



**July 2022**

**Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice Strategic Plan Year 2 (July 1, 2021-June 30, 2022) in Review**

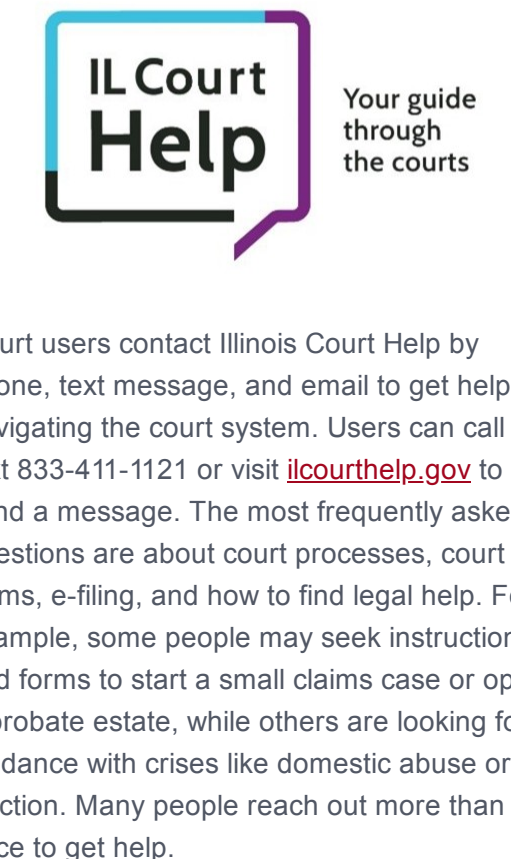
Ten years ago, the Illinois Supreme Court established the Commission on Access to Justice (ATJ Commission) with a charge to improve the civil court process for self-represented litigants, limited English proficient litigants, litigants with disabilities or who are otherwise vulnerable. Throughout this time, countless volunteers, dedicated commissioners, and ambitious staff have focused on creating services, policies, resources, programs, and rule changes in furtherance of this charge. However, the charge is far from accomplished and the ATJ Commission and the Access to Justice Division (ATJ Division) of the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts (AOIC) will continue its endeavors under the leadership and guidance of the Supreme Court.

In May 2020, the Illinois Supreme Court approved the [2020-2023 Strategic Plan](#) (Plan) for the ATJ Commission. The Plan details principles, initiatives, and activities for ensuring meaningful access to our courts. The plan is built on the existing work of the ATJ Commission and the statewide momentum towards enhancing access to justice and improving the court user experience. This newsletter will serve as a report evaluating and reflecting on the ATJ Commission's activities by initiative from July 1, 2021 through June 1, 2022 as required under Initiative #10 of the Plan.

**Initiative #1: Identify and promote strategies for removing and reducing barriers to accessing the court system. This includes procedural, financial, logistical, or geographic barriers.**

**Justice For All Grant:** In October of 2019, the ATJ Division and the ATJ Commission were awarded a grant from the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) as part of its Justice for All (JFA) project. To fulfill the grant, the ATJ Commission formed a Steering Committee and an Advisory Committee. The committees completed a report, titled *Access to and Meaningful Participation in Family Court*, which can be found online [here](#), that made several recommendations.

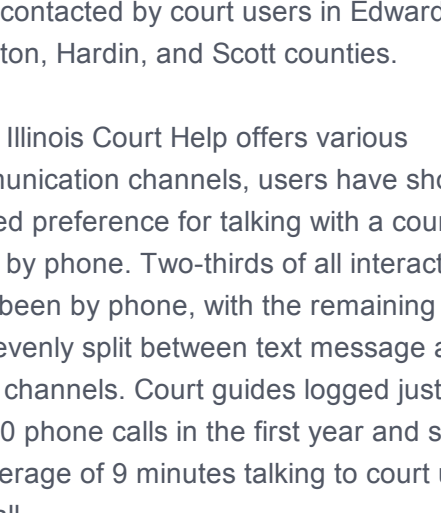
We took those recommendations and applied for an implementation grant with the NCSC's JFA project, which we received in April 2021. We explored barriers and ways to improve navigability of the court system for self-represented litigants facing child-related cases (Divorce, Parentage, and Guardianship). The original plan was to incorporate enhancements into an electronic system with a user-friendly interface to provide litigants with the necessary information, forms, and a better e-filing experience all in one place.



