



2021 – 2023 Strategic Plan

Berrien County Trial Court

Revised – July 2021

(January 31, 2019 – Original)



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Letter from Court’s Leadership

Strategic Planning Team

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Supporting Work – Available Upon Request

A: 2018 Strategic Planning Surveys – Summary of Findings

B: Trends Information



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Berrien County Trial Court

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In 2019, the Berrien County Trial Court implemented a three year strategic plan. The initial plan was a representation of many dedicated hours of work by court leadership to develop a new trajectory for the court. Several strategic initiatives were introduced and successfully completed in 2019 with additional projects planned for 2020. The courts unanticipated and immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemic overshadowed any previously made plans and resulted in focus of a much more confined direction.

As we begin to emerge from the pandemic, we recognize that globally the landscape has changed. This included Berrien County and required reassessment of our initial strategic goals to determine if they remained a fit. Thus, court leadership determined that a re-boot of the strategic plan would be necessary. With the continued financial support of the State Justice Institute, the court again engaged PRAXIS Consulting to assist in facilitating an update to the plan and objectives. The result is a new and even more vibrant Berrien County Trial Court 2021-2022 Strategic Plan.

While the Court's mission, vision, and values have not changed, our focus areas have shifted to include a more accurate picture of the community we represent and serve. It is the hope of the Trial Court to continue to engage with other justice stakeholders to implement changes that meet the needs of the community while continuing to *serve the public, ensuring fair and timely justice for all*. The Court appreciates the continued support of the justice community in its continued efforts to be an innovative, high-performing court and looks forward to sharing our ongoing successes with and for Berrien County.

Regards,

Honorable Mabel J. Mayfield
Chief Judge

Carrie Smietanka-Haney
Trial Court Administrator

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2021 - 2023 Strategic Plan

July 2021

Section 1: Overview/Introduction

The Berrien County Trial Court (BCTC), a unified trial court in southwest Michigan comprised of the District, Probate, and Circuit Courts, embarked on long-range strategic planning process in the spring of 2018. With grant assistance from the State Justice Institute (SJI), the BCTC developed a Strategic Plan that set forth a future direction and strategic priorities. The Courts worked on implementing the Strategic Plan in 2019 and 2020 focusing on several strategic projects until the coronavirus pandemic was declared in March 2020. In March 2020, BCTC turned its attention to other urgent matters in response to the pandemic including conducting remote hearings, providing remote services, and pivoting to remote work.

The Court's leadership opted to update the Strategic Plan in the spring of 2021 ensuring the Plan is relevant and provides a strategic direction and priorities for the future. The planning process also served to reboot implementation, which began in the summer of 2021.

Background: Berrien County borders Indiana and Lake Michigan. The Court provides services from two locations: the primary courthouse in Saint Joseph, Michigan and an ancillary facility in Niles, Michigan. The Court also operates a juvenile center with secure detention and a residential treatment program in Berrien Center. The Court has eleven judges and approximately 230 staff. The Court has a higher-than-average caseload for its population (e.g., double the caseload of similarly sized counties) and is experiencing an increasing demand for services.

The BCTC initially engaged in strategic planning in 2003. The 2018 process helped the Court define a vision of the future and establish long-term goals and strategies for enhancing court performance (e.g., access, timeliness, etc.) and court services. It was an opportunity to identify needed improvements and changes that will enhance the Court's services, performance, and work culture. The Court and the Berrien County community will benefit greatly from this effort.

Dr. Brenda J. Wagenknecht-Ivey, CEO of PRAXIS Consulting, Inc., facilitated the Court's planning process in 2018 and in 2021. In the spring of 2018, justice system partners, judges, and employees were surveyed. The 2018 planning process included a series of meetings with a Strategic Planning Team to:

