Send reminders to other relevant parties too, as possible.** The problem of nonappearance is systemic in that all actors struggle to show up. In fact, lawyers, witnesses, police officers, and victims are shown to have *higher* no-show rates than the people charged in a case.²⁴

This illustrates that missing court is a widespread and common issue (not a "criminal" one), and that all parties may be well served by reminders. While we focus this report on creating an effective reminder program for people who suffer direct consequences (warrants, etc.) for nonappearance, courts could expand the program to reach additional parties.

2 WHICH HEARINGS: Pre-court and post-nonappearance reminders

- **Send reminders before the first out-of-custody hearing.** Reminders before someone's first out-of-custody hearing are particularly important because these hearings are often the most missed court dates.ⁱ Because these hearings are so early in the process, people are uncertain about what may happen next and understandably fearful. Often at this stage, people lack appointed counsel to advise them of their rights and expectations before the hearing. In addition, longer periods between arrest and the first hearing can make people more likely to forget their court date.²⁵

For pre-court reminders, we recommend sending three text messages at 7, 3, and 1 days before the hearing, to allow for sufficient time to make arrangements, to prompt people to make concrete plans, and to keep it top of mind right before the court date. For more details and recommendations on reminder timing for all delivery methods, please see [Section 3A](#).

- **Send reminders before every subsequent court hearing.** Since barriers to appearance—logistical, economic, and behavioral—typically persist through the life of a case, courts should send reminders before every required court appearance. In fact, one study shows that nonappearance increases as the number of court dates increase, making continued reminders all the more important.ⁱⁱ This makes good sense because long, tedious processes with no clear end date (the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel) can sap people's motivation, focus, and energy. As a result, the costs of appearing may seemingly outweigh the benefits. It is therefore important to continue to remind people of every court date as well as the continued consequences of not appearing.

- **Send reminders immediately after every missed court date.** Reminders are particularly helpful after a missed court date. First, people may not know they missed a hearing, so this provides a helpful notice. Second, the reminder can clarify the specific consequences triggered for the missed court date and whether a warrant has issued or will issue shortly. Third, the reminder can encourage action by communicating the specific steps needed to either avoid a warrant or cure an issued warrant.

In our research, people are most reluctant to come to court after a missed date because of the possibility (often real and sometimes merely

Post-nonappearance reminders, like their pre-court counterparts, are also proven to work. One study looked at open warrant rates 30 days after the court date.²⁹ This rate was lowest among people who received reminders both before the court date and after a nonappearance (16.6% vs. 24.3% for people who did not get any reminder). Even on its own, a post-hearing reminder resulted in fewer open warrants than not sending any reminder at all (20.5% vs. 24.3%).

ⁱ Courts have shared this anecdotally, and we have seen this to be true in the limited number of court datasets to which we have access. Further research could document the extent of this discrepancy in support of case resolution.

ⁱⁱ See data from Chohlas-Wood, A., Coots, M., Nudell, J., Nyarko, J., Brunskill, E., Rogers, T., and Goel, S. (2023). "Automated Reminders Reduce Incarceration for Missed Court Dates: Evidence from a Text Message Experiment." DOI: [10.48550/arXiv.2306.12389](https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2306.12389), whereby 12% of the control group received a bench warrant for missing their first court date in the study window, while 21% received at least one warrant for a missed court date throughout the life of the study.

perceived) of arrest.²⁶ To realistically encourage appearance in this scenario, courts should adopt and communicate a “no arrest policy” for people coming in to resolve a nonappearance warrant. Fortunately, more and more courts are doing so: for example, St. Louis County launched “Fresh Start Fridays,” a virtual docket where people with traffic and nonviolent municipal cases can ask for a new court date without fear of arrest.²⁷ Kansas City Municipal Court reports a large boost in the number of people appearing at the “walk-in” docket to resolve warrants after adopting their no-arrest policy.²⁸

SECTION 2

SYSTEM SET UP: INFRASTRUCTURE THAT WORKS

A Which delivery methods to use for reminders?

Topline recommendation:

Text messages are typically the best way to send court date reminders because they're cost-effective, immediate, and customizable. If texting isn't an option, courts should remind people through email, mail, or phone calls. Whatever method is used, the priority is that every person receives reminders.

Courts have used text, mail, phone, and email to remind people of their upcoming court dates. All delivery methods are shown to be effective for reminders in general.³⁰ To date, only text, phone, and mail reminders for court have been independently studied. In the limited number of rigorous studies, live calls are the most effective followed by text messages and mail.

Overall, we recommend using text message reminders where possible given their unique combination of cost-effectiveness, immediacy of delivery, and language accessibility.

However, when phone numbers are not available (or people request another delivery method), then other forms of reminders should be used to ensure everyone with a court hearing receives reminders.

To understand more about each type of reminder, consider their practical pros and cons:

REMINDER TYPE PROS AND CONS

Delivery Method	Pros	Cons
 Text reminders	▪ Immediately received and frequently readⁱ ▪ Phone numbers are easy to collect (and less prone to being entered incorrectly) ▪ Adaptable to be sent in multiple languages ▪ Allows for multiple reminders with nuanced content (see Section 3B and Section 4A for reminder content)	▪ Phone numbers may change often, especially for those with less stability (though courts can use third-party phone verification tools)ⁱⁱ
 Email reminders	▪ Reaches people without consistent mailing addresses or phone numbers ▪ Allows for more thorough content and thoughtful design ▪ Multiple reminders can be sent	▪ Open rates depend on how often email is accessed ▪ Email addresses are prone to typos during collection of contact information ▪ May get lost in “junk” email (especially when the sender is not in their address book) * <i>Consider using an official “.gov” domain and other best practices to reduce spam blocks</i>
 Mail reminders	▪ Easy access to addresses, from multiple sources ▪ Allows for more thorough content and thoughtful design	▪ Source of mailing address (e.g., driver’s license or ID card) may be outdated * <i>Third-party address verification tools can greatly improve receipt rates by correcting address formats and finding correct addressesⁱⁱⁱ</i> ▪ Often high return rate (due to outdated addresses) without timely bounce backs ▪ Less likely to be opened in a timely manner compared with other methods
 Phone call reminders	▪ Allows for real-time questions and answers ▪ Accessible to people without access to smartphones or computers ▪ Accessible for people with lower literacy levels ▪ May better serve smaller jurisdictions with lower volumes of cases	▪ Most expensive ▪ Requires persistent calling to connect to live recipient; many may ignore calls and possibly voicemails ▪ May be most difficult method to serve people who need another language

ⁱ To increase successful delivery of text messages (better avoid mobile carrier spam filters) and allow for higher sending thresholds, inquire about using short codes instead of traditional phone numbers.

ⁱⁱ For example, [Experian](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ In Arizona, the City of Buckeye Court used [Melissa](#), one of many third-party address verification systems, to reduce returned mail. In a conversation with its Presiding Judge, we learned that they corrected and re-mailed about 32% of returned items. Of these, 17% were due to address entry errors (e.g., transposed numbers or missing apartment numbers), 23% were due to formatting issues, and 59% were from finding new addresses.

Key considerations

- ▶ **Start Now:** We suggest that all courts start now with whatever reminder method(s) are the lowest lift, while also considering how to build upon what exists to make reminder programs as wide-reaching and effective as possible.
- ▶ **Default:** Courts should identify a default reminder method to use when recipients' preferences are unknown. We recommend this order: text, phone calls (for smaller courts), email, and mail.
- ▶ **Choice:** When your jurisdiction can deliver reminders using more than one method, allow court users to choose their preferred mode of delivery. Allow them to select this when you ask for contact information. Behavioral science demonstrates that providing choices among recommended options enhances mental buy-in and likelihood of following through.³² If no choice is made, use the default above.
- ▶ **Language Accessibility in Text Reminders:** Text messages are relatively easy to translate into multiple languages. Translation enables a significant percentage of people to effectively receive the same reminders as others and increases access to justice. While no studies exist to date regarding the effectiveness of various translation options, there are a few possibilities. The most impressive option is a platform that can recognize the recipient's device browser language and send all messages in that language. Another innovative approach comes from eCourtDate and New Mexico's Pretrial Services where the recipient can reply to the message with any word in their language, and the system will resend the message and future messages in that language. Of course, each court can also identify the top two languages spoken in its jurisdiction and offer those languages in the welcome message. For more information on this capacity, speak with your IT staff, CMS provider, and reminder system vendors. See also [Section 4A](#) for an example welcome message with this content.

Courts should use multiple delivery methods, wherever possible, so that reminders are not limited to the availability of a specific type of contact information. For example, a New York law requires that when a court receives a case, the local criminal court shall use any contact information available to issue a reminder via text, call, email, or mail.³¹ New York allows people to select their preference, and if that preference is unknown, reminders are sent in the following order, based on relative system costs: email, text/phone call, mail.

One-way vs. two-way reminders?

