



EDUCATION. SUPPORT. EMPOWERMENT.

Access to Justice Articles July-November 2025

Giving Thanks to Access to Justice Champions – November 2025 – Hon. Jorge Ortiz, Chair of Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice

During this time of thanksgiving, I want to take a moment to thank all of the Commissioners on the Access to Justice Commission, our Supreme Court liaison, Justice David K. Overstreet, and our many volunteer committee members for their steadfast commitment to increasing access to justice throughout Illinois. I also want to add a special thanks to the ATJ Division staff who shepherd the work of the ATJ Commission and are the backbone of the initiatives.

Looking outward, we also want to recognize a few of the many individuals who have made meaningful contributions to the Illinois justice system this year. At the outset, it is necessary (and hopefully obvious) to point out that this list is representative of the great work being done across the state and reflective of the many individuals who strive each day to ensure that our courts are fair and accessible.

- **Chief Judge Timothy Evans, Circuit Court of Cook County**

Chief Judge Timothy Evans has served as Chief Judge in the Circuit Court of Cook County for the last 24 years. During that time, he championed many initiatives to improve access to the courts. Most recently, he issued General Administrative Order 2025-10 reiterating the common law privilege against civil arrest for people attending court. As stated in the order, the “fair administration of justice requires that courts remain open and accessible, and that litigants and witnesses may appear without fear of civil arrest.” This effort to protect people who may be afraid to leave their homes to attend court is admirable.

Other initiatives that launched under his leadership include the new and improved Resource Center for People Without Lawyers in the Daley Center, Illinois JusticeCorps, Early Resolution Program and Right to Counsel program for Eviction Court as well as the court-based rental assistance program, foreclosure mediation launched in the heart of the recession, specialty/treatment courts including restorative justice community courts, and much more.

Thank you for your service as Chief Judge and all of the programs you shaped or approved to increase access to justice throughout Cook County.

- **Guardianship Forms Subcommittee**

This forms subcommittee has been hard at work creating a new statewide form set for minor guardianship. This work started back in 2020, after a Justice For All Grant program that sought to increase resources around family-related issues in the courts. Minor guardianship is an area of law that has tremendous differences across the state for how cases were processed and charged fees. In order to create more uniformity before the release of statewide forms, this led to an effort to remove the filing fees for those individuals who are willing to become guardians of minors. The Court approved the change to filing fees in April, and the committee completed the form set.

The form set was approved by the Forms Committee in October and will be available under the Guardianship of a Minor section of [this page](#). This form set will help self-represented litigants navigate the complex process of obtaining guardianship of a minor. These forms will undeniably increase access to justice for underrepresented populations. Thanks to all the subcommittee members for bringing these forms to life!

The subcommittee is composed entirely of volunteer subject matter experts who donated ample time toward drafting and refining this vital form set. Subcommittee is staffed by Brent Page, Supervising Senior Policy Attorney, Access to Justice Division and the members are:

- Cheryl Lipton, Senior Attorney, Center for Disability & Elder Law
- Doug Smothers, Senior Staff Attorney, Land of Lincoln Legal Aid
- Frances Paparigian, Illinois Court Help, Court Guide
- John Joanem, Circuit Judge, 19th Judicial Circuit Lake County
- Matt Newsted, Associate Director of Legal Tech, Illinois Legal Aid Online
- Megan Nolan, Attorney, Johnson, Johnson & Nolan
- Rebecca Rashidfarokhi, Director of Court Advocacy, Chicago Volunteer Legal Services
- Maureen Loughran, Senior Vice President, Northern Trust
- Stephen Iden, Partner, Young Law Partners, P.C.
- Susan McGrath, Circuit Clerk of Champaign County

- **Illinois Court Help Team, Access to Justice Division, Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts**

Since launching in 2021, Illinois Court Help has provided court users with reliable information by phone, text, and email. This year the program [launched a new bot, Lex](#). To ensure only accurate information is provided to anyone chatting with Lex, the bot is fully programmed. This means that the people had to input all the information in to the flow

charts and logic trees rather than using AI. Now people can receive accurate information from Illinois Court Help via Lex 24/7.

This herculean effort was executed with enthusiasm by the entire Illinois Court Help team (Avani Patel, Helen Doig, Jessica Acosta, Sara Schlecht, Brittany Underwood, Daisy Fermaint, Darli Cortez, Erik Lubben, Frances Paparigian, Janice Coleman, Miguel Nunez, Naomi Wilner, Rick Hamer, Tahmia Dugger). In addition to being on the Illinois Court Help hotline every day from 8:30am to 3pm, this team found time to work on and perfect this vital addition to the ILCH offered services.

