



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# IMPROVING COURT ATTENDANCE **The Essential Guide to Court Reminder Programs**

Alissa Fishbane • Shannon McAuliffe • Yiping Li

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# Introduction

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**M**issed court appearances create significant problems that ripple through the court system, law enforcement, and communities. For courts, they drain resources, overburden dockets, and cost millions annually. For law enforcement, they divert valuable time away from addressing serious crimes to handle nonappearance-related warrants. For individuals, missed court dates often result in unnecessary warrants, jail time, and a cycle of escalating collateral consequences. But there's an intervention that's simple, effective, and proven to work: **court reminder programs**.

This [guide](#), summarized here, offers a step-by-step roadmap for courts to implement reminder programs proven to reduce missed court dates by 20–40%, unlock massive savings, and streamline operations. By adopting this approach, courts can increase attendance and improve outcomes for everyone involved. Whether you're a judge, court administrator, policymaker, or IT professional, this guide equips you with everything you need to create a program that's feasible to implement, powerful in its impact, and reaps rewards for courts and their partners.

## ① Enrollment: Building the Foundation for Success

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A great reminder program starts with collecting contact information early and often, automatically enrolling participants, and ensuring reminders are sent for every hearing to everyone with a pretrial case.

**Collect contact information early and often** to reach people most likely to need them (you can't collect a number from someone who doesn't show up!) and prevent missed hearings from the start. Courts will need to partner with law enforcement and sheriffs to collect phone numbers and emails at critical moments (when cited or booked) and share that information with courts for their reminder programs. Continue to collect and update information at every subsequent interaction with the court to ensure the successful delivery of reminders over time.

**Automatically enroll participants** for maximum impact. Forget complicated sign-ups and expensive advertising campaigns—most people want reminders,<sup>1</sup> and auto-enrollment ensures fewer people slip through the cracks. By switching to automatic enrollment, with the ability to opt-out, Colorado state increased participation by 300%.<sup>2</sup>

**Send reminders to everyone with a pretrial case** for every hearing and following a missed court date. It's crucial that reminders include the first out-of-custody hearing, which is often the most missed, and when someone misses a court date, to help people get their case back on track.

These strategies lay the foundation for a reminder program that maximizes reach and impact while minimizing staff effort.

## ② System Setup: Infrastructure That Works

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It's time to demystify the technological aspects of reminder programs. This section helps courts choose the best delivery methods and technologies for their unique needs and determine which entity should implement the reminder system.

**Deliver reminders** using multiple methods, based on available contact information. Text messages are the best option—affordable, immediate, and customizable. Emails, phone calls, and even mail (surprisingly effective) should be used to reach broader audiences. What's most important is that everyone receives a reminder.

**Choose a technology** that enables key features, is cost-effective, and remains easy for your court to set up and use. Courts have three main options: Turnkey (using a current court management system with reminder capacity), Do It Yourself (DIY) Build (custom-built options), and Specialty Communication Platforms (vendors offering fully managed platforms). Overall, DIY Build and Specialty Communications Platforms will provide the best functionality and content flexibility, while Turnkey will be the lowest lift for court staff. We encourage courts to explore and get quotes for each relevant option, to learn more about their functionality (is it capable of all key features?) and costs. Costs will depend on the court's IT capacity, yet all will have a staggering return on investment.

**Provide the system at the state level for all courts** (even when data housed locally) for greatest cost-savings and widest reach. When no state reminder system exists (yet), local courts should send reminders system however possible (Turnkey, DIY Build, Specialty Communications Platform).

Whether you're part of a small court or a statewide system, setting up your infrastructure right will provide the greatest success.

## ③ Reminder Timing and Content: The Power of the Right Message

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Timing is everything, and content is too. Results from existing reminder programs provide recommendations for each.

**Send reminders with enough time to receive, read, and act.** A proven schedule for text reminders (7, 3, and 1 days before the court date) ensures people have sufficient time to make arrangements and mitigates last-minute forgetfulness when life gets unexpectedly complicated. For other methods, we recommend emails (14, 7, and 1 day before), mail (14 days before), and phone calls (start 7 days before).

For those who miss their appearance date, send follow-up reminders that offer clear, actionable steps to reschedule or resolve warrants, and assure the person they will not be arrested when following those steps.

**Write messages that are proven to work best.** Effective reminders make it easy to find the court date, time, and location, flag any consequences, prompt people to plan, and use simple, everyday language. [The guide](#) offers more specific guidance as well as behaviorally informed examples for every method (text, email, letters, and calls) to ensure clarity and effectiveness.

The right words, sent at the right time, can make all the difference.

## Conclusion: An Opportunity Courts Can't Afford to Miss

Court reminder programs aren't just a good idea—they're a game-changer. By embracing this practical, low-cost solution, courts can save millions, reduce workload, and foster fairness for all. This guide provides the blueprint to design a program tailored to your needs, so you can start improving attendance and efficiency today.

Now is the time to take action and join the growing number of courts using reminders to build a more effective and just legal system. See the [full guide](#) for more information on each step—and get started now!

### 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](#))

## 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](mailto: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](https://ideas42.org/unwarranted) or follow us on [LinkedIn](#) to learn more about our work.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Magnuson, S., Dezember, A., Kuehmeier, K., et. al. (2023). Understanding Court Absence and Reframing “Failure to Appear.” Justice System Partners. <https://justicesystempartners.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/SJC-Lake-County-Getting-to-Court-as-Scheduled-Reframing-Failure-to-Appear.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> See Colorado Courts’ Text Reminder Data dashboard, graph: “Total Messages by eCourtDate.” The change from voluntary to automatic enrollment occurred between September and October 2022. <https://app.powerbigov.us/view?r=eyJrIjoiaWVMT11OTMtZjE2Zi00NWY0LWE5ODctNDMxNDQ0YjM3ZTViIiwidCI6IjNiOWMwZWZjLWExNmItNGQ1MS04MDg4LTZlMjlkY2YyYTA3NyJ9&pageName=ReportSection>.