One-way (no interactive communication) and two-way (interactive communication) text reminders are equally effective at reducing nonappearances, based on a recent study comparing the two.³³ The difference lies in how the interventions encourage people to address their court requirements: one-way messages encourage more people to show up for their original court date, while two-way messages encourage more people to reschedule their hearing. Two-way messages cost more (text cost plus staff time to respond), but more research is needed to understand their net impact on the court (if they reduce incoming calls, etc.) and on people (if they make it easier, increase trust and satisfaction, etc.).

We recommend sending one-way reminders that include the court phone number (and website if it provides helpful information) for court appearance questions and offer recipients the ability to reply to request reminders in another language.

B What technology to use for a reminder system?

Topline recommendation:

The best technology solution for your jurisdiction will depend on needs and capacities. Courts can build their own system, work with a Specialty Communications Platform, or, sometimes, add a reminder feature to their existing case management system.

This section outlines how to select the optimal system for digital reminders (primarily text, with email and automated call alternatives). We focus on these systems, as mail operations are typically already used by courts and live calls do not require new technology.

There are three main platform types for a reminder system: Turnkey, Do It Yourself (DIY) Build, and a Specialty Communications Platform.

PLATFORM COMPARISON

Functionality	OPTION 1: Turnkey	OPTION 2: DIY Build	OPTION 3: Specialty Communications Platform
Custom, editable messages	Depends on CMS vendor	Yes	Yes; often access to dashboard where court staff can see and edit templates for all events
Auto-enroll	Depends on CMS vendor	Yes	Yes
Multilingual (adaptive)	Depends on CMS vendor	Yes	Yes
Staff time for setup	Low	Medium - High	Low
Cost	Can include: One-time implementation fee + yearly fee + per message fee	Court IT time or vendor cost for build, plus possible monthly/annual fee +/- or cost per message fee	Can include: One-time implementation fee + yearly fee + per message fee
Evaluation	Depends on CMS vendor	If developed	Yes
External vendor support	Depends on CMS vendor	Limited if using Twilio as reminder platform	High (end-to-end service)

OPTION 1: Turnkey

What it is

Larger case management system (CMS) vendors may have the added capability to send reminders from within the existing system, which must be activated at additional cost.

Functionality

The **Turnkey** option typically offers the least functionality for reminders, as the CMS is designed primarily for core court operations rather than specialized reminder capabilities. For instance, it may provide only one simple default reminder instead of allowing for customization of multiple pre-court messages using content proven to decrease nonappearances. Also, since auto-enrollment is crucial for maximizing the effectiveness of a reminder system, it's crucial to inquire about this feature with the CMS vendor as some may have rigid policies that could impact effective implementation.

Ease

This option requires the least effort from court staff because it operates within the existing CMS. This approach offers several advantages: the responsibility for activation falls on the vendor, not the court staff; employees can continue using a familiar system; and existing vendor contracts can be leveraged. However, for CMS vendors that restrict auto-enrollment, fewer people will receive reminders, and staff must manage a time-consuming, costly, and less effective voluntary sign-up process.

Cost

Costs^{iv} often include a one-time software implementation fee, annual license fees, and a per text charge. While upfront costs may seem high, annualized costs over 3 years can result in an expense of less than 75 cents per case for statewide programs.

For illustration purposes only, please see approximate costs from a 2020 Odyssey CMS estimate³⁴ based on: about 100,000 cases per year; 3 hearings per case; and 3 text reminders sent before each hearing.



2020 Odyssey CMS Estimate

One-time implementation fee: \$125K

Yearly fee: \$21K

Reminders fee: \$7K

Annualized costs over 3 years: \$70K/year = \$0.07/text or \$0.70/case

Annualized costs over 10 years: \$41K/year = \$0.04/text or \$0.41/case

^{iv} All costs in this report are approximations from information gathered online or from conversations with vendors. Costs will vary based on jurisdiction characteristics and capabilities. Please use these figures as a guide only.

OPTION 2: **DIY Build**

What it is

The court's IT team, by themselves or with the help of an external vendor, develops a custom reminder system, taking responsibility for technical setup and ongoing maintenance.

Functionality

The **DIY Build** provides high flexibility and customization for messages, allowing for expansive possibilities and experimentation. The court will have full control over message content to leverage behavioral science without limits imposed by its CMS provider. Additionally, the court can adjust content based on the specific event (first versus subsequent hearings) and sequencing (in a series of reminders, each conveys different content).

Ease

The DIY Build is the most labor-intensive option for court IT staff, requiring technical setup and ongoing maintenance. This includes hosting, extracting data sources, scheduling, setting triggers, conducting safety checks, monitoring duplicates, and creating message templates.

- ▶ It's important to note that the scope of the DIY reminder system is limited to capabilities of the CMS.
- ▶ DIY Google Voice may be another platform for courts that do not meet Twilio's volume requirements.

Twilio Option

This option can leverage a cost-effective reminder platform like Twilio to send reminders (but the court would still need to set up all the scaffolding behind it). Court IT staff find Twilio relatively easy to use within a compatible CMS (like Tyler Technology products and others) to send the messages.

However, for courts with homegrown or noncompatible CMS, using Twilio requires a more substantial IT effort up front. For example, Alaska uses [CourtView](#) for their CMS and they have connected that directly to Twilio.

Cost

Specific costs for courts to build their own reminder system vary greatly—we have seen quotes ranging from one state needing 2 FTE Developers for 60 days and another spending \$200K to build a statewide reminder system. For smaller courts to build a basic in-house system would be much less expensive. For courts integrating with a communication platform such as Twilio, [pricing](#) for this component is reasonable and usage-based, starting at \$.0079 per message for up to 150,000 messages and ending at \$.0069 for over a million messages.

OPTION 3: Specialty Communications Platform

What it is

This is where an outside vendor handles all aspects of the reminder process, making it a comprehensive, low-maintenance option for the court while also offering more functionality than Turnkey options.

Functionality

This option provides high flexibility and customization for messages. Unlike the Turnkey or DIY Build with Twilio options, these vendors can typically provide message templates with tailored content for each message (e.g., when sending three reminders before court, each message can convey different content) and work with the court to customize the content based on the court's needs. Vendors such as eCourtDate can offer multiple applications such as messaging via text, email, and voice, multilingual messages, as well as self-service portals that allow nontechnical personnel to independently manage preferences, subscriptions, and event-based notifications. They can also offer [data dashboards](#) to provide insight into usage and performance.

Ease

This option requires minimal technical involvement from the court, providing a more user-friendly setup than a DIY Build. Vendors typically offer an end-to-end service, host the reminder system in its entirety, and work with the court to customize reminders (logic, triggers, content, translation, etc.) based on a court's preferences. Additionally, the Specialty Communications Platform will determine how to extract and send the data needed for reminders (name, event, contact information) which can be done automatically or manually depending on the capabilities of the court.

Cost

Like the Turnkey option, costs include a one-time software implementation fee, annual license fees, and a per text charge. While upfront costs may seem high, annualized costs over 3 years can result in less than 50 cents per case for statewide programs.

For illustration purposes only, the Specialty Communications Platform vendor eCourtDate provided a 2024 estimate based on: 100,000 cases per year; 3 hearings per case; and 3 text reminders sent before each hearing.



2024 eCourtDate Estimate

One-time implementation fee: \$15K

Yearly fee: \$29K

Reminders fee: \$9K

Annualized costs over 3 years : \$40K/year = \$0.04/text or \$0.40/case

Annualized costs over 10 years: \$39K/year = \$0.04/text or \$0.39/case

A note on nonprofit options

Some technology companies, like eCourtDate, focus specifically on providing reminder services for courts, while other organizations, often nonprofits or university labs, provide technology support to courts more broadly as part of a mission to improve technology in government. These organizations, like [CourtChat](#), [Computational Policy Lab](#), Stanford [Legal Design Lab](#), and [Code with Asheville](#), may be able to help jurisdictions set up court reminder systems.

Key considerations

When assessing your options and vendors, explore the following with each vendor:

1 Confirm essential components of a reminder system.

- ▶ Automatic enrollment of every person for whom contact information is obtained.
- ▶ Reminders before every required and missed appearance, including the first out-of-custody appearance.
- ▶ Ability to opt out.
- ▶ Tailored content for each message (e.g., when sending three reminders before court, each message can convey different content).
- ▶ Multilingual capabilities.
- ▶ Offer text/email/phone alternatives based on user preference or available contact information (note that mail operations are separate). If it's not feasible to provide options, choose a default communication method for sending reminders.
- ▶ Confirm the vendor will ensure contact information will be used for court reminders, and never for marketing or third-party purposes.

2 Ask how many characters per message are included per charge.

For example, one vendor may charge \$0.02 per 160 characters, and another may charge \$0.02 per 320 characters. For a message of 200 characters, the cost would be double at the first vendor. We have tested successful messages at 160 characters or less, but this limit is tight, and extra space is preferred and easily accommodated by smart phones.

A staggering return on investment

While all reminder systems involve costs, these expenses should be viewed in context of the extremely high costs of missed court dates. Every missed court date is estimated to cost the government \$1,496, covering expenses from court staff to law enforcement. In addition, each missed court date can cost an individual \$1,394, which includes a day's loss of employment, additional fines, and services avoided.

