

Additional Webinar Questions

Court watching can be time-consuming and sometimes mundane, would love to hear what strategies you all have used to keep court watchers engaged.

Jesse Manley, Deputy Director, Court Watch NOLA: Honestly, our bigger issue with volunteer motivation is the challenging learning curve out of the gate overloading volunteers. Mundane hasn't been an issue for us, but that might be a product of New Orleans courts more than anything we're doing. It is important to acknowledge the volunteer lifecycle, though. You are right that it is a considerable commitment, and sometimes our volunteers have to move on for personal reasons. We value their contributions for the time that we have them. I think the biggest ongoing motivation we provide for volunteers is that this is an avenue where they can see a tangible "payoff" for the work they are doing. People who have court watched for us in the past can look at our list of accomplishments and say, "I contributed to part of that." It may not be world-shaking in the grand scheme of things; it may just be a small scratch in a big wall, but they can look at that scratch and say "That's MY scratch." I think that's incredibly powerful and rewarding for people, and I try to remind them of the impact of their work whenever I can.

Karen Reece, Vice President for Research and Education, Nehemiah Center for Urban Leadership Development: Jesse is spot on! We have found having periodic meet ups for volunteers to be helpful. We have one of the volunteers take ownership of planning something simple and social with food where observers can get to know one another and discuss what they are seeing and learning.

We hold "findings" updates a couple of times per year as well where we come back to the high level purpose of what this is for and make sure volunteers are able to see the impact of their work, even if it's as simple as working to change the narrative by sharing what they've learned. We try to be available if a volunteer is feeling discouraged or doubtful and encourage them to reach out for a conversation. Sometimes this helps renew motivation, other times it results in them deciding they would rather use their time in different ways. Both outcomes are okay!

Do your organizations observe child support cases? If so, what have you learned and if not, why?

Jesse Manley, Deputy Director, Court Watch NOLA: We do not observe civil court currently. We only observe criminal courts. There are very, very important things that happen in civil court, including child support, protective orders, and evictions, but our capacity is limited and we still have things in criminal court we don't cover as much as we'd like to.

Karen Reece, Vice President for Research and Education, Nehemiah Center for Urban Leadership Development: We don't observe child support cases. Many times these cases are closed hearings and involve confidential family information. This would need a carefully designed program with agreements between the court and families with robust ethical and privacy considerations.

For very small programs that only do court accompaniments and have little experience with data, what are some achievable changes we make, given our limited capacity?

Jesse Manley, Deputy Director, Court Watch NOLA: You will have an impact just by showing up. Just sitting in the room consistently with a clipboard and ominously writing something down will change the behavior of the people in the courtroom. People act differently when they know that they're being watched and reported on. It sounds simplistic, but I promise you that you will make a noticeable difference in the demeanor in the room if you show up in a consistent, predictable way.

Karen Reece, Vice President for Research and Education, Nehemiah Center for Urban Leadership Development: I agree with Jesse. The reason we started our program is because a judge told us that it really matters to have

people in the room! Your data collection can include a simple form that tracks anything you find interesting or that you want to develop advocacy around. You also might consider reaching out to a college or university if there is one nearby for help in setting this up. Feel free to reach out to use at Nehemiah and we would be happy to talk through possibilities! We are a small program too. If you reach out, put court observation assistance in the subject line.

Have you asked volunteers to fill out forms on paper or online? If paper, how have you then gone about uploading that information?

Karen Reece, Vice President for Research and Education, Nehemiah Center for Urban Leadership Development: Most of our observers prefer paper so we allow that and then either they enter it later or we have another volunteer enters it later

Jesse Manley, Deputy Director, Court Watch NOLA: We use a combination of paper forms to record data in court and online web forms for uploading and housing data, but as part of the grant, we are building the infrastructure with the free Microsoft resources provided by the grant.

How do you manage the internal bias of a court watcher?

Karen Reece, Vice President for Research and Education, Nehemiah Center for Urban Leadership Development: We hold regular meet ups with observers where they can share what they are seeing and learning. This is a great way to detect unconscious bias or to address bias an observer is aware of. We discuss where this may come from and how to deal with it. We also require our volunteers to take our Black History for a New day course, which is not legal system related, but helps to give a solid understanding of the origins of systemic racism in our country. For more info on that go to <https://nehemiah.org/justified-anger>. We encourage volunteers to pursue other anti-bias and anti-racism trainings in the community.

Jesse Manley, Deputy Director, Court Watch NOLA: We approach this in a few ways. First, we try to make sure that we have court watchers with different lived experiences and backgrounds. We know that some biases are unavoidable, but we try to neutralize it as much as we can with a diverse population. We also address bias in a direct way in our classroom training. We discuss bias and our commitment to objectivity as a concept, but we also are frank and direct about topics such as the legacy of slavery inherent to mass incarceration and our prison system and we are explicit about the text of the 13th Amendment and the reality of what sentencing someone to "hard labor" means. We anchor our training in these concepts and consistently come back to them when we are discussing seemingly innocuous or mundane hearings. When you're discussing the root cause of continuances during discovery or motions hearings, it can be easy to forget that the consequences for not getting it right are sending a potentially innocent person to do hard labor in prison. We keep coming back to it.

For Court Watch NOLA, is their data dashboard on bond amounts/trends available to view for previous years as well?

Jesse Manley, Deputy Director, Court Watch NOLA: We don't have it set up for this currently, but this is a great idea. We have to be careful about overloading readers with too much info in this particular visualization, but we are working on expanding it onto an additional page. Including previous years is a great addition.

Can you talk a little bit about the process of building up the capacity and vision to manage the catalyst grant?

Jesse Manley, Deputy Director, Court Watch NOLA: We are in a fortunate position that we didn't need to do much capacity building to manage this grant because it is an extension of our well-established core program. We had initially planned to take on more capacity-stretching aspects, but the tech experts and advisors the grant provides access to covered more than we imagined. Two pieces of advice I have are to attend the seminar about applying for the grant and meet with a program officer to get individualized guidance on how to craft a great pitch for your project.