However, we learned through our research that the creation of such a system could not feasibly be done during a one-year project and refocused our energies on considering how to improve the content and design of the standardized court forms, develop new supplemental resources, standardize court procedures, and distribute crucial information in the community, not just within the walls of courthouses. We made several findings during this process and have a plan of action to complete these steps.

Please read the report, which can be found [here](#), to see what we learned and what we will be working on going forward including completing a redesign of statewide standardized forms, using community panels to user-test resources, and working closely with the e-filing manager to make improvements to the current interface while utilizing personal help assistance in the meantime.

**Illinois Court Help:** The groundbreaking and innovative [Illinois Court Help](#) service marked its one-year anniversary on May 17, 2022. This program assists court users with court processes, court forms, e-filing, and more. To celebrate this milestone, the Illinois Court Help team now shares data and impactful court user stories that demonstrate the importance of the service to people in all corners of the state.



Court users contact Illinois Court Help by phone, text message, and email to get help navigating the court system. Users can call or text 833-411-1121 or visit [icourthelp.gov](#) to send a message. The most frequently asked questions are about court processes, court forms, e-filing, and how to find legal help. For example, some people may seek instructions and forms to start a small claims case or open a probate estate, while others are looking for guidance with crises like domestic abuse or eviction. Many people reach out more than once to get help.

A recent court user who was filing for divorce in DuPage County as a self-represented person spoke with 4 different court guides at various stages of their case to get the required forms, learn about service of process, receive assistance with e-filing their court documents, and get help scheduling a court date. They commented that Illinois Court Help guides were *"Very helpful! Would have been very hard to navigate representing myself in my divorce without their help!"*.

By digging into the data we can see that in the first year of service, Illinois Court Help's trained court guides logged 13,696 interactions with 8,049 individual court users in 98 (of 102) Illinois counties. About one-third of all interactions were with people in Cook County, followed by St. Clair, Macon, DuPage, McLean, and Sangamon counties. The service has yet to be contacted by court users in Edwards, Hamilton, Hardin, and Scott counties.

While Illinois Court Help offers various communication channels, users have shown a marked preference for talking with a court guide by phone. Two-thirds of all interactions have been by phone, with the remaining one-third evenly split between text message and email channels. Court guides logged just shy of 20,000 phone calls in the first year and spent an average of 9 minutes talking to court users per call.

The vast majority (85%) of people who connected with Illinois Court Help in its first year were self-represented individuals. Family and friends of people with legal problems and members of the public made up another 8% of interactions, and nearly 2% were with lawyers and legal professionals.

The top issues that people sought help with are court processes, court forms, and filing or e-filing documents. 87% of all interactions related to civil court cases, while 4% related to criminal cases and 2% to traffic cases. Approximately 2% of interactions related to appeals. Of the civil cases, the most prevalent types of suits were small claims, divorce, family, eviction, and probate, in that order.

Feedback received from court users has been overwhelmingly positive, with over 92% of users who responded to a customer satisfaction survey rating their experience as Good. Court guides have been described by many users as patient, kind, knowledgeable, and a lifesaver!

Following the addition of new staff members, the service will expand the phone hotline hours to accommodate more callers. The team will also explore adding a chat message channel so that users can chat with a court guide in real time from our website, [icourthelp.gov](#). The outlook for Illinois Court Help's second year is continued growth and excellent service to more court users.

