

THE RECORDER

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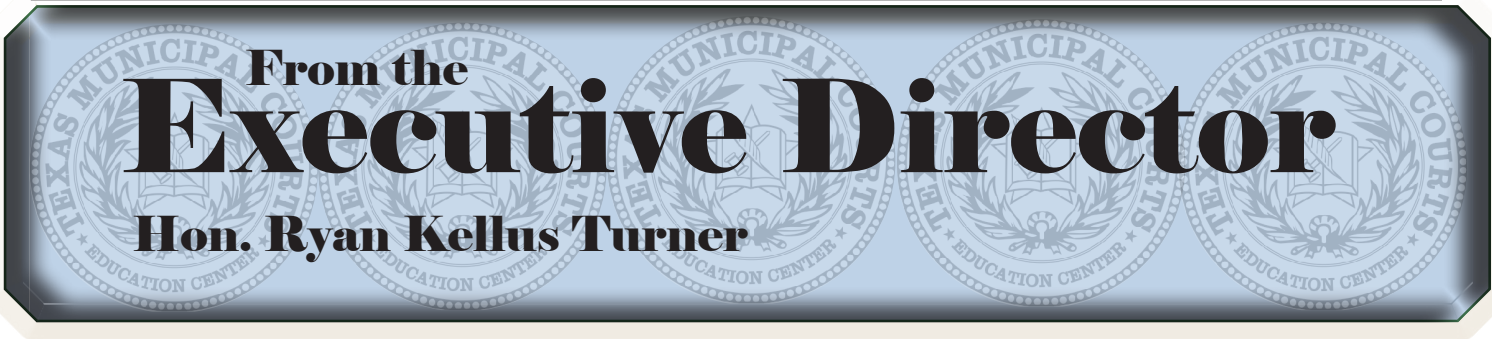
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From the **Executive Director** **Hon. Ryan Kellus Turner**

Here's to the volunteers. We can't do it without you.

Volunteering looks different from person to person and takes many forms. Some give their time. Others share their talent. Still others contribute their treasure. The form of the contribution may differ, but each ultimately advances a shared objective.

TMCEC would not be what it is today without people willing to contribute in each of those ways.

During Academic Year 2026, TMCEC faculty members volunteered their time and traveled thousands of miles across the vast state of Texas. They came by car and by air. Many spent nights away from home and time away from their families in service to TMCEC's educational mission. They prepared presentations, shared their expertise, answered questions, and helped colleagues throughout the state better serve their courts and communities. Much of what TMCEC accomplishes each year depends upon people willing to give something of themselves for the benefit of others.

That spirit of contribution extends beyond the classroom.

In June, I penned an article in *The Recorder* detailing the [past, present, and future of the Judicial and Court Personnel Training Fund](#). As that article explained, state grant resources alone are no longer sufficient to sustain everything organizations like TMCEC are expected to provide. Increasingly, we have had to

look to our own constituents to help close that gap and preserve the programs and services they have come to expect.

There is a simple truth underlying all of this: TMCEC is able to support its constituents because TMCEC's constituents are prepared to support TMCEC.

That support comes in many forms. It comes from the faculty member who spends hours preparing to teach a course. It comes from the judge, clerk, prosecutor, court administrator, or other professional who shares hard-earned experience with colleagues. It comes from cities that recognize the value of continuing education and invest in the professional development of their personnel. And it comes from individuals and institutions willing to contribute resources so that TMCEC can continue doing the work it was created to do.

None of these contributions stands alone. Together, they make it possible.

It only works when everyone contributes in different ways.

That has always been one of TMCEC's greatest strengths. We exist to serve Texas municipal courts, but our ability to do so depends upon a community that believes enough in the mission to support it.

So here's to the volunteers, in every sense of the word, and to everyone whose contribution helps make TMCEC what it is.

Thank you, and here's looking forward to a great Academic Year 2027.

AROUND THE STATE

2026 TMCA Annual Meeting & Awards Dinner

Jurist of the Year:
Hon. Michael Acuña
Presiding Judge, Irving



Left to right: Jennifer Bozorgnia, Court Services Director, Irving; Hon. Michael Acuña; Hon. Tammy Odom, Region VIII Director, TMCA

2026 TMCA Award Recipients

Outstanding Court Support Staff
Heather Sutton
Court Administrator, Burnet



Left to right: Landra Solansky, Treasurer, TMCA; Heather Sutton; Hon. Shelley Becker, Region VII Director, TMCA

Outstanding Prosecutor
Pam Liston
Prosecutor, Decatur



Left to right: Hon. Hilda Cuthbertson, Secretary, TMCA; Pam Liston; Hon. Bonnie Townsend, Past President, TMCA

President's Award
Hon. Julie Escalante
Retired Judge, Baytown



Left to right: Hon. Hilda Cuthbertson, Secretary, TMCA; Hon. Julie Escalante, Retired Municipal Judge and former TMCA President; Hon. Teresa Evans, President, TMCA

