



Supreme Court of Illinois

February 23, 2024

FIRST JUDICIAL CIRCUIT REMOTE APPEARANCE PROJECT REPORT HIGHLIGHTS GREAT SAVINGS FOR RURAL COURT USERS

The Illinois Supreme Court’s Commission on Access to Justice (ATJ Commission), partnering with the First Judicial Circuit of Illinois and Land of Lincoln Legal Aid, Inc., announced the release of its final report on its two-year pilot program on remote court appearances in the southernmost counties of Illinois.

“The rights guaranteed to our citizenry are only as good as the ability to exercise and enforce those rights. Such was the peril faced by courts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of quick-thinking, well-intentioned partners, the First Judicial Circuit Remote Appearance Pilot Project was born to help ensure access to justice for the people of the First Circuit,” said Saline County Associate Judge Todd Lambert. “The project has allowed consistent, uninterrupted service by the judiciary and in turn has provided a much needed gateway for individual litigants to appear for cases remotely during a very difficult, scary time for our country and state. The project has been a catalyst for new, inventive thinking concerning court appearances and in turn has allowed substantial savings to litigants and attorneys alike who may appear remotely rather than travel to the various courthouses of our circuit. Beneficiaries of the project abound, but none are prouder than those of us on the bench who were able then, and continue to be able today, to reach litigants who wish to exercise the rights we as Americans hold so dear.”

The full report is available [here](#). The pilot program ran from July 2021 to June 2023.

Land of Lincoln, a Legal Services Corporation funded provider of free civil legal services to low-income and senior residents of central and southern Illinois, and the First Judicial Circuit both agreed to work on this pilot program. Land of Lincoln attorneys would appear remotely before First Judicial Circuit judges. The attorneys and judges in these cases would then provide important data and information on these appearances to the ATJ Commission, which served to help the Commission towards its goal of measuring the impact remote court proceedings could have on reducing the barriers rural communities experience in accessing justice.

“Allowing our clientele to access the courts through Zoom has been a game changer,” said Diane M. Goffinet, Managing Attorney for Land of Lincoln in Carbondale. “Many of our clients have jobs that do not allow for time off to attend court and such missed work time (even if a half day) counts against them and their ability to remain employed. Being able to appear via Zoom can be done on a break which allows them to access court while maintaining their employment, which is a win-win for everyone involved.”

The First Judicial Circuit is comprised of nine rural counties (Alexander, Jackson, Johnson, Massac, Pope, Pulaski, Saline, Union, and Williamson) and spans over 3,100 square miles of southern Illinois. During the pilot program, most case management and status proceedings were handled remotely, while motions were evenly split between remote and in-person proceedings. Trials were almost always in-person.

Over the course of the pilot program, Land of Lincoln lawyers appeared remotely for 467 proceedings in the First Judicial Circuit, saving the agency 633.5 hours of time spent traveling to various courthouses and 18,432 miles of driving, resulting in cost savings of \$11,626.83.

The ATJ Commission, established in 2012 by the Illinois Supreme Court, is charged with promoting, facilitating and enhancing equal access to justice with an emphasis on access to the Illinois civil courts and administrative agencies for all people.

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