



States Underuse Court Date Reminders

Research shows that reminders can help get people to court—and reduce the cost of missed hearings

Overview

State courts bear the immense responsibility of handling about 66 million cases a year, many of which require people facing civil or criminal matters to go to court for at least one hearing, and often several, to resolve their cases.¹ Although most people show up for court,² no-shows in even a small percentage of cases add up to millions of missed hearings that slow court operations and inconvenience court personnel, witnesses, and victims. In criminal and traffic cases especially, missed court hearings not only strain court efficiency but also can have cascading consequences: A missed hearing can result in an arrest warrant, driver's license suspension, fine, and even jail time for the person charged in the case.³

But missed court hearings don't have to be such a drain on justice system resources.⁴ Just like the reminders that people get from a dentist's office or a hair salon, a court date reminder that notifies a person of an upcoming appointment helps reduce the no-shows that happen simply because the person forgot.

Rigorous research has found that these court date reminders are consistently effective at reducing missed court hearings. A recent review of the research found that reminders boosted court appearance in 11 of 12 studies, with relative reductions in the failure-to-appear rate ranging from 11% to 61%.⁵ Cases for lower-level offenses, such as misdemeanors and traffic violations, saw even more improvement when the reminders were sent.

Despite the research supporting court date reminders, there was no centralized information about where these programs were being deployed and in what way. Researchers from The Pew Charitable Trusts sought to fill this gap by surveying states in the second half of 2024 about whether and how reminders are being used across the country. The results show that many states don't offer reminders. And, of those that do, the reminders may not be as effective as they could be because of enrollment and design features. In particular, the study found:

- Only 18 states (plus Washington, D.C.) confirmed that they have a statewide court date reminder program. Of the remaining states, 19 do not have a reminder program, 10 have programs that reach only some jurisdictions, and three did not respond to our questionnaire.
- Even among states reporting a program, reminders are generally not offered for all court cases.
 - Noncriminal cases, such as civil, family, or traffic matters, are rarely eligible to receive reminders, and some programs apply only to a subset of criminal cases.
- Most states with reminder programs require that people sign up for those reminders, rather than automatically enrolling them, leading to low usage. The enrollment rate in some states is less than 5%.
- Text reminders aren't being used to their full potential: Messages typically include key details about court hearings (time, date, location) but often lack other helpful information.

Overall, the results show that text reminders are underused and that state courts are missing an opportunity to improve court appearance rates and minimize some of the consequences of missed hearings with this simple solution.

Reminders are provided in some states for some cases

Pew sent a questionnaire to the administrative office of the courts or the judicial branch in all 50 states, plus Washington, D.C. These central entities oversee the operations of local courts and have authority to set certain rules, processes, or requirements, including providing or requiring certain technology. If statewide reminder programs exist, these central entities would be responsible for them.

