



January 2022

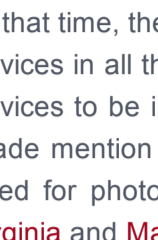
As we enter year 10 since the Illinois Supreme Court created the ATJ Commission, I am feeling renewed by the program updates we bring to you this January. The Illinois Supreme Court's approval of the statewide policy on portable electronic devices is of particular importance as it will increase court users' access to essential information and lead to equal treatment for all members of the public who enter our courthouses.

The other, smaller, lower profile projects discussed below may be less flashy but are just as important to achieving the Commission's goals. These other projects reflect the determination of the Commission and the ATJ Division to constantly make meaningful improvements to our programs to assure that they are efficient and up to date. – Alison Spanner

New Supreme Court Policy on Portable Electronic Devices

By: Jill Roberts

Back in 2018, the ATJ Commission's Court Guidance and Training Committee began studying the issue of whether cell phones and other portable electronic devices should be allowed in courthouses. The timing of this study corresponded with the e-filing mandate for civil cases, a process that required litigants to verify their email addresses, usually via cell phone.



In April 2019, after research, the Committee found cell phone policies in 44 counties in Illinois. Of those 44 counties, 27 allowed portable electronic devices in the courthouses, including the Daley Center which is the largest and most visited courthouse in the state. Many had explicit signage prohibiting the use of cell phones or requiring that they be on silent or powered off inside courtrooms.

Seventeen counties did not allow the public to carry portable electronic devices into the courthouses at all but made exceptions for certain groups of people like employees, lawyers, and jurors. Of those 17 counties, only three provided lockers for court patrons to store their devices while in the courthouses. The Committee was unable to find any counties that prohibited devices entirely.

At that time, the Committee also discovered that 19 states had statewide policies regarding electronic devices in all their courts (many more local courts had more localized policies). All 19 states allowed devices to be in the courthouse buildings and only one prohibited them from courtrooms. Nearly all made mention that devices needed to be off or on silent in courtrooms and that they could not be used for photographs or other recordings. In the spring of 2019, the leaders in this space were [Virginia](#) and [Massachusetts](#).

After discussing this information and the unique challenges in Illinois, including the fact that building security is often run by county sheriff's departments, the Committee asked a working group that included more stakeholders including sheriffs and sheriff association representatives to examine the issue and the collected information. That working group met several times and concluded their work in November 2020. The working group discussed a wide variety of topics, including policies and practices in their respective counties and circuits, a new statewide policy adopted by [Michigan](#) in early 2020, and the balancing of competing interests in favor and against a statewide policy permitting cell phones in Illinois courthouses. Although the working group was unable to reach consensus on recommending a compulsory statewide policy permitting cell phones in Illinois courthouses, the group recommended an aspirational policy, modeled after the Virginia policy, that all jurisdictions work towards achieving based on their individual resources and capacities. Based on all of these efforts and recommendations, a proposed policy on portable electronic devices was drafted.

In June 2021, the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice considered the proposal. The Commission understood that portable electronic devices are essential tools of today's society and are often necessary for court users, in particular self-represented litigants, to access resources, conduct court business, accomplish procedural steps, and to present evidence or arguments in their cases. The Commission saw a need for the proposed policy which requires each courthouse to adopt individualized orders or rules allowing the use of portable electronic devices by all court users. The policy also requires that the terms of the orders and rules be prominently displayed on signage in the courthouses and on court websites. The Commission voted to send the proposal to the Supreme Court for its review.

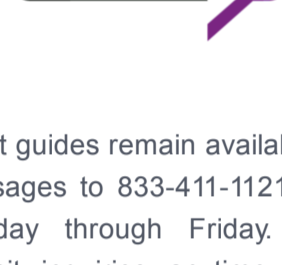
After seeking the input of the Conference of Chief Judges, the Court adopted the [Illinois Supreme Court Policy on Portable Electronic Devices](#) this month. The new policy requires all courthouses to create local rules or orders addressing the use of devices in courthouse buildings and courtrooms while allowing them to address any security issues by providing restrictions.

The Court Guidance & Training Committee's next steps will be to draft model local rules and signage that courthouses can use. Stay tuned for those sample materials.

Illinois Court Help

By: Lisa Colpoys

Illinois Court Help continues to assist court users daily. Our service platform, Zendesk, published a case study about our program which we invite you to read at: <https://www.zendesk.com/customer/illinois-court-help/>.



