

Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice
Access to Justice Improvement
Grant Policy
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I. Background

In 2012, the Illinois Supreme Court established the Commission on Access to Justice (ATJ Commission) to promote, facilitate, and enhance equal access to justice. To that end, under the leadership of the Supreme Court, the ATJ Commission and the Access to Justice Division of the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts (ATJ Division) focus on developing improvements, resources, and programs within the judicial system to assist self-represented litigants (SRLs) with accessing our courts and providing support for the judiciary and other court personnel in ensuring justice for all.

The core goal of the ATJ Commission and the ATJ Division is to help make the entire judicial system fairer and more efficient for court users, judges, circuit clerks, court personnel, and all other stakeholders. To do that, the ATJ Commission and the ATJ Division have worked on a number of statewide initiatives to assist SRLs and the judges and court staff who serve them. However, the ATJ Commission and the ATJ Division also recognize that in many instances, a top-down approach will not work—especially given the size and diversity of Illinois. So, local programs are essential.

II. Grant Program Overview

The goal of this program is twofold. The first is to provide funds to jurisdictions so that they are able to develop access to justice initiatives locally (the ATJ Improvement Grant). The second is to offer training and support to people working at courthouses throughout the state who assist SRLs and other court users as part of the Court Navigator Network (Network). Network members serve as a bridge, linking courthouses throughout the state, to share ideas, develop new resources, and establish programs for assisting SRLs. The base of this Network has been the Illinois JusticeCorps program and the grant program, but now it has expanded to any clerk and court staff. In compliance with the Illinois Supreme Court's Strategic Agenda, it is our mission to maintain this Network with at least one member in every Judicial Circuit in the state.

Courts and Clerk's Offices may apply for grant funds to cover expenses related to the development, modification, or expansion of resources and services to improve access to justice. Each grant will be for a one-year period with the funds being paid at the beginning of the grant period.



III. Grant Parameters

The ATJ Improvement Grants can be used for any project or need that advances access to justice, diversity, equity, inclusion, or procedural fairness in a courthouse. The needs of each local courthouse are unique, so the projects that are funded are as well.

Grant funds are meant to be used to create, expand or improve programs which enhance access to our courts particularly for vulnerable litigants, like those facing barriers being self-represented, having disabilities, dealing with financial burdens, or experiencing language barriers, while addressing issues of diversity and inclusion. The ATJ Commission encourages creativity and innovation as well as experimentation through pilot projects. The ATJ Commission also encourages collaboration across court departments.

Each grant recipient must enter into a Grant Agreement with the ATJ Commission, which will detail important features of the grant award such as constraints on spending, reporting requirements, and fund disbursement.

IV. Grant Eligibility, Requirements, and Expectations

Each application for grant funding must be submitted by a Court or Clerk's office in Illinois and must identify someone who will be the "Project Lead." The Project Lead may be anyone working at a courthouse in Illinois who has a demonstrated knowledge of the challenges faced by SRLs, familiarity with court operations and the local legal community, and a passion for improving access to justice. This includes staff or personnel in the offices of chief or presiding judges, appellate clerks, circuit clerks, court law libraries, self-help centers, sheriffs or bailiffs, or other relevant courthouse staff.

Each grant recipient is expected to:

- Submit reports to the ATJ Division about project activities, opportunities and challenges, number of individuals served, and grant expenditures;
- Present to the Court Navigator Network about the project;
- Secure a replacement Project Lead from the jurisdiction if the original one is unable to continue work as Project Lead;
- Participate in orientation and ongoing monthly virtual trainings on relevant topics;
- Cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate with Network members;
- Partner with the ATJ Commission, ATJ Division, AOIC, and Network members to identify statewide needs and emerging trends and to collaborate on larger scale solutions.

The ATJ Commission and Division will:

- Facilitate an annual Court Navigator Network orientation training and monthly virtual meetings with the ATJ Division and other Court Navigator Network members;
- Provide support to the Project Lead to further the Grant Purpose; and
- Disburse funds to support Grantee upon execution by the parties of a Grant Agreement.

V. Application Process

To be responsive to needs, the ATJ Commission will accept proposals once per year. A Request for Proposals (RFP), explaining the grant parameters, eligibility, requirements, and expectations, based on what is included in this grant policy, will be posted on the ATJ Commission's and the Illinois Courts' website. Each proposal for grant funds must include the following components:

- Section I Application Form
- Section II Program Narrative (including partnership letters of support if applicable)
- Section III Grant Amount Request

More information, including the application form, is included in the annual RFP. The proposals shall be submitted electronically by email, as explained in the RFP, by the deadline stated.

VI. Proposal Review & Evaluation Process

The ATJ Improvement Grants are awarded through a comprehensive screening and evaluation process. All award decisions will be made by the ATJ Commission's Grant Selection Committee. The Committee will review all grant applications and make awards based on the information contained in the application looking at several criteria including:

- Demonstrated need,
- Local support,
- Long-term sustainability,
- Ability to work collaboratively,
- Practicality of the project being completed,
- Willingness to innovate and think creatively, and
- For returning applicants, how effectively previous funds have been utilized.

VII. Funding

The ATJ Improvement Grants are funded by the ATJ Commission. The ATJ Commission is funded via publication royalties, *pro hac vice* fees, and attorney registration fees. No government funds are used for the grants. All grant awards will be based on availability of funds and the criteria mentioned above. The ATJ Commission may fully or partially fund a project or decline to fund a project. Grants will be paid by check or direct deposit to the person or entity designated by the recipient after selection as a grantee.

Each year, the ATJ Commission's budget will include a line item for grant awards as well as for Court Navigator Network training. In any given year, funds allocated for Court Navigator Network training that will not be used may be reallocated for grants for the same program year. Any unused grant or Network training funds from one program year's budget may be carried over to the following program year's budget to be used for grant funds.