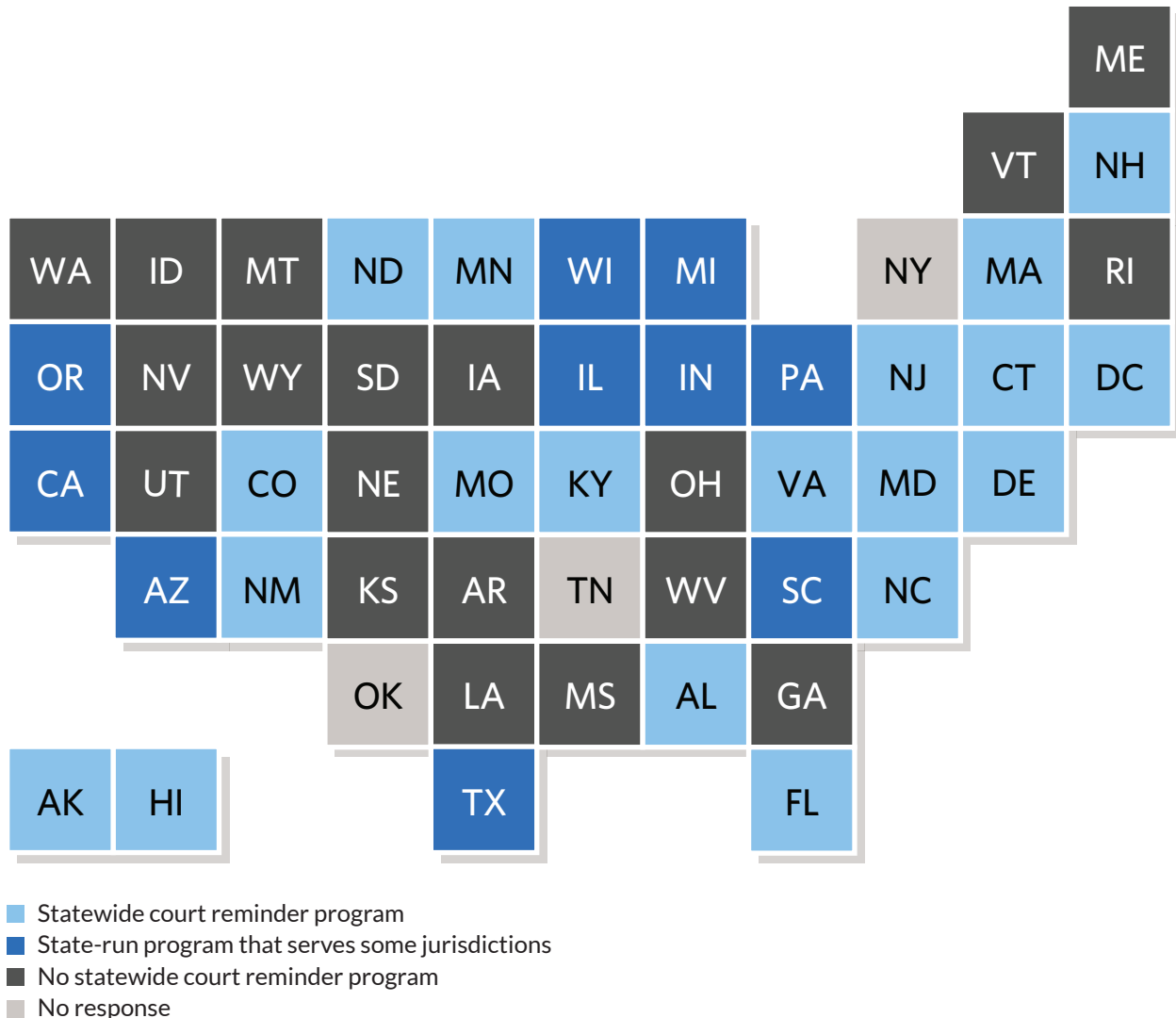
The Pew study found that:

- **18 states (and D.C.) have statewide court date reminder programs.** In these states, courts in all jurisdictions send reminders to at least some people with court hearings for at least some cases.
- **19 states do not have statewide reminder programs.** Jurisdictions in some of these states may send reminders on their own initiative, but there is no obligation, and the state does not provide technology to send reminders.
- **10 states have a state-run program that serves some jurisdictions.** Some states in this group offered the program to all jurisdictions, but only some courts have chosen to use it. In other states, the court date reminder program was provided only to courts already using certain technology, such as court case management systems.