When adding government and individual costs, each missed court date costs \$2,580.^v Compared with roughly \$1 per case for reminders, it's easy to see why a small investment in creating a reminder program reaps huge rewards.

To put this in perspective, a court with a reminder program for 10,000 cases per year is estimated to save \$1.75 million each year in government costs alone, with a total annual social benefit of \$3.3 million^{vi}—while the annual cost is likely to be \$8,000–16,000.^{vii} With the improvement in case processing and reduction in wasted time and costs for courts, law enforcement, and attorneys, reminder programs are a simple, cost-effective solution to a key challenge of the legal system.

Statewide Reminders: A blueprint for success across local systems

For states looking to implement a statewide reminder system without a unified CMS—where county and municipal courts operate on local platforms—the Specialty Communications Platform option is particularly useful. It can accommodate the varying systems, provide uniformity in reminders, and facilitate effective evaluation, regardless of the differences in CMS platforms used by individual courts. For example, the Texas Office of Court Administration, as directed by recent legislation, offers a reminder system for all county courts on various CMS platforms.

^v This conservative estimate of costs is derived from a probabilistic model built by the ideas42 (Un)warranted team. This model is based on cost components that are publicly documented and easily quantifiable and uses published costs from 15 sources. Government incurs time costs of court staff and attorneys, warrant issuance, warrant clearing, and for a smaller percentage of people, apprehension and arrest, booking, jail holding for up to 24 hours (avg hold time may be longer), and possible new supervision costs. Individuals incur at least 1 day lost income if arrested or held in custody, potential fines to clear warrant or arrest, loss of bail, and delays to license renewal, delays to new employment, and avoidance of social services and benefits until warrant is cleared. Future publication anticipated and details available upon request.

^{vi} Based on an estimated nonappearance rate of 25% and reminders decreasing missed court dates by 26%.

^{vii} Based on online quote for small (\$8K) and large (\$16K) counties on eCourtDate website: <https://ecourtdate.com/pricing>. Accessed November 10, 2024.

C Who sends reminders?

Topline recommendation:

Ideally, states should provide reminder systems for all courts in their jurisdiction, even where data is housed locally. This will ensure availability across urban, suburban, and rural communities and prevent the high cost of local courts purchasing individual systems. Where no state reminder system exists, local jurisdictions should send reminders however possible (using their own CMS, DIY Build, or Specialty Communications Platform).

The options for who should send reminders and how will depend on where court data is stored. To determine what will work best in your jurisdiction, consider the following:

1 **Court data housed or accessed at state level**

State court administrations can send reminders directly when they house local court data, or they can access or communicate with local court data systems. To do so, states can 1) use a Specialty Communications Platform vendor that partners with the state court to send reminders; 2) develop their own reminder platform; or 3) purchase an add-on from their case management vendor. (See [Section 2B](#) for more on technology options.)

2 **Court data housed or accessed at local level**

► **State court administrations** can establish a statewide reminder program using a Specialty Communications Platform that can directly connect with local (and diverse) court case management systems. A statewide reminder program that local courts access is significantly less expensive than purchasing individual systems in each local court, and we highly recommend states provide this program for all courts under their jurisdiction.

► **Local courts**, including county and municipal courts, can also send reminders directly. This is a good option when there is no access to a statewide reminder program or in cases where the statewide program does not offer the features required for an effective reminder program that are outlined in this report.

To do so, local courts can 1) use a Specialty Communications Platform that partners with the court to send reminders; 2) develop their own reminder platform; or 3) purchase an add-on from their case management vendor. In these cases, using a platform with lower upfront costs will make the most sense if there is the possibility of accessing a statewide program in the coming decade. (See [Section 2B](#) for more on technology options.)

► **Other agencies/offices:** In some jurisdictions, pretrial agencies or public defenders' offices may already be sending court date reminders to their clients. While this is a helpful steppingstone, jurisdictions should expand or supplement these programs so that people who are not under supervision or do not yet have a public defender assigned can still benefit from reminders.

Key features of an effective reminder program

1. Collects contact information early and often—starting with the initial point of contact (see [Section 1A](#))
2. Enrolls people automatically, with the ability to opt-out (see [Section 1B](#))
3. Reaches everyone with a pretrial case and for all hearings (see [Section 1C](#))
4. Has ability to use multiple delivery methods based on available contact information (see [Section 2A](#))
5. Uses technology that enables these features and is cost-effective and easy to use (see [Section 2B](#))
6. Provides the system at a state level for all courts, for greatest cost-savings and impact, wherever possible. Otherwise, local courts should act (see [Section 2C](#))
7. Sends reminders with enough time to receive, read and act based on delivery method (see [Section 3A](#))
8. Writes messages that are proven to work best (see [Section 3B](#) and [Section 4](#))

SECTION 3

REMINDER TIMING AND CONTENT: THE POWER OF THE RIGHT MESSAGE

When to send (and how many) reminders?

Topline recommendation:

Reminders should be sent before every court date and with sufficient time to receive, read, and act—based on the delivery method. For text messages, a good rule of thumb is 7 days, 3 days, and 1 day before the hearing. If someone misses a court date, immediately send a message explaining how to resolve the missed appearance to get them back on track.

Below we provide recommendations for when to send pre-court reminders for each method, starting with our most highly recommended method: text reminders. When people do not show up to court, at least one post-nonappearance message should be sent immediately for each method.

Text reminders

It's likely more effective to send multiple (vs. only one) text messages, based on our analysis of rigorous evaluations. We recommend sending three messages before the court date, as this frequency has been effectively replicated in multiple studies with a schedule of 7, 3, and 1 days before^{viii} (and another study with messages sent 14, 7, and 1 days before^{ix}).

A 7/3/1 day cadence notifies people of their obligations with sufficient time to make arrangements (7 days before), prompts people to make concrete plans, which is shown to improve attendance (3 days before), and reminds people immediately before to ensure the court date stays top-of-mind and mitigate common last-minute forgetfulness (1 day before). Court users share that they appreciate advance notice to be able to coordinate logistics, such as requesting time off work, securing transportation, or covering childcare.

^{viii} Two studies sent text reminders 7/3/1 days before: Fishbane A., Ouss A., and Shah A.K. (2020). "Behavioral nudges reduce failure to appear for court." *Science*, 370(6517). DOI: [10.1126/science.abb6591](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abb6591) and Chohlas-Wood, A., Coots, M., Nudell, J., Nyarko, J., Brunskill, E., Rogers, T., and Goel, S. (2023). "Automated Reminders Reduce Incarceration for Missed Court Dates: Evidence from a Text Message Experiment." DOI: [10.48550/arXiv.2306.12389](https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2306.12389).

^{ix} One study sent text reminders 14/7/1 day before: Emanuel, N. and Ho, H. (2024). "Tripping through Hoops: The Effect of Violating Compulsory Government Procedures." *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 16(3): 290–313. DOI: [10.1257/pol.20220331](https://doi.org/10.1257/pol.20220331).

For courts with limited resources, courts can send two messages (7/1 days before), which allows for advance planning while also providing a top-of-mind reminder. For the most limited budgets, one message can be sent 3 days before,^x which offers a balanced compromise between early notice and immediacy.



Email reminders

Emails are delivered instantaneously, yet people may not read them immediately. While no studies exist studying email reminders in the court context, text studies show that two frequencies work: 7/3/1 or 14/7/1 days before to allow for advance coordination, concrete planning, and a more top-of-mind reminder. For email, we suggest the longer 14/7/1 cadence because emails may take longer to see, open, and read.

While emails in the court context have not been studied on their own, studies from other domains show that emails are an effective reminder method.³⁵ Emails may be particularly useful in reaching populations without stable access to phone or mail.



Mailed reminders

As paper mail requires a longer delivery time than texts and people may not open and read mail immediately, mail reminders should be sent 14 days before the court date.^{xi}

Postcards, which are often read faster than mail in envelopes, are shown to be effective when mailed only 5 days in advance; however, we urge courts to consider local mail delivery schedules and to ensure people receive them with sufficient time to make advance arrangements.^{xii}

While multiple mailed reminders may be more effective, this has not been studied, likely due to the higher cost of mail.



Phone call reminders

The key to phone call (and all other) reminders is reaching the person to advise them of the hearing. As multiple call attempts (~3) are often necessary to reach someone, we recommend starting calls at least 7 days before the court date. The attempts can be spread out or occur on the same day at different times.

^x One study sent a text reminder 3 days before: Owens, E. and Sloan, C. (2023). "Can Text Messages Reduce Incarceration in Rural and Vulnerable Populations?" *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*. Volume 42, Issue 4: 992-1009. DOI: [10.1002/pam.22505](https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22505). Another study sent a single text message, although timing is not listed: Lowenkamp, C., Holsinger, A. and Dierks, T. (2018). "Assessing The Effects of Court Date Notifications Within Pretrial Case Processing." *American Journal of Criminal Justice* Volume 43: 167-180. DOI: [10.1007/s12103-017-9393-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-017-9393-7).

