



DECEMBER 2025

Access to Justice Winners

The Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice (ATJ Commission) is proud to announce the winners of two awards, the Jeffrey D. Colman Access to Justice Award and The Hon. Thomas L. Kilbride (Ret.) Judicial Access to Justice Award. The Jeffrey D. Colman Access to Justice Award is given to a lawyer, paralegal, or court employee who has made a significant or meaningful contribution to improving access to our court system for litigants who are self-represented, limited English proficient, disabled, or otherwise vulnerable. The Hon. Thomas L. Kilbride (Ret.) Judicial Access to Justice Award is given to a member of the judiciary who has made a significant or meaningful contribution to increasing access to the court system by improving the experience of litigants.

“The ATJ Commission is thrilled to spotlight the exceptional efforts court stakeholders are making to enhance the court user experience,” said Judge Jorge L. Ortiz, Chair of the ATJ Commission. “The recipients of these awards exemplify the critical impact innovative projects, policies, and partnerships can have advancing the vital goal of increasing access to justice.”



The 2025 awardee of The Hon. Thomas L. Kilbride (Ret.) Judicial Access to Justice Award is Illinois Human Rights Commission’s (IHRC) Chief Administrative Law Judge Brian Weinthal. The importance of access to justice in our courts extends to administrative proceedings that may eventually be appealed to the courts. ALJ Weinthal modernized paper filings and mailed service to be able to be done electronically at the IHRC. He also implemented the first ever standing order for virtual hearings. He also drafted and passed an important change to the Illinois Human Rights Act

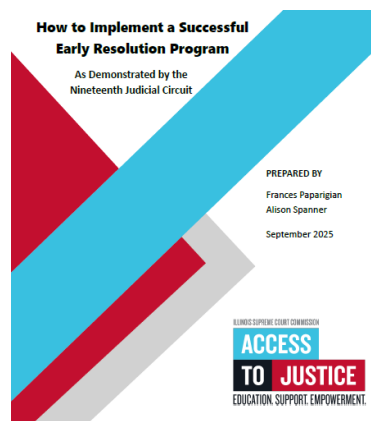
that requires the IHRC (at the state’s expense) to provide language access to litigants whose first language is not English. Lastly, he led an effort to improve access to representation at the IHRC by engaging with legal service organizations that are willing to provide pro bono services to self-represented litigants. By partnering with entities like Chicago Volunteer Legal Services, Legal Aid Chicago, Prairie State Legal Services, and Land of Lincoln Legal Aid, ALJ Weinthal has created another first-ever resource for administrative law judges to connect self-represented parties to *pro bono* service providers.



The 2025 awardee of the Jeffrey D. Coleman Access to Justice Award is Brenda Sprague, the Executive Assistant to the Chief Circuit Judge of the First Judicial Circuit. Brenda created, coordinated, and expanded a Lawyer in the Library program throughout the nine county circuit. The program is now located in 14 public libraries throughout all nine counties within the Circuit. Brenda has recruited multiple lawyers to assist the public at these events and promoted these events through numerous press releases and on social media to ensure the public is aware of these programs. Brenda further coordinates the Illinois JusticeCorps program in which an AmeriCorps volunteer travels throughout the Circuit to provide assistance to self-represented litigants. The First Circuit faces unique and often daunting challenges: limited access to public transportation, sparse legal resources, language barriers, and the need for hearing-impaired accommodations. Brenda not only understands these obstacles—she meets them head-on with creativity, compassion, and unwavering resolve.

A reception to celebrate the awardees will be held on April 9, 2026 in Chicago. Save the date if you'd like to celebrate these access to justice champions with us.

New White Paper on Early Resolution Programs



Across Illinois, we see courts and stakeholders working to develop innovative strategies to address the barriers that self-represented litigants (SRLs) face when accessing the courts as well as the courts' own challenges in managing a high volume of self-represented litigants. The Access to Justice Division and Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice have long recognized the importance of promoting the exchange of information about SRL initiatives between circuits as evidenced by programs like the Court Navigators Network. To build upon this, we determined that a written guide to implementing one of the programs proven to be successful would be a beneficial resource.

