



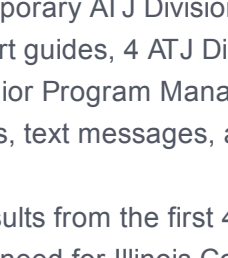
September 2021

We are pleased to share this newsletter with all of you to highlight our progress in terms of addressing the justice gap. You will read about two important direct service programs, an ongoing analysis regarding e-filing challenges for self-represented litigants, rule changes requiring the availability of standardized court forms, new and updated standardized court forms, and ongoing training for court staff and court partners. There is no one way to ensure meaningful participation in the court process for self-represented litigants, limited English proficient litigants, litigants with disabilities, and other historically excluded persons. Instead, it is vital that we listen, learn, and evolve. The ATJ Commission and its staff extend our deepest gratitude to the Illinois Supreme Court and all our dedicated volunteers for sharing a vision of a more accessible civil justice system. —Alison Spanner

Illinois Court Help Serves Nearly 2000 Court Users in First Four Months

By: Lisa Colpoys

The Illinois Court Help program was created to provide court users throughout the state with easy access to trained court guides who answer questions about court processes, forms, and going to court. The court guides also direct people to appropriate legal and community resources. The service opened on May 17, 2021 and began accepting phone calls and text messages to its toll-free number, **833-411-1121**. The phone hotline was initially open between 10am – 2pm.



Your guide
through
the courts

After six weeks of operation, on July 1, 2021, the service expanded by opening email as a communication option. Visitors to ilcourthelp.gov can now complete a short web form to ask a question at any time of day. Also on July 1, the Spanish language version of the website launched, and the hours of operation for the telephone hotline were expanded to 9am – 2pm. Text and email messages are answered between 9am – 5pm.

Illinois Court Help was initially staffed by two full-time court guides and a Supervising Senior Program Manager who oversees the program. To get the program up and running, the remaining 8 members of the AOIC Access to Justice Division were trained as court guides, and each contributed 4 hours per week staffing the service. In August, two more full-time court guides were hired to replace temporary ATJ Division members. As of September 1, 2021, Illinois Court Help is staffed by 4 full-time court guides, 4 ATJ Division members who together serve 10 hours per week, and the Supervising Senior Program Manager. During peak hours for the phone hotline there are 4 – 5 guides answering calls, text messages, and email.

Results from the first 4 months, from May 17, 2021 through September 17, 2021 demonstrate both the need for Illinois Court Help's services and its initial success in helping people navigate the court system. The following data from Illinois Court Help's online platform provides a snapshot of the impact the service is having.

Who contacts Illinois Court Help?

Between May and September, court guides helped 1987 unique court users, some of them multiple times. An interaction with a court user can be just a single phone call that lasts a few minutes, or it may be several phone calls, text messages, and emails spanning days or weeks until the user's questions are answered.

Court users from 90 of 102 Illinois counties have connected with Illinois Court Help. Approximately 85% of people who contact Illinois Court Help are self-represented litigants. The remaining users include friends and family of a person with a court issue, represented court users, lawyers and law office staff, court staff, and members of the general public.

A court user who contacted Illinois Court Help several times in August recently sent this message – "I would like to thank you all for the help that you have given to me through my divorce process. It was granted today and I don't think I could have done it without your help. I'm so grateful there was help when I needed it most."

How do people contact Illinois Court Help?

Two-thirds of people contact Illinois Court Help by phone, and the average length of calls is 9 minutes. The other one-third of people who connect are split equally between text message and email. Usage has increased steadily each month. In August 2021, court guides fielded over 900 interactions with court users. On an average day, court guides will answer over 50 phone calls. The Illinois Court Help website has been visited nearly 10,000 times by 7,500 people.

Why do people contact Illinois Court Help?

Over 82% of people who contact Illinois Court Help have a question or issue related to the Circuit Court and 3% have questions about the Appellate or Supreme Court. Of all users, 82% ask questions about civil cases, 5% ask about criminal cases, 3% about traffic cases, 2.5% about other topics, and 7% ask questions of an unknown origin.

The most popular reason why people contact Illinois Court Help is because they have a question or issue related to court processes, court forms, and filing and e-filing documents. Many people are also seeking legal assistance and substantive legal information. The case types that are most prevalent include domestic relations, small claims, and housing/eviction. Surprisingly, nearly 10% of people contacting the service have questions related to probate cases.

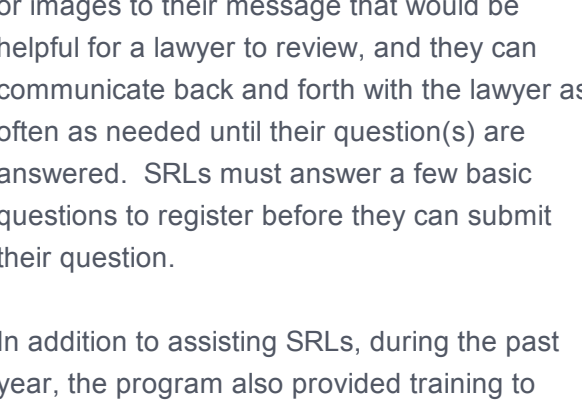
Future Enhancements

As Illinois Court Help continues to grow and evolve, there are plans to add more services. In the future, web chat will be added as an option so that users can chat in real time from our website, or maybe even another entity's website, such as the website for the Circuit Clerk. We will also develop the ilcourthelp.gov website to include self-help content so users can search for answers before they call, text, or chat with a court guide.

