

Request for Proposals

Court Navigator Network Self-Represented Litigant Coordinator Grants 2022-2023

Background Information

Thousands of litigants appear in the Illinois civil courts without lawyers every year. The growing number of self-represented litigants (SRLs) in court is not unique to any one circuit, county, or case type. However, the vast majority of SRLs do not choose to represent themselves. Most would prefer legal representation but are unable to find or afford a lawyer. The growing number of SRLs—many who have little or no prior experience with the judicial system—poses challenges for clerks, judges, and other court staff. And the litigants themselves face many obstacles.

To address these challenges, the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice (ATJ Commission) and the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts (AOIC) 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 AOIC also recognize that in many instances, a top-down approach will not work—especially given the size and diversity of Illinois. This is particularly true considering the lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the court system. We recognize that appropriate responses to the pandemic may differ from court to court and that local partners will be critical to fully understand and address the needs of the SRL population caused by the pandemic and changes to court operations.

Program Overview

The goal of this project is to create, train, and support a statewide Court Navigator Network (Network) of clerks and court staff. Network members serve as a bridge, linking courthouses throughout the state, to share ideas, develop new resources, and establish programs for assisting SRLs, perhaps through additional and new methods because of COVID-19. Over the past few years, the base of this Network has been the Illinois JusticeCorps program and the Self-Represented Litigant Coordinator (Coordinator) grant program. At the urging of the Illinois Judicial Conference, it is our mission is to maintain a Network with at least one member in every Judicial Circuit in the state.

Established in 2017 under the ATJ Commission Strategic Plan, the Coordinator grant program served nearly 250,000 court users in its first five years. Utilizing grant funds, Coordinators developed innovative projects, which ranged from repurposing courthouse space for help desks and improving signage materials to creating early resolution programs that resolve divorce cases more quickly. Future projects could also include helping SRLs with appearing remotely for court



dates, conducting outreach campaigns to the community about court operations, unifying Circuits with consistent resources across a region, or partnerships with legal aid or other court stakeholders. You can read more about the previous grantees in *Illinois Courts Connect* newsletters for [November 2017](#), [November 2018](#), [December 2019](#), [August 2020](#), and [July 2021](#).

The Network shares resources and best practices across county lines and judicial circuits to more effectively address the self-help service gaps seen throughout the state. Network members identify, develop, and implement new tools and resources in their local courthouses and work with other stakeholders to facilitate better communication and collaboration in addressing these issues. Network members become aware of what their counterparts throughout the state are doing, have learned from each other's successes, shared resources and updates, and provided the best possible service for SRLs.

Network members receive in-person (when possible) and remote trainings throughout the grant year, addressing topics such as information vs. legal advice, making referrals, customer service, implicit bias, assisting people who are dealing with mental illness, plain language, user-centered design, communication/de-escalation, and working with court users who have low literacy levels.

Courts may apply to participate in the Network for the training and collaboration segment only or courts may also apply for Coordinator grant funds (up to \$20,000) to cover expenses related to the development, modification, or expansion of resources and services for SRLs. If a grant application is submitted on behalf of a Circuit with multiple counties, please indicate which counties will be served on the application form provided below in Section I. The award cap of \$20,000 could be lifted based on the availability of additional funds.

This SRL Coordinator grant opportunity cannot be used for Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) projects. If your jurisdiction is interested in pursuing an ODR program, please apply to the ODR grant program, the RFP can be found at <https://atjil.org/about/>. **You still are welcome and encouraged to be part of the Network if you pursue an ODR grant.**

Requirements & Expectations

A Network member or SRL Coordinator may be any person working at a courthouse in Illinois who has a demonstrated knowledge of the challenges faced by SRLs and familiarity with court operations and the local legal community. This includes staff or personnel in the offices of chief or presiding judges, appellate clerks, circuit clerks, court law libraries, self-help centers, or other relevant courthouse staff. Network members should have strong problem-solving and customer service skills, and the ability to work both independently and with others.