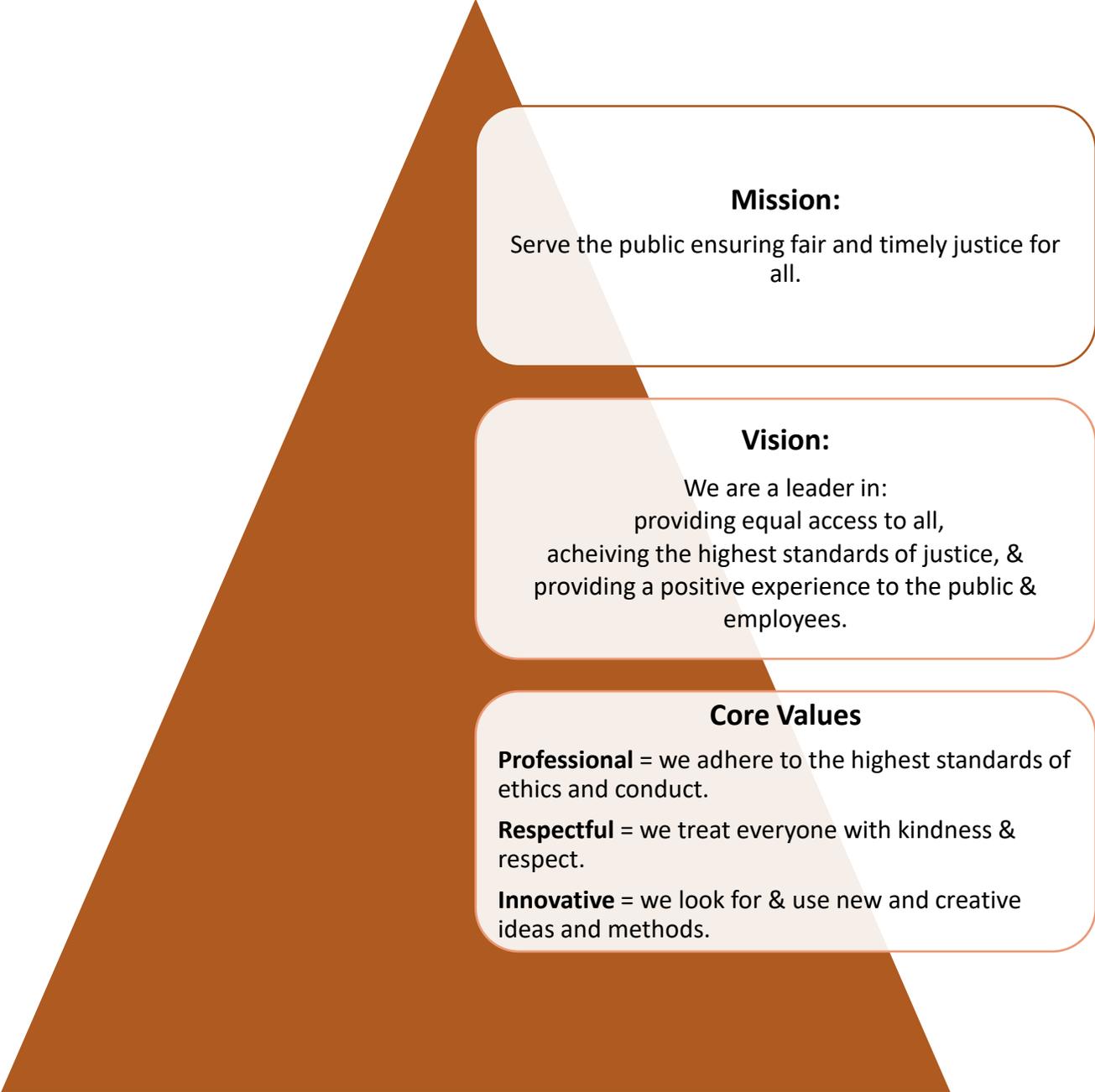
- Develop mission, vision, and core values.
- Analyze external and internal trends.
- Review the survey results.
- Identify key, strategic focus areas and long-range goals and strategies for making improvements.
- Identify specific, strategic initiatives.

The Team also developed an implementation plan and approach that will ensure follow-through. Strategic initiatives for the first year were identified and will be reviewed regularly and updated annually.

The Strategic Plan was reviewed and updated in 2021 to account for current times, new strategic projects were identified, and implementation began again in June 2021.

Section 2: Mission, Vision, and Core Values

The mission, vision and core values of the Berrien County Trial Court are below.



Mission:

Serve the public ensuring fair and timely justice for all.

Vision:

We are a leader in:
providing equal access to all,
achieving the highest standards of justice, &
providing a positive experience to the public &
employees.