Service Award
Hon. Teresa Evans
President, 2025-26



Left to right: Hon. Wayne Frost, President Elect, TMCA; Hon. Teresa Evans, President, TMCA

Service Award
Hon. Kathleen Person
2nd Vice President, 2025-26

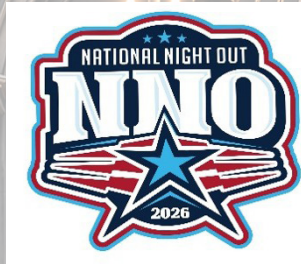


Service Award
Hon. Bonnie Townsend
Past President



Left to right: Landra Solansky, Treasurer, TMCA; Hon. Bonnie Townsend; Hon. Hilda Cuthbertson, Secretary, TMCA

AROUND THE STATE



MARK YOUR FALL CALENDAR!

NATIONAL NIGHT OUT OCTOBER 6, 2026

MUNICIPAL COURTS WEEK NOVEMBER 2-6, 2026

National Night Out and Municipal Courts Week bring Texas communities together to recognize the important role the judicial system plays in promoting public safety. They are also an ideal time to promote traffic safety!

National Night Out is a fun-filled evening dedicated to building trust and partnerships between law enforcement and the neighborhoods they serve. Music, food, games, safety demonstrations, and meet-and-greets with court personnel, police officers, firefighters, and public officials are common features of a successful National Night Out event.

Municipal Courts Week is a time to recognize the essential role municipal courts play in promoting safety, justice, accountability, and public trust.

Need Materials? Through funding from the Texas Department of Transportation, TMCEC has a limited supply of traffic safety items and resources available! Get your requests in as early as possible! Visit tmcec.com/mtsi/resources-municipal-courts/ to explore available materials.

Check out TMCEC webpages dedicated to these events for more information:

tmcec.com/mtsi/national-night-out/
tmcec.com/mtsi/municipal-courts-week/



Artificial Intelligence, Self-Represented Litigants, and Municipal Courts

Madison Mondragón, Program Attorney and Deputy Counsel, TMCEC

I. Introduction

Just a couple of decades ago, the villainous Skynet of the *Terminator* series formed our cultural understanding of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Today, AI is seemingly everywhere—and the criminal justice system is no exception. Attorneys, judges, and court personnel across Texas are grappling with how AI can be leveraged to improve productivity without sacrificing integrity and legal accuracy. This article, however, will focus on an increasingly common AI user group: self-represented litigants (often referred to as pro se defendants in criminal courts). AI can serve as an effective tool for self-represented litigants to represent themselves, an often under-prioritized hurdle in American courts. At the same time, courts are seeing AI produce unreliable or inaccurate work products.

This article will explain what AI is, explore the benefits and consequences of AI for self-represented litigants, and provide municipal courts with ideas to respond to AI use by self-represented litigants.

II. What is AI?

AI is “technology that enables computers to simulate human learning, comprehension, problem solving, decision making, creativity, and autonomy.”¹ Over the years, AI began with machine learning, relying on historical data and defined mathematical logic and rules to recognize patterns and predict the future,² like recommending content on Netflix, routing a suspicious email to spam, or recognizing faces. From there, AI evolved into deep learning, where it used a multi-layered system to further extrapolate

data and mimic the human brain without relying on the established rules used in machine learning. This brought auto captioning videos on social media, automated translations, and speech recognition for systems like Siri and Alexa.³

These developments in AI have led to the emergence of Generative AI (Gen AI). Gen AI is usually what people are referring to when they say “AI” today. Gen AI creates original content based on a prompt given by a user. Most people have probably encountered Gen AI even if they do not realize it. Perhaps a Facebook friend posted a stylized cartoon self-portrait. Maybe a conference presenter displayed a cartoon on their PowerPoint that encapsulated a very specific scenario with uncanny accuracy. Interactions with customer support chatbots are typically interactions with Gen AI. Gen AI is everywhere—and it is shaping our everyday lives more than we might realize.

While Gen AI can sift through information and generate a comprehensive response at superhuman speed, accuracy is far from guaranteed. AI can produce unreliable and incorrect information. Gen AI seeks to provide accurate output based on the information available, but it does not guarantee that the output is correct.

This is especially true when it responds to more complex prompts. For legal research, it may rely on information that is outdated or from a different jurisdiction. But it is not always AI’s fault: the user may provide a deficient or incomplete prompt. Herein lies the fundamental challenge with deploying AI in the legal system.

III. AI and Self-Represented Litigants

Despite these risks, AI (and Gen AI in particular) provides self-represented litigants an attractive and effective tool to assist in making their case. It might also make a person feel empowered to represent themselves effectively when such a notion would have been unfathomable before AI. According to one study, federal civil cases filed by self-represented litigants who were not incarcerated increased from 11% in 2020 to 16.8% in 2025.⁴

A. Expanding Access to Justice

The proliferation of Gen AI can be a substantial tool for self-represented litigants and is a boon for access to justice,⁵ a core principle of the United States legal system. As a concept, access to justice ensures that even without a lawyer, a person can obtain the relevant information necessary to understand and navigate the court system.