**Initiative #2: Expand and unify existing court navigator programs to help more court users access the court system and continue to improve the efficiency of the court system.**

**Court Navigator Network:** The Court Navigator Network (Network) is made up of Illinois JusticeCorps fellows, SRL Coordinator grant recipients, and other circuit clerks and court staff based in courthouses throughout the state. The Network members serve as a bridge linking their courthouses with others throughout the state to share ideas, develop new resources, and establish programs for better assisting self-represented litigants.

The Network continues to reach nearly all corners of Illinois. In the most recent program year, August 2021-July 2022, 161 questions were submitted from members in 22 of the 24 Judicial Circuits. We did specific outreach this year as to circuits with low to no participation, as well as to reviewing courts, in hopes of expanding the Network further. We will continue those efforts until the next program year begins on August 15.

The most recent program year marks 5 years of the ATJ Commission awarding SRL Coordinator grant funds. In those five years, the ATJ Commission has awarded over \$750,000 in grant funds to local jurisdictions who have helped nearly 250,000 self-represented litigants. Utilizing grant funds, Coordinators developed innovative projects, which ranged from repurposing courthouse space for help desks or Zooms stations and improving signage materials to creating early resolution programs that resolve divorce cases more efficiently.

This year, we received applications for SRL Coordinator grant funds covering 36 counties, awarding over \$300,000 in grant funds. To see more information about this year's grant recipients, see the [July Illinois Courts Connect newsletter](#).

**Initiative #3: Develop self-help services and resources that are useful and accessible to court users.**

**Remote Appearances:** The ATJ Commission worked with a former Illinois JusticeCorps Fellow to create short video tutorials on how to Zoom from an [iPhone](#), [android device](#), or [computer/laptop](#).



**Appellate Resource Program:** Self-represented litigants in the Illinois Appellate Court face many unique challenges and lack sufficient resources to assist them throughout the process. We have worked this year to broaden access points to information relating to appeals. We partnered with Illinois Legal Aid Online (ILAO) to transform content on the Illinois Courts [website](#) to their platform. ILAO now has a landing [page](#) for civil appeals, as well as a [toolbox](#) to assist appellants and appellees in understanding the necessary steps in an appeal.

We continued to work with the Public Interest Law Initiative (PILI) on [Illinois Free Legal Answers](#) for Civil Appeals, which is the virtual legal help desk launched in September 2020. From July 2021-June 2022, 161 questions were submitted by self-represented litigants, which were answered by over 30 volunteer attorneys. Litigants can converse with pro bono attorneys as often as necessary until the question is answered to their satisfaction. We also surveyed users and volunteer attorneys about their satisfaction with the help desk, as well as continued outreach to self-help centers, libraries, and clerks throughout the state.

Finally, we worked with numerous court stakeholders on judicial redistricting efforts to ensure information about the transition was available to all court patrons. We developed an [FAQ](#) and staffed committee work on redistricting, including changes to local appellate rules.

**Initiative #4: Identify, analyze, and implement technology-based programs and services to increase access to the courts.**

**Remote Court Appearances:** Technology played a pivotal and important role during the COVID-19 pandemic by providing a second "doorway" to access the courts. And as courthouses reopen, many courts continue to see the immense value and benefit of remote court appearances, particularly for people who have difficulty traveling, taking time off work, or finding childcare options. Judges, attorneys, self-represented litigants, and members of the public believe that remote court appearances should have a permanent place in our court system.

