

July 1, 2025 - June 30, 2027

# Nebraska Supreme Court Strategic Agenda



# NEBRASKA JUDICIAL BRANCH STRATEGIC AGENDA 2025-2027

The Nebraska Judicial Branch continues its six overarching goals for the 2025-2027 strategic agenda. This document identifies those goals and their respective objectives and initiatives. It is essential that in the twenty-first century, the provision of justice is sustained and maintained through a system of impartial, fair, and accessible courts and related services to achieve community safety, promote the general welfare, and encourage civility among people. The six overarching goals of the Nebraska Judicial Branch are:

Goal 1: Providing Access to Swift, Fair Justice

Goal 2: Protecting Children and Vulnerable Adults

Goal 3: Addressing Community Safety

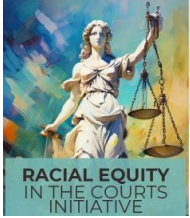
Goal 4: Being Accountable to the Public

Goal 5: Strengthening Communication with Citizens and Government

Goal 6: Regulating the Legal Profession



## GOAL 1: PROVIDING ACCESS TO SWIFT, FAIR JUSTICE



### **Race, Equity in the Courts**

The Supreme Court's Access to Justice Commission is hosting virtual feedback sessions in September 2024 with participants from Phase II of the Commission's three-phase initiative to engage court users, community leaders, judges, lawyers, court staff, and probation staff in a discussion of racial equity in the courts.

The goals are to share comments collected during the focus group sessions in a way that honors the experience of participants; discuss feedback and ideas to address the concerns shared during the focus group sessions; and explore topics and questions for the next phase of this project (Phase III, public engagement sessions).

### **Self-Help Center Pilot**

Nebraska's court system is piloting a grant-funded Self-Help Center at the Douglas County courthouse and launching a statewide virtual self-help process. This initiative will assist self-represented litigants with court procedures, filings, and appearances, addressing challenges they face in navigating the legal system. Data from the pilot will inform the development of user-friendly forms and resources, benefiting rural areas with limited legal representation.

The role of courts is to swiftly and fairly resolve cases. To accomplish this goal, the courts must be impartial, efficient, and accessible to the public. Our judicial system is based upon the principle that all citizens coming before the courts are entitled to fair and equal justice. Courts must ensure that the participants fully understand their rights and that those rights are protected. Courts must provide meaningful access to all, ensuring that no litigant is denied justice due to the lack of counsel, the inability to understand legal proceedings, or because of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, English language proficiency, or immigration status. Participants in the court process should have physical access to safe, secure courthouses, and when this is not possible because of an emergency event, continuity of operations plans should be in place, so all courts are open and accessible and maintain their mission essential functions.

This strategic goal focuses on the following areas: providing adequate funding for the Judicial Branch; implementing and maintaining modern technology to support and protect the internal work of the courts; enhancing technological access for external court users; processing and managing cases efficiently to resolve disputes in a fair and timely manner; continuously improving access to justice for limited English-proficient and the deaf or hard of hearing; ensuring quality continuing education for judges and staff of the Judicial Branch; addressing any bias and racial inequality in the judicial system; providing meaningful assistance to self-represented litigants; integrating alternative dispute resolution approaches to improve how trial and appellate courts conduct their business; and planning for courthouse accessibility, and security.

- Adequate funding for Judicial Branch Operations
- Procedural Justice
- Access to Justice
- Enhancing and securing technology for the Judicial Branch
- Case Management Procedures
- Access to Justice for those with limited English-proficiency or the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
- Enhancing Judicial Branch Education
  - Civil Justice Reform
  - Self-help Assistance for Self-Represented Litigant
- Alternative Dispute Resolution
  - Tribal, State, and Federal Court Interconnection
  - Engaging Public through Community Conversations
- Courthouse Accessibility, Security, and Continuity of Operations

## GOAL 2: PROTECTING CHILDREN AND VULNERABLE ADULTS

Nebraska's children and families are the State's precious resources. Courts must be able to act swiftly and justly in those instances when children are at risk of abuse or neglect. In domestic relations cases in which children are involved, courts must be able to offer procedures and resources to decrease children's exposure to parental conflict, as well as make timely decisions so parents have certainty in their roles and responsibilities. Any racial and ethnic disparities must be assessed considered when working with children and their families. Courts must ensure the rights of parents or other family members are also addressed.