Figure 1

Many States Don't Provide Reminders for Court Hearings

Implementation of statewide court reminder programs, by state



Source: Pew analysis of questionnaire responses

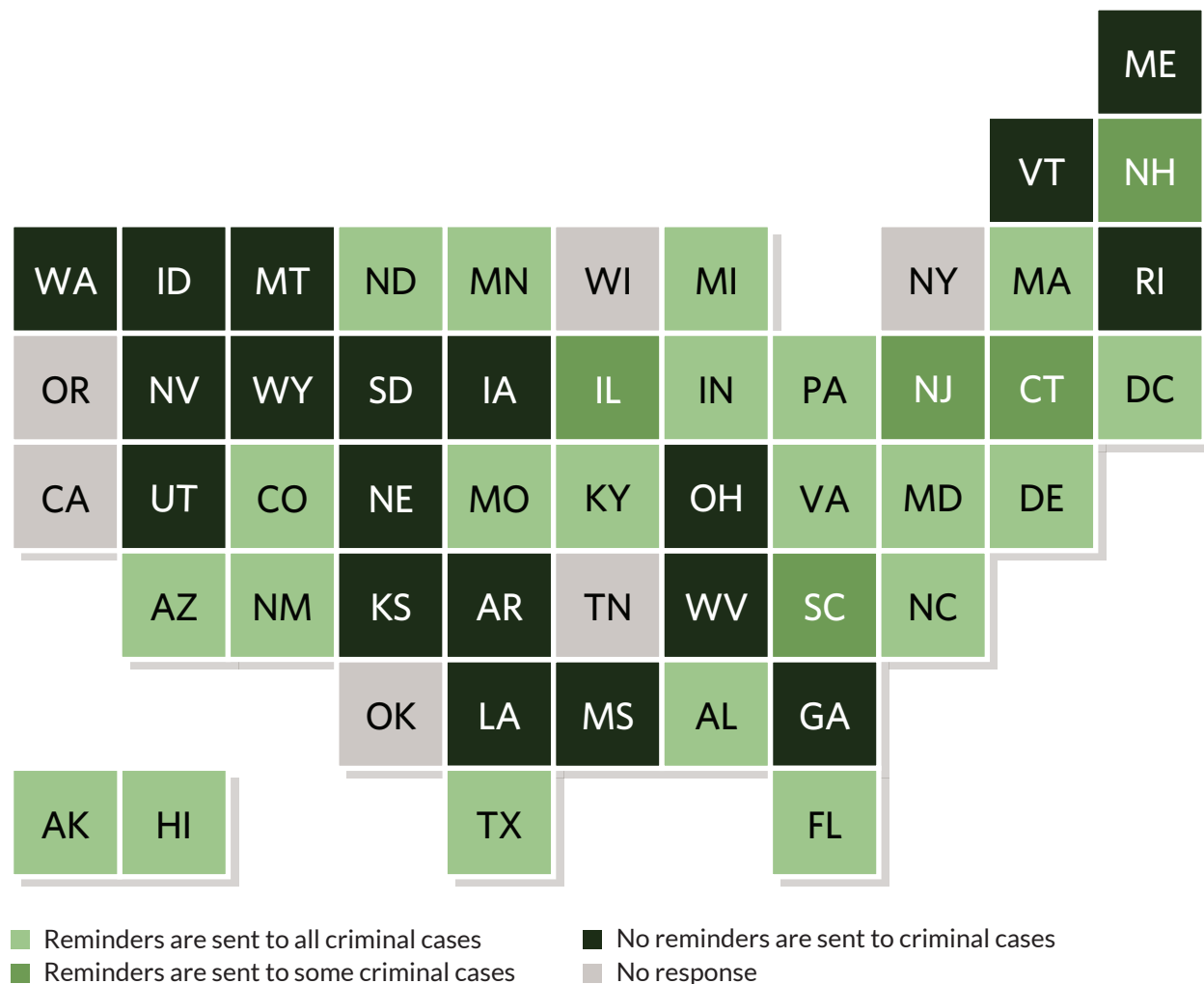
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Even in states that have a court date reminder program, reminders aren't available for all cases. Reminder programs usually apply to criminal rather than civil cases, and even then, only certain types of criminal cases may be included. For example, Illinois and Connecticut send court date reminders only to people with criminal cases who receive pretrial services, meaning services or supervision while they await their trial.

Figure 2

Reminders Are Often Available for Criminal Cases, but Not All Criminal Cases Are Covered

Eligibility of statewide court reminder programs, by state



Note: California, Oregon, and Wisconsin have reminder programs but did not provide this information.

Source: Pew analysis of questionnaire responses

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Criminal cases represent less than a quarter of all cases handled by state courts,⁶ but they carry some of the most significant consequences for people facing charges who miss their court hearings. In most states, failing to appear for a criminal hearing can lead to a warrant for arrest (often called a bench warrant) or driver's license suspension (for traffic-related violations), making the person susceptible to arrest and jail time for simply forgetting a court date.⁷

Reminders are available less frequently for noncriminal matters. Throughout the country,⁸ most court cases are traffic cases, and missing court for a noncriminal traffic case carries consequences in many states—including accumulation of driver's points or the possibility of a bench warrant or driver's license suspension.⁹ But noncriminal traffic cases are eligible for reminders in only 10 states.

Figure 3

Reminders Are Less Commonly Available for Noncriminal Matters, Such as Traffic or Family Cases

