

ILLINOIS SUPREME COURT COMMISSION

ACCESS

TO JUSTICE

EDUCATION. SUPPORT. EMPOWERMENT.

Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice

STRATEGIC PLAN 2023-2028



Welcome to What's Next

OUR LEGAL SYSTEM was originally designed with the assumption that people would be represented by lawyers. Yet, increasingly, people without lawyers regularly appear in court. For a variety of reasons, not everyone who is filing claims for common issues like divorce, guardianship, and orders of protection or defending themselves against debt collection, eviction, and mortgage foreclosure is able to access a lawyer.

This creates challenges for the legal system and the broader principle of equal access to justice.

Without a lawyer, a person may not even recognize that they have a legal issue. If this hurdle can be cleared and a person turns to the court system or is subject to a lawsuit, they are often left to navigate the drafting of a complaint or answer on their own. They face the daunting tasks of achieving service of process, answering interrogatories, securing witnesses through subpoenas, dealing with dispositive motions, a

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trial, post judgment activities, and a myriad of other steps in between—all designed for people with lawyers. As a result, the person who appears in court is often lost, confused, angry, and alone, and the judge and opposing counsel are limited in the help they can provide. When they share their frustrating experiences with friends and family, distrust of the court system grows.

The Commission on Access to Justice (ATJ Commission) and the Access to Justice Division of the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts (ATJ Division) strive to help members of our community identify their legal issues, provide them with resources, information, and assistance to navigate the courts—including referrals to appropriate legal assistance whenever possible—and help them gain an understanding of court processes. The ATJ Commission also seeks to assist judges, clerks, and court staff in providing meaningful access to justice for everyone in Illinois.

The ATJ Commission has developed this five-year strategic plan to guide its work. First, the ATJ Commission affirms its mission as set forth in Illinois Supreme Court Rule 10-100 and which reads, in part:

The Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice is established to promote, facilitate, and enhance equal access to justice... The purpose is to make access to justice a high priority for everyone in the legal system and, to the maximum extent possible, the Commission is intended to complement and collaborate with other entities addressing access to justice issues.

Second, the ATJ Commission will continue to follow the principles as set forth in the ATJ Commission's 2020-2023 Strategic Plan:

EQUAL ACCESS: Court users should have access to justice through full participation in the judicial process, regardless of their circumstances, socioeconomic status, English language proficiency, cultural background, disability status, or legal representation status.

PROCEDURAL FAIRNESS: Court users should have access to a fair, impartial, and transparent judicial branch where they are treated with dignity, respect, equality, and professional courtesy.

ASSISTANCE: Court users should have access to assistance with navigating the courthouse and understanding court systems and procedures from individuals with particular knowledge and sensitivity to their needs.

PLAIN LANGUAGE: Court users should have access to a wide variety of plain language resources designed to help them understand and exercise their civil and procedural rights.

PROCESS SIMPLIFICATION: Court users should find that court procedures and policies are streamlined and efficient, while still preserving due process and substantive and procedural fairness.

TECHNOLOGY: The ATJ Commission will promote the deployment of user-friendly technology to provide court users with assistance and information, as well as to streamline and simplify court procedures and processes.

PROMOTING LEGAL REPRESENTATION: The ATJ Commission will promote free and affordable representation for those who cannot afford legal representation and encourage the development or enhancement of pro bono programs.

COMMUNICATION: The ATJ Commission will ensure public awareness of its Initiatives and will effectively communicate with its partners and court users through all available channels to achieve successful implementation of its programs and to solicit feedback.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT: The ATJ Commission will strive for continuous improvement and increased capacity to best meet the diverse and evolving needs of court users.

Lastly, this Strategic Plan sets forth our vision for the Illinois courts, which is consistent with our mission and statement of principles. This Plan defines objectives for achieving this vision, and states the important steps for fulfilling the objectives. It will serve as a guiding light and touchstone for the ATJ Commission's endeavors over the next five years and will be put into action by yearly operational plans, which will detail the tasks to be accomplished.

Pursuant to this overall framework, the ATJ Commission and the ATJ Division will continue to prioritize our mainstay programs, for example, standardized forms, Illinois Court Help, the interpreter registry, Illinois JusticeCorps, and Court Navigator Network while strengthening our relationships with the courts and our many partners and developing new innovative court programs.

The ATJ Commission will listen to the voices of those who seek assistance and information and lift the voices of those who wish to be heard about their court experiences. The ATJ Commission will then make meaningful changes to improve court procedures and the way information is provided to increase trust in our courts.