Access to justice takes different forms. It can include law libraries, free legal resources, volunteer legal clinics, or pro bono attorneys. But these come with obstacles, such as figuring out when and where to access them, expending time getting to them, understanding them, and then effectively utilizing them without formal legal training. AI, for the most part, eliminates these particular obstacles. Moving forward, AI will perhaps be the largest, most effective toolkit available for self-represented litigants. And accessing AI requires little more than internet access.

B. Practical Uses for Self-Represented Litigants

Gen AI can be used as an educational tool in the absence of an attorney. AI can guide a self-represented litigant through unfamiliar legal terms and procedures, inform them what documents they should bring to court, and suggest forms and resources that may be available. AI might generate a list of questions that they should ask the judge, court personnel, or prosecutor. If the user is going to trial, it could create a walk-through guide of what questions to ask when authenticating evidence or common objections to make or watch for.

AI can also be helpful for organization. It can quickly review information and generate helpful breakdowns. AI can create relevant event chronologies and summaries. AI can organize documents, generate

charts and tables, or create a checklist in preparation for court—things that are all extremely helpful for someone unfamiliar with the legal system. AI can help reduce some of the information asymmetry that self-represented litigants face.

For a person charged with a crime or wishing to bring civil action, hiring an attorney can be cost-prohibitive. This is especially true in municipal courts, where the fine-only punishment does not trigger the right to a court-appointed attorney at no charge.⁶ Furthermore, no matter the financial situation of a defendant in municipal court, he or she might feel that the cost of representation is not worth it because attorney fees are typically higher than the maximum fine for the offense itself. The AI platforms typically used to assist in court cases, such as ChatGPT, are available free of charge. And because they are available on the internet, all one needs is access to a local library that has computers to enjoy the benefits of AI.

C. The Risks of AI-Generated Legal Work

Most commonly, Gen AI in the legal system is used for drafting pleadings, briefs, and motions. Gen AI can conduct research and, in seconds, create well-written documents that might take even a highly intelligent person hours to produce. These documents, however, have not been without fault. A common issue is when an AI system creates quotes, cases, statutes, or legal standards that do not exist. Courts in Texas are already seeing this issue, known as hallucinated citations.⁷ Hallucinated citations consume resources in an already overloaded legal system, often requiring judges and prosecutors to spend additional time fact-checking. AI may provide incorrect standards of law by confusing civil and criminal law. Or it may use federal law for a state court matter or provide authority that is not binding in the jurisdiction where the self-represented litigant's case is pending. The better the information the user feeds AI, the better the response will be.

Accurately crafting prompts for a Gen AI system is difficult. Gen AI can lack the context to understand how the information plays into the larger picture or if the information is up to date. Skilled Gen AI users know when to amend or clarify their prompts when the AI's response is inadequate or incorrect.

A report by the New York Bar Association notes that providing a legal prompt requires skill: “While a person may download advice on how to frame a question (i.e., developing a “prompt”) correctly, some non-lawyers, particularly in those sections of society that have been traditionally underserved by the law, may struggle to design the correct prompt.”⁸

D. Responsibility for AI-Assisted Filings

Although Gen AI may do the work, the consequences of any mistake will generally fall on the person who submitted it. AI does not sign documents swearing to the veracity of their contents. AI will not appear in court and swear under penalty of perjury that their testimony will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And AI will not take the blame if a person presents false information to the court. AI may explain legal concepts and procedures, but a self-represented litigant should not assume that an AI-generated answer constitutes legal advice specific to their case.

Article 1.052(b) of the Code of Criminal Procedure provides that by signing a motion, pleading, or other paper, pro se defendants are certifying that they have read it and it is, to the best of their knowledge, not groundless. Violating this provision may lead to contempt.⁹ Federal and state courts in Texas have written on this issue, with Magistrate Judge Christina A. Bryan, for the Houston division of the United States Southern District Court of Texas, writing that self-represented status “does not exempt a party from compliance with relevant rules of procedural and substantive law.”¹⁰

E. Judicial Responses to AI Misuse

Courts across the country are seeing these issues play out in real time. In one case, the Missouri Court of Appeals Eastern Division fined a self-represented litigant \$10,000 for using hallucinated citations and ultimately dismissed the appeal.¹¹ In the Western District Federal Court of Texas, one plaintiff cited cases that did not stand for the purported topic, cited made-up cases, and provided a quote that misrepresented the holding of the case over multiple discovery pleadings.¹² As a result, the court ruled that the litigant could not file any additional motions without leave of court, in addition to ordering

attorney’s fees for the costs associated with the discovery motions.¹³ In a Texas district court, a self-represented litigant submitted filings with 13 hallucinated citations.¹⁴ As a result, the judge imposed sanctions requiring the litigant in future filings to attach any legal authority cited as well as highlight the exact proposition used for support.¹⁵ Now is the time for municipal courts in Texas to start, if they have not already, contemplating how they will respond in such scenarios.

