

**COURT WATCH  
LOS ANGELES**

**TRAINING MANUAL**

## GOALS OF COURTWATCH LOS ANGELES

- To create accountability & transparency by bringing people into the courtroom to observe, report out, and collect data about the behavior of public officials in court.
- To raise awareness about the absurdity and harms of using fines and fees to punish poverty.
- To raise awareness about the injustices of the bail system.
- To expose the disparate punishment of communities of color.
- To hold law enforcement and elected officials accountable to public commitments, laws, and settlement agreements that call on them to refrain from excessive criminalization.
- To support and connect with organizing efforts outside the courtroom to limit the reach of the criminal system.

## PARTNERSHIPS



**Ground Game LA:** A grassroots, horizontally managed organization, building local power in Los Angeles

**Let's Get Free LA Coalition:** A coalition of organizations working to end fees, fines, and bail in LA County led by people impacted by system debt and incarceration.

**National Lawyers Guild (NLG) – LA:** A network of public interest and human rights activists working within the legal system to observe and protect people in arenas where they are not usually represented, including through a Homeless Citation Clinic with LACAN and a Street Vendor Citation clinic.

**Youth Justice Coalition:** An organization working to build a youth-led movement to end police violence, mass incarceration & criminalization of youth of color.

## EXPECTATIONS of COURTWATCHERS

- Participate in a CourtWatch LA training.
- Sign up to observe courtroom sessions at specified locations and times. We encourage working with a partner; two people can sign up for the same shift.
- Complete court watch forms and take notes during courtroom sessions.
- Submit court watch forms and data on the same day:
  - Scan or take a photo of completed court watch forms and email them to [CourtWatchLosAngeles@gmail.com](mailto:CourtWatchLosAngeles@gmail.com).
- Show up on time and plan to observe for roughly 3 hours per shift.
- Communicate with CourtWatch LA team if any issues arise.

## TOOLS

**Shift sign-up:** Sign up for a court watching shift online here: <https://bit.ly/2StrPkZ>

**Court watch form:** Use our court watch forms to record your courtroom observations. Take some extra copies of the form today! We will also email you a pdf copy of the court watch form the week of your shift.

*Don't worry if you don't hear everything can't write down all the information fast enough.*

If you manage to record some information, we can refer to the court calendar and superior court records to get the rest. The most important thing is record your observations of the discussions and conduct of the parties in the courtroom. Feel free to write on the back of the forms or in the margins as you follow along and fill in the boxes later.

**Twitter:** We will make your court observations accessible to the public by publishing them on Twitter. If you would like to suggest specific ideas for tweets, please include them in the "Notes" section of your court watch form. Make sure to follow us on Twitter – and retweet!

@CourtWatchLA  
[www.twitter.com/courtwatchla](http://www.twitter.com/courtwatchla)

### Email

Send your completed CourtWatchLA forms, Twitter post ideas, suggestions for improving this process, and questions or concerns to [CourtWatchLosAngeles@gmail.com](mailto:CourtWatchLosAngeles@gmail.com).

## **COURTHOUSE LOCATIONS**

### Airport Courthouse

11701 S. La Cienega, Los Angeles, CA 90045

Public parking is available at the Pacific Concourse parking lot and metered parking around the courthouse for a fee.

### Clara Shortridge Foltz Criminal Justice Center or "CCB" (Criminal Courts Building)

210 West Temple Street Los Angeles, CA 90012

There are pay parking lots located all around the courthouse, but the easiest thing to do is to take Metro to Civic Center/Grand Park station, a short walk away

### Compton Courthouse

200 West Compton Blvd., Compton, CA 90220

Pay parking is available in the parking structure on 400 South Acacia Ave., located on the corner of Acacia Ave. and Myrrh St. which is south of the courthouse.

### Metropolitan Courthouse or "Metro"

1945 South Hill Street, Los Angeles, CA 90007

Public parking is available for a fee in the parking structure. Metered parking is available on the surrounding surface streets.