^{xi} One study sent mail reminders with a corresponding envelope design: ideas42. (2024). "Stamping Out Missed Court Dates: How Mailed Reminders Boost Appearance." https://www.ideas42.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Sacramento_Brief-Aug2024-1.pdf.

^{xii} One study sent postcards: Tomkins, A., Bornstein, B. H., Herian, M. N., Rosenbaum, D. I., and Neeley, E., (2012). "An experiment in the law: Studying a technique to reduce failure to appear in court." *Court Review: Journal of the American Judges Association*. Volume 48, Issue 3: 96-106. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ajacourtreview/395/>.

To maximize the chances that the caller picks up, consider also calling slightly outside of traditional business hours. Live calls³⁶ appear to be more effective than automated calls,³⁷ when comparing across the two rigorous evaluations.^{xiii} In less rigorous studies, both show promise.

REMINDER FREQUENCY

Reminder Type	How many reminders	When to send
 Text reminders	3 texts	7/3/1 days before
 Email reminders	3 emails	14/7/1 days before
 Mailed reminders	1 mailed item	14 days before
 Phone call reminders	3+ call attempts	Begin at least 7 days before

^{xiii} We focus recommendations on rigorous evaluations using experimental and quasi-experimental study designs and compare across them using two measures of impact: Cohen's *h* and odds ratio. For more on these measures, please see Appendix table and section on methodology. For more on rigor, please see: Synowiec, C., Fletcher, E., Heinkel, L., and Salisbury, T. (2023). "Getting Rigor Right: A Framework for Methodological Choice in Adaptive Monitoring and Evaluation." *Glob Health: Science and Practice*. Vol. 12, No. 6. DOI: [10.9745/GHSP-D-22-00243](https://doi.org/10.9745/GHSP-D-22-00243).

B What should reminders say?

Topline recommendation:

The right message increases appearance rates. Reminders should cover the logistics of the hearing (i.e., where and when), flag consequences of nonappearance, prompt people to plan, and use simple, everyday language that helps people to navigate their court date or missed court date.

Reminders with behaviorally informed content, designed to help people understand, remember, and act, are most effective. Key components for messages are listed below, followed by examples of message content proven to increase court appearances in Section 4. In addition, two important elements of effective communications include:

1 **Use plain language for all.**

While reminders take on different formats (text, mail, email, phone), all reminders should use **plain language**, because unfamiliar terms confuse people and can prevent them from taking the correct action. Plain language is helpful for everyone, and especially people unfamiliar with legal terms, with lower literacy levels, and for those who are developing proficiency in English.³⁸ This includes substituting legalese for common words (for example, “warrant” instead of “capias,” or “required court appearance” instead of “summons”). To learn more, NCSC offers a [plain language resource list](#) and [glossary](#).

2 **Format documents strategically to ensure vital information is read and understood.**

- ▶ Format for ease of reading with a clear, descriptive title and subtitles.
- ▶ Place all the court date information (date, time, place, clearly stated consequences of nonappearance) at the top of the document and visually set it apart (using spacing, placement in a box, light shading, etc.) for optimal salience and ease of finding.
- ▶ Refrain from using all caps outside titles and headers (it’s harder for the brain to process letters when they’re all the same size, and capitals are also often read as conveying a tone of “shouting”³⁹) in favor of strategic use of bold and color (be judicious, as overusing these graphic elements dilutes their power to emphasize the most critical information).
- ▶ The Americans with Disabilities Act offers guidelines for certain signage that can be instructive here. Specifically, accessible fonts are sans serif because serifs (small flourishes at the top of letters as in Times New Roman) are harder to read for people with low vision.^{xiv}

^{xiv} See [Americans with Disabilities Act, § 703.2.3](#) and [Section508.gov](#) for more on low legibility of serif fonts.

PRE-COURT REMINDERS

Information Type	Specifics to Communicate
Logistics	▪ Date, time, court name, court address ▪ Court contact information (phone/helpline and website if useful) ▪ Offering access to live human help has been shown to move people to action, even if they don't use the offered resource.⁴⁰ ▪ Texts: Ideally, your system will be able to recognize the language on the recipient's web browser and adjust it accordingly. If not, the welcome message can instruct those who need another language to reply by writing in a word in their language (most platforms can then switch messages into the new language).
First name	▪ Using people's first name indicates that a message is relevant and increases their attention to the message. It also alerts people when a message is not intended for them.
Consequences	▪ The immediate costs of attending court (feeling fear, missing work, hassles like finding transport or childcare, traffic, etc.) can outweigh the less-clear future consequences of missing court. Making warrants or other consequences of nonappearance salient in the moment combats our human tendency to overweight immediate costs ("present bias") by helping people accurately weigh future consequences. The most effective messages always include the consequences of nonappearance, and state them in a way that is accurate and clear (vs. threatening or inducing additional fear).
Planning and commitment	▪ Prompting people to make a plan (e.g., asking them to consider when they need to leave to arrive on time and what other arrangements they may need) and commit to attending court (write out a plan) can increase follow-through by helping people anticipate obstacles, avoid common planning errors like underestimating how long tasks will take, and create a personal commitment that makes them less likely to miss the appointment.⁴¹
Expectations	▪ Public Defender: For first out-of-custody hearings in particular, people may assume they will face a judge/prosecutor without their own advocate. For courts that make counsel available at this stage, specifying access to a lawyer can reduce this fear, such as, "At court tomorrow, a public defender will help you through the process." ▪ Usual outcome: For courts that have usual outcomes, reminders can state them. For example, court reminders for infractions or minor criminal offenses may offer, "Tickets could be dismissed or end in a fine (60 days to pay)."
Virtual hearings	▪ Clarify how to attend and include link to hearing ▪ Explain what to expect when logging on to avoid confusion and premature leaving that can be caused by waiting rooms, long wait times, and unclear processes. ▪ For best practices, see NCSC's Remote Proceeding Toolkit
Resources available	▪ If your court offers additional resources, such as transportation assistance or childcare, specify that with links to resources.

POST-NONAPPEARANCE COMMUNICATIONS

Reminder Type	Specifics to Communicate
Missed hearing	▪ Notify people that they missed their hearing and offer clear steps to cure the nonappearance before a warrant is issued (for example, call/email the court to reschedule, report to a “walk-in” docket). ▪ Assure people that they will not be arrested when they act to address the nonappearance. For example, “When you come back to court, you will not be arrested for missing court.”
Warrant	▪ People with arrest warrants for nonappearance are the hardest to get back into court because of the reasonable fear of arrest and the lack of a specific date and time to appear. ▪ Offer concrete steps to clear the warrant, ideally beyond directing them to call their lawyer. ▪ Assure people that they will not be arrested when they take the steps needed to clear the warrant. For example, “You will not be arrested when you come to court to address your warrant for missing court. We want to help you get back on track.”

SECTION 4

COMMUNICATIONS IN PRACTICE: MODEL REMINDERS

This section models pre-court and post-nonappearance messages, broken out by delivery method. The examples are based on messaging proven to work in court reminder studies.

A Text reminders

Topline recommendation:

Keep messages concise for easier reading and lower costs (more characters can increase costs). We recommend layering in effective, behaviorally informed content within each message. Note: Most messages are designed to be 160 characters or less; abbreviations that don't compromise clarity for court names and addresses (example: "Rd" instead of "Road" or omitting anything superfluous) help keep message length concise.

1 Pre-court text reminder^{xv}

We recommend providing messages several days ahead of court to allow sufficient time to make arrangements, as well as sending a reminder the day before to keep it top-of-mind.

Three messages per hearing look like this:

7 Days Before

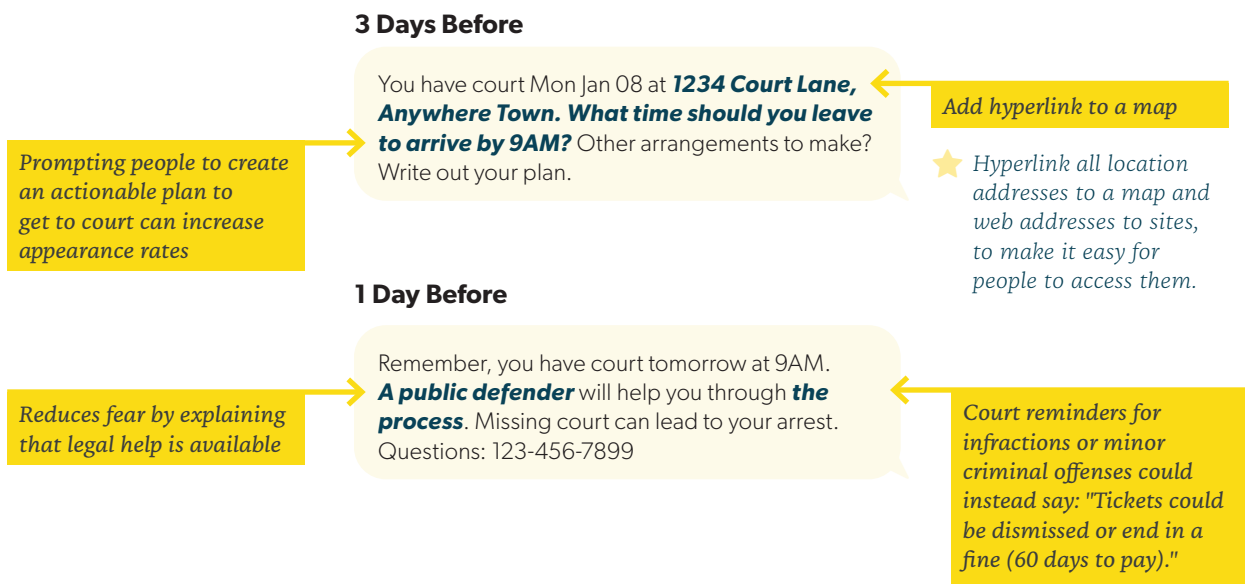
Conveys positive tone and states purpose of message

Helpful reminder: Anthony, go to court Mon Jan 08 9AM at Smith County Court. **Show up to avoid an arrest warrant.**

For questions, call the court: (123) 456-7899.