IV. Proactive Tools for Municipal Courts

If a self-represented litigant uses AI to prepare for court, what, if anything, should the court do about it? Is it worth a court’s time to attempt to sniff out every self-represented litigant who used AI? A court might decide to provide mechanisms or rules to guide the safe use of AI that complies with the requirements of the legal system. Or a court might continue to assess the accuracy of all pleadings, testimony, and other content the same way it did before the emergence of AI.

A. Preventive Guidance and Public Information

Before implementing formal rules, a court’s initial response could involve clearly communicating its expectations and making reliable court-specific information available to the public. One proactive approach would be to inform court users (including attorneys) that if AI is used, the rules and expectations for documents submitted to the court are unchanged. Submitting false, unverified, or groundless information to a court is unacceptable. Courts might also consider updating and expanding the information they provide to the public. This could be a simple Frequently Asked Questions page on the court’s website. The more accessible court information, rules, and guidelines become, the less self-represented litigants should need to rely on AI to gather information. A court may create publicly available resources that self-represented litigants might otherwise seek through AI that explain court procedures, rules, and terms that they might be hearing in the courtroom. This increases the likelihood that a self-represented litigant views accurate information that is specific to the court they are in.

B. Standing Orders and Verification Requirements

Judges seeking a more formal approach may opt to create standing orders and verification requirements to govern the use of AI in court filings.¹⁶ Such orders can remind self-represented litigants that the rules apply to them just as they apply to an attorney, that they should verify any legal authorities, and that failure to do so may result in sanctions. Courts may provide a form requiring verification when Gen AI is used,¹⁷ which could require the person submitting to provide the name of the specific AI system(s) used, a verification that the filing has been reviewed and contains no misstatements of law or fact and that no attached exhibits were altered.¹⁸

C. Responding to Violations

Any court that adopts an AI-related order or policy should also determine how violations will be addressed. Perhaps the first step is setting a hearing or giving the violator one re-do. Ultimately, in the absence of firm guidance, court responses will vary. Judges need to analyze what steps they are comfortable with and what sanctions might be authorized by law.

D. Resources for Developing a Court Response

Courts do not need to develop these responses from scratch. A growing body of resources, including judicial toolkits, databases of standing orders and local rules, professional organizations, and research institutes can help courts evaluate and develop appropriate measures.¹⁹

V. Looking to the Future

It appears that AI will become a routine part of navigating the legal system for self-represented litigants and even licensed attorneys. Judges and clerks have started using AI to improve efficiency and better serve the public. It is important, however, to remember that AI cannot replace judicial discretion. Judges and court personnel do not need to become computer science experts, but they will increasingly need enough AI literacy to understand what these systems can do, what they cannot do, and how AI-generated information may affect court proceedings. The future of AI in municipal courts is unlikely to look like *The Terminator*. It is much more likely to look like a defendant in the courthouse using their smart phone to ask an AI system what happens next.

1 Cole Stryker, Eda Kavrakoglu, *What is Artificial Intelligence (AI)?*, IBM (Aug. 9, 2024) <https://www.ibm.com/think/topics/artificial-intelligence>.

2 *10 Everyday Machine Learning Use Cases*, IBM, <https://www.ibm.com/think/topics/machine-learning-use-cases>.

3 Laurie MacPherson, David Gaule, *Deep Learning: How Neural Networks Turn Complex Data into Enterprise AI*, Snowflake, <https://www.snowflake.com/en/artificial-intelligence/machine-learning/deep-learning/>.

4 Mattathias Schwartz, Zach Montague, *Artificial Intelligence Floods Court Dockets with Home-Brewed Lawsuits*, N.Y. Times (May 25, 2026), <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/25/us/politics/artificial-intelligence-courts.html>.

5 Mostafa Soliman, *Pro Se Advocacy in the AI Era: Benefits, Challenges, and Ethical Implications*, N.Y. State Bar Ass'n (Feb. 10, 2026), <https://nysba.org/pro-se-advocacy-in-the-ai-era-benefits-challenges-and-ethical-implications/>.

6 Tex. Crim. Proc. Code Ann. § 1.051(c).

7 *Fletcher v. Experian Info. Sols., Inc.*, 168 F.4th 231 (5th Cir. 2026).

8 *Report and Recommendations of the Task Force on Artificial Intelligence*, N.Y. State Bar Ass'n (Apr. 6, 2024), <https://nysba.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/2024-April-Report-and-Recommendations-of-the-Task-Force-on-Artificial-Intelligence.pdf>.

9 Tex. Crim. Proc. Code Ann. § 1.052(d).

10 *Robertson v. TrueAccord Corp.*, No. 4:25-CV-2816 (S.D. Tex. Feb. 18, 2026).