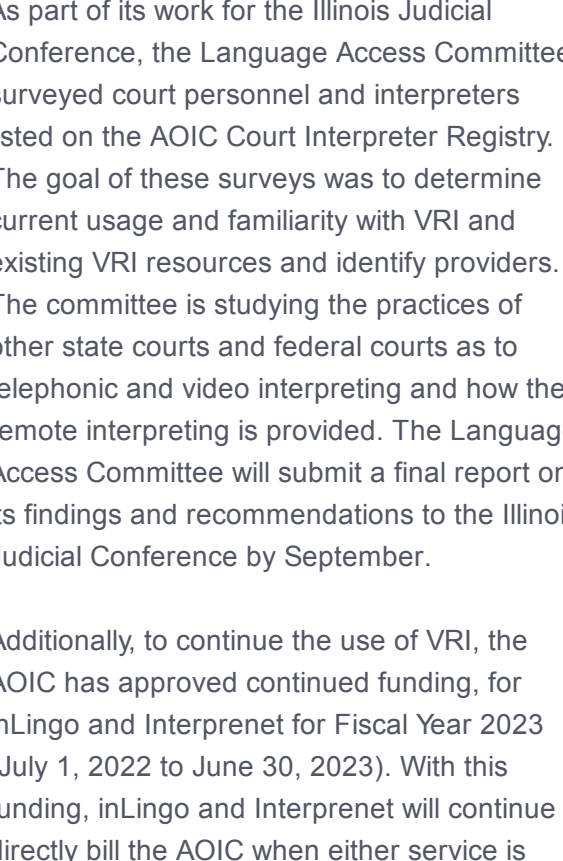
Accordingly, in order to promote remote appearances, the ATJ Commission collaborated with the Illinois Judicial College's Committee on Judicial Education and supported three courses at the biennial Education Conference.

Moreover, the ATJ Commission is pleased to report that 12-months into a First Judicial Circuit Remote Appearance Pilot Program (a partnership between the courts throughout the circuit and Land of Lincoln Legal Aid to allow them to serve more low-income clients through Zoom court in a geographically dispersed region), preliminary data shows that remote appearances can considerably increase the capacity of legal aid lawyers. Since the launch of the program on July 1, 2021, Land of Lincoln Legal Aid lawyers have been able to appear remotely for court proceedings 226 times in the First Circuit. This correlates to a savings of 287 attorneys' hours and over \$5,600 in travel reimbursements. These early findings are encouraging and demonstrate the potential value of replicating this pilot in other geographically dispersed and under-resourced areas of the state.

**Electronic filing (e-filing):** E-filing is mandatory for all civil court users, including self-represented individuals and permits court users to submit their court documents from a location of their choosing. However, it can be a very complicated and lawyer-centered process. With support from the AOIC and the Justice For All Grant, the ATJ Commission worked with nationally recognized consultant, Abhijeet Chavan, to research and systematically catalogue the e-filing experience for self-represented filers. The new report, titled [Improving the E-Filing Experience for Self-Represented Litigants in Illinois](#), is the result of Mr. Chavan's interviews with court navigators, circuit clerks, and legal technology vendors as well as his review of surveys completed by actual self-represented filers.

**Initiative #4 cont.**

Mr. Chavan's research revealed not only challenges with the current e-filing process itself but also challenges further upstream in a self-represented user's journey caused by the inefficient and disorganized delivery of information and resources to the litigant. It also shed light on the unrealistic burdens placed on SRL e-filers on to understand and recognize legal jargon and hyperlocal court business processes, which to the filers seemed to be information held solely by judges, clerks, and lawyers. The research also uncovered more worrisome effects—a bad user experience with e-filing could undermine trust and confidence in the justice system.



The ATJ Commission looks forward to using Mr. Chavan's recommendations to implement changes not only to e-filing but general court system navigation.

**Video Remote Interpreting:** Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) allows essential access to court interpreters, particularly when a court is faced with a last-minute request for an interpreter or the need for an interpreter in a variant language. The pandemic highlighted the significance of VRI even more. The Illinois Judicial Conference asked the Language Access Committee of the ATJ Commission to help expand VRI across the state.

As part of its work for the Illinois Judicial Conference, the Language Access Committee surveyed court personnel and interpreters listed on the AOIC Court Interpreter Registry. The goal of these surveys was to determine current usage and familiarity with VRI and existing VRI resources and identify providers. The committee is studying the practices of other state courts and federal courts as to telephonic and video interpreting and how the remote interpreting is provided. The Language Access Committee will submit a final report on its findings and recommendations to the Illinois Judicial Conference by September.