Clearly states consequences of missing court

^{xv} Based on text messages from: Fishbane, A., Ouss, A., and Shah, A.K. (2020). "Behavioral nudges reduce failure to appear for court." *Science*, 370(6517). DOI: [10.1126/science.abb6591](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abb6591) and Owens, E. and Sloan, C. (2023). "Can Text Messages Reduce Incarceration in Rural and Vulnerable Populations?" *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*. Volume 42, Issue 4: 992-1009. DOI: [10.1002/pam.22505](https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22505).



Below are options for sending fewer messages per hearing. However, the length of messages becomes longer (and potentially more costly) to share the same amount of information. Many systems charge per 160 characters, and therefore we recommend reviewing your system's features to determine the optimal frequency, timing, and length of messages for your court.

Two messages per hearing look like this:

7 Days Before

Helpful reminder: Anthony, go to court Mon Jan 08 9AM at Smith County Court. Show up to avoid an arrest warrant. Any arrangements to make to get to court? Write out your plan.

For questions, call the court: 123-456-7899.

Adding court hours can be useful. For messages over 160 characters like these, may be able to add and stay within 320 characters.

1 Day Before

Anthony, remember you have court tomorrow at 9AM at 1234 Court Lane, Anywhere Town. A public defender will help you through the process. Missing court can lead to your arrest. Questions: 123-456-7899.

One message per hearing, for courts who can only send one, looks like this:

3 Days Before

Helpful reminder: Anthony, you have court Mon Jan 08 9AM at Smith County Court, 1234 Court Lane, Anywhere Town. When should you leave to arrive on time? Any other arrangements to make? Missing court can lead to your arrest.

For questions, call the court: 123-456-7899

The following messages are also used in reminder programs, in addition to those for a specific court date.

Welcome message (sent once upon enrollment)

Always add an opt-out choice in the first message. It can be a welcome message or the first message for the case.

Anthony, welcome to Smith County Court Reminders. We'll text about upcoming court dates, cancellations, court closures.

For messages in a different language, reply with any word in that language

Reply STOP to end texts, but most people find reminders helpful!

If your text system is unable to automatically determine the recipient's phone browser language, then provide instructions on language accessibility in the first message

Court closure (sent as needed)

Add how, if by mail or text

Smith County Court is closed today. Court is cancelled. DO NOT go to the courthouse today. **The court will notify you** of your rescheduled court date.

2 Post-appearance text messages

Send these messages immediately after a missed court date. Follow up texts could also be sent weeks later if still unresolved. The content will depend on your court's policy for managing missed appearances:

Missed court text

Anthony, you missed court Jan 08. Reschedule by **[insert date 1 month from missed hearing]** to avoid an arrest warrant. Call the court: 123-456-7899. This is a one-time courtesy.

Clear deadlines motivate action, and it's important to include a specific date (rather than timeframe such as "within 30 days") to aid planning and reduce confusion.

Warrant notice text^{xvi}

Anthony, since you missed court on Jan 01 at Smith County Court, a warrant was issued. Please go to 1234 Court Lane, Anywhere Town, to clear the warrant. You will not be arrested when clearing the warrant. For questions, call the court at (123) 456-7899.

★ *Courts should provide clear next steps tailored to their policies. Note, calling or emailing are immediate solutions that courts have used with success. Some vendors can also include a link to reschedule in the message.*

^{xvi} Based on post-nonappearance text message from: Fishbane, A., Ouss, A., and Shah, A.K. (2020). "Behavioral nudges reduce failure to appear for court." *Science*, 370(6517). DOI: [10.1126/science.abb6591](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abb6591).

B Email reminders

Topline recommendation:

Email allows more room for information (like mail), and its low cost allows for multiple messages to be sent (like text) to ensure people have enough time to plan and get reminded the day before. Emails should start 14 days before the court date, and multiple messages should be sent prior to the court date. We've provided one sample email for each type of message below.

1 Pre-court email reminder

Subject: Reminder: You have court on Mon Jan 1st at 9:00AM (Smith County Court)

Dear Anthony,

We are sending a reminder about your upcoming court date. You must appear in court on **Monday, January 8, 2025 at 9:00AM**. We look forward to seeing you in **Smith County Court** at 1234 Court Lane in Anywhere Town.

Missing court can lead to a warrant for your arrest. Don't let that happen!

Do you need to make plans for work, transportation, or childcare to go to court? Please make those plans now and place this date and time in your calendar to help you remember.

If you have any questions or need help, call your lawyer, or call the court at (123) 456-7899. You can also find more information at www.smithcourt.gov.

See you next Monday!
Judge Harry Davis

2 Post-nonappearance email reminders

Missed court email

For when court has a grace period and no immediate warrant.

Subject: Missed court date: Simple steps to take now to avoid arrest

Dear Anthony,

You missed court on January 8, 2025 at the Smith County Court for Case Number 25-9999. Don't worry, you can **reschedule your court date by** *[insert date 1 month from missed hearing]* **to avoid a warrant and arrest.** Call your lawyer, if you have one, for advice on next steps, and then do one of the following:

1. Call Court at (123) 456-7899 now, explain that you missed court, and request a new date.

OR

2. Go to the next Walk-In Docket, which occurs every day at 2:00PM at the Smith County Court, 1234 Court Lane, Anywhere Town. You will not be arrested for missing court when you come to court.

We want to help you take care of this and get back on track with your case.

If you have any questions or need help, please call your lawyer, or call the court at (123) 456-7899. You can also find more information at www.smithcourt.gov.

Sincerely,
Judge Harry Davis

Warrant notice email

Subject: Missed court date: Simple steps to clear your warrant and avoid arrest

Dear Anthony,

You missed your court date and now there is a warrant for your arrest. We want to help you take care of this and get your case back on track.

To clear your warrant and avoid arrest, act now in 2 simple steps:

1. Go to the Records & Warrants Bureau at 1234 Court Lane, Anywhere Town, from 8:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. on weekdays.
2. Bring this email with you, and your photo ID if you have one. The staff will help you clear the warrant and set up a new court date.

You will not be arrested when clearing the warrant. If you have any questions or need help, please call your lawyer, or call the Records & Warrant Bureau at (123) 456-7899. You can also email us at records@smithsheriff.gov.

Sincerely,
District Attorney Marie Davis

C Mailed reminders

Topline recommendation:

Mailed reminders should be used whenever phone or email information is not available and should be sent 14 days before the court date.

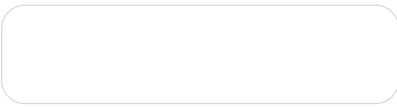
Mailed letters should highlight key information (date, time, location, consequences of nonappearance) at the top for ease of reading and to increase salience. Adding helpful tips can make it easier to navigate the process. Envelopes should also include messaging to grab attention and encourage people to open them immediately, reducing the chances that they forget or misplace the letter.

Postcards offer the advantage of immediate visibility (no envelope to open), but the trade-off is they have less space and reduced privacy, as others can see the message.

1 Pre-court mailed reminders^{xvii}

Pre-court letter and envelope

Superior Court
Smith County
1234 Court Lane
Anywhere, ZZ 12345



Important court reminder
inside. **Open today.**

^{xvii} Letter and envelope from: ideas42. (2024). "Stamping Out Missed Court Dates: How Mailed Reminders Boost Appearance." https://www.ideas42.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Sacramento_Brief-Aug2024-1.pdf.