Your guide through the courts

Court guides remain available for calls and text messages to 833-411-1121 from 9am to 2pm Monday through Friday. People can also submit inquiries anytime via a webform at ilcourthelp.gov. Early this year we will be adding a live chat option on that website, too.

Community Trust Committee

By: Lekisha Gunn



The newly reconstituted Community Trust Committee recently convened for its initial meeting in December 2021 after a lengthy process of seeking applicants and conducting interviews with individuals from a variety of backgrounds. The Community Trust Committee springs from the Cook County Southern Suburbs Working Group, which focused efforts on improving relations between the courts and communities of color in and around the Markham Courthouse.

With the Court's approval, the Commission began soliciting applications for broader membership in August 2021 to recruit a more diverse group of individuals from various organizations across the state. Ideally, our goal was to incorporate more leaders in the faith-based community, as well as civic leaders and public servants, who may not necessarily serve as legal professionals. We selected fourteen individuals with a strong commitment to social justice and public service. The committee also includes Deanie Brown, Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer of the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts, to provide her expertise and recommendations on building a more racially inclusive court and maintaining strong relationships with diverse communities.

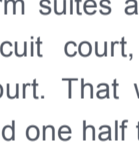
The Community Trust Committee will meet monthly to fulfill two current projects: (1) The charge from the Illinois Supreme Court to consider and develop a Community Justice Navigator program, a recommendation from the Chicago Bar Association/Chicago Bar Foundation Task Force on the Sustainable Practice of Law and Innovation Report; and (2) reengagement of initiatives commenced before the pandemic at the Markham Courthouse and efforts to duplicate the Markham model in a more rural area of the state, Lee County.

Our second Community Trust Committee is tentatively scheduled for the last week of January and our hope is to build upon the previous success of the working group and expand our access to justice efforts into the larger statewide community.

We thank the Cook County Southern Suburbs Working Group for their hard work and look forward to what is to come for this Committee.

Launching a Business Process Analysis For Standardized Court Form Development and Maintenance

By: Jill Roberts



The ATJ Commission has approved the hiring of a business process analysis (BPA) or process improvement consultant to evaluate our current procedures for developing, maintaining, and updating standardized court forms. The existing forms development and update processes were created in 2012 and started with the work of 3 drafting subcommittees and one staff member. Now, there are 52 published form suites and 202 total forms for use in the circuit court, appellate court, and Supreme Court. That work has been done by one full and one half time staff member who coordinate 13 subcommittees and the Forms Committee.

The current process for forms development is, generally, that everything is drafted by subcommittees comprised of subject matter experts. The forms go through user testing and public comment. The forms are reviewed by the central Forms Committee twice before final approval. Each approved form is reviewed at least annually to determine if changes are needed. If so, and the changes are substantive, the Forms Committee reviews and approves the amended form.

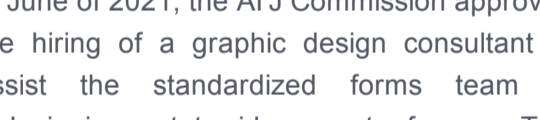
To get a new forms suite to final approval currently takes no less than two years. For example, the forms suite on expunging and vacating cannabis convictions began to be drafted in the summer of 2019 but was not finally approved until October 2021. The process for annual review can also be lengthy with subcommittees reviewing comments for nearly a year before updated versions are finalized.

We will ask the consultant to assess the development process and suggest improvements and ways to increase efficiencies for how forms are created and maintained. Additionally, we seek suggestions on better ways to track forms and updates as well as overall project management.

We are currently accepting proposals/quotes from consultants until January 31. If you or someone you know might be interested in this undertaking, please reach out to Jill Roberts at jroberts@illinoiscourts.gov for more information.

Standardized Form Redesign Project

By: Israel Putnam



In June of 2021, the ATJ Commission approved the hiring of a graphic design consultant to assist the standardized forms team in redesigning statewide court forms. This initiative was developed in response to a growing need reported by Self-Represented Litigants (SRLs) and observed by the ATJ Commission staff as well as many others involved in the use and development of forms.

The Forms Redesign Council (FRC) was then established in September to oversee the development of this project. The FRC reviewed and graded vendor proposals, narrowed the candidate field, and eventually selected a consultant.