States grouped by case eligibility in the reminder program, by case type

AR	CA	GA	AK	AR	CA	AK	AR	CA	AK	AR	CA
ID	IA	KS	CO	CT	DE	CO	CT	DE	CO	CT	DE
LA	ME	MS	GA	ID	IL	GA	ID	IL	DC	GA	ID
MT	NE	NV	IN	IA	KS	IN	IA	KS	IL	IN	IA
NY	OH	OK	LA	ME	MD	KY	LA	ME	KS	KY	LA
OR	RI	SD	MS	MT	NE	MD	MS	MT	ME	MD	MA
TN	UT	VT	NV	NH	NJ	NE	NV	NJ	MS	MO	MT
WA	WV	WI	NM	NY	NC	NM	NY	NC	NE	NV	NH
AL	AK	WY	ND	OH	OK	ND	OH	OK	NM	NY	ND
AZ	CO	CT	OR	PA	RI	OR	PA	RI	OH	OK	OR
DE	DC	FL	SC	SD	TN	SC	SD	TN	RI	SC	SD
HI	IL	IN	UT	VT	VA	UT	VT	VA	TN	TX	UT
KY	MD	MA	WA	WV	WI	WA	WV	WI	VT	WA	WV
MI	MN	MO	AL	AZ	WY	AL	AZ	WY	AL	WI	WY
NH	NJ	NM	DC	FL	HI	DC	FL	HI	AZ	FL	HI
NC	ND	PA	KY	MA	MI	MA	MI	MN	MI	MN	NJ
SC	TX	VA	MN	MO	TX	MO	NH	TX	NC	PA	VA
Criminal cases			Civil cases			Family and probate cases			Traffic cases		

Notes: At least one type of case in each category is eligible for reminders in that state. California, Oregon, and Wisconsin have reminders but did not provide this information. New York, Tennessee, and Oklahoma did not complete Pew's questionnaire

Source: Pew analysis of questionnaire responses

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Reminders can also be beneficial in civil cases, in which people generally don't have a right to counsel and are mostly navigating their cases without the help of lawyers.¹⁰ Only 11 states have programs that send reminders for civil cases, and not all of those are statewide.

For example, in debt collection cases in many states, people who miss their court dates automatically receive a default judgment, meaning they are found responsible for the debt and are vulnerable to wage garnishment or seizure of property. Reminders could decrease these automatic judgments.¹¹

And for any type of case, whether related to families, businesses, or public safety, reducing missed hearings by any party will increase courtroom participation and support fair and speedy resolution of cases.

Even where reminders are offered, low enrollment dampens impact

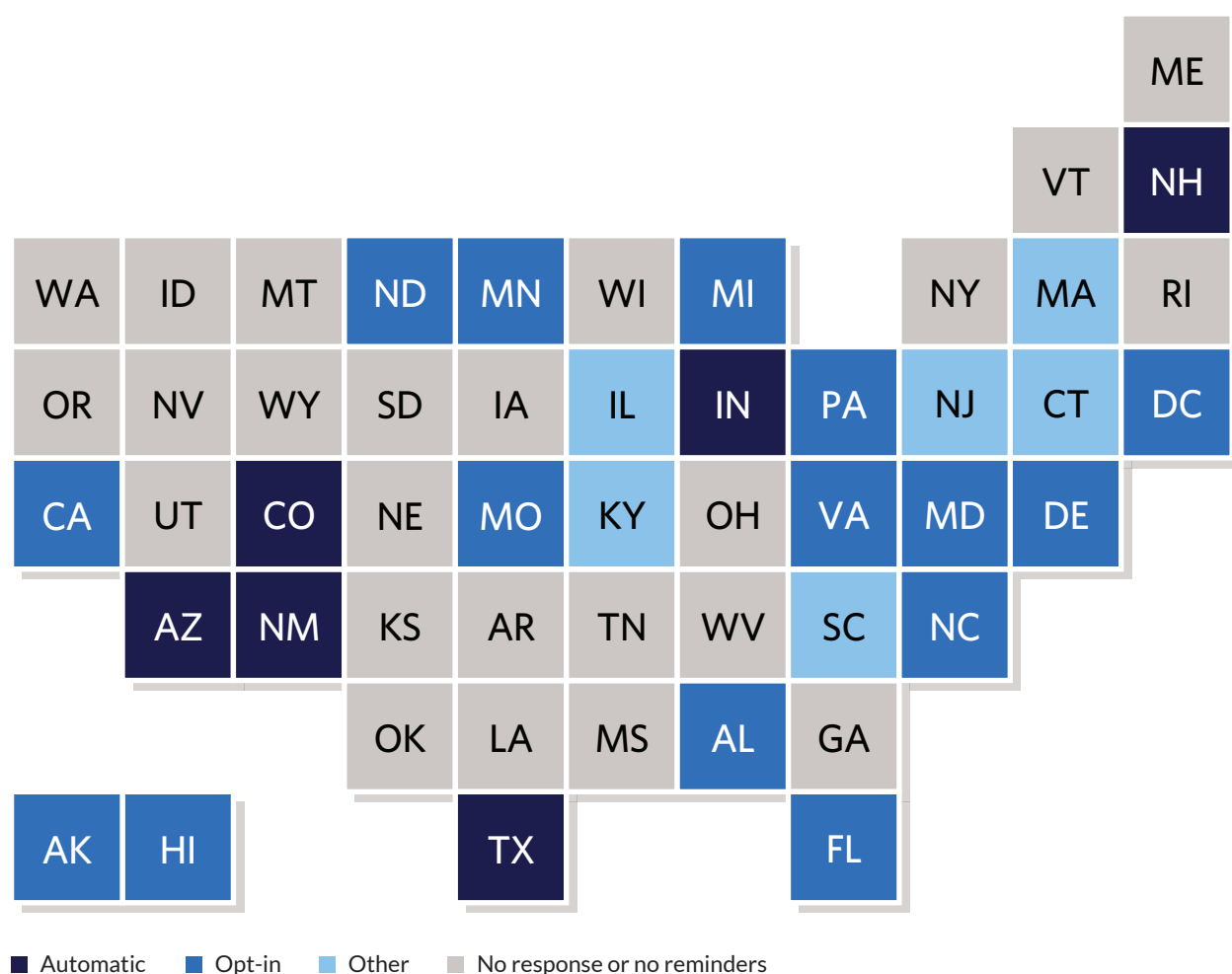
Fourteen states and D.C. have court reminder programs use opt-in enrollment, meaning that people have to sign themselves up to receive reminders for upcoming hearings. Just six states offer opt-out programs, in which court users are automatically enrolled to receive reminders—and can choose to stop receiving them.