- **Seth Floyd, Circuit Clerk of Piatt County**

Through strategic grant funding and internal resourcefulness, Seth modernized the county's court technology-scanning resulting in archiving over 25 years of case files in less than a year, saving the county more than \$100,000. He managed upgrades to IT infrastructure across all court stakeholders, including court staff in six offices. His leadership in making the court more accessible through a redesigned website, mobile application, and in courthouse display system has set a benchmark for user-centered public service. Even during his first year in office, Seth pushed Piatt County to the forefront as one of the first counties in Illinois to implement criminal e-filing. As Court Disability Coordinator and Jury Commissioner, he has continued to ensure the Circuit Clerk's Office is accessible, responsive, and deeply attuned to the needs of the public.

On behalf of the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice, we thank those mentioned above. We also are deeply grateful to all the judges, legal aid and pro bono lawyers, circuit clerks, court staff, self-help personnel, navigators, volunteers, AOIC staff, our partners, and all those who share the vision of a more fair and accessible court system.

Illinois Contingent Attends ABA Forum on Building Access to Justice for All - October 2025

Seven members of the Illinois courts attended the American Bar Association's Forum on Building Access to Justice and the National Meeting of State Access to Justice Commission Chairs in Atlanta, Georgia October 15-17. This included the Chair of the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice (ATJ), Judge Jorge Ortiz, and six staff of the ATJ Division of the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts (AOIC).

The third annual ABA Forum on Building Access to Justice for All combined the annual Joint IOLTA Conference, the National Lawyer Referral Workshop, and the National Meeting of State Access to Justice Commission Chairs (ATJ Chairs Meeting). The 2025 Forum provided

unique educational training, networking opportunities, and support to access to justice commissions, IOLTA programs, lawyer referral programs, and others working to increase access to the civil justice system. Each individual conference, and the Forum collectively, addressed topics of concern to local and state programs and brought together national leaders seeking to share information on resources and best practices to better serve the legal needs of their communities. In addition, special joint programming focused on overlapping concerns.

Judge Jorge Ortiz and Jill Roberts led a table talk entitled ATJ Commission Funding – How to Get Money and What to Do With It, Alison Spanner and Sarah Song led a table talk called Opening Courthouse Doors: Advancing Disability Access and Inclusion One Step at a Time, and Avani Patel was a panelist for Empowering the Self-Represented: Innovations in Legal Information, Tools, and Technology.

It was so powerful to get all the states' Commissions together to share information. Illinois, again, was proven to be a leader in many initiatives and we serve as a model to replicate. We also learned a lot from other states including states who have already launched a new Community Justice Worker program—of which, Illinois is just embarking on.



Melissa Barlotomei, Brent Page, Alison Spanner, Judge Jorge Ortiz, Jill Roberts, Avani Patel, Sarah Song

Access to Justice Improvement Grant Awards – August 2025

The Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice (ATJ Commission) awarded \$400,000 in grant funds to improve access to justice and services for self-represented litigants (SRLs) across the state. Thousands of litigants appear in the Illinois courts without a lawyer every year. The growing number SRLs in court is not unique to any one circuit, county, or case type. The ATJ Commission and the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts Access to Justice Division (ATJ Division) recognize, given the size and diversity of Illinois, that local partners are critical to fully understand and address the needs of the SRL population. For these reasons, the ATJ Commission created a grant program to increase local partnerships, the Access to Justice Improvement Grant.

In addition to distributing grant funds, local court staff also participate in a statewide Court Navigator Network (Network) to receive training and share ideas about improving access to justice. This year, the Network met August 18-21 via Zoom for orientation and covered topics such as information vs. legal advice and implicit bias. The Network will continue to receive training throughout the year as well as have opportunities to collaborate and share resources with their counterparts across the state. If you are interested in joining the Network, please email Jill Roberts, Deputy Director, Access to Justice Division at jroberts@illinoiscourts.gov.

Although there are Network members from every Judicial Circuit, here is just the list of this year's newly awarded ATJ Improvement grant recipients and their grant projects:

- **First Judicial Circuit:**

- Brenda Sprague, Administrative Assistant to the Chief Judge, will serve all nine counties in the circuit to expand the Lawyer in the Library program to new locations and support the Illinois JusticeCorps fellow with circuit-wide mileage costs.
- Patti Clark, Director of Court Operations, Jackson County, will create posters and brochures for the public and have a public-use copy machine.
- Union County Circuit Clerk staff Terra Vancil will continue the Counsel in the Courthouse program and pay for copier, texting, supplies, and app maintenance.
- Williamson County Circuit Clerk Kristin Bayer will get a computer and printer, new signage, and have staff dedicated to assisting SRLs.

- **Second Judicial Circuit:**

- Erica Summers, Administrative Assistant, will maintain the Lawyer in the Library program to in four counties and expand to one new county.
- Lawrence County Circuit Clerk Cheryl Winkles will update the law library and SRL area of the courthouse.

- **Third Judicial Circuit:**

- Madison County Law Librarian Angela Wille will offer wireless internet, have staff for order of protection assistance, and expand services to Bond County.