★ Designed for black and white, easy to program formats

Superior Court, Smith County

1234 Court Lane, Anywhere, ZZ 12345
(123) 456-7899 | www.smithcourt.gov

Hours: 8:30am-12:30pm
1:30pm - 4:00pm
M – F except court holidays

COURT DATE REMINDER NOTICE

**This is a friendly reminder of your upcoming court date.
Be sure to go to court to avoid a warrant for your arrest.**

Any questions? Call us at (123) 456-7899

Anthony Harris
123 Tree Lane
Anywhere, ZZ 12345

Mailing Date: Jan 10, 2025
Case Number: 2025-12345

COURT DATE: Mon, Jan 08, 2025

TIME: 9AM **ROOM / DEPT:** X

ADDRESS: 1234 Court Lane, Anywhere, ZZ 12345

*Directions, parking, and more info: www.smithcourt.gov/locations/
For general information about your case: www.smithcourt.gov*

HELPFUL TIPS FOR YOUR COURT DATE

- ▶ **Plan ahead:** What time will you need to leave to arrive at court on time? How will you get there? Do you need to make plans for work, transportation, or childcare? Write out your plan.
- ▶ Set a reminder on your phone to remember to go to court.
- ▶ At your first court date, the judge will explain the process to you. If you plead “not guilty,” your case will continue to other dates and you can work with your lawyer to resolve your case.
- ▶ If you do not have a lawyer, the judge may provide you with a public defender at no cost to you or will give you time to hire your own private lawyer.
- ▶ For help with your case, call the Public Defender’s Office at (123) 456-7899.
- ▶ Plan to arrive at least 15 minutes before the start of your court date to allow time for parking or walking from public transportation. It’s important to be on time. However, go to court even if running late to avoid a warrant.

If you happen to miss court, call the court right away to avoid a warrant!!

Immediately call either your lawyer or the Clerk’s Office at (123) 456-7899 between 8am-4pm weekdays, or email Clerk@smithcourt.gov to ask for next steps. The staff will help you resolve the missed court date. It is important to act quickly to avoid a warrant.

CASE DETAILS:

You have been charged with: (lists up to 5 charges)

	CODE	SECTION	SEVERITY	DESCRIPTION
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				

ANY QUESTIONS? We can help!

Call your lawyer, or the court at (123) 456-7899
or visit www.smithcourt.gov

Pre-court postcard^{xviii,xix}

Superior Court
Smith County
1234 Court Lane
Anywhere, ZZ 12345

Anthony Harris
123 Tree Lane
Anywhere, ZZ
12345

Important Court Reminder – Read Today!
See reverse side for more details.

**PRESORTED
FIRST CLASS MAIL**
U.S. Postage &
Fees Paid
KDT
75019

Case Number: 2025-12345

Anthony,

This notice is to remind you that you have a hearing scheduled on January 8, 2025 at 9:00AM at the Smith County Superior Court, 1234 Court Lane, Anywhere Town.

Not appearing for this hearing may result in a number of negative consequences, including: *[insert consequences here, e.g., charged with a crime, fined, additional jail time, warrant, harder to make bail in the future, considered by judge in determining sentence for original charge]*.

Smith County Superior Court

Phone: 123-456-7899
Call us today for more info!

Website:
www.smithcourt.gov

Address: 1234 Court Lane
Anywhere, ZZ
M-F, 9AM-4PM

Courts should include the definite consequence(s) for their courts. To date, no study compares whether it is better to list all consequences, or only the most serious one(s). As a long list may overwhelm people, we encourage testing here.

^{xviii} Based on postcard from: Bornstein, B. H.; Tomkins, A., Neeley, E., Herian, M., and Hamm, J. A. (2013). "Reducing Courts' Failure-to-Appear Rate by Written Reminders." Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology. 601. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/psychfacpub/601>. The original postcard contact used the term "failure to appear" which we have changed to "not appearing" in line with using person-centered language.

^{xix} Courts may consider adding elements tested in later text and mail reminder studies, such as prompting people to make an actionable plan or explaining what to expect at court.

2 Post-nonappearance mailed reminders

Missed court postcard

Superior Court Smith County 1234 Court Lane Anywhere, ZZ 12345	PRESORTED FIRST CLASS MAIL U.S. Postage & Fees Paid KDT 75019
Anthony Harris 123 Tree Lane Anywhere, ZZ 12345	
YOU MISSED COURT ACT TODAY TO AVOID A WARRANT! See reverse side for easy steps to take care of this ASAP.	

Case Number: 2025-12345			
Anthony, you missed court on January 8, 2025 at the Smith County Superior Court.			
To prevent a warrant for your arrest, call (123) 456-7899 or email clerk@smithcourt.gov to reschedule your court date now. We want to help you take care of this and get your case back on track!			
You must reschedule your court date by <i>[enter date 1 month from missed hearing]</i> . This is a one-time courtesy. Please act now.			
P.S. You will not be arrested when you come to court for your rescheduled date. However, if you do nothing, a warrant will be issued for your arrest. Call or email to reschedule now.			
<table border="0"><tr><td>Phone: 123-456-7899 Call us today for more info!</td><td>Website: www.smithcourt.gov</td><td>Address: 1234 Court Lane Anywhere, ZZ M-F, 9AM-4PM</td></tr></table>	Phone: 123-456-7899 Call us today for more info!	Website: www.smithcourt.gov	Address: 1234 Court Lane Anywhere, ZZ M-F, 9AM-4PM
Phone: 123-456-7899 Call us today for more info!	Website: www.smithcourt.gov	Address: 1234 Court Lane Anywhere, ZZ M-F, 9AM-4PM	

Warrant notice letter and envelope

Superior Court
Smith County
1234 Court Lane
Anywhere, ZZ 12345

Important information
inside. **Open today.**

Records & Warrants Bureau
1234 Court Lane, Anywhere, ZZ 12345
(123) 456-7899 | www.smithcourt.gov

HOW TO CLEAR YOUR WARRANT FOR MISSING COURT

Anthony Harris
123 Tree Lane
Anywhere, ZZ 12345

Mailing Date:
Case number:
Warrant number:

Dear Anthony,

You missed your court date and now there is a warrant for your arrest. We want to help you take care of this and get your case back on track.

To clear your warrant and avoid arrest, act now in 2 simple steps:

1. Go to the Records & Warrants Bureau at 1234 Court Lane, Anywhere Town, from 8:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. on weekdays.
2. Bring this letter with you, and your photo ID if you have one. The staff will help you clear the warrant and set up a new court date.

You will not be arrested when clearing the warrant. If you have any questions or need help, please call your lawyer, or call the Records & Warrant Bureau at (123) 456-7899. You can also email us at records@smithsheriff.gov.

CASE DETAILS - BRING WITH YOU

Warrant number:
Case number:

Warrant issue date:
Violation date:

Charges: (lists up to 5 charges)

	CODE	SECTION	SEVERITY	DESCRIPTION
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				

ANY QUESTIONS? We want to help!

Call us at (123) 456-7899 or email us at records@smithsheriff.gov
8am to 5pm Monday – Friday (except for holidays)

D Phone call reminders

Topline recommendation:

Live calls offer the advantage of being able to convey more information and answer any questions, while also confirming the reminder is received, but they come with higher operational costs compared to automated calls. Live calls⁴² appear to be more effective than automated calls⁴³ when comparing across the two rigorous evaluations.⁴⁴ In less rigorous studies, both show promise. Calls should start at least 7 days before the court date.

1 **Pre-court call reminders**

Pre-court automated call



I am calling to remind you that you have court at 9 a.m. on Monday January 8th at Smith County Court. Missing court can lead to your arrest, so be sure to go to court. Please add the date and time to your calendar and make any plans needed to get to court. If you have any questions, you may call the court at (123) 456-7899. To hear this message again, please press 1.

Pre-court live call^{xx,xxi}



Hello, my name is Ciara. I am calling on behalf of the Smith County Court for Anthony Harris. Is Anthony available?

If the respondent says YES:

I am calling to remind you of your scheduled court date on Monday January 8th at 9 a.m. at the Smith County Court at 1234 Court Lane in Anytown. It is important for you to come to court. Missing court can lead to a warrant for your arrest. Will you come to court on your scheduled court date?

→ If response is YES:

Thank you. If you have any questions, please call (123) 456-7899.

→ If response is NO:

It is important for you to come to court. If you miss court, a warrant may be issued for your arrest. When you are able to come to court, please call the court at (123) 456-7899.

If the respondent indicates a WRONG NUMBER:

Thank you for your time. Have a nice day.

If the respondent is NOT AVAILABLE:

Are you able to deliver a message to Anthony as soon as possible?

→ If person answers YES:

Do you have a pen and paper available? I am calling to remind Anthony Harris about a scheduled court date on Monday January 8th at the Smith County Court at 1234 Court Lane in Anytown. It is important that Anthony comes to court. Missing court can lead to a warrant for their arrest. If you or Anthony have any questions, please call the court at (123) 456-7899.

→ If person answers NO:

Is this a good number to reach Anthony Harris at another time?

→ If person answers YES:

I will try again later. Thank you for your time. Have a nice day.

→ If person answers NO:

Do you know of a phone number at which I can reach Anthony?

↓ YES:

Thank you. What is that number?

↓ NO:

Thank you for your time. Have a nice day.

^{xx} Based on script from: Ferri, R. (2020). "The Benefits of Live Court Date Reminder Phone Calls during Pretrial Case Processing." *Journal of Experimental Criminology*. Volume 18: 149–169. DOI: [10.1007/s11292-020-09423-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-020-09423-0).