Another six states with reminder programs have different types of enrollment for different case types or rely on court staff or other personnel (e.g., pretrial service officer) to enroll individuals in the program.

Figure 4

More States Use Opt-in Programs Than Automatic Enrollment

Enrollment type of reminder program, by state



Notes: Oregon and Wisconsin have reminder programs but did not provide this information. New York, Tennessee, and Oklahoma did not respond to our request or complete the questionnaire.

Source: Pew analysis of questionnaire responses

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Opt-in programs require people with court hearings to know that a program exists and then follow the right steps to be enrolled. While this may seem easy enough, in practice it creates additional hurdles and requires more work on the courts' part to adequately publicize the program. Automatic enrollment would probably lead to higher rates of participation, meaning that more people with court dates would receive reminders; the available data bears this out.

New Mexico and Arizona both have automatic enrollment and high rates of participation in reminder programs: 72% and 90%, respectively. States with opt-in programs had substantially lower participation rates: as low as 2% (in Pennsylvania) and as high as 30% (in Alaska) of eligible cases were enrolled to receive reminders.

For automatic enrollment to work, courts need current and accurate contact information for people with cases. One way to ensure this is to collect phone numbers on the citation or ticket used by law enforcement, as is done in Hawaii and Colorado. Another method is to have court staff ask for contact information when the individual is in court—but this works only for future hearings for people who show up to court in the first place.

Figure 5

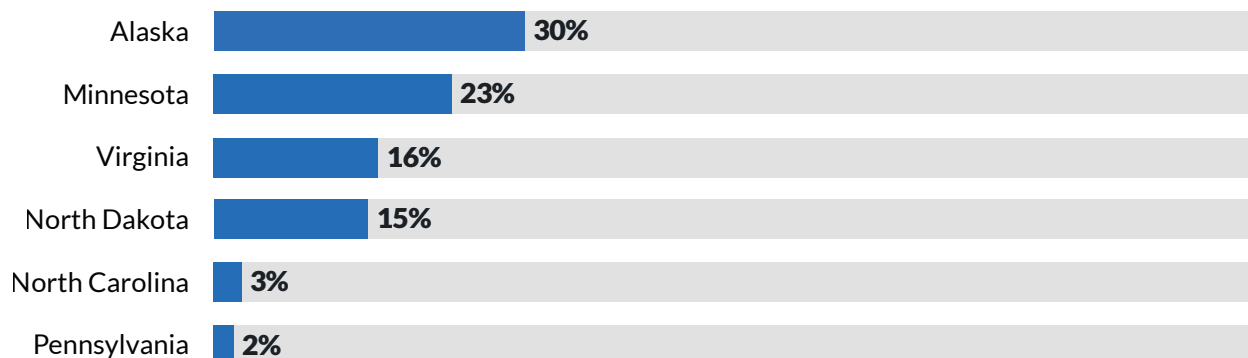
Not All Eligible Cases Receive Reminders, but States With Automatic Enrollment See Greater Usage

Enrollment rates for eligible cases, by state and type of enrollment

Automatic



Opt-in



Note: States are shown if they provided data on the number of enrolled and eligible cases and have automatic or opt-in enrollment.

