



# Government Facilities Sector

## Courthouses

The Government Facilities Sector (GFS) is uniquely governmental. Although some types of government facilities are exclusive to the GFS, government facilities also exist in most other sectors. The GFS includes a wide variety of facilities owned or leased by Federal, State, Territory, local, or tribal governments, located domestically and overseas. The importance of these facilities stems from the services they provide to the American people. Many are open to the public for business activities, commercial transactions, provision of services, or recreational activities. Others not open to the public contain highly sensitive information, materials, processes, and equipment. This series of Fact Sheets describes the various types of facilities that make up the GFS.

A courthouse is a building that is home to a court of law and may include offices of other branches of government as well. Courthouses range from small-town rural buildings with a few rooms to huge metropolitan courthouses that take up large plots of land.

Within courthouses, space types are classified into general office and enhanced office. Whereas general office space types include the actual courtroom and associated supportive infrastructure, some office spaces require additional security measures beyond those typically in place.

Courtrooms include separate circulation patterns for public, prisoner, and judiciary members. Typical features include accessibility, civic aesthetics appropriate for proceedings, and special security features such as ballistic cladding integral

for Judges' benches. Enhanced office space types within courthouses encompass a wide range, including everything from ancillary offices and jury facilities to conference and robing rooms for judges, news media rooms, and private toilets.

Judicial chambers are areas used by the U.S. Courts and are typically located on the upper floors of a courthouse building shell and core structure dedicated for U.S. Court occupancy. Judicial chambers house various court and judge suites, and they serve a similar function as a law office practice.

### Federal Courts

The Supreme Court is the highest court in the Federal judiciary. Congress has established two levels of Federal courts under the Supreme Court: the trial courts and the appellate courts.

***District or Trial Courts.*** The United States district courts are the trial courts of the Federal court system. There are 94 Federal judicial districts, including at least one district in each State, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Each Federal judicial district has at least one courthouse, and most districts have more than one. Three territories of the United States – the Virgin Islands, Guam, and the Northern Mariana Islands – have district courts that hear Federal cases, including bankruptcy cases.

Each U.S. district court also has a Federally owned building where its courtrooms, chambers, and clerk's offices are located. Many Federal judicial districts are further divided into divisions, which may also have their own courthouses, although sometimes the smaller divisional court facilities are located in buildings that also house other agencies or offices of the U.S. government.

***Courts of Appeals.*** The United States courts of appeals (or circuit courts) are the mid-level appellate courts of the United States Federal court system. A court of appeals decides appeals from the district courts within its Federal judicial circuit and in some instances from other designated Federal courts and administrative agencies.

There currently are 13 United States courts of appeals, although there are other tribunals (such as the Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces, which hears appeals in court-martial cases) that have “Court of Appeals” in their titles.

## **State Court Systems**

Although Federal courts are located in every State, they are not the only forum available to potential litigants. In fact, the great majority of legal disputes in American courts are addressed in the separate State court systems. For example, State courts have jurisdiction over virtually all divorce and child custody matters, probate and inheritance issues, real estate questions, and juvenile matters. Also, State courts handle most criminal cases, contract disputes, traffic violations, and personal injury cases.

In most U.S. counties, the local trial courts conduct their business in a centrally located courthouse that may also house county governmental offices. The courthouse is usually located in the county seat,

although large metropolitan counties may have satellite or annex offices for their courts. In addition to judicial duties, in some cases a courthouse is also the main administrative office for the county government.

## **Courthouse Security**

Courthouse security comprises security checkpoints where all incoming persons are searched for weapons, as well as a wide array of equipment and procedures throughout the courthouse that are designed to minimize the risks associated with the business of the courts. Many urban courthouses have become heavily fortified as a result of incidences of violence associated with dissatisfied litigants. Some courthouses in areas with high levels of violent crime have redundant layers of security.

Architectural and equipment standards can enhance court security. Such standards include:

- A single point of public entry to the building
- Installation of weapons-screening checkpoints with walk-through metal detectors and x-ray devices at all public entrances
- Properly sized and configured lobbies to permit queuing at entry screening checkpoints without making people wait outside
- Separate judicial entrance from a secure parking area with separate access to offices for elected officials
- Separation of public, judicial/staff, and prisoner circulation systems
- Use of central and court-floor prisoner holding areas accessed by secure prisoner circulation for the quick and safe delivery of prisoners to courtrooms
- Elimination of blind areas and dead ends, or places where people can hide
- A comprehensive system of intrusion alarms, duress alarms, CCTV monitoring, and card access to restricted areas.



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For questions or more information, please contact [NIPP\\_GFS@dhs.gov](mailto:NIPP_GFS@dhs.gov), or visit [www.dhs.gov/nipp](http://www.dhs.gov/nipp).