11 Marco Poggio, *Gen AI Shows Promise – And Peril – For Pro Se Litigants*, LAW360 (May 3, 2024), <https://www.law360.com/articles/1812918/gen-ai-shows-promise-and-peril-for-pro-se-litigants>.

12 *Phap Anh Le v. Midland Credit Mgmt.*, 2026 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 162600 (W.D. Tex. July 21, 2026).

13 *Id.*

14 *In re Obeginski*, No. 09-26-00057-CV, 2026 Tex. App. LEXIS 2321 (Tex. App.—Beaumont Mar. 12, 2026, no pet.).

15 *Id.*

16 *Standing Order Regarding the Use of Artificial Intelligence* (90th Jud. Dist. Ct. Tex. Feb. 12, 2026), <https://newtools.cira.state.tx.us/upload/page/2590/2026/Updated%20Standing%20Order.pdf>.

17 *See Standing Order Concerning the Use of Artificial Intelligence in the Preparation of Filings Before U.S. District Judge Ernest Gonzalez*, (W.D. Tex. June 25, 2026), <https://www.txwd.uscourts.gov/team/ernest-gonzalez/>.

18 *See Standing Order on the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence* (457th Jud. Dist. Ct. Tex. Apr. 1, 2026), <https://cms1files.revize.com/montgomerycountytexas/457th%20District%20Court/Standing%20Order%20on%20Use%20of%20AI.pdf>.

19 *See Supporting Courts AI Readiness and Other Resources*, State Justice Institute, <https://www.sji.gov/supporting-courts-ai-readiness-and-other-resources/>; *AI in Courts*, Thomson Reuters, <https://www.thomsonreuters.com/en/institute/sectors/ai-in-courts>; *Standing Orders, Local Rules, and Decisions on the Use of AI*, Ropes & Gray, <https://www.ropesgray.com/en/sites/artificial-intelligence-court-order-tracker?applicableto=2bd3fe1e-961c-4f1e-b081-efd693de2aeb&states=92f2d20d-403c-47cd-ac05-83efc9bdcd0e&page=1>; and *AI Toolkit*, State Bar of Texas, <https://www.texasbarpractice.com/artificial-intelligence-toolkit/>.

JUDICIAL EDUCATION for Texas Municipal Judges

Plan Your Hours Now

Judicial Education in AY 27: What You Need to Know

A new academic year began September 1! Municipal judges should plan now to complete their required judicial education by August 31, 2027. With regional seminars, clinics, virtual programs, webinars, and on-demand education, TMCEC offers several ways to meet annual requirements.

Experienced Judges: 16 Hours Annually

Beginning with a judge's second year of judicial education, all municipal judges must complete **16 hours of judicial education each academic year**.

At least **eight hours must be live instruction from a TMCEC seminar or clinic**. The remaining eight hours may be completed through approved live education, approved online education, or a combination of the two—often referred to as **flex-time**.

Judges do not have to complete all 16 hours at one event. After satisfying the required eight live hours, judges may build the remaining eight hours using eligible education that best fits their schedules and educational needs.

What Counts as Flex-Time?

Eligible flex-time opportunities include:

- TMCEC webinars completed during the current academic year;
- TMCEC virtual clinics, live or on-demand;
- TMCEC seminars such as the Legislative Update, Municipal Traffic Safety Initiatives Conference, and Impaired Driving Symposium; and
- Qualifying education from approved non-TMCEC providers.

Remember: Flex-time hours must be reported to TMCEC. Documentation for training completed through another approved provider should be submitted as soon as possible and no later than August 31.

New Judges

Attorney Judges: Within one year of taking office, a new judge who is licensed by the State Bar of Texas must complete at least 16 hours of live instruction at a TMCEC seminar or clinic.

Non-Attorney Judges: Within one year of taking office, a new non-attorney judge must complete at least 32 hours of in-person, continuous instruction at a TMCEC New Judges Seminar.

The flexibility described above applies beginning with a judge's second year of required judicial education.

Plan Your 16 Hours Early

Judicial education is more flexible than ever, but judges should not wait until the end of the academic year to determine whether they have satisfied the live-training requirement. Consider your 16-hour plan now: identify how you will earn your required live hours, then select flex-time opportunities that complement your work on the bench.

Visit [TMCEC's Judicial Education FAQ](#) for answers to common questions about annual requirements, live education, flex-time, and approved programs.