Source: Pew analysis of questionnaire responses

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Text messages include basic details about the court hearing and sometimes other helpful information

Court forms, websites, and processes can be difficult to understand. Establishing a reminder program creates a new opportunity for courts to communicate clearly and concisely with court users. Pew's questionnaire found

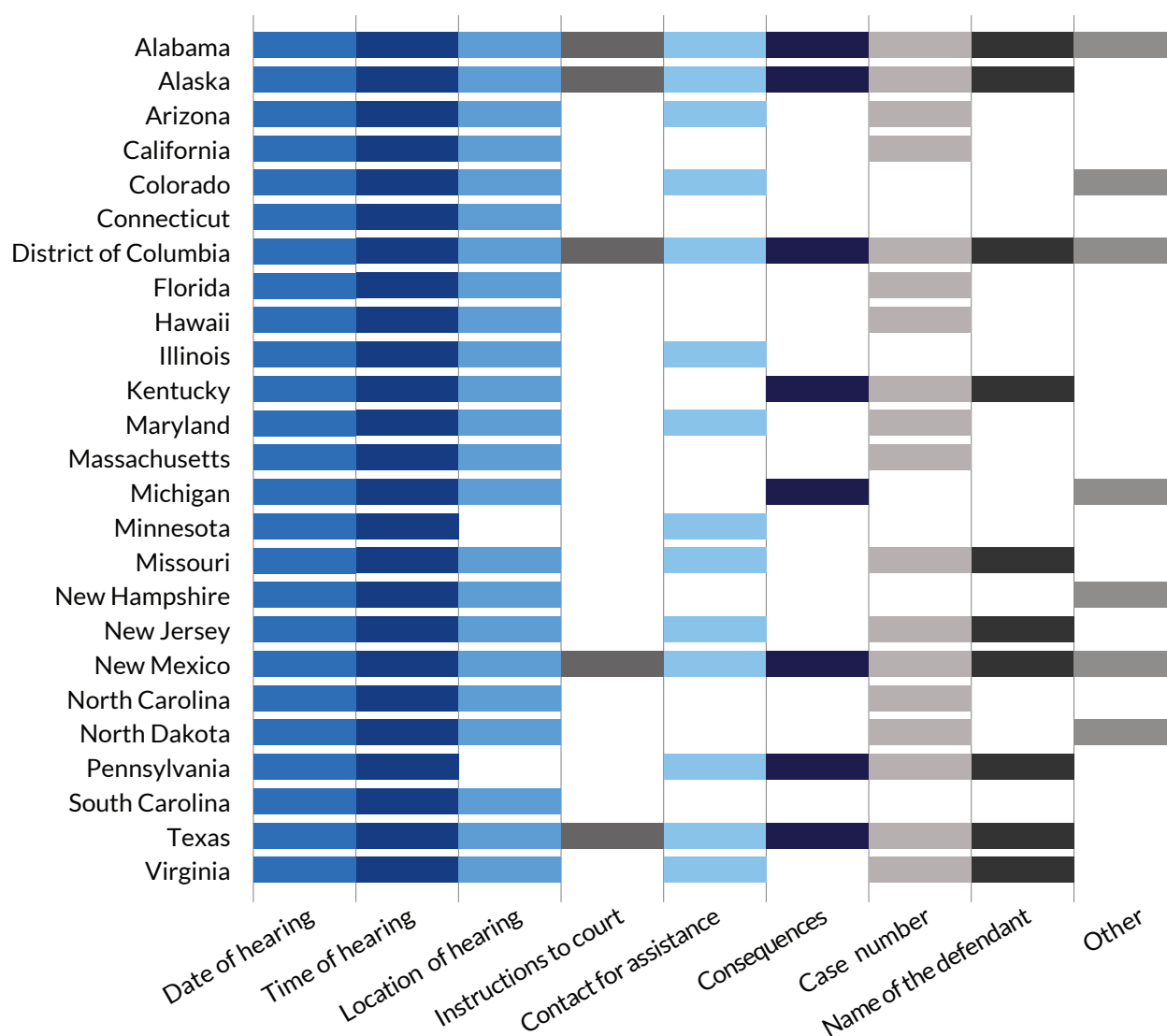
that the majority of states that provide reminders send the notifications via text message; some also send them via email. The messages typically include basic information about the upcoming court date, such as the date, time, and location of the hearing.