Additionally, to continue the use of VRI, the AOIC has approved continued funding, for InLingo and Interpret for Fiscal Year 2023 (July 1, 2022 to June 30, 2023). With this funding, InLingo and Interpret will continue to directly bill the AOIC when either service is used. Thus far, over 30 providers have taken advantage of these service providers. No contract is necessary to use these services. However, InLingo does require a PIN prior to use. This PIN can be received via email after a request for services is made to the service providers. For questions directed to InLingo, please contact Dulce Gonzalez, [d.gonzalez@inlingo.com](mailto:d.gonzalez@inlingo.com), and for Interpret, Eliza Jackson, [eliza@interpret.net](mailto:eliza@interpret.net).

**Initiative #5: Foster community trust and engagement by cultivating communication and coordination between the courts, non-traditional court stakeholders, justice partners, and the public.**

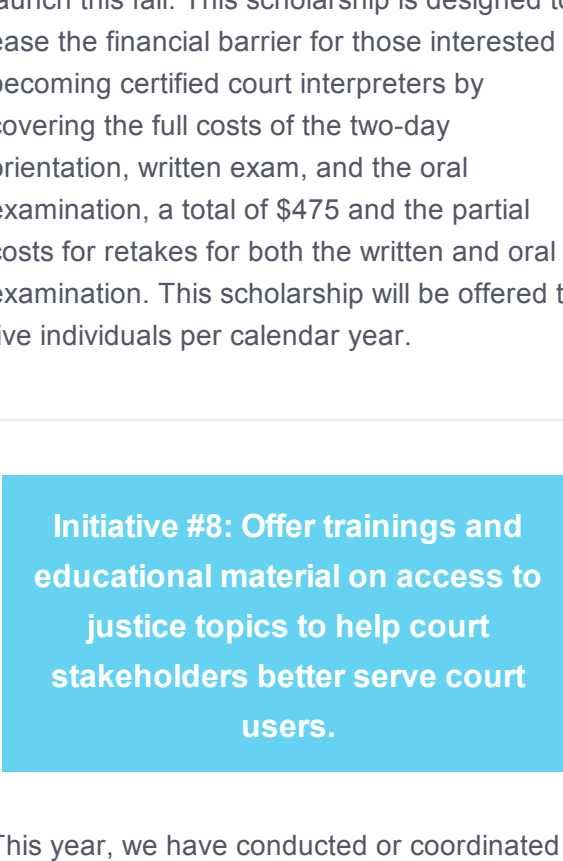
**Community Trust Committee:** The pandemic put a hold on most of the Community Trust Committee's planned programming, including a professionalism and civility training with the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism at the Cook County Sixth District Marquette courthouse and replicating town halls in Lee County. Further, the past few years revealed a concerning disconnect between the courts and the communities they serve.

Therefore, we used this pause to re-envision the Community Trust Committee, and with the Supreme Court's approval, the ATJ Commission solicited applications to broaden the membership of the Community Trust Committee. With an eye towards recruiting more diverse individuals from a variety of community organizations, the Supreme Court approved a new Community Trust Committee comprised of fourteen civil leaders coming from faith-based organizations, public libraries, and social service providers. The newly constituted Community Trust Committee is co-chaired by Commissioners Carolyn Clift and the Honorable Jorge L. Ortiz and includes Deanie Brown, Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer of the AOIC.

The Community Trust Committee submitted a proposal to the ATJ Commission (which has been approved to be sent to the Supreme Court) to develop a Community Justice Navigator Program (a recommendation from in the [Chicago Bar Association/Chicago Bar Foundation Task Force on the Sustainable Practice of Law and Innovation Report](#)) and reengaging in the programming that was put on hold due to the pandemic.