- Madison County Circuit Clerk's Office employee Terianne Edwards will use funds towards the copy machine rental and continue previous resources (text message reminders and AdGator digital screens).
- **Fourth Judicial Circuit:**
 - Trial Court Administrator Jaime Warren will facilitate and support the Illinois JusticeCorps member's travel throughout the circuit.
 - Jasper County Circuit Clerk Jamie Blake will use the funds for translation devices, mobile app, daily docket, printer cartridges, paper, and maintenance of public use computers.
 - Marion County Circuit Clerk Tiffany Schicker will obtain tablets, courtroom chairs, cell phone lockers, and conduct outreach efforts.
 - Shelby County Circuit Clerk Peter Otis will use funds toward translation devices and a text message reminder program.
- **Fifth Judicial Circuit:** Cumberland County Circuit Clerk Rhonda Wilson will use funds for copy machine, case management system and imaging systems, translation devices, and copy paper.
- **Sixth Judicial Circuit:** Macon County Judicial Clerk Supervisor Jennifer Michel will oversee the grant to assist with staffing the law library.
- **Seventh Judicial Circuit:** Macoupin County Circuit Clerk Amy Ashby will use funds for public access Westlaw and a text message reminder program.
- **Eighth Judicial Circuit:** Court Administrator Molly Caughlan will create SRL computer stations in the Circuit.
- **Ninth Judicial Circuit:**
 - Hancock County Circuit Clerk Keara Weber will create a Lawyer in the Library program.
 - Trial Court Administrator Sandy Redington will update technology and furniture for the SRL space in Warren County.
- **Tenth Judicial Circuit:**
 - Marshall County Circuit Clerk Gina Noe will update technology equipment and furniture for the SRL space.
 - Peoria County CFO Jennifer Shadid will use funds to support a staff member in the Peoria Law Library and Self-Help Center.
 - Court Administrator Tricia Richmond will use funds to staff the library and self-help center in Tazewell County.
- **Eleventh Judicial Circuit:**
 - Library Staff Mary Sellmyer will fund a train the trainers program on the Safe Harbor Policy in McLean, Ford, and Livingston Counties.
 - Ford County Circuit Clerk Kasi Schwarz will obtain ipad communication devices and some supplies.
- **Twelfth Judicial Circuit:** Law Librarians Cheri Van Eck and Diane Brandolino will continue facilitating a Lawyer in the Library program.
- **Thirteenth Judicial Circuit:**

- Bureau County Circuit Clerk Dawn Reglin will start a Lawyer in the Library program which involves technology, paper, and advertisement.
- Assistant Trial Court Administrator Michalah Mertel will use funds to support a self-represented litigant help center with staff in LaSalle County.
- **Fourteenth Judicial Circuit:** Rock Island Circuit Clerk staff Kate Anderson will obtain new SRL seating and translation devices.
- **Fifteenth Judicial Circuit:**
 - Carroll County Circuit Clerk Patty Hiher will use funds for printing costs and e-citation and mobile app fees.
 - Lee County Circuit Clerk Amy Johnson will use funds to have designated SRL assistant staff, as well as pay for the copy machine and AdGator.
 - Stephenson County Circuit Clerk Shanelle Bardell will start a Lawyer in the Library program, maintain technology programs, and get new signage and supplies.
- **Sixteenth Judicial Circuit:** Law Librarian Halle Eichert will use funds to support the work of the Law Library.
- **Nineteenth Judicial Circuit:** SRL Coordinator Mireya Garcia will continue the online chat function on the court's website and obtain Gimlet service, supplies, translation devices, and mobile standing desks.
- **Twenty-First Judicial Circuit:** Administrative Assistant to the Chief Judge Heather Ruel will continue to provide Westlaw access for SRLs and get translation devices and supplies.
- **Twenty-Third Judicial Circuit:** The DeKalb County Circuit Clerk's Office will continue to have dedicated staff assist SRLs.
- **Twenty-Fourth Judicial Circuit:**
 - Monroe County Circuit Clerk's office staff member Sheila Jerls will get self-help center computers, furniture for the violence prevention area, and public access Westlaw.
 - Trial Court Administrator Jeff Twardowski and Perry County Circuit Clerk Tricia Kelly Chandler improve SRL computers and furniture, set up a kiosk and signage, and cover public access Westlaw.
 - Randolph County Circuit Clerk Julie Carnahan will update technology equipment and programs including public access Westlaw.
 - Trial Court Administrator Jeff Twardowski will update Washington County's SRL technology equipment.
- **Circuit Court of Cook County:** Cook County's Executive Law Librarian Joane Kiley will purchase public access IICLE publications to be available in all the district's law libraries.

Please join us in congratulating all ATJ Improvement grant recipients and encouraging their efforts to make Illinois courts better, easier, and more accessible for self-represented litigants. If you have any questions or are interested in joining the Network, please email Jill Roberts at jroberts@illinoiscourts.gov.