Virtual Help Desk for Civil Appeals Launched

By: Kathryn Hensley

In September 2020, the ATJ Commission, the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts (AOIC), and the Public Interest Law Initiative (PILI) partnered to establish the first-ever civil appeals virtual help desk to assist self-represented litigants (SRLs) in the Illinois state court system. Since its launch a year prior, Illinois Free Legal Answers for Civil Appeals has received 123 appellate questions, which were answered by 31 volunteer attorneys.



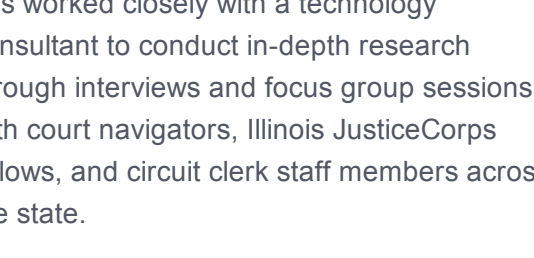
Through this program, SRLs can submit a question about their case and receive an answer from a lawyer who specializes in appeals. They can also attach any documents or images to their message that would be helpful for a lawyer to review, and they can communicate back and forth with the lawyer as often as needed until their question(s) are answered. SRLs must answer a few basic questions to register before they can submit their question.

In addition to assisting SRLs, during the past year, the program also provided training to attorneys on the civil appellate process, provided an overview of the Illinois Free Legal Answers platform, and co-hosted a session on assisting self-represented litigants with Housing questions.

We are currently seeking additional volunteer attorneys with appellate experience. Contact **Brent Page**, Senior Program Manager at PILI, for more information on volunteering.

Justice For All Grant Update

By: Sarah Song



The first action item we are working on as part of the Justice For All grant, awarded from the National Center for State Courts, is researching what is needed for an SRL-focused electronic filing (e-filing) system.

To better understand the e-filing experience for SRLs, including parents and guardians, the AOIC Access to Justice Division (ATJ Division) has worked closely with a technology consultant to conduct in-depth research through interviews and focus group sessions with court navigators, Illinois JusticeCorps fellows, and circuit clerk staff members across the state.

We have also given SRL filers the opportunity to complete a short survey about their e-filing experiences and share in their own words what the process is like for them. Themes and recommendations from these interviews and survey responses will be used to guide the next phase of the project.

While this e-filing research is ongoing, the Justice For All Advisory Committee members have volunteered to participate in subcommittees to focus on other aspects of the project. Each subcommittee will be meeting monthly, starting this month, to work on the following initiatives:

1. Standardization (delving into whether there are areas of law where the process can be standardized statewide, starting with fee waivers)
2. Forms (design and usability improvements which could be made to improve current form suites)
3. Process maps, videos, and other legal information resources (ways to help users complete forms and understand the whole court process)
4. Community panels (identify community groups to participate in panels to develop and test materials)

Forms Committee and Subcommittee members continued to work towards fulfilling the ATJ Commission's initiative of developing and publishing certain plain language legal forms. Since the last newsletter, the Forms Committee approved and published updated forms within the following form suites:

Circuit Court Forms:

- Civil Procedures Suites:
 - Answer / Response
 - Appearance
 - Fee Waiver for Civil Cases
 - Motions (general, Continue or Extend Time, Special Process Server)
 - Proof of Delivery
 - Summons (general, Eviction, Protective Orders, Small Claims)
 - Eviction Suite
 - Expungement and Sealing Suite
 - Certificate of Good Conduct Suite
- Fee Waiver for Criminal Cases Suite
- Divorce, Child Support, and Maintenance Suite
- Financial Affidavit Suite
- Order of Protection Suite

Appellate Court Forms:

- Fee Waiver Suite
- Notice of Appeal Suite
- Request for Preparation of Record on Appeal Suite
- Docketing Statement Suite

Supreme Court Forms:

- Fee Waiver Suite

The Forms Committee also approved and published the following new forms within the Fee/Assessments Waiver for Criminal Cases suite in response to the new pilot project detailed in the statutory amendment to the Criminal Traffic Assessment Act:

- Application and Order for Waiver of Criminal and/or Traffic Court Assessments for Use in Cook County Only

This form is approved by the Illinois Supreme Court and is required to be accepted in all Illinois Circuit Courts.