^{xxi} Courts may consider adding elements tested in later text and mail reminder studies, such as prompting people to make an actionable plan or explaining what to expect at court.

2 Post-nonappearance call reminders

Missed court automated call



Anthony, you missed court on January 8th at Smith County Court. Reschedule your court date by **[insert date 1 month from missed hearing]** to avoid an arrest warrant. Call the court at 123-456-7899 to request a new court date. This is a one-time courtesy—act now to avoid a warrant. To hear this message again, please press 1.

Missed court live call



Hello, my name is Ciara. I am calling on behalf of the Smith County Court for Anthony Harris. Is Anthony available?

If the respondent says YES:

Anthony, I am calling to let you know that you missed court on January 8th at Smith County Court. You need to reschedule your court date by **[insert date 1 month from missed hearing]** to avoid an arrest warrant. Please call the court at 123-456-7899 to request a new court date. This is a one-time courtesy. It's important to act now to avoid a warrant.

If the respondent indicates a WRONG NUMBER:

Thank you for your time. Have a nice day.

If the respondent is NOT AVAILABLE:

Are you able to deliver a message to Anthony as soon as possible?

→ **If person answers YES:**

Do you have a pen and paper available? I am calling to let Anthony Harris know that he missed court on January 8th at the Smith County Court. He needs to reschedule his court date by **[insert date 1 month from missed hearing]** to avoid an arrest warrant. He can call the court at 123-456-7899 to request a new court date. This is a one-time courtesy—its important that he acts now to avoid a warrant.

→ **If person answers NO:**

Is this a good number to reach Anthony Harris at another time?

↘ **If person answers YES:**

I will try again later. Thank you for your time. Have a nice day.

↘ **If person answers NO:**

Do you know of a phone number at which I can reach Anthony?

↓ **YES:**

Thank you. What is that number?

↓ **NO:**

Thank you for your time. Have a nice day.

Warrant notice automated call



Anthony, since you missed court on January 8th at Smith County Court, a warrant was issued. Please go to 1234 Court Lane, Anywhere Town, to clear the warrant. You will not be arrested when clearing the warrant. For questions, call the court at 123-456-7899. To hear this message again, please press 1.

Warrant notice live call



Hello, my name is Ciara. I am calling on behalf of the Smith County Court for Anthony Harris. Is Anthony available?

If the respondent says YES:

Anthony, I am calling because a warrant was issued after you missed court on January 8th at the Smith County Court. I'd like to give you instructions on how to clear your warrant and avoid arrest. Are you able to take down this information now? Please go to 1234 Court Lane, Anywhere Town, between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. to clear the warrant. You will not be arrested when clearing the warrant. If you have any questions, you can reach the court at (123) 456-7899.

If the respondent indicates a WRONG NUMBER:

Thank you for your time. Have a nice day.

If the respondent is NOT AVAILABLE:

Are you able to deliver a message to Anthony as soon as possible?

→ If person answers YES:

Do you have a pen and paper available? I am calling to let Anthony Harris know that a warrant was issued after he missed court on January 8th at the Smith County Court. He can avoid arrest by going to 1234 Court Lane, Anywhere Town, between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. to clear the warrant. He will not be arrested when clearing the warrant. If you or Anthony have any questions, please call the court at (123) 456-7899.

→ If person answers NO:

Is this a good number to reach Anthony Harris at another time?

→ If person answers YES:

I will try again later. Thank you for your time. Have a nice day.

→ If person answers NO:

Do you know of a phone number at which I can reach Anthony?

↓ YES:

Thank you. What is that number?

↓ NO:

Thank you for your time. Have a nice day.

Conclusion

It's time for all courts to embrace reminders, a practice that's already standard in sectors like healthcare for one simple reason: reminders increase attendance and thereby improve outcomes. In the court system, the stakes are even higher—missing a single court date can lead to warrants, jail time, and default judgments. The good news is that reminder programs are within reach of any court. We hope this guide helps courts set up and improve reminder programs.

Research shows that reminder programs can reduce nonappearance rates by 20% to 40%. These reductions not only save money but also enhance court efficiency and streamline operations. The benefits extend to all stakeholders—from people attending their court date to judges, clerks, attorneys, victims and witnesses—and reduce the burden on police and jails.

To maximize their potential, courts should reach everyone with a pretrial case. This includes analyzing data to identify gaps and ensure that all individuals—especially those who don't currently provide contact information—can participate in reminder programs. Reminder programs that cast the widest net possible will lead to the best appearance rates overall and improve outcomes for all stakeholders.

It is also important to remember that while reminders are a powerful tool, they should not be a standalone solution. Most immediately, all court date notices (including citations, release forms, notices of next court date, etc.) should be updated to ensure that key information, as highlighted in this guide, is effectively, widely, and consistently communicated to everyone with a pretrial case.^{xxii} Additionally, courts should continue efforts to understand and address the underlying resource gaps and needs of those involved in the legal system.^{xxiii} By combining reminder programs with broader support initiatives, courts can significantly enhance attendance rates and promote a more just legal process for all.

^{xxii} Improving court date notices increases appearance rates, and together with reminders lead to higher appearance rates overall (than either intervention on their own). Fishbane, A., Ouss, A., and Shah, A.K. (2020). “Behavioral nudges reduce failure to appear for court.” *Science*, 370(6517). DOI: [10.1126/science.abb6591](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abb6591).

^{xxiii} For other proven and promising practices to increase court appearance, see: McAuliffe, S., Hammer, S., Fishbane, A., and Wilk, A. (2023). “National Guide to Improving Court Appearances.” ideas42. <https://www.ideas42.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/national-guide-improving-court-appearance.pdf>.

Appendix

This guide was informed by data and research, operational best practices, and the experience of the ideas42 (Un)warranted initiative and colleagues in the field (courts and other legal agencies, justice organizations, researchers, and IT professionals and vendors).

Court reminder studies

Studies on court reminders are central to this guide. A 2022 meta-analysis⁴⁵ on court reminders, and studies published since then, demonstrate their replicable impact and cost-effectiveness. Court reminders are one of the only proven interventions to increase court appearance,⁴⁶ so they're important to ensure fair, just, and timely resolution of cases. (For more on other proven and promising practices, see the [National Guide to Improving Court Appearances](#).)

The court reminder studies used to inform this guide focus on a U.S. population with a court hearing subject to warrants for nonappearance (typically traffic or criminal misdemeanors, or felony cases).^{xxiv} While we reviewed all court reminder studies that met these criteria, our conclusions are drawn only from studies using experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation design. The table below outlines key details for these studies.

^{xxiv} Very few studies exist for court reminders outside the U.S., for non-criminal cases, or for other pretrial matters such as supervision appointments.

TABLE A1: COURT REMINDER STUDIES USING EXPERIMENTAL OR QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL EVALUATION DESIGN*

