



## **Supreme Court of Illinois**

September 23, 2025

### **ILLINOIS SUPREME COURT APPROVES VISION FOR NEW COMMUNITY JUSTICE WORKER PROGRAM**

Chief Justice Mary Jane Theis and the Illinois Supreme Court announced today the approval in concept of a new Community Justice Worker Program (Program) to allow for certified individuals who are not lawyers to provide limited legal assistance in designated high-need areas of law under the supervision of an Illinois-licensed attorney.

While Illinois is home to over 70 civil legal aid organizations, the need for free civil legal aid far outpaces available services. The approved proposal will position trained and certified community justice workers in legal aid and other non-profit organizations to provide limited legal assistance in areas of law where there is a high unmet need. The most likely beneficiaries of this model of community justice worker assistance are people who are not currently accessing legal services and cannot afford an attorney.

“Far too many Illinoisans cannot find or afford a lawyer who can handle legal issues affecting basic issues of life – custody, divorce, housing, debt relief or what is needed in a will. This has been a problem for decades, in Illinois and elsewhere, and simply asking lawyers to work more pro bono hours is not the answer,” said Tim Eaton and Tim Bertschy, who are former Presidents of the Illinois State Bar Association (Eaton also served as President of the Chicago Bar Association) and served as the original Chair and Vice Chair of the Supreme Court Executive Committee on the Practice of Law (Executive Committee). “Providing for certified community justice workers closely supervised by a licensed lawyer and employed by nonprofits only, will become one important tool in resolving the unmet legal needs of the public while still protecting the tenets of our profession.”

The Program is intended to expand access to legal services and help underserved areas, including legal deserts, by leveraging existing resources and people already in those communities. People often look first to known, trusted sources (family, friends, social service agencies) for help with their problems. A community justice worker program can build trust and confidence in the judicial system by equipping trusted sources to provide accurate and effective assistance.

“There continues to be an increase in the number of people coming to court for civil cases who are self-represented,” Chief Justice Mary Jane Theis said. “This is part of a nationwide trend and states are looking to programs like this to increase access to the justice system for individuals who cannot afford an attorney.”

This July, the Conference of Chief Justices (CCJ) and the Conference of State Court Administrators (COSCA) adopted a [resolution](#) in support of exploring access to justice through authorized justice practitioner programs. Their resolution notes that approximately half of states are already exploring, implementing, or administering at least one regulatory reform initiative wherein individuals without law licenses are authorized to provide legal assistance in limited or community settings. In August, the American Bar Association (ABA) similarly adopted a [resolution](#) encouraging states to study community justice worker programs and to adopt programs appropriate for their jurisdiction.

The Program was proposed by the Executive Committee, which drew on the experiences of other states that have implemented similar programs. The Executive Committee, which was created in 2023, is charged with making recommendations on issues impacting the practice of law and unmet legal needs and consists of 13 members appointed by the Supreme Court. Attorney Eaton, a partner in the Taft Law Firm, continues to serve as Chair, and 4<sup>th</sup> Circuit Judge Wesley A. Gozia, a member of the ISBA Board of Governors, currently serves as Vice Chair.

The Executive Committee will work with the Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice, the Attorney Registration and Disciplinary Commission (ARDC), and other stakeholders to develop the regulatory and other details of the Program. The Executive Committee will submit a final recommendation to the Court prior to October 1, 2026.

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