The ATJ Commission welcomes the opportunity to share its strategic agenda with the Illinois Supreme Court for its review and counsel. The ATJ Commission is grateful for the Supreme Court's leadership and enduring support of our endeavors and for the advice and direction of **Hon. David Overstreet**, Justice, Illinois Supreme Court, the Supreme Court's liaison to the ATJ Commission.

Respectfully submitted by the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice:

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THE ATJ COMMISSION'S VISION FOR THE ILLINOIS COURTS IS:

An accessible and innovative court system that serves people equitably and empowers them to participate meaningfully in the resolution of their legal issues.

The ATJ Commission recognizes that achieving this vision requires partnership, collaboration, and adaptability. The ATJ Commission will work towards realizing its vision by*:



1. Supporting and listening to local courts,

including judges, clerks, and court staff, and partnering with them to create the tools and resources necessary to work together to attain the ATJ Commission's vision.



3. Collaborating with community-based organizations,

being informed by the communities they serve, sharing what is learned with court stakeholders, and responding to community needs.



2. Working with the legal profession,

including but not limited to the ATJ Commission's 100-plus volunteers, ATJ Division staff, Illinois Judicial Conference, Illinois Judicial College, Committee on Equality, Commission on Professionalism, The Chicago Bar Foundation, Lawyers Trust Fund of Illinois, Illinois Equal Justice Foundation, Illinois Bar Foundation, Illinois Access to Justice (ILA2J), and the Illinois Supreme Court to identify and address barriers to access.



4. Facilitating and fostering innovation

and helping to identify, analyze, implement, and evaluate emerging programs and services.

**See more specifics in the ATJ Commission's yearly at-a-glance operational plan.*

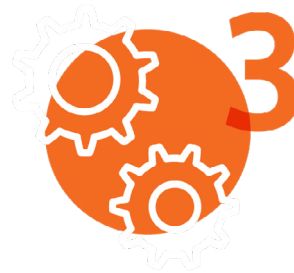
The ATJ
Commission
believes its
vision will be
achieved when:



People recognize when they have a legal issue and trust the court to address it.



People feel welcomed, respected, and encouraged to participate in the court process.



People understand the court process.



People can use legal information and services.



People are offered innovative options to enhance access to and improve their experience with the court system.

1 ■ People recognize when they have a legal issue and trust the court to address it.



THE ATJ COMMISSION WILL:

- Convene courts and community groups that directly serve the public to collaborate and share information about legal issues, court process, legal resources, and referrals.
- Listen to people's experiences of participating in the court process, ask for feedback, and respond to this feedback by making appropriate changes within the court system.
- Help courts routinely evaluate policies, rules, and procedures to identify points of unfairness and inequality and whether they hinder full and equitable access to the court system, and work with them to address these issues.
- Acknowledge that our legal system is impacted by systemic racism and institutional discrimination and that without deliberate action, such practices will continue to undermine our democracy, the fair and equitable administration of justice, and severely diminish individual constitutional protections and safeguards of full citizenship sacred to all.

BY, FOR EXAMPLE:

- Collaborating on various projects with the Illinois Supreme Court Committee on Equality and the Court's Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer to address barriers founded on inequality, bias, and racism.
- Cultivating communication and coordination between the courts, non-traditional court stakeholders, justice partners, and the public, and partnering to make legal information available.
- Conducting focus groups, interviews, and collaboration to make space for all voices to be heard, with a special focus on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, and identifying practices that perpetuate inequity.
- Always considering programs, policies, and innovations through a race equity lens to ensure they do not perpetuate bias.

DEVOTING THESE ATJ COMMITTEES OR STAFF

Remote Appearance Committee
Community Trust Committee
Rules & Policy Review Committee
Illinois Court Help
ATJ Liaison to the Committee on Equality



2 ■ People feel welcomed, respected, and encouraged to participate in the court process.

THE ATJ COMMISSION WILL:

- Help courts promote legal information to everyone.
- Offer statewide standardized court forms, as well as multi-lingual signage, certified interpreters, and reasonable accommodations.
- Ensure courts respond to the basic needs of all people by providing, where possible, accessible court spaces, all gender single occupancy bathrooms, nursing rooms, children's waiting rooms, and free places to store personal belongings not allowed in courthouses.
- Promote processes that allow courts to grant fee and assessment waivers consistently and in a manner that minimizes the burden on court users.
- Engage in training and practical techniques to counteract bias and discrimination.