Judges and court staff must be informed about adolescent brain development, racial and other implicit bias, as well as the legal, societal, or familial impact of domestic violence on parents and children involved in the dissolution of marriage, custodial, or child welfare matters. Additionally, protecting children includes an active role by the court to support permanency for children through legal adoption after timely relinquishment or termination of parental rights.

In cases involving vulnerable adults, courts must be able to appropriately appoint guardians and conservators to help protect those adults who can no longer protect themselves. Individuals who are unable to make responsible decisions about their finances, property, living situation, or care may require the courts to appoint a guardian or conservator to manage the vulnerable adult's personal and financial affairs. As our state's population continues to age, the responsibility placed on the courts to appoint guardians and conservators will also increase.

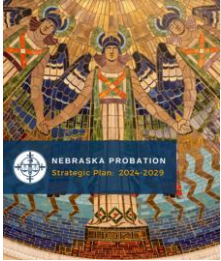
- Nebraska Court Improvement Project
- Office of the Public Guardian
- Office of Dispute Resolution
- Judicial Branch Education
- Attorney Services Guardian Ad Litem Training
- Probation Juvenile Services Division



### ***First Community Mapping Held***

*Nebraska, selected as a pilot site for the National Center for State Courts' Upstream initiative, held its first community mapping workshop in Red Willow County. Over 50 participants developed an action plan to address family issues before a child is subject to court involvement. The Nebraska Court Improvement Project plans to expand these workshops statewide.*

## GOAL 3: ADDRESSING COMMUNITY SAFETY



### Strategic Plan

Nebraska Probation's 2024-2029 Strategic Plan, developed over two years, aligns with the Supreme Court's goal of enhancing community safety. It outlines six leadership principles and provides guiding goals and strategies for the Probation system.



Scan to view  
the Plan

### Veterans Justice Program

The Administrative Office of the Courts and Probation is implementing the 2024 legislation to support veterans who find themselves in the criminal justice system. The Veterans Justice Program aims to support military veterans in the criminal justice system, particularly those whose offenses are linked to challenges like PTSD or traumatic brain injuries from their service. The program will offer veterans tailored services and treatments to address issues such as substance abuse. Veterans who complete the program could avoid a criminal record. Judges will consider service-related mental health issues during sentencing, with severe crimes being excluded. The program will be monitored for effectiveness, with victims informed and involved in the process. The goal is rehabilitation over punishment.

Courts are required by State statute to determine the appropriate sanctions or disposition for individuals who violate the law. When a court determines probation to be the most appropriate action, it must ensure that the individual is not only held accountable but also offered rehabilitative services designed to reduce or eliminate future criminal or delinquent activity. Those individuals with histories of substance use or mental health concerns present a unique challenge. Teens involved in juvenile court proceedings require a unique array of interventions from the court and community to address the legal and habilitative concerns of young people.

Innovative approaches, such as specialized probation programs, or problem-solving courts, must be strengthened. Successful management of probation populations, including those returning to the community from incarceration, requires following proven principles of effective community supervision and using treatment and rehabilitation programs supported by research. It also requires accurate, relevant, and timely information.

Initiatives that enhance probation and community supervision call for increased technology, advanced officer skill competency, competitive compensation, reasonable workloads, access to services, and improved methods to assist individuals with special needs.