Core Values

Professional = we adhere to the highest standards of ethics and conduct.

Respectful = we treat everyone with kindness & respect.

Innovative = we look for & use new and creative ideas and methods.

Section 3: Trends Analysis – Future Implications

The Strategic Planning Team reviewed a variety of trends impacting the Court in the future. External trends included social and demographic, economic, policy/political, technological, and juvenile justice trends. Internal trends included caseload, dispositions, pending caseload, specialty courts, budget, programs/services, and employee demographics.

Below are likely future implications for the Court, which were revised in 2021 to reflect the effects of the pandemic.

1. Agility and Future Innovations. The disruptions and challenges caused by the global coronavirus pandemic of 2020 -2021 were massive and unprecedented. All court operations and service to the public were affected. Yet, the Court responded quickly to the immediate crisis and threats and proceeded to serve the public by pivoting to remote hearings, remote services, and remote work. While not perfect, the Court learned the importance of being agile and responsive to changing circumstances. Going forward the Court sees opportunities to further advance and transform services and operations leveraging the positive aspects of the pandemic. Doing so will ensure that Courts “bounce forward” and implement and institutionalize innovative practices that will result in even higher court performance and better service to the public.
2. Equal Access. Providing equal access to all needs to be high priority in the future. This includes providing easier access to court and case information, services and assistance, and the like. Using technology to enhance electronic access also is critically important in the future (e.g., e-filing, texting notifications, video-conferencing, paying fines/fees online, accessing information on the website, online dispute resolution, etc.). Finally, the Court will need to work to eliminate/minimize barriers to access such as hours of operation, cost, transportation, and language.
3. Composition of Court Users. The composition of court users will continue to change. More self-represented, elderly, racially and culturally diverse, non-English speaking, people with mental health and substance abuse issues, etc. will likely use the Court in the future. Providing new and expanding existing services, making the Court more user-friendly, and ensuring procedures are understandable will be increasingly important in the future. The Court must prepare now so it is able to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population.
4. Composition of Cases. The composition and complexity of case types are changing. The Court must be nimble in the future. It must be able to monitor and shift judicial and court resources as needed to respond to changing workloads.
5. Operational Efficiency. Processing and managing cases (and workloads) efficiently and effectively will be important in the future. Effective scheduling, reducing wait times, improving/streamlining work processes are examples of improvements needed.

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6. Technology. Technology is constantly changing, improving, and evolving. The Court must be able to adapt and improve technology to enhance access, services, and operational efficiency. Court employees also need to know how to use available technology to enhance efficiency and services to court users. Court rules and laws also will need to be updated to stay current/ahead of technological changes. Staying up with the times will be challenging given the pace and associated costs of technological change.
 7. Case Outcomes. Measuring/evaluating case results is on the rise. Using evidence-based practices (e.g., risk/needs assessments) and other innovative practices for early assessment, sentencing, and supervision/monitoring are proving important to help reduce risk to the community, help youth and litigants succeed, reduce recidivism, etc. Providing effective treatment plans and tools also are necessary. In addition to holding defendants accountable for their actions, it is important be responsive to the needs of victims. Achieving a just outcome includes reducing the victimization of victims and responding to their needs. In short, it will be increasingly important for the Court to implement practices that will achieve effective case outcomes (for defendants, litigants, families, victims, and the community).
 8. Staffing. It is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit and retain a skilled, experienced, and diverse workforce. And, a relatively large number of managers/employees will be eligible to retire within the next few years. Consequently, the Court is vulnerable. The Court will need to make changes that will make the court a sought-after place to work, develop the next generation of managers/workers, retain institutional knowledge, and engage and satisfy the workforce.
 9. Funding and Other Resources. Having adequate monetary and non-monetary resources (i.e., funding, staff, technology, etc.) will likely be an ongoing challenge for the Court. The Court will continually need to look for innovative ways to use its limited resources efficiently and effectively (e.g., do more with less as well as do less with less).
 10. Collaborative Relations. The Court needs to continue to develop positive, collaborative relations with community, justice system partners, and stakeholders. Developing partnerships, enhancing communication, and improving transparency are needed in the future.
 11. Public Trust and Education. Developing the public's trust and confidence are essential. Reaching out to and educating the public/community about the Court will be increasingly important in the future.