BY, FOR EXAMPLE:

- Collaborating on courses through the Illinois Judicial College to bring awareness of ways to increase racial equity and reduce bias.
- Developing statewide standardized court forms. Automating those forms and translating them into languages relevant for users.
- Providing significant grant opportunities to courts to increase their access to resources and support so they can establish procedures and processes that benefit the public and ensure high-quality customer service.
- Investigating, understanding, and responding to what court staff, such as Court Disability Coordinators, need to be successful.

DEVOTING THESE ATJ COMMITTEES OR STAFF

Language Access Committee
Forms Committee
Disability Access Committee
Court Guidance and Training Committee
Court Navigator Network and Grant Selection Committee
ATJ Liaisons to the Illinois Judicial College

3 ■ People understand the court process.



THE ATJ COMMISSION WILL:

- Work with courts to routinely evaluate their processes and recommend simplification of processes that are found to be onerous or unnecessarily complex without corresponding benefit.
- Promote processes that ensure that filing court forms is easy to do online and in person.
- Use plain, gender-inclusive, and person-centered language in verbal and written communications, including signage, notices, instructions, forms, orders, and rules and encourage courts to do the same.
- Explain the court process and legal information in accessible formats and multiple ways (e.g., person to person, translated, written, audio, video, visually mapped) to accommodate different disability and learning needs.

BY, FOR EXAMPLE:

- Developing self-help services and resources that are useful and accessible to court users.
- Collaborating with justice partners to develop additional automated interviews that improve and streamline the process for creating and e-filing documents.
- Working with justice partners and court stakeholders to simplify and increase access to the legal process through both legislative and rule-making avenues, with a focus on reducing procedural, financial, and other barriers.

DEVOTING THESE ATJ COMMITTEES OR STAFF

Rules & Policy Review Committee
Court Navigator Network
Illinois Court Help
ATJ Division Staff on Inclusive Access

4. People can use legal information and services.



THE ATJ COMMISSION WILL:

- Ensure that people can easily access information about their court cases online, in person at the courthouse, or on the phone through Illinois Court Help or courthouse staff, and that people without lawyers can access the same case information as lawyers.
- Encourage referrals to free and affordable legal advice or representation services.
- Facilitate and foster partnerships with legal aid organizations, pro bono programs, and bar associations to identify areas for collaboration to help make legal services available to people at the courthouse.
- Promote and encourage limited scope and pro bono representation.

BY, FOR EXAMPLE:

- Promoting the necessity of user testing all public interfaces and resources to ensure the products can be used and are of value to people.
- Increasing access to resources in languages relevant to the user.
- Partnering with courts and justice stakeholders statewide to expand access to a continuum of legal assistance including self-help and legal advice assistance, rather than just the traditional one-size-fits-all legal representation.

DEVOTING THESE ATJ COMMITTEES OR STAFF

Illinois Court Help
Language Access Committee
Court Navigator Network
Community Trust Committee



5. People are offered innovative options to enhance access to and improve their experience with the court system.

THE ATJ COMMISSION WILL:

- Embrace new and emerging ideas and implement changes that reimagine the status quo and promote the same to courts.
- Help courts stay current on the evolving needs and expectations of their communities and effectively use technology to help people more easily participate in the court system.
- Encourage court processes that allow people to, generally, choose how they access the courts, either in person or remotely, including by computer, smart phone, tablet, or telephone, and ensure that they will receive the same access to the courts, regardless of their choice.

BY, FOR EXAMPLE:

- With our partners across the state and nation, actively participating in the access to justice movement to learn what other access to justice commissions, state courts, bar associations, legal aid groups, educational institutions, and private companies are developing to improve a person's ability to participate in the court process and adapting those improvements for Illinois.
- Facilitating and incubating innovative programs and services and sharing lessons and best practices throughout the state.

DEVOTING THESE ATJ COMMITTEES OR STAFF

Court Guidance and Training Committee
Remote Appearance Committee
Disability Access Committee
ATJ Division Staff on Legal Technology

Special Thanks:

This Strategic Plan would not have been possible without the efforts and commitment of the ATJ Commission's Strategic Planning Committee chaired by Jennifer Nijman, a commissioner. The ATJ Commission recognizes and thanks all of the members of the Strategic Planning Committee for their insight, advice, and significant contributions to the development of this strategic agenda.

Jennifer Nijman
Commissioner, Chair of Committee

Justice Mary K. Rochford
Chair of the Commission

Andrew Weaver
Commissioner

Carolyn Clift
Commissioner

Judge Dominique Ross
Commissioner

Justice Sanjay Tailor
Commissioner

Kimberly Ackmann
17th Judicial Circuit

Mark Marquardt
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