In Nebraska, as well as across the country, more specialty courts and specialized probation programs have been established. The utilization of problem-solving courts, including drug courts, veteran's treatment courts, reentry courts, DUI courts, mental health courts, and young adult courts, results in significant cost savings. Recidivism rates for problem-solving court participants are less than rates of incarcerated individuals. In addition, specialized probation programs incorporating proven risk reduction practices continue to yield positive outcomes in the management of those who have caused sexual harm, experienced behavioral health disorders, or engaged in domestic violence behavior. Lastly, any overrepresentation of people of color in the criminal and juvenile justice systems must not be ignored.

Juvenile justice is also an area of specialty. In addition to maintaining safety, the primary goals of juvenile justice are skill development, rehabilitation, addressing treatment needs, and community or family reintegration. An individualized approach utilizing the tenets of adolescent development and brain science is necessary for sustained outcomes. The juvenile justice system strives to prevent juveniles from returning to the juvenile justice system or entering the adult system. This is accomplished by engaging juveniles and their families in the court process, eliminating barriers to accessing treatment or services, and partnering with educational and community stakeholders.

- Problem-Solving Court Services
- Adult Probation Services
- Juvenile Probation Services



## GOAL 4: BEING ACCOUNTABLE TO THE PUBLIC

The Judicial Branch must be accountable to the public. This goal focuses on the obligation of courts and probation to ensure that staff at all levels are competent, professional, fiscally responsible, and customer service oriented; to establish standards by which court and probation operations and performance can be measured; to keep all branches of government and the public informed of Judicial Branch operations, programs, and initiatives; and to develop a clear strategic agenda that fosters public trust and confidence. Confidence in our courts is at the heart of maintaining the public's trust in the Judicial Branch. It is vital that judges and all Judicial Branch employees are provided an ongoing quality education. Allegations of misconduct must be investigated and resolved timely and fairly.

- Professional, Competent, Customer Service Oriented Workforce
- Leadership Development and Conferencing with Judges Statewide
- Performance Standards for the Judicial Branch
- Financial Accountability
- Ongoing Branch Wide Education
- Professional Ethics and Codes of Conduct
- Judge and Attorney Disciplinary Systems
- Judicial Case Progression Standards
- Efficient Court Business Practices



### ***Chief Justice's Leadership Academy***

*Judicial Branch Education sponsors a leadership program for trial court judges, stemming from the Chief Justice's Annual Leadership Conference. Over a one-year period, judges enhance leadership skills by addressing emerging court issues, collaborating with stakeholders, and providing recommendations to improve the Judicial Branch's effectiveness. The academy has been supporting Judicial Branch leadership since 2013.*

## GOAL 5: STRENGTHENING COMMUNICATION WITH CITIZENS & WITHIN GOVERNMENT



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While the Judicial Branch is independent of the Executive and Legislative Branches of government, it does not exist in isolation. Courts serve the public and cannot do so effectively if meaningful communication between the branches, within the Judicial Branch, and with the public does not take place. This goal focuses on enhancing Judicial Branch communication with the Executive, Legislative Branches of state government, with Federal government, and with the public.

The Judicial Branch also fosters public understanding of its role and how it functions through community outreach and education programs. The Judicial Branch provides information regarding the duties of a judge, the jury system, and the judicial merit selection process. The court system strives for transparency and to share information with the public while safeguarding the private information of court participants, including victims of crimes.

### External Communications

- Executive and Legislative Branch Meetings
- Local Governmental Groups, Specifically County Governmental Organizations
- Educational and Media Programs
- Public Understanding of the Judicial Branch Programs
- Access Through In-House Broadcast Capabilities
- Development of Communication Via Social Media
- Chief Justice and Administrative Leadership Annual Visits Throughout State



## GOAL 6: REGULATING THE LEGAL PROFESSION

The Judicial Branch has long recognized the indispensable role of the legal profession in protecting individual rights and liberties in a free society. Nebraska's Judicial Branch continues in that tradition. Because the Nebraska Supreme Court regulates the practice of law, the Court must determine how the legal profession can best serve the public. This strategic goal requires ongoing oversight of the attorney admission process, disciplinary systems, and the unauthorized practice of law. The Judicial Branch oversees the licensure of attorneys and the requirements of the Mandatory Continuing Legal Education (MCLE) rule through Attorney Services.