Section 4: Organizational Assessment – Summary of Strategic Planning and Public Satisfaction Surveys

Summary of Strengths and Opportunities for Improvement

| Strengths | Areas/Opportunities for Improvement |
|---|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Accessibility of the court – language, ADA, hours 2. Facilities/security 3. Accessibility of judges 4. Judges and staff – knowledgeable, courteous, friendly; seasoned/experienced workforce; institutional knowledge 5. Job satisfaction – staff feel heard, clear expectations, caring supervisors, implementation of employee friendly initiatives (alternative work schedules) 6. Encouraged to work across areas (break down silos) 7. Confidence in leadership 8. Quality/effectiveness – willingness to take a critical look, learn, and improve | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Timeliness – timely resolution, taking the bench on time 2. Perception of fairness 3. Access to records/information 4. Use of technology 5. Providing better assistance to self-represented litigants 6. Ensuring litigants know what they need to do when they leave court (procedural fairness) 7. Public outreach and education – PR for the Court 8. Communication – internal and external 9. Transparency 10. Turnover and succession planning 11. Finding/making time to do train and cross train (within and between departments) 12. Compensation levels 13. Resistance to change – some have a mindset - this is how we have always done it |

Section 5: Strategic Focus Areas, Long-Range Goals, and Objectives

In 2018, the Strategic Planning Team identified five strategic focus areas (SFAs) to work on in the future to advance the Court and help it achieve its mission and vision. They remain relevant and even more important in 2021. The strategic focus areas (SFAs) are:

Strategic Focus Areas
November 15, 2018
Re-Affirmed in April 2021

1. Access to the Court
2. Efficient Case Processing and Court Operations
3. Court Infrastructure
4. Workforce Excellence
5. Community and Partner Relations

SFA 1: Access to the Court (Information, Services, and Programs)

Description: The Berrien County Trial Court (BCTC) is committed to providing 100% equal access to all. This includes enhancing access to information, services, and programs and eliminating barriers to access. It also includes enhancing and expanding treatment and aftercare services for litigants, youth, and families.

The demographics of the County, and thus the needs of court users, are changing. To ensure 100% equal access to justice, the Court must adapt and respond to the changing needs ensuring the Court is accessible, user-friendly, understandable, and provides needed services and programs.

According to the 2018 Strategic Planning Survey, areas for improvement included:

1. Expand ability to do business with the Court remotely/electronically (e.g., e-filing, pay fines/fees; access to case information).
2. Provide assistance to people who represent themselves/cannot afford an attorney (i.e., self-represented litigants).
3. Meet a growing need for legal assistance and services (e.g., criminal, civil, self-represented litigants).
4. Enhance language assistance to people who are not proficient in English.
5. Simplify court procedures, processes, and forms making them more understandable.
6. Provide answers to questions as court users arrive at court.
7. Eliminate or reduce access barriers, such as the cost of hiring an attorney.
8. Address the distance people must travel, or difficulties getting, to court.
9. Increase need for/access to treatment services (e.g., substance abuse, mental health, family counseling, etc.).

Long Range Goals and Objectives:

Goal 1: All court users will have access to helpful information, tools, and resources to improve their court experience.

Objective 1: Increase availability of helpful resources and information.

Objective 2: Make processes, procedures, and requirements easier to understand.

Objective 3: Expand electronic/online access to court and case information.

Objective 4: Increase employees' cross-divisional knowledge and understanding so they are better able to assist court users.

Goal 2: The Court provides access to services and programs that meet the needs of court users.

Objective 1: Assess and continuously improve the effectiveness of the Court's programs and services.

Objective 2: Use data to determine programming needs and measure outcomes.

Objective 3: Identify, advocate for, and work with others to expand community-based services.

Objective 4: Collaborate with community partners to strengthen diversion, treatment, and other services that will help court users/litigants succeed.

Objective 5: Expand civil and criminal justice system improvements in areas that meet local needs, ensuring all people are treated fairly.

Refer to the Court's Annual Operational Plan for a list of strategic initiatives being worked on in this strategic focus area.