### Santa Monica Courthouse

1725 Main Street

Santa Monica, CA 90401

Public parking is available next to the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium, which is south of the courthouse.

## LOGISTICS

- When you enter the courthouse you will be required to go through a metal detector, and your belongings will go through an x-ray machine operated by court security.

If the x-ray or metal detector sets off an alert or alarm, security may use a hand-held wand to scan you. Security may also conduct a physical search of your personal belongings.

- No electronic device can be used in any courtroom. If you need to send a text or make a call, step out of the courtroom to do so. Make sure your phone is on silent when court watching.
- Photography and videorecording is prohibited everywhere in the courthouse – not just in the courtroom.
- Food, drink, and chewing gum are not permitted in any courtroom.
- If you need to step out to get water and/or use the bathroom, feel free! Try to coordinate with your court watching partner so at least one person is present in the courtroom at all times during the shift.
- Court rules state: “persons in the courtroom may not dress in an inappropriate manner so as to be distracting to others of usual sensibilities.”

- Items prohibited in the courthouse include:

- Animals (except service animals)
- Bicycles, skates, skateboards, and scooters
- Blades, knives, or scissors
- Ceramic and glass containers
- Controlled substances, including marijuana
- Knitting and crochet needles
- Lighters
- Locks, chains, or rope
- Metal or studded belts
- Smoking devices



## **WHAT YOU MAY BE WATCHING**

**Arraignment:** Accused person's first appearance in front of a judge once a criminal allegation has been made. Purpose of this appearance is to formally charge someone with a crime, appoint a lawyer if that is necessary, receive a defendant's guilty or not guilty plea, and decide any conditions of release.

**Pre-trial hearing:** Court date after arraignment that can address a variety of subjects, often including further discussions about plea negotiations.

**Probation violation / status hearing:** A hearing to decide whether a person has violated the conditions of their probation or court-ordered conditions, or for the person charged to give a progress report to the court. Subjects of conditions and progress reports can include attendance in domestic violence classes, alcohol programs, parenting classes; completion of community labor; and payment of restitution.

**Sentencing hearing:** When a person pleads guilty or is convicted, the judge decides the punishment the person will receive, including incarceration, probation conditions, and fees, fines, & restitution the person must pay after hearing argument from the defense and the prosecution at this hearing.

**Ability to pay hearing:** When a judge considers evidence relating to a defendant's financial situation (for example, income, debts, or whether the defendant receives public benefits) in setting the amount of a fine or fees owed, or when deciding whether a defendant should be punished for failing to pay.

## **EXAMPLES OF THINGS TO WATCH FOR**

- Is a city attorney charging a homelessness-related offense as a misdemeanor instead of an infraction?
- Are fines or fees being imposed on someone who does not have the money to pay?
- Is the person in trouble because they are poor – for example: they were not able to pay court-ordered fines or fees, they were driving with a license suspended for failure to pay tickets or registration, or they did not have access to housing?
- Is the person being prosecuted for street vending?
- Is the person in court for a bench warrant more than 5 years old?
- Is the prosecutor or the judge making discriminatory arguments about the bail that should be imposed?
- Is the prosecutor or judge trying to force the defense attorney to divulge immigration-sensitive information?
- Is bail being used to force a plea – meaning the person can't afford the bail demanded by the prosecutor or judge and would rather plead guilty than stay in jail?
- Is the prosecutor or the Probation department arguing that someone has violated the terms of their probation because they did not complete a class or program because the person could not afford the class or program fees?

# PEOPLE IN THE COURTROOM



**Judge**  
 The official that makes legal decisions in the courtroom. This includes setting bail conditions and the amount of money bail, as well as granting or denying requests from the prosecutors and defense attorneys – such as requests to dismiss charges or to waive or impose fees or fines.

**Clerk**  
 Court employee that assists judge, oversees flow of cases & records



**Prosecutor**  
 The attorney bringing charges against the defendant on behalf of the government. Sometimes referred to as “the People.”  
  
**City attorney:** A prosecutor employed by the city.

**Defense attorney**  
 The attorney representing the defendant.  
  
**Public defender:** An attorney employed by the county to represent people who cannot afford to hire their own attorneys.  
  