- Attorney Admissions Process
- Annual Licensure of Attorneys
- Counsel for Discipline
- Mandatory Continuing Legal Education
- Rules of Practice in Appellate and Trial Courts
- Unauthorized Practice of Law
- Guardian ad Litem Training



### ***New MCLE System Overview and Launch***

*In August 2024, Attorney Services launched a new system for attorney licensing and MCLE. The goal of the system is to create a more user-friendly experience for the attorneys and MCLE providers. The system can be accessed at: <https://attorneys.nejudicial.gov>*





*"I am proud of the many accomplishments of Nebraska's judges, court staff, probation officers, public guardians, and other Judicial Branch employees these past 18 years. And although there have been many changes and challenges during my term, the basic principles of Justice for All and Equality Before the Law have not changed."*

*~ Chief Justice Mike Heavican, Letter of notice of retirement to Governor, August 2024*

The Nebraska Supreme Court wishes to acknowledge and thank the following Committees for integral participation in planning for the future of the Judicial Branch of Government:

**Chief Justice's Leadership**

**Supreme Court**

Chief Justice Michael G. Heavican (*ret. 10/31/2024*)

Lindsey Miller-Lerman

William B. Cassel

Stephanie F. Stacy

Jeffrey J. Funke

Jonathan J. Papik

John R. Freudenberg

**Court of Appeals**

Chief Judge Francie C. Riedmann

Frankie J. Moore

Michael W. Pirtle

Riko E. Bishop

David K. Arterburn

Lawrence E. Welch, Jr.

**Nebraska District Judges' Association**

**Nebraska County Judges' Association**

**Nebraska Separate Juvenile Court Judges' Association**

**Workers' Compensation Court**

**Administrative Office of the Courts and Probation**

Corey R. Steel, State Court Administrator

Deborah A. Minardi, Probation Administrator

## **Supreme Court Committees/Commissions/Councils**

### **Access to Justice Commission**

Stephanie F. Stacy, Supreme Court

### **Civil Justice Reform Working Group**

Jonathan J. Papik, Supreme Court

### **Committee on Equity and Fairness**

Stefanie A. Martinez, District Court

### **Consortium of Tribal, State and Federal Courts**

Andrea D. Miller, District Court

### **Self-Represented Litigation Committee**

Frankie J. Moore, Court of Appeals

### **Commission on Children in the Courts**

Francie C. Riedmann, Court of Appeals; Roger J. Heideman, Separate Juvenile Court

### **Commission on Guardianships and Conservatorships**

Francie C. Riedmann, Court of Appeals; Holly J. Parsley, County Court

### **Advisory Council on Public Guardianship**

Todd J. Hutton, County Court

### **Statewide Court Security Clearinghouse Committee**

John R. Freudenberg, Supreme Court

### **Dispute Resolution Advisory Council**

Michael W. Pirtle, Court of Appeals

### **Judicial Branch Education Advisory Committee**

Riko E. Bishop, Court of Appeals

### **Mandatory Continuing Legal Education Commission**

Jonathan J. Papik, Supreme Court

### **Probation Services Committee**

Jodi L. Nelson, District Court

### **Committee on Problem-Solving Courts**

Jeffrey J. Funke, Supreme Court

### **Public Education Outreach Promoting Law & Equity Media Committee**

Jeffrey J. Funke, Supreme Court; Todd J. Hutton, County Court

### **Technology Committee**

William B. Cassel, Supreme Court

### **Judicial Resources Commission**

Jonathan J. Papik, Supreme Court

**Judicial Ethics Committee**  
Matthew L. Acton, County Court

**Judicial Qualifications Commission**  
Chief Justice of the Supreme Court

**Supreme Court Personnel Board**  
Kris D. Mickey, County Court

**Committee on Practice and Procedure**  
Riko E. Bishop, Court of Appeals



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