SFA 2: Efficient Case Processing and Court Operations

Description: The Court’s mission is to serve the public by providing fair and timely justice for all. To fulfill its mission, the Court is committed to resolving legal matters in a fair and timely manner, managing and processing cases efficiently, and ensuring efficient court operations. Meeting time standards, using best practices to schedule and manage cases, reducing unnecessary delay, focusing on outcome and procedural fairness, and streamlining/reengineering work processes are included in this strategic area.

Areas for improvement in this strategic focus area are as follows, according to the 2018 strategic planning survey:

1. Improve scheduling practices.
2. Start court hearings on time – at the time they are scheduled to begin.
3. Resolve cases in a reasonable amount of time.
4. When at the courthouse, complete court business in a reasonable amount of time.
5. Treat court users equally and respectfully.
6. Ensure court users understand what they need to do when they leave the courtroom/courthouse.
7. Handle cases fairly.
8. Reduce the time court business/hearings take away from work or home – reduce wait times and unnecessary delay.
9. Streamline and standardize court processes and procedures.

In addition to the above, the Court’s technology is antiquated. The Court needs an effective case management system as well as other technology tools to enhance communication and efficiency (e.g., texting notifications, integrated systems making information easily accessible, electronic reminders, paying fines/fees online).

Long Range Goals and Objectives:

Goal 1: The Court will resolve matters efficiently and effectively.

Objective 1: Use integrated technology and innovative practices to increase court attendance.

Objective 2: Adopt and improve written policies and procedures for efficient case processing and case management.

Objective 3: Implement a new, consolidated case management system and other emerging technologies that will enhance operational efficiency.

Objective 4: Maintain timely docket management with scheduled start/stop times and compliance with case management standards.

Objective 5: Evaluate and improve policies, procedures, and practices ensuring equitable impact across all groups.

Objective 6: Implement local criminal justice system improvements in response to new laws and national best practices.

Goal 2: Judges and staff will provide the highest quality of customer service to all court users.

Objective 1: Treat all parties impartially and with respect.

Objective 2: Provide court users an opportunity to be heard – tell their side of the story/explain their situation.

Objective 3: Explain rulings/provide explanations for decisions about court users' case.

Objective 4: Ensure/help litigants understand what they need to do when they leave the courtroom/courthouse.

See the Court's Operational Plan for a list of strategic initiatives being worked on in this area.

SFA 3: Court Infrastructure (Facilities and Technology)

Description: The Berrien County Trial Court (BCTC) needs facilities (including office space) that meet the current and future needs of court users, partners, judicial officers, and employees. Adequate – modern, spacious, clean, and safe – facilities are needed to build and enhance respect for the Court (judicial branch) and to enable the court to conduct business in an efficient and effective manner.

In addition, the Court must have and maintain technology infrastructure that provides easy access, efficient workflow, access to data, and other tools to enhance efficiency and effectiveness. Enhancing internal capacity and adding emerging technology resources and online tools are essential in the future.

Survey respondents identified the following areas for improvement:

1. Improve aging infrastructure (e.g., building, design, furniture).
2. Enhance security (exterior, perimeter and internal), cyber security, and safety/emergency procedures.
3. Improve internal space (e.g., parking, jury room, meeting space for attorneys and litigants, offices, chambers and courtrooms, separate areas for victims and law enforcement, holding cells).
4. The Court has facilities in 3 locations.
5. Improve signage.
6. Update antiquated technology (hardware, software, equipment).

Long Range Goals and Objectives:

Goal 1: The Court’s facilities will meet the needs of all who access the Court.

Objective 1: Modernize and improve existing Court facilities.

Objective 2: Re-evaluate space needs and optimize usage of space and facilities.

Objective 3: Suggest and advocate for new funding and capital improvement strategies.

Objective 4: Build support for a new, centralized justice campus.

Objective 5: Maintain and enhance the safety and security of court facilities.

Goal 2: The technology infrastructure will support existing and future needs of the Court.

Objective 1: Invest in and maintain updated hardware, software, and equipment including mobile devices.

Objective 2: Prepare for and use emerging technologies, applications, and tools.

Objective 3: Enhance and improve the technology capacity and cyber security at court facilities.

See the Court's Annual Operational Plan for a list of the strategic initiatives being worked on in this area.