	STUDY DETAILS				REMINDER CHARACTERISTICS					SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS				IMPACT						
Study	Location	Study Years	Study Method	Publication Type	Method	Content	Timing	Frequency	Details	Includes Only People with Contact Info	Includes Only Successfully Delivered Reminders	Control Group Size	Treatment Group Size	Outcome Measured	Outcome for Control	Outcome for Treated	Percentage Point Reduction	Percent Reduction	Cohen's <i>h</i>	Odds Ratio
The Benefits of Live Court Date Reminder Phone Calls during Pretrial Case Processing. (2020) ⁴⁷	New York City	2017–2018	Randomized Controlled Trial	Peer-reviewed article	📞 Live call	Consequences + confirmation	3 days before	1	Desk appearance tickets (criminal)	❌	❌	481	640	Court nonappearance	19.3%	11.3%	-8.00	-41.5%	0.22	0.53
							3-day, same-day, or both	1 or 2				481	1,737		19.3%	12.1%	-7.21	-37.4%	0.20	0.58
							3-day + same-day	2				481	679		19.3%	12.5%	-6.80	-35.2%	0.19	0.60
							Same-day	1				481	419		19.3%	12.6%	-6.70	-34.7%	0.18	0.60
Behavioral Nudges Reduce Failure to Appear for Court. (2020) ⁴⁸	New York City	2016–2017	Randomized Controlled Trial	Peer-reviewed article	💬 Text message	Consequnces + plan-making, plus post-nonappearance consequence message	7-3-1 days + post	4	Summons tickets (criminal)	✅	❌	7,522	4,237	Open warrant 30 days after	24.3%	16.6%	-7.70	-31.7%	0.19	0.62
						Consequences + plan-making	7-3-1 days	3				7,522	4,237	Court nonappearance	37.9%	28.1%	-9.81	-25.9%	0.21	0.64
						Consequences	7,522	4,237				37.9%	28.9%		-8.99	-23.7%	0.19	0.67		
						Any reminder	7,522	12,712				37.9%	29.9%		-8.04	-21.2%	0.17	0.70		
						Plan-making	7,522	4,237				37.9%	31.7%		-6.16	-16.3%	0.13	0.76		
Tripping through Hoops: The Effect of Violating Compulsory Government Procedures. (2024) ⁴⁹	County in western United States	2018–2019	Randomized Controlled Trial	Working paper	💬 Text message	General or personalized assistance	14-7-1 days	3	Misdemeanor, traffic, and municipal violations resulting in warrant for nonappearance	❌	❌	15,670	7,835	Court nonappearance	21.2%	15.0%	-6.20	-29.2%	0.16	0.66
Stamping Out Missed Court Dates: How Mailed Reminders Boost Appearance. (2024) ⁵⁰	Sacramento County, California	2022–2023	Regression Discontinuity	Brief	✉ Letter with designed envelope	Consequences + plan-making	Mailed 14 days before hearing	1	Misdemeanor cases on arraignment calendar	✅	❌	13,614	13,597	Court nonappearance	51.0%	42.8%	-8.20	-16.1%	0.16	0.72
Court Date Reminder Postcards: A Benefit-Cost Analysis of Using Reminder Cards to Reduce Failure to Appear Rates. (2012) ⁵¹	14 counties across Nebraska	2009–2010	Randomized Controlled Trial	Peer-reviewed article	✉ Postcard	Consequences	At least 5 days before court date	1	Misdemeanor tickets	✅	❌	2,095	1,901	Court nonappearance	12.6%	8.3%	-4.30	-34.1%	0.14	0.63
						Any reminder						2,095	5,770		12.6%	9.7%	-2.90	-23.0%	0.09	0.75
						Consequences + procedural justice						2,095	1,980		12.6%	9.8%	-2.80	-22.2%	0.09	0.75
						General						2,095	1,889		12.6%	10.9%	-1.70	-13.5%	0.05	0.85
Can Text Messages Reduce Incarceration in Rural and Vulnerable Populations? (2023) ⁵²	Shasta County, California	2021	Randomized Controlled Trial	Peer-reviewed article	💬 Text message	Consequences + plan-making	3 days before	1	Housed individuals with misdemeanor charges	❌	❌	547	549	Court nonappearance	49.5%	44.2%	-5.30	-10.7%	0.11	0.81
										✅	✅	547	296		49.5%	40.0%	-9.50	-19.2%	0.19	0.68
									Unhoused individuals with misdemeanor charges	❌	❌	185	178		86.5%	87.7%	1.20	1.4%	-0.04	1.11
										✅	✅	185	61		86.5%	89.8%	3.30	3.8%	-0.10	1.37
Assessing the Effects of Court Date Notifications within Pretrial Case Processing. (2017) ⁵³	Louisville, Kentucky	2012	Randomized Controlled Trial	Peer-reviewed article	💬 Text message	General	N/A	1	Provided contact info and signed up at pretrial interview prior to release	✅	❌	2,117	1,953	Court nonappearance	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.10	0.84
						Consequences						2,117	1,969		n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.10	0.84
					📞 Automated call	General						2,117	2,029		n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.06	0.90
						Consequences						2,117	1,985		n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.06	0.89
Automated Reminders Reduce Incarceration for Missed Court Dates: Evidence From a Text Message Experiment. (2023) ⁵⁴	Santa Clara County, California	2022–2023	Randomized Controlled Trial	Working paper	💬 Text message	General + consequences if do not confirm appearance by 1 day before hearing	7-3-1 days	3	Public defender clients with felony, misdemeanor or supervision violations	✅	❌	2,809	2,897	Bench warrant issued	20.7%	17.6%	-3.10	-15.0%	0.08	0.75
												2,809	2,897	Remanded to custody on bench warrant	6.2%	4.8%	-1.40	-22.6%	0.06	0.75

* Reminder studies in this table are listed in approximate order of Cohen's h, a standardized measure of impact. Please see next page for more information on Cohen's h and odds ratio scores.

Methodology

To make specific and actionable recommendations in this guide (to the extent possible based on available evidence to date), we undertook a comparative analysis of court reminder studies. First, we reviewed each study and its details, including evaluation design, location, year, population, sample size, reminder method, content, frequency, timing, and results. Then we compared key components (method, content, frequency, timing) to determine which may have the most impact.

To compare across studies, we calculated two measures of impact, odds ratio^{xxv} and Cohen's *h*. For this report, the two outcomes of interest are the court nonappearance rate for the group given the reminder (p_1) and the group that was not (p_2).

Given the studies examined reported results by percentage change and/or odds ratio, we first converted the outcomes from all studies to an odds ratio.⁵⁵ The odds ratio can be interpreted as the odds of court nonappearance given the reminder program, whereby the smaller the odds ratio the larger the effect. It is calculated as follows:

$$\text{Odds Ratio} = \frac{\frac{p_1}{(1-p_1)}}{\frac{p_2}{(1-p_2)}}$$

Next, to compare across studies and their components, we calculated a standardized measure, Cohen's *h*, to quantify the magnitude of difference between the two outcomes (nonappearance rate with and without reminders).⁵⁶ The higher the Cohen's *h*, the larger the effect size, or impact, of the intervention. It is calculated as follows:

$$\text{Cohen's } h = 2 * \arcsin(\sqrt{p_1}) - \arcsin(\sqrt{p_2})$$

Some studies presented results in terms of odds ratios with insufficient information on court nonappearance rate to use the formula above. For those studies, Cohen's *h* is calculated as the following:

$$\text{Cohen's } h = \frac{\ln(\text{oR}) * \sqrt{3}}{\pi}$$

Overall, we found the results of the odds ratio and Cohen's *h* analysis to be very similar, leading to the same conclusions and recommendations for this report.

^{xxv} While relative risk would have been preferred over odds ratio, the papers examined did not all include the necessary information to calculate the relative risk for each intervention. However, we were able to calculate relative risk for most studies, and results indicated the same conclusions drawn from the above measures.

Challenges and limitations

Many more court reminder programs have been launched and studied over the past decade. However, there are still few studies for each reminder method, and very few studies compare across different components (method, frequency, timing, etc.). This limits the recommendations we can provide, and there may be variations, due to geography, local practice, and other factors, that we are unable to quantify. In addition, recommendations may piece together components that have been found effective, yet in some cases may not have been examined as a combined package. Occasionally, where there are gaps, we use findings from other sectors using reminders (for example, medical appointments).

Only one of the reminder studies was conducted in a rural area, as the rest were conducted in urban or suburban settings, and only a handful examine the influence of income, race and housing on outcomes. Data shows that reminders are most helpful for people who previously missed court,⁵⁷ and also that income and race can play a role in court attendance,⁵⁸ as communities with less access to resources are more likely to experience common barriers to appearance.⁵⁹ Reminders help mitigate some of these discrepancies. The following are findings to date along the dimensions of income, race, and housing:

- ▶ **Income:**^{xxvi} One study found that text reminders are twice as impactful among communities with the lowest wealth,⁶⁰ while another study found text reminders to be equally helpful across all income levels.⁶¹ A separate study found mailed reminders for arraignments are also equally effective across income groups, while mailed reminders for people returning to the arraignment calendar (many of whom missed court) are most effective for communities with middle wealth. It may be that the longer length of time between arrest and returning hearings (in this study: 562 median days vs. 91 days for first arraignments) is a factor if addresses become outdated faster for people in the lowest wealth group.⁶²
- ▶ **Race:** One study found that live calls are two to three times more impactful for Hispanic and Black participants (both groups have higher baseline nonappearance rates) compared with white participants.⁶³ A study on text reminders did not find a statistically significant difference by race yet saw larger reductions in nonappearance for Black individuals compared to white individuals.^{xxvii} A study on mailed reminders found that they are equally effective across all groups.⁶⁴
- ▶ **Housing:** To date, only one study has looked at housing status, and it's also the only study conducted in a rural area. It found that while text reminders are effective for people with housing, they do not have any effect on people who do not have stable housing.⁶⁵ Overall, text messages were less likely to be delivered in this study than pre-court text reminders in other contexts. Anecdotally, case managers share that emails are more reliable than phone numbers to reach clients without stable housing and hope to see research on this in the future.

^{xxvi} Zip codes were used to estimate median household incomes as a proxy for individual income level.

^{xxvii} For the warrant eligible sample (see page 15) in Emanuel, N. and Ho, H. (2024). "Tripping through Hoops: The Effect of Violating Compulsory Government Procedures." *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 16(3): 290–313. DOI: [10.1257/pol.20220331](https://doi.org/10.1257/pol.20220331).

We encourage implementers and researchers to look at the populations where nonappearance rates are highest in future studies on reminders and other court interventions^{xxviii} in order to learn and build further evidence on how to best support people who experience the most challenges in showing up at court.

We also recognize that the court reminder studies and this guide are largely informed by courts, legal stakeholders, and researchers. While the recommendations in this guide are also grounded in our research and design engagement with people who receive reminders, they were not directly represented in the writing of this guide, and their voices appear in some but not all studies referenced within.

Finally, while we originally planned to provide further details about available technology and costs, we struggled to obtain clear information from many (not all) vendors with reminder platforms. We encourage courts to use this section (see [Section 2B](#)) to guide inquiry with vendors and IT professionals and identify the optimal technology for their reminder program.

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