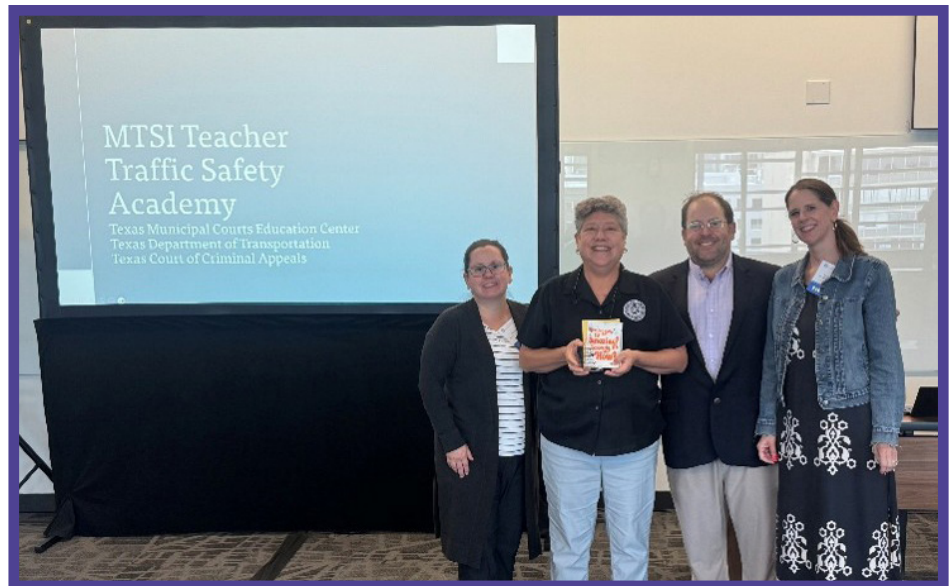
Visit the [TMCEC Judicial Flex Time](#) page for additional information about eligible education, approved providers, and reporting flex-time hours.

Celebrating 10 Years: Teacher Traffic Safety Academy

Each summer for the past ten years, schoolteachers from across Texas have converged in Austin for a three-day workshop hosted by TMCEC designed to bring traffic safety back into Texas classrooms. The annual Teacher Traffic Safety Academy (TTSA) is funded by the Municipal Traffic Safety Initiatives grant and is the brainchild of TMCEC's TxDOT Grant Administrator, Elizabeth De La Garza.

This year's TTSA was held July 27-29 at the AT&T Hotel and Conference Center on the University of Texas at Austin campus. Participants visited the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals, Texas Supreme Court, and Travis County Court at Law #9 to go along with courses on mock trials, teen court, traffic safety legislation, and seatbelt usage.

Please contact TMCEC for information about how your municipal court can partner with local schools to promote traffic safety in your community!



TTSA Instructors, from left: Debbie Keen, Elizabeth De La Garza, Ned Minevitz, and Cory Cummings



2026 TTSA participants

THE BRIEF



Information for Texas Municipalities about Texas Municipal Courts (September 2026)

ORDINANCES

Four Things Every City Should Keep in Mind

Municipal ordinances are among the most direct ways that local government affects everyday life. From weeds, junked vehicles, and dangerous dogs to zoning, property maintenance, and public safety, ordinances allow cities to respond to local needs and protect the health, safety, and welfare of their communities.

But adopting an ordinance is only the beginning. How an ordinance is written, investigated, enforced, prosecuted, and ultimately adjudicated matters. That process may involve the city council, city attorney, code enforcement, animal services, prosecutor, municipal court, and other city departments—each performing a different role.

That intersection was the focus of TMCEC's recent C3 4-Hour Virtual Clinic: Ordinances Revisited. The program examined ordinances from four different perspectives: nuisance regulation, animal ordinances, constitutional and criminal case law, and judicial ethics.

Here are four takeaways for Texas cities.

1. Cities Have a Toolbox

Nuisance problems illustrate why ordinance enforcement is rarely a one-size-fits-all proposition. Cities may encounter high weeds and rubbish, substandard structures, junked vehicles, animal-control issues, and other conditions affecting health and safety. State law provides municipalities with several mechanisms for addressing these problems, but the appropriate tool depends on the problem and the governing law.

Depending on the circumstances, a city might use notice and administrative abatement procedures, criminal enforcement, civil enforcement, or other statutory remedies. The practical lesson is simple: identify the problem first, then identify the legal tool designed to address it. Effective enforcement also requires communication among departments. Code enforcement, prosecutors, city attorneys, and courts should understand their respective responsibilities and the limitations on each role.

2. Animal Ordinances Are More Complicated Than They Look

Few subjects demonstrate the complexity of municipal regulation better than animals. Cities may regulate matters ranging from animals running at large and rabies control to dangerous dogs and the keeping of animals in residential areas. But municipal authority exists alongside—and is sometimes limited by—state and federal law.

Dangerous-dog proceedings, for example, can place specific responsibilities on municipal courts. State law also limits what municipal ordinances may provide in certain dangerous-dog matters. A seemingly straightforward animal ordinance violation may therefore implicate substantially broader legal questions.

Good ordinance drafting matters too: use clear and consistent terminology, organize provisions logically, define necessary terms, and avoid placing substantive requirements inside definitions.