All members of the Network, whether receiving SRL Coordinator grant funds or not, are expected to:

- Participate in orientation (in-person or virtual), tentatively scheduled for the week of August 1-5, 2022, and ongoing training via monthly teleconferences on relevant topics;
- Cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate with Network members;

- Determine the best way to communicate, maintain effective relationships, and share information and resources with staff throughout the jurisdiction and across departments (e.g., circuit clerk's office, chief judge's office, law libraries, interpreters, probation, etc.);
- Post ATJ Commission/AOIC signage and informational materials throughout the courthouse(s) such as information and signage relating to fee/assessment waivers, standardized forms, interpreters, and e-filing;
- Determine the need of the District's or Circuit's courthouse(s) for any other brochures, referral sheets, or navigational signage and work with the ATJ Commission/AOIC and other Network members to fulfill those needs. Regularly assess and maintain sufficient numbers of resources;
- Create community outreach plans for how to disseminate information outside the courthouse walls;
- Provide one-on-one legal information and referrals to SRLs as appropriate;
- Partner with the ATJ Commission, AOIC, and Network members to identify statewide needs and emerging trends and to collaborate on larger scale solutions;
- Secure a replacement representative from the jurisdiction if the original member is unable to continue work as a Network member; and

Each SRL Coordinator grant recipient must also participate in the following required activities:

- Create, modify, and update self-help resources for the courthouse;
- Evaluate self-help services and resources to determine their effectiveness;
- Solicit ongoing feedback from litigants, judges, clerks, and other court staff about the effectiveness of self-help resources and programs;
- Track individuals served by the Coordinator and report data to the AOIC;
- Submit quarterly updates to the AOIC about activities and grant expenditures;
- Identify new program needs (e.g., mediation, remote appearances, dedicated *pro se* calls); and
- Develop new partnerships with community organizations (e.g., bar association *pro bono* programs, volunteer greeters, public libraries, social service providers);

This list is not exhaustive but is meant to give some general guidance to the Coordinators. Each Coordinator's time will be used differently depending on both local priorities and needs and the level of resources currently available in the courthouse. This work is dynamic and will change over time as community and courthouse needs evolve. The Coordinator will be instrumental not just in creating and implementing new resources, but in monitoring existing ones to make sure they continue to be accurate and effective.

Each grant will be for a one-year period from August 1, 2022-July 31, 2022. During the grant period, each recipient will be expected to take steps towards developing a sustainable path forward to keep the service level consistent at the conclusion of the grant.

Grant Proposal Requirements

Each proposal for grant funds must include the following five components:

- Section I Application Form
- Section II Program Narrative
- Section III Statement of Interest & Resume/Bio
- Section IV Letters of Support
- Section V Grant Request

More information on each section is provided below.

Grant Award Decision Process & Due Date

Completed grant applications must be submitted before 5:00 pm on **June 21, 2022** by email to Jill Roberts, Deputy Director, Access to Justice Division, AOIC at jroberts@illinoiscourts.gov. All award decisions will be made by the ATJ Commission's SRL Coordinator Grant Selection Committee. The Committee will review all grant applications and make awards based on several criteria including demonstrated need, local support, ability to work collaboratively, and willingness to innovate and think creatively. The committee anticipates that the grant recipients will be announced the week of July 11, 2022 with grant monies to be disbursed shortly thereafter. The program year will begin August 1, 2022 with orientation taking place that week.

Network Membership Only

Anyone who is interested in joining the Court Navigator Network solely for training and collaboration and without submitting a full proposal for grant funds should submit Section I only by email to Jill Roberts Deputy Director, Access to Justice Division, AOIC at jroberts@illinoiscourts.gov before 5:00pm on June 21, 2022.

Questions about the RFP or overall Court Navigator Network should be directed to Jill Roberts Deputy Director, Access to Justice Division, AOIC at jroberts@illinoiscourts.gov. We can brainstorm, discuss proposal ideas, and provide support with the application process.