SFA 4: Workforce Excellence

Description: The Court values its workforce and sees opportunities to make improvements that will make the Court a great place to work. This includes using innovative methods to recruit and retain a skilled workforce, maintaining a positive and engaging work environment, developing employees, and ensuring judicial officers and staff are able to perform their jobs well.

According to the 2018 strategic planning survey, improvements are needed in the following areas:

1. Enhance communication from Court leadership (e.g., keeping staff informed about what is going on at the Court and within and across Departments)
2. Improve management/supervision practices (e.g., soliciting and valuing the opinions of staff, giving performance feedback/performance management, communicating job expectations).
3. Recognize employees for doing their jobs well.
4. Build pride in and connect the work of staff to the important mission of the Court (e.g., staff recognizing the importance of their job/work).
5. Provide staff with opportunities to learn and grow (e.g., training and development, career advancement and mobility).
6. Provide competitive pay and benefits, and align job expectations with levels of pay.
7. Provide non-monetary benefits and perks (e.g., flexible/alternative schedules, work life balance).

Long Range Goals and Objectives:

Goal 1: The Court will maintain an inclusive, positive, and engaging work environment.

Objective 1: Provide competitive pay and benefits.

Objective 2: Promote and prioritize work/life balance.

Objective 3: Regularly solicit employee input and feedback.

Objective 4: Promote cross-departmental alignment, collaboration, and problem solving.

Objective 5: Enhance employee recognition and appreciation.

Objective 6: Provide and promote opportunities for job and career development ensuring equitable opportunities for all employees.

Objective 7: Enhance communication with employees.

Objective 8: Continually strengthen leadership, management, and supervision practices.

Objective 9: Increase visibility and connections among judicial officers and staff.

Objective 10: Promote an equitable, inclusive, and welcoming culture for all employees.

Goal 2: Court employees will have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform their jobs.

Objective 1: Increase training and educational opportunities.

Objective 2: Establish and maintain a meaningful performance management system.

Objective 3: Develop the next generation of court leaders.

Objective 4: Upskill staff to match the needs of today's courts.

Goal 3: The Court will recruit and retain a diverse and skilled workforce.

Objective 1: Increase outreach regarding job opportunities.

Objective 2: Communicate/promote the Court's positive image.

Objective 3: Forge new relationships/partnerships with diverse candidate pools.

Objective 4: Enhance recruiting and retention practices.

Refer to the Court's Annual Operational Plan for the strategic initiatives being worked on in this area.

SFA 5: Community and Partner Relations

Description: Educating the public and strengthening justice system/community partnerships are very important to the future of the Berrien County Trial Court (BCTC). The Court is committed to educating the public about the Court and increasing understanding and respect among the public. Reaching out to, engaging in dialogue, and sharing information with the public will be important in the future. In sum, building trust and confidence in the Court are high priorities.

Additionally, the Court needs to continue to strengthen relations with external partners. Increasing communication, forging new partnerships, coordinating services, and collaborating with stakeholders and partners to enhance services will yield many benefits. The Court will function more efficiently, and the services provided to court users/the public will be of higher quality.

Areas for improvement include:

1. Expand outreach to and education of the public.
2. Promote the positive achievements of the Court.
3. Increase listening and dialogue with the public and partners.
4. Enhance communication, information sharing, and coordination among all agencies.

Long Range Goals and Objectives:

Goal 1: The public will understand and have a high level of trust and confidence in the Court.

Objective 1: Increase transparency by sharing information openly and honestly about the Court.

Objective 2: Reach out to, solicit input from, and engage in dialogue with the public.

Objective 3: Educate/inform the public about the Court's role, goals, and priorities.

Objective 4: Promote the positive achievements and performance of the Court.

Objective 5: Be a visible leader in the community.

Objective 6: Practice fair and respectful treatment in our interactions with all people, consistent with principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Goal 2: The Court will have and maintain effective relationships with partners.

Objective 1: Learn about the needs and priorities of partners.

Objective 2: Develop methods to improve communication and information sharing.

Objective 3: Develop and grow a collaborative network of diverse partners to solve system problems and implement justice system improvements.

Objective 4: Communicate/share the Court's needs and priorities.

Objective 5: Use data to demonstrate needs and support changes.

See the Court's Annual Operational Plan for a list of strategic initiatives being worked on in this strategic focus area.