3. An Ordinance Must Survive the Courthouse

An ordinance may reflect a legitimate policy goal and still encounter constitutional or criminal-law problems when enforcement begins. Decades of case law provide important guardrails. The Fourth Amendment generally limits warrantless administrative inspections of private property. Due process requires penal ordinances to provide fair notice rather than leave people guessing about prohibited conduct. And Texas criminal law imposes its own requirements concerning matters such as culpable mental states and charging instruments.

For cities, the message is important: ordinance drafting and ordinance enforcement cannot be separated. Before adopting model language—or before relying on an existing ordinance for prosecution—cities should understand what the ordinance actually requires the State to prove.

4. The Court Is Part of the City—But It Is Still a Court

Municipal courts occupy a unique place in city government. Although created and supported by municipalities, courts exercise an independent judicial function.

The Texas Code of Judicial Conduct requires judges to preserve the integrity and independence of the judiciary, promote public confidence in judicial impartiality, and perform judicial duties without bias or prejudice. That can become particularly important when a city is trying to solve a difficult ordinance-enforcement problem. Judges cannot become another member of the city's enforcement team. Relationships with city officials, pressure to achieve a particular result, concerns about reappointment, or even disagreement with the law cannot dictate the outcome of a case. Judicial independence can be threatened when professional relationships, political pressure, or desired outcomes interfere with neutrality.

Everyone benefits when the roles are clear: city councils make policy, city personnel enforce the law, prosecutors prosecute cases, and judges independently decide the matters that come before the court.

More Than *The Brief*: C3 Education for Texas Cities

The Brief is one part of TMCEC's broader Councils, Courts, and Cities (C3) initiative. Created in 2018, C3 seeks to bridge the information gap between city halls and municipal courts by increasing understanding of municipal courts among mayors, council members, city attorneys, and other local officials.

That mission includes educational resources as well as training opportunities bringing together the different people whose work intersects with municipal courts.

The latest example is TMCEC's Ordinances Revisited, a C3 Virtual Clinic that aired on August 12, 2026. The entire Ordinances Revisited clinic is now available on demand through TMCEC's Online Learning Center.

Whether you work at city hall or in the municipal court, ordinances provide a good reminder of why communication and education across city government matter. The same ordinance may begin in the council chambers, be investigated in the field, prosecuted in municipal court, and ultimately interpreted by a judge. Each person has a different role. Understanding those roles—and the legal boundaries between them—helps local government work better.

The Brief is a periodic briefing for Texas mayors, city council members, and other local officials highlighting issues and increasing awareness and understanding of municipal courts in the Lone Star State. *The Brief* is part of TMCEC's public information and education campaign, *Councils, Courts, and Cities* (C3). For more information about TMCEC, visit: www.tmcec.com. Follow C3 on X: @C3ofTexas.

Texas Municipal Courts Education Center is funded by a grant from the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals

AY 27 TMCEC Academic Schedule

At-A-Glance

Seminar	Date(s)	City	Venue
East Texas Regional Clerks Seminar	October 20-22, 2026	Tyler	Holiday Inn Tyler Conference Center 5701 S Broadway Ave
East Texas Regional Judges Seminar	October 20-22, 2026	Tyler	Holiday Inn Tyler Conference Center 5701 S Broadway Ave
East Texas Mental Health Clinic	October 20, 2026	Tyler	Holiday Inn Tyler Conference Center 5701 S Broadway Ave
Central Texas Regional Clerks Seminar	November 17-19, 2026	Austin	Austin Southpark Hotel 4140 Governors Row
Central Texas Regional Judges Seminar	November 17-19, 2026	Austin	Austin Southpark Hotel 4140 Governors Row
Central Texas Mental Health Clinic	November 17, 2026	Austin	Austin Southpark Hotel 4140 Governors Row
New Clerks Seminar	December 7-11, 2026	Austin	DoubleTree by Hilton 6505 North IH-35
New Judges Seminar	December 7-11, 2026	Austin	DoubleTree by Hilton 6505 North IH-35
South Central Regional Clerks Seminar	January 6-8, 2027	San Marcos	Embassy Suites by Hilton San Marcos Hotel Conference Center, 1001 E McCarty Ln
South Central Regional Judges Seminar	January 6-8, 2027	San Marcos	Embassy Suites by Hilton San Marcos Hotel Conference Center, 1001 E McCarty Ln
South Central Mental Health Clinic	January 6, 2027	San Marcos	Embassy Suites by Hilton San Marcos Hotel Conference Center, 1001 E McCarty Ln
Level III Clerk Certification Assessment Clinic	January 12-15, 2027	Austin	Holiday Inn Austin Midtown 6000 Middle Fiskville Road
4-Hour Virtual Clinic	January 27, 2027	Online	TMCEC Online Learning Center
Gulf Coast Regional Clerks Seminar	February 2-4, 2027	Galveston	Moody Gardens Hotel 7 Hope Blvd
Gulf Coast Regional Judges Seminar	February 2-4, 2027	Galveston	Moody Gardens Hotel 7 Hope Blvd
Gulf Coast Mental Health Clinic	February 2, 2027	Galveston	Moody Gardens Hotel 7 Hope Blvd
Houston Metro Regional Clerks Seminar	February 17-19, 2027	Houston	Hilton Houston Post Oak by the Galleria 2001 Post Oak Blvd
Houston Metro Regional Judges Seminar	February 17-19, 2027	Houston	Hilton Houston Post Oak by the Galleria 2001 Post Oak Blvd
Houston Metro Mental Health Clinic	February 17, 2027	Houston	Hilton Houston Post Oak by the Galleria 2001 Post Oak Blvd
Teen Court Workshop	February 22-23, 2027	Georgetown	Day 1: Georgetown Municipal Court Day 2: Fairfield Inn & Suites
Juvenile Case Managers Seminar	March 3-5, 2027	Dallas	DoubleTree by Hilton Dallas Near the Galleria 4099 Valley View Ln
Prosecutors Seminar	March 3-5, 2027	Dallas	DoubleTree by Hilton Dallas Near the Galleria 4099 Valley View Ln
North Texas Regional Clerks Seminar	March 22-24, 2027	Dallas	DoubleTree by Hilton Dallas Near the Galleria 4099 Valley View Ln