Director of the Access to Justice Division, Alison Spanner and Illinois Court Help Court Guide, Frances Paparigian collaborated to write, "[How to Implement a Successful Early Resolution Program](#)." This white paper highlights the Nineteenth Circuit's Early Resolution Program for Divorces through which hundreds of SRLs have resolved their uncomplicated divorces in a reduced timeframe with support throughout the process. In addition to providing an overview of the existing program at the Nineteenth Circuit, the paper includes best practices, considerations, and sample program steps- all of which provide a foundation for courts across the state to implement similar programs despite their different needs and resources. With the guidance of this white paper, implementing an Early Resolution Program for Divorces in any jurisdiction is an achievable goal.

Statewide Standardized Form Updates

In 2025, the Forms Team focused on redesigning existing form sets into the new standardized format, publishing new forms, developing a new case management system, and recruiting two new Forms Committee members.

There are currently 69 statewide standardized form sets available, comprising 341 individual forms used across all levels of the state court system. To date, the Forms Team has completed the conversion of 23 form sets into the redesigned format, totaling 123 individual forms. You can find all statewide standardized forms on the Illinois Courts' [website](#).

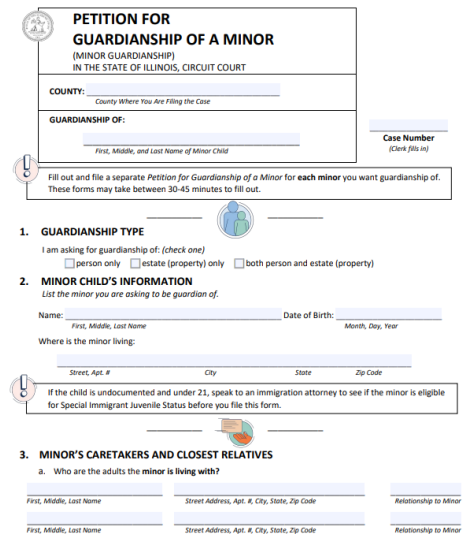
Over the past year, six new form sets were approved by the Forms Committee, including [Minor Guardianship](#), General Complaint, Appearance (Appellate and Supreme Court), and Notice of Change of Address (Appellate and Supreme Court).

The release of the Minor Guardianship forms was a significant achievement. These forms originated from a National Center for State Courts Justice for All grant in 2021 to the AOIC and ATJ Commission to expand resources for family-related issues within the court system.

Finalizing this form set required advocating for an amendment to M.R. 29741 to eliminate filing fees for individuals seeking to become guardians of minors. The Court approved the change in April, and the committee completed the form set, which was formally approved by the Forms Committee in October. This new resource will help self-represented litigants navigate the complex process of obtaining guardianship and will meaningfully expand access to justice for underrepresented populations.

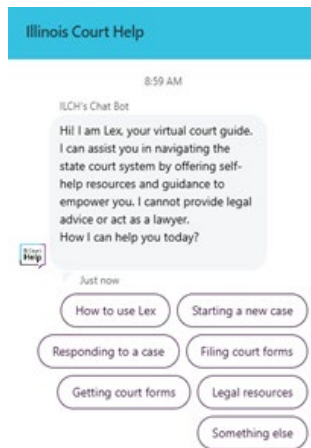
In addition, the Forms Team is nearing completion of a new case management system designed to improve the management of forms and automate universal updates in currently published forms. We contracted Thomson Reuters's HighQ for a customized system that will streamline operations and administration of our forms library.

Finally, we are bidding farewell to long-serving Forms Committee members Marilyn Stromborg and Richard Toboz, who will conclude their terms in 2025. Both have played an instrumental role in the committee's success, and we are deeply grateful for their service and dedication to developing and improving statewide forms. A Forms Committee working group was convened to select two new members from a total of 42 applications submitted for the volunteer positions. Stay tuned for the announcement of the new committee members.



The image shows a sample of the "PETITION FOR GUARDIANSHIP OF A MINOR" form. The form is titled "PETITION FOR GUARDIANSHIP OF A MINOR (MINOR GUARDIANSHIP) IN THE STATE OF ILLINOIS, CIRCUIT COURT". It includes fields for "COUNTY" (County Where You Are Filing the Case), "GUARDIANSHIP OF:" (First, Middle, and Last Name of Minor Child), and "Case Number (Clerk fills in)". A note states: "Fill out and file a separate Petition for Guardianship of a Minor for each minor you want guardianship of. These forms may take between 30-45 minutes to fill out." The form is divided into three main sections: 1. GUARDIANSHIP TYPE (I am asking for guardianship of: (check one) person only, estate (property) only, or both person and estate (property)), 2. MINOR CHILD'S INFORMATION (List the minor you are asking to be guardian of, including Name, Date of Birth, and Where is the minor living: Street, Apt. #, City, State, Zip Code), and 3. MINOR'S CARETAKERS AND CLOSEST RELATIVES (a. Who are the adults the minor is living with? including First, Middle, Last Name, Street Address, Apt. #, City, State, Zip Code, and Relationship to Minor).