**Initiative #6: Promote the use of standardized, plain-language legal forms statewide and continue to develop, automate, and translate forms for areas of law frequently encountered by court users.**

**The Forms Project:** As a result of amendments to Rule 10-101 effective September 1, 2021, the period from July 1 through September was an extremely busy one for the Forms Project. Sixty-four individual forms across thirteen form suites were edited, updated, and published to provide the most up to date copies for county Circuit Clerks throughout the state to adopt in compliance with the new requirements under 10-101. This was a Herculean effort by staff and committee volunteers especially. We could not have done this amount of work without them! The Forms Committee approved one new suite to be published this program year, Cannabis Expungement.



The Forms Project, in October 2021, engaged a consultant to redesign the look of the forms. Over the past decade, the team has done a great job of identifying, developing, and publishing commonly needed forms for SRLs, but it was now a good time to begin a reassessment of the usability and efficacy of the forms and accompanying feedback from numerous court stakeholders over the years, it was clear that we should engage in a graphic redesign of our forms and instructional materials with the assistance of an expert.

After putting out a request for proposals and interviewing several design firms we hired Briefly, Inc., a design firm specializing in legal content, to develop a creative and engaging new form style as well as accompanying resources. In concert with Briefly, staff developed a plan to gather formal feedback from various groups of court stakeholders and end users to create a graphic design and resource structure that would be greatly improved in its usability, usefulness, and efficacy. We are scheduled to release the newly designed Divorce form set in early 2023.

We also engaged a second consultant, Bold Duck Studio, LLC, to study the "business process" for the creation of the forms and to assist us in making the process more efficient and effective, reducing the time it takes to get a form from "suggested" to published, and increasing the overall consistency and quality of the forms as well.

Bold Duck Studio, LLC's work was to include help in outlining the existing processes, assess for friction points, and develop workable solutions that would allow the Forms Committee and the ATJ Commission to meet the goals of Initiative #6. To date, the Business Process Analysis (BPA) has generated an excellent digital map of the full form development process to provide a "10,000-foot view" of the current state and is now shifting into projections of where the project should ideally adapt to achieve its goals of more efficiency and effectiveness.

Finally, in addition to these ongoing projects, members of the Forms Committee and a Forms Subcommittee have continued to fulfill the goals of the Justice For All Advisory Committee by developing a number of new form suites: Petition for Parentage, Allocation of Parental Responsibility, and Child Support and Minor Guardianship. Form subcommittee members are also working on new or revised forms for Motion to Seal an Eviction Order, Order of Protection suite, and Petition for Leave to Appeal & Notice of Election.

As always, the statewide standardized forms can be found at [illinoiscourts.gov/documents-and-forms/approved-forms](#).

**Initiative #7: Promote language access resources and language assistance services by recruiting and training spoken and sign language interpreters to achieve court certification, encouraging judges and court personnel to provide appropriate language assistance both inside and outside of the courtrooms, and building awareness in limited English proficient communities about language access available in the courts.**

**Language Access Program:** In April and June, the Judicial Education Conference offered a session called, "How to Overcome Language Barriers Inside and Outside the Courtroom" and was open to judges, court personnel and justice partners. The faculty included Judge Sandra Parga and Nicole Okerblad and Alex Gallata, both Certified Court Interpreters in Illinois. The course addressed best practices when working with an interpreter and identifying language access tools available in Illinois such as bench cards and I-speak cards to help identify the language spoken by an LEP.

To continue to grow the AOIC Court Interpreter Registry, the AOIC held a two-day court interpreter orientation in October and another in April with 36 potential interpreters. The orientation is the first required step toward becoming a certified court interpreter. We also conducted two rounds of written exams and 2 rounds of oral exams with Zoom session FAQs beforehand which offered an overview of the exams and how to answer the questions.

Additionally, the AOIC continues to receive reciprocity applications and requests to be listed on the Illinois registry from out of state certified interpreters. VRI has allowed LEP individuals access to interpreter in variant languages.