STATE OF ILLINOIS
CIRCUIT COURT

COUNTY MOTION

Restrictions:
- Must be filed with the clerk of the court.
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Plaintiff / Petitioner (Print, model, and name)

Defendant / Respondent (Print, model, and name)

Case Number

1. Motion for: ☐ Plaintiff/Petitioner ☐ Defendant/Respondent

2. Motion for: ☐ Plaintiff/Petitioner ☐ Defendant/Respondent

3. Motion for: ☐ Plaintiff/Petitioner ☐ Defendant/Respondent

Change in Rule about Standardized Forms

By: Jill Roberts

The Illinois Supreme Court approved amendments to **Rule 10-101** regarding standardized court forms effective on September 1, 2021. The rule now prohibits courts from providing or making available local forms for a legal remedy if there is already an approved standardized court form available for that same remedy.

The changes stem from the work of the Illinois Judicial Conference. The Conference is currently operating under a three-year **Strategic Agenda** that was approved by the Illinois Supreme Court in October of 2019. The Agendas first strategic goal is Accessible Justice & Equal Protection Under the Law," and the first prong of this strategic goal is to

To serve this goal, the Conference asked the ATJ Commission to examine Illinois Supreme Court Rule 10-101 and propose amendments to increase the use of standardized court forms statewide. The ATJ Commission then submitted its proposed amendments to the Conference for its approval. The Conference gave its unanimous support and submitted the proposal to the Court, and the Court adopted the changes in March of 2021.

These amendments are intended to:

- Increase standardization in court procedures and simplify procedures for SRLs;
- Reduce the confusion, inconsistency, and risk associated with the use of non-standardized forms;
- Reduce the frequency of rejections of standardized form in favor of a local or alternative forms;
- Ensure that legally compliant forms and associated self-help resources are available, promoted, and used by courts; and
- Increase access to self-help resources, including technology-based resources and translated resources.

Based on the feedback we have received, the forms are found to be self-represented litigants and court staff assisting court patrons. SRLs have made comments such as: "wonderful form, easy to complete," "very helpful and easy to use," "thank you for making it easy to prepare and file my divorce papers," and "everything was well explained and easy to fill out." We hope the changes to Rule 10-101 will significantly increase the use of the standardized court forms.

The ATJ Commission has also created helpful documents in relation to Rule 10-101, including a flyer, a guidance document for courts, an FAQ, and a Benefits of Standardized Court Forms handout. If you are interested in any of these materials, please send Jill Roberts an email at jroberts@illinoiscourts.gov.

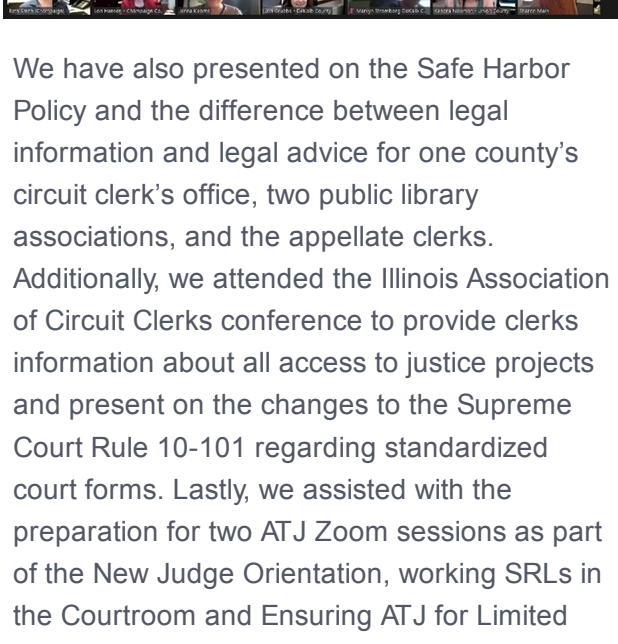
ATJ Staff Updates

We welcomed two new staff members in August of 2021. **Brittany Underwood** is one of the new Illinois Court Help guides answering calls on the statewide hotline. She comes to us from the Illinois JusticeCorps program where she served as a fellow in Champaign County. **Nina Wilson** is another new Illinois Court Help guide answering calls on the new hotline. She comes to us from the Illinois JusticeCorps program where she served as a fellow in McHenry County.

ATJ Training Sessions

By: Jill Roberts

Since July 2021, ATJ Division has been hard at work offering training sessions and educational materials on a variety of access to justice topics. One major training program was for the Court Navigator Network orientation in August of 2021. About 60 court staff, clerks, and Illinois JusticeCorps fellows from 23 judicial circuits participated in the program and received training on Illinois Legal Aid Online, Implicit Bias, Communication, Evictions, Trauma Informed Services, the Safe Harbor Policy, and Disability Access.



We have also presented on the Safe Harbor Policy and the difference between legal information and legal advice for one county's circuit clerk's office, two public library associations, and the appellate clerks. Additionally, we attended the Illinois Association of Circuit Clerks conference to provide clerks information about all access to justice projects and present on the changes to the Supreme Court Rule 10-101 regarding standardized court forms. Lastly, we assisted with the preparation for two ATJ Zoom sessions as part of the New Judge Orientation, working SRLs in the Courtroom and Ensuring ATJ for Limited English Proficient Litigants.

For more information about the ATJ Commission's work, please contact Alison Spanner at aspanner@illinoiscourts.gov

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