Illinois Court Help – 1 Year of Lex the Chat Bot



Illinois Court Help expanded its services on January 29, 2025 with the launch of its chat bot, Lex. Since Illinois Court Help began in May 2021, the program has been dedicated to providing reliable legal information to court users across the state by phone, text, and email. The introduction of Lex marked an important milestone because it allowed users to access accurate information at any time. To ensure every response is correct, the entire Illinois Court Help team built Lex through fully programmed flow charts and logic trees rather than artificial intelligence. This was a major undertaking completed by the entire team while they also continued to staff the hotline every day from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. and answer text and email tickets throughout the day.

In the months since its launch, Lex has served nearly 7,000 users. While most court users are able to find the answers to their questions by engaging with Lex, only about 18% were unable to find what they needed and submitted a ticket, which was answered by a court guide via email the next business day. People have accessed Lex every day of the week and at all hours, with the highest engagement between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. on weekdays. Getting court forms and responding to a case are the most common uses of the bot. Small claims, evictions, and divorce remain the top case types users ask about. Looking ahead, Illinois Court Help is committed to continuing to grow Lex and make it even more accessible to all court users, including exploring how AI can be responsibly leveraged while preserving the accuracy and trust that Lex provides.

Commissioner Updates

In June 2025 two long-serving Access to Justice Commissioners reached the end of their terms. Retired attorney **Carolyn Clift**'s contributions led to a record of successful accomplishments for the ATJ Commission. As Co-Chair of the Community Trust Committee, she led extensive efforts to promote trust and confidence in Illinois state courts, and left an indelible mark on the tone, atmosphere, and experience of court users accessing court. **Hon. Thomas M. Harris** of the Fourth Appellate District had steadfast commitment to expanding access to legal representation, and thoughtful caution against implying that navigating the court system without a lawyer is easy, provided an essential and grounding perspective that helped shape the Commission's work.



They are replaced by **Kendric Cobb**, Vice president and Chief Counsel at Kellanova and former president of the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation Board of Directors; and **Hon. David L. Vancil, Jr.** Appellate Court Justice for the Fourth Appellate District. Welcome to the ATJ Commission!



Staff Updates



The ATJ Commission is staffed by the Access to Justice Division (ATJ Division) of the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts (AOIC) and remains grateful to the Illinois Supreme Court and AOIC for this collaboration.

First, we would like to mention some staffing changes. We said goodbye to four members of the team. **Lillie Schneyer** was the Program Coordinator on the Forms team. She is now a 2L at Northwestern University School of Law. **Sara Schlecht** and **Rick**

Hamer, who both worked as Court Guides on Illinois Court Help, are now full-time law students at Chicago-Kent College of Law. **Brittany Underwood**, another former Court Guide on Illinois Court Help, started a new opportunity with the Cook County court system.

Since we last provided a staffing update, six employees have joined the ATJ Division:

- **Aliyah Edelstein** is one of the Court Guides for Illinois Court Help. She came to us after getting her Master of Social Work from the University of Chicago and interning at the Law Center for Better Housing.
- **Erik Lubben** is one of the Court Guides for Illinois Court Help. He came to us from the Champaign County Circuit Clerk's Office.
- **Frances Papparigian** is one of the Spanish-speaking Court Guides for Illinois Court Help. She came to us after being the Self-Represented Litigant Coordinator in the 19th Judicial Circuit, Lake County.
- **Melissa Bartolomei** is the Senior Program Manager for Forms. She came to us from Legal Aid Chicago where she was the supervisory attorney for pro bono and community partnerships.
- **Miguel Nunez** is one of the Spanish-speaking Court Guides for Illinois Court Help. He came to us from The Community Center - Catholic Charities.
- **Obie Marcel** is one of the Court Guides for Illinois Court Help. They came to us from Chicago House and Social Service Agency.



For more information about the ATJ Commission's work, please contact
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