This consultant, [Briefly, Inc.](#), is a New York based graphic design firm specializing in creating legal content that is accessible and engaging. In past projects, they have worked with New York state courts as well as numerous legal self-help services throughout the country, including those in Michigan, Louisiana, and Nevada.

With Briefly's assistance, ATJ Commission staff mapped out important stakeholders and formulated standardized questions. They then held five informational gathering sessions with a cross section of court-related individuals from across the state.

These efforts resulted in some unanimous insights, including the following:

- Instructions in the left-hand margin of forms are not utilized effectively or at all by SRLs
- SRLs are overwhelmed by the entire process and thus have difficulty understanding how or why a form should be filled out, and whether a particular form suits their needs.

- SRLs need something to orient them to the big picture of how their whole case operates and something to guide them along the "milestones" that each form represents.

- SRLs and subject matter experts tend to prefer "shorter" forms; however, judges, attorneys, and other legal professionals are concerned that overly shortened forms will fail to provide enough information to SRLs and the courts that serve them.

The next phase of research will be conducting user testing on both existing and prototype forms to acquire input on what design elements and resources the users believe will make forms easier and more efficient to use.

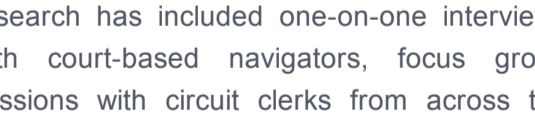
After user testing, initial design drafts will be finalized and brought to the FRC for further review and feedback. The design iterations will be implemented within both the forms themselves and other supplemental materials, such as instructional documents. All these updated documents and guides will then go through further rounds of user testing for refinement.

The current goal is to develop a comprehensive template design, fully apply it to the Divorce with Children suite of forms by the end of April 2022, then start rolling that design out to other form suites over the subsequent months.

The Forms Redesign Council and staff have also been reminded through this process that the court experience is intrinsically complex and challenging for SRLs. Unfortunately, that system will not suddenly change just with a redesign of standardized forms. Additionally, elegant design is often as much about what is left out as what is included. So simple, clean forms will always be more effective than those that are complex and cluttered. As such, the improvements taking place are focused on guiding SRLs through their litigation pathway in a user-friendly way, and one that will hopefully improve the process efficiency for the whole court system as well.

E(as) Filing Research Summary

By: Sarah Song



As a result of the [Final Report of Illinois Justice for All: Strategic Action Plan](#), we have been working with a technology consultant to conduct in-depth research into how we can improve the entire electronic filing (e-filing) journey for self-represented litigants. His research has included one-on-one interviews with court-based navigators, focus group sessions with circuit clerks from across the state, and reviewing survey responses submitted by self-represented litigants who have been able to e-file. He also met with legal technology developers with relevant expertise to explore the role technology can play in fostering an improved SRL experience.

Although technology can help alleviate some of the identified pain points, the research has revealed how e-filing places an immense burden on SRLs to understand and apply all the nuances and intricacies of our legal system when most of that information is exclusively in the hands of legal professionals and court staff. Although we originally set out to consider the mechanics of e-filing, the research has uncovered deficiencies further upstream that could help SRLs better understand and prepare for not only the step of e-filing but their entire court journey. The research showed a near unanimous call for more plain language information but also significant process simplification. The level of detail and granularity a filer needs to know to e-file is simply unrealistic and leads to inefficiencies where SRLs and clerks have to go through numerous rounds of e-filing before a document can be successfully submitted to the court. These experiences have led SRLs to become increasingly frustrated and distrustful of our justice system.

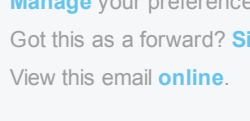
Much can be done to make this mandatory process more accessible and friendly to SRLs and we look forward to sharing our consultant's final report later this year. Under the direction of the JFA Committee, we will be taking the next steps to change the e-filing journey and are optimistic that the conveniences and benefits of this remote process can be realized by SRLs, clerks, and courts alike.

ATJ Staff Updates

Kathryn Hensley is out on parental leave after the birth of her son, Elio in December. Join us in congratulating Kathryn and her family! If you have any questions about the appellate resource program while she is on leave, please contact Alison Spanner at aspanner@illinoiscourts.gov.

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

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