In all, we added approximately 20 interpreters to the registry this program year for 12 different languages: Spanish, Somali, Russian, Mongolian, Albanian, Romanian, Greek, Vietnamese, Yoruba, Pidgin, Mandarin, and Portuguese.

To assist in the recruitment of court interpreters, from different socioeconomic backgrounds, the ATJ Commission approved the creation of a scholarship this year which will launch this fall. This scholarship is designed to ease the financial barrier for those interested in becoming certified court interpreters by covering the full costs of the two-day orientation, written exam, and the oral examination, a total of \$475 and the partial costs for retakes for both the written and oral examination. This scholarship will be offered to five individuals per calendar year.

**Initiative #8: Offer trainings and educational material on access to justice topics to help court stakeholders better serve court users.**

This year, we have conducted or coordinated nearly 60 training sessions for various audiences including judges, judicial branch staff, trial court administrators, circuit clerks, pro bono lawyers, court interpreters, the Court Navigator Network, public libraries, and social service agencies. These sessions have been attended by over 700 people.

Training topics included interpreter orientation and skill building, legal information vs. legal advice (using the Safe Harbor Policy), e-filing, forms, working SRLs, and Illinois Court Help. Presentations took place through a mix of virtual and in-person forums.

We were able to revive the SRL Simulation "Navigating Legal Issues Alone" in-person at the Judicial Education Conference where it, again, was a big hit. We decided to postpone the Law Student Leaders Access to Justice Summit until 2023.

**Initiative #9: Identify, develop, and promote court policies and rules that promote legal representation, including full and limited-scope representation, in partnership with court stakeholders, bar associations, community groups, and justice partners.**

With pressing priorities elsewhere, no project was undertaken this year under initiative 9.

**Staffing Updates:** The Commission is staffed by 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 two members: **Lekisha Gunn**, who worked on Language Access, Community Trust, and Disability Access projects; and **Israel Putnam**, who worked on position standards and forms. The hiring process to replace those two Senior Program Manager positions is underway and we hope to have new staff starting in early September. We will also have additional staff starting in August as we expand the Illinois Court Help hotline to bring on four new Court Guides.

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

**Lillie Schneider** is the new Forms Program Coordinator. She came to us from One Million Degrees where she managed volunteer mentors. Prior to that position Lillie was at Cabrini Green Legal Aid where she was the Criminal Records Help Desk Coordinator.

**Brittany Underwood** is one of the Court Guides for Illinois Court Help. She came to us from the Illinois JusticeCorps program where she served as a fellow in Champaign County.

**Nina Wilson** is also one of the Court Guides for Illinois Court Help. She came to us from the Illinois JusticeCorps program where she served as a fellow in McHenry County.

The Commission is grateful to its volunteers and staff for their tremendous effort over this last year. Without them, pushing forward on these key initiatives would have been impossible.

**The Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice**

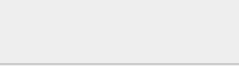
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  - Hon. Mary K. Rochford, Chair
  - Carolyn H. Clift
  - Linda T. Coberly
  - Hon. Thomas M. Harris, Jr.
  - Hon. Leonard Murray
  - Jennifer T. Nijman
  - Hon. Jorge Ortiz
  - Hon. Daniel J. Pierce
  - Wendy Vaughn
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**The Access to Justice Division at the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts**

- Staff:*
- Alison D. Spinner, Director
  - Jessica Acosta, Court Guide
  - Noor Alawadwa, Sr. Program Manager
  - Lisa Colpoys, Supervising Sr. Program Manager
  - Helen Doig, Court Guide
  - Kathryn Hensley, Supervising Sr. Program Manager
  - Jill Roberts, Deputy Director
  - Lillie Schneider, Program Coordinator
  - Sarah Song, Supervising Sr. Program Manager
  - Brittany Underwood, Court Guide
  - Nina Wilson, Court Guide

**For more information about the ATJ Commission's work, please contact Alison Spinner at [aspinner@illinoiscourts.gov](mailto:aspinner@illinoiscourts.gov)**

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