AY 27 TMCEC Academic Schedule - continued

At-A-Glance

Seminar	Date(s)	City	Venue
North Texas Regional Judges Seminar	March 22-24, 2027	Dallas	DoubleTree by Hilton Dallas Near the Galleria 4099 Valley View Ln
North Texas Mental Health Clinic	March 22, 2027	Dallas	DoubleTree by Hilton Dallas Near the Galleria 4099 Valley View Ln
Municipal Traffic Safety Initiatives Conference	March 31-April 2, 2027	Austin	Embassy Suites by Hilton Austin Central 5901 North IH-35
4-Hour Virtual Clinic	April 14, 2027	Online	TMCEC Online Learning Center
Panhandle Regional Clerks Seminar	April 27-29, 2027	Lubbock	Overton Hotel and Conference Center 2322 Mac Davis Ln
Panhandle Virtual Regional Clerks Seminar	April 27-29, 2027	Online	Livestream Simulcast
Panhandle Regional Judges Seminar	April 27-29, 2027	Lubbock	Overton Hotel and Conference Center 2322 Mac Davis Ln
Panhandle Virtual Regional Judges Seminar	April 27-29, 2027	Online	Livestream Simulcast
Panhandle Mental Health Clinic	April 27, 2027	Lubbock	Overton Hotel and Conference Center 2322 Mac Davis Ln
Panhandle Virtual Mental Health Clinic	April 27, 2027	Online	Livestream Simulcast
4-Hour Virtual Clinic	May 12, 2027	Online	TMCEC Online Learning Center
South Texas Regional Clerks Seminar	May 25-27, 2027	Corpus Christi	Omni Corpus Christi 900 North Shoreline Blvd
South Texas Regional Judges Seminar	May 25-27, 2027	Corpus Christi	Omni Corpus Christi 900 North Shoreline Blvd
South Texas Mental Health Clinic	May 25, 2027	Corpus Christi	Omni Corpus Christi 900 North Shoreline Blvd
4-Hour Virtual Clinic	June 16, 2027	Online	TMCEC Online Learning Center
West Texas Regional Clerks Seminar	June 22-24, 2027	El Paso	Radisson Hotel El Paso Airport 1770 Airway Blvd
West Texas Regional Judges Seminar	June 22-24, 2027	El Paso	Radisson Hotel El Paso Airport 1770 Airway Blvd
West Texas Mental Health Clinic	June 22, 2027	El Paso	Radisson Hotel El Paso Airport 1770 Airway Blvd
New Clerks Seminar	July 12-16, 2027	Austin	DoubleTree by Hilton 6505 N IH 35
New Judges Seminar	July 12-16, 2027	Austin	DoubleTree by Hilton 6505 N IH 35
Impaired Driving Symposium	July 29-30, 2027	Sugar Land	Houston Marriott Sugar Land 16090 City Walk
Court Administrators Seminar	August 2-4, 2027	Austin	Austin Southpark Hotel 4140 Governors Row
Prosecutors Seminar	August 2-4, 2027	Austin	Austin Southpark Hotel 4140 Governors Row
Legislative Update	August 26, 2027	Austin	Austin Southpark Hotel 4140 Governors Row
Legislative Update Simulcast	August 26, 2027	Online	TMCEC Online Learning Center

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TMCEC MISSION STATEMENT

To provide high quality judicial education, technical assistance, and the necessary resource materials to assist municipal court judges, court support personnel, and prosecutors in obtaining and maintaining professional competence.

Municipal Court Clerk Certification Program

Check out our freshly updated clerk certification source materials, including the **Level One Guide** and the **Level Two Guide**. Both are accessible for free online!