**Alternative public defender:** An attorney employed by the county to represent people who cannot afford to hire their own attorneys in cases where there is a conflict that prevents the public defender from representing the person.  
  
**Court-appointed/bar panel attorney:** An attorney who is appointed by and paid by the court to represent someone who cannot afford to hire their own attorney in an individual case.  
  
**Pro per:** A person representing themselves without an attorney

**Defendant**  
 The person being prosecuted; the person facing criminal charges



**Bailiff**  
 Court security, uniformed



## DEFINITIONS

**Bail:** Money a person is required to give to be released from custody.

**Bail schedule:** A list adopted by the court that recommends the amount of bail a person should pay for different charges.

**Bench warrant:** An order given by the court to arrest a person who didn't do what the court ordered. For example, a bench warrant might issue if a person didn't appear in court or didn't pay a fine when they were required to do so.

**Calendar or Docket:** The official list of cases before the court, which may note the status or action required for each case. We will refer to the early list of cases available on the LA Superior Court website (<http://www.lacourt.org/criminalcalendar/ui/>) as the "calendar." We will refer to the updated list of cases only available on the day of court as the "docket."

**Charge:** The specific law the person is accused of violating.

**Community service:** Work that the court orders a person to perform as punishment, often for a nonprofit organization as an alternative to paying fines.

**Community labor:** Work that the court orders a person to perform as punishment. Often involves outdoor physical labor, such as roadside cleanup for Caltrans.

**In custody:** When a person is held in jail during their criminal case.

**Diversion:** Referral of a defendant to services or a mandatory program instead of jail. Diversion can be "informal" – meaning a person can have their case dismissed if they meet the terms of their diversion without pleading guilty. In other cases, diversion is "formal" and requires the person to first enter a plea that can later be withdrawn

**Fine:** Money a convicted person must pay as punishment

**Fee:** Money a person must pay to cover administrative costs relating to criminal proceedings or to raise funds for local government.

**GPS or Electronic Monitoring:** Condition of release from jail requiring someone to wear an ankle monitor. Often, the person has to pay a fee for the monitoring. The monitor tells the probation department where the person is and notifies probation if the person violates other conditions of release.

**Infraction:** A minor violation of law that cannot be punished by time in prison.

**Misdemeanor:** A crime that can be punished up to 1 year in jail. Less serious than a felony, more serious than an infraction.

**Own recognizance (OR)/Personal recognizance:** Release without any financial conditions based on a promise to return to court.

**Penalty assessment:** Money a convicted person must pay to raise funds for different state programs.

**Pretrial services report:** A report that the Probation department puts together to make recommendations to the judge about whether and on what conditions someone should be released from jail before trial.

**Plea:** A defendant's answer to the criminal charges against them. A person can plead "not guilty" to continue fighting the charges, or they can plead "guilty" or "no contest." Plea bargaining is the process of negotiation between the prosecution and defense to settle the case. For example, defendant may agree to plead guilty in exchange for a lesser charge.

**Probation:** Formal probation is an alternative to imprisonment in which the judge releases a convicted defendant under supervision of a probation officer that makes sure the defendant follows certain rules (for example, gets a job, completes a drug counseling program). People also sometimes use the word "probation" as shorthand for the Probation Department, which is in charge of supervising defendants who are serving probation terms. Some defendants receive "summary probation" which means they are not supervised by the Probation Department but have to check in and provide progress reports to the court.

**Probation violation:** Allegation by Probation Department, prosecutor, or court that a person who is on probation violated a term of their probation. The judge decides whether there is enough evidence to decide whether someone violated their term of probation at a separate hearing.

**Remanded to custody:** When a person is sent back to jail instead of being released.

**Restitution fine:** Money a convicted person is ordered to pay into a state fund that is supposed to help victims of crime.

**Stayed/Suspended fine:** A fine that does not have to be paid at that time.

**Waived fee or fine:** A fee or fine that does not have to be paid at all.