Section I – Application Form Court Navigator Network 2022-2023

Applicant Jurisdiction Information

Judicial Circuit/Appellate District	
County served (if multiple counties in a Circuit, please list each one that will be served by Member)	
Chief Judge/Presiding Justice	
Presiding Judge (if applicable)	
Circuit/Appellate Clerk Name	

Court Navigator Network Member Information (if requesting grant funds, this is the person who will attend trainings, oversee the grant project, and report to the ATJ Commission and AOIC)

Name			
Job Title			
Employer			
Street Address			
City, State, Zip Code			
Phone Number		Email Address	
Request	<input type="checkbox"/> Grant funds & network membership <input type="checkbox"/> Network only*		
Will you still work on the project if you are awarded partial or no grant funds?			<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Are you interested in participating in the Court Navigator Network even if you are not awarded any grant funds?			<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No

*If you are requesting to participating in the network without requesting grant funds, you only need to complete this section of the application.

Additional Contact Information (if additional staff members should be included on communication about the Network, please include their information here. If additional space needed, please submit on an additional page)

Name			
Job Title			
Employer			
Street Address			
City, State, Zip Code			
Phone Number		Email Address	

Section II - Program Narrative SRL Coordinator Grant 2022-2023 Please answer each of the following prompts:

What is your proposed project or program? Please describe the project or program for which you are requesting grant funds.

What are your goals for the project or program? Please list specific objectives and any steps that will be taken to achieve them.

Section II – continued

Who will partner with your Coordinator to achieve these goals? Please describe any proposed partnerships that will enhance the work of the Coordinator. This should include court-based partners (e.g., circuit clerks, IL JusticeCorps) and external partners (e.g., bar associations, public libraries).

How will the Coordinator evaluate the effectiveness of their work? Please include a plan to evaluate the effectiveness of the Coordinator's initiatives. Evaluations should consider the impact on both litigants and court staff.

For current grant fund recipients only, if applying for additional funding for your current project: Please describe any steps you have taken towards developing a sustainable path forward for your current project and the reason for needing additional grant funds.

Section III – Statement of Interest & Resume/Biography This section should be completed by the proposed Coordinator who will oversee the implementation of the grant program. The statement of interest should detail their interest in the role, any relevant experience or qualifications, and interest in statewide conversations and training. *Please attach the Coordinator's resume or brief bio with the statement of interest.*

Section IV - Letters of Support

The best recipe for success is for the whole courthouse community to be informed about projects and potentially partner on them. As such, we require letters of support as described below. However, these letters are not requesting approval from another office to do a project nor does failure to submit a letter automatically disqualify a court from consideration. If you are unable to secure a letter from any person or group listed, please include a note regarding your efforts to obtain such letters.

Each proposal must include a letter of support from the following:

- a) If applying from a Circuit Court:
 - 1. The Circuit's Chief Judge and the local Presiding Judge (if applicable);
 - 2. The Circuit Clerk (unless the applicant is the Clerk); and
 - 3. Any other relevant partners listed in the program narrative.
- b) If applying from a Court of Review:
 - 1. The Presiding Justice or Chair of the First District Executive Committee;
 - 2. The Appellate Clerk (unless the applicant is the Clerk); and
 - 3. Any other relevant partners listed in the program narrative s.

Section V – Grant Amount Request

Please provide a budget summary and itemized chart below explaining (1) how much grant money the applicant is requesting (up to \$20,000) and (2) how the grant money will be spent. The grant money should not primarily cover the Coordinator's salary, but should instead be used to cover expenses related to programmatic needs like resource development and training (*e.g.*, printing, events), to create an appropriate SRL workspace (*e.g.*, signs, minor renovations), for technology innovations (*e.g.*, Zoom or e-filing stations or online chat services), or for partnerships with other justice stakeholders.