A few states also report including information in the reminders that goes beyond the standard details for the hearing. In Colorado, for example, if the hearing is virtual, the text message reminder includes a link to connect to the hearing.

Figure 6

Reminders Nearly Always Include the Date, Time, and Location but May Lack Other Information About the Hearing

Information included in reminders, by state



Note: Delaware, Oregon, and Wisconsin have reminder programs but did not provide this information.

Source: Pew analysis of questionnaire responses

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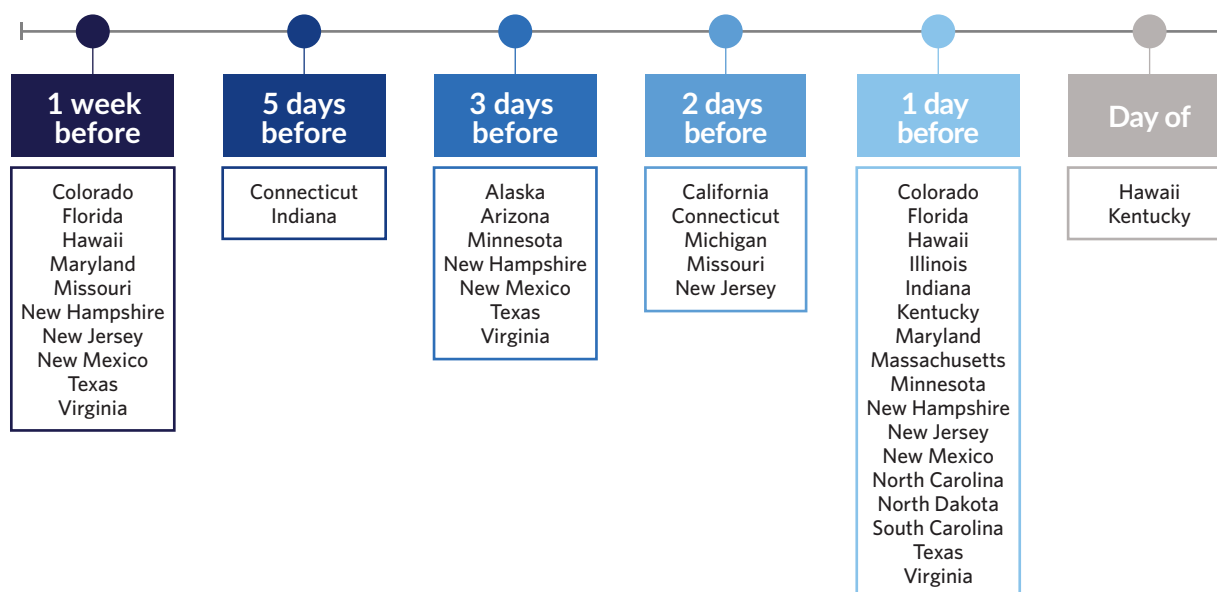
Some states include information about whom users should contact if they have questions about their cases—or information about the consequences of missing court, extra context could make reminders more effective. A study in New York City found that reminders that prompt the recipients to make plans for getting to court and inform them of the consequences of missing a hearing reduced missed hearings more effectively than reminders that did not include such context.¹²

To allow someone to plan to attend their hearing, reminders must also be sent with enough lead time. Most states that use text reminders send multiple text messages—one a few days before the hearing and another the day before the hearing. At least 10 states provide notifications a full week before the hearing.

Figure 7

Reminders Are Often Sent Several Days Before the Hearing and Again Right Before

When reminders are sent, by state



Notes: Delaware, Oregon, and Wisconsin have reminder programs but did not provide this information. Some states send reminders at times not displayed in Figure 7.

Source: Pew analysis of questionnaire responses

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Courts can get reminders up and running with relatively minimal costs

In the Pew study, some states provided information on the procurement or development of their reminder programs. About half of the states reported that the judicial branch's IT staff built the technology allowing for a statewide court reminder program and paid a vendor to send the text messages. The other half relied on a vendor for the entire building and management of the service.

Without providing the exact costs of their programs, a few states described minimal costs while eight states provided specific figures. Those states reported startup costs ranging from \$35,000 to \$600,000, and ongoing costs ranging from \$720 to \$70,000 annually. These costs represent a small percentage of overall judiciary

budgets, which, for the states reporting costs, range from \$219 million to \$1 billion. Across the four states reporting both startup and ongoing costs, the total expense for the reminder program represented, on average, 0.05% of the judiciary's annual budget.

Figure 8

Average Judiciary Budget and Cost of Reminders Program from 4 States



Note: Average cost is based on four states—Colorado, Arizona, Minnesota, and Hawaii—that provided startup and ongoing costs.

Source: Pew analysis of questionnaire responses

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There is no standard cost for states to develop and run a reminder program, because each state has varying technology needs, assets, court structures, and populations. The Texas Legislature recently set aside up to \$2.2 million to provide reminder programs to all courts in the state, which use various case management systems.¹³ This sum is a much larger number than those reported by other states, but the figure remains a consistently small fraction, costing an average of just 0.4% of the state's more than \$500 million judiciary budget.¹⁴

Although setting up a reminder program has a cost, so do missed court dates. When someone doesn't show up at a hearing, judges and clerks often have additional paperwork; victims and witnesses are inconvenienced; and court operations run less efficiently. Bench warrants and driver's license suspensions for missed criminal court hearings often lead to arrests and jail admissions, which strain communities and expend law enforcement resources.

Conclusion

Court date reminders can increase court appearances and minimize the costs and consequences associated with missed court dates. Yet this simple and effective tool is not widely used across the country. The Pew study reveals that nearly half the states in the U.S. do not provide reminders, and the other half could be getting better outcomes with more comprehensive programs.

To be most effective, reminders should reach as many people as possible. States should consider providing a reminder program statewide or requiring localities to create their own. Courts could also increase participation by expanding eligibility to anyone with an upcoming court hearing, regardless of case type, and automatically enroll them in the program. States investing in these programs will receive the greatest benefit for courts and court users when they maximize participation in the program.

States can also increase the effectiveness of reminder programs by sending more helpful messages that include crucial information for navigating the case, such as a number to call for assistance, and details about the consequences of missing a court hearing. Each reminder helps to improve communication between the court

and the public, fostering trust and encouraging meaningful participation in cases. By adopting a statewide court reminder program—and using it effectively—states can begin to reduce not only the missed hearings but also the human and fiscal costs of those missed hearings.

Methodology

The Pew Charitable Trusts conducted a study across all 50 states and the District of Columbia to assess the prevalence and effectiveness of statewide court reminder systems in the United States. The study was designed to capture quantitative data on the types of reminders available, case filings, frequency of reminders, enrollment data, and other key metrics.

Pew collected data from June 25, 2024, to Dec. 3, 2024. To maximize response rates, participants were initially contacted with a questionnaire request, followed by two reminder emails during the data collection period. The final response rate was 94%, with responses from 47 states, plus D.C. Three states did not report any data: New York, Tennessee, and Oklahoma.

Participants for this study were identified through a targeted approach, using publicly available online resources. The research team conducted online searches to locate appropriate state-level contacts within the judicial branch of each state. The key people targeted for participation in the study were:

- State court administrators
- Chief information officers
- Public information officers
- Directors of research

These titles were selected based on their likely familiarity with their respective states' court reminder programs and their roles overseeing or implementing such systems.

Once the appropriate contacts were identified, the questionnaire was distributed via email, which provided an overview of the study and a direct link to the questionnaire. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire or to forward it to the most suitable person to complete it. If there was no response in the first round of requests, a second email was sent to additional state-level officials to get as many state responses as possible. By the end of the study, researchers had sent participant requests to at least three state officials in most states. To confirm that each state submitted only one response, the research team closely monitored submissions.

The questionnaire contained 18 questions, most of which had fixed-choice responses but some of which were open-ended. It prompted respondents to provide additional nuance or context in text fields. This information was used alongside fixed-choice responses to create new variables for analysis that more accurately reflected the situation in the respondents' states and captured trends across states.

The questionnaire relies on self-reported data from states, and it's possible that some respondents did not fully understand every question, leading to potentially inaccurate responses. Researchers followed up with participants to verify the accuracy of the data provided. If requests for verification were unanswered, the research team used state public websites and resources to obtain the necessary information. However, researchers could not verify all responses thoroughly.

Endnotes

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- 8 “State Courts Play a Key Role in American Life.”
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For more information, please visit: [pew.org](https://www.pew.org)

The Pew Charitable Trusts

Contact: Maria Borden, communications manager

Email: mborden@pewtrusts.org

Project website: [pew.org](https://www.pew.org)

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