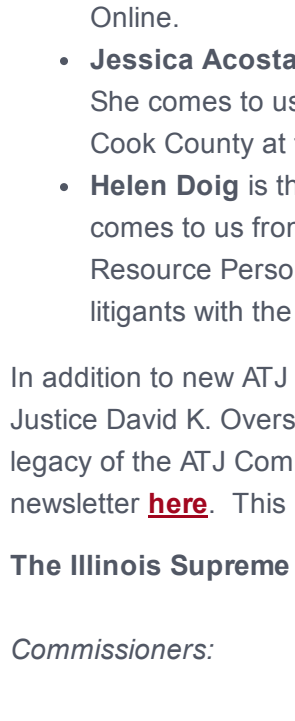


June 2021

Strategic Plan Year 1 (July 1, 2020-June 30, 2021) in Review

In May 2020, the Illinois Supreme Court approved the [2020-2023 Strategic Plan](#) (Plan) for the Commission on Access to Justice (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. The ATJ Commission began its work under the new plan on June 1, 2020. This newsletter will serve as a report evaluating and reflecting on the activities from June 1, 2020 through June 1, 2021 as required under Initiative #10 of the Plan.



First, we would like to remind you of previous staffing changes and inform you about newly hired staff. As we mentioned in the November 2020 newsletter, this program year, we have had to say goodbye to two members of the Access to Justice Division (ATJ Division) of the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts (AOIC): Sophia Akbar, who created an orientation, examination, and registration system for court interpreters; and Kathleen Callahan, who worked on statewide standardized forms and oversaw publication of the Eviction, Small Claims, and Special Process Server forms suites. We also informed you about two new members of our team: Sarah Song and Lekisha Gunn. Sarah focuses

on technology related initiatives, such as e-filing, remote appearances, and online dispute resolution. Lekisha oversees the language access program and community trust work while also developing a program responsive to the needs of court users with disabilities.

Since that staffing update, we have had four more employees join the ATJ Division:

- **Israel Putnam** is the new Senior Program Manager for Forms. He comes to us from the Center for Conflict Resolution, where he served as Programs Manager and Supervisor of Onboarding New Volunteers in high volume courtrooms at the Daley Center.
- **Lisa Colpoys** has taken on the inaugural position of Supervising Senior Program Manager for Illinois Courts Help, the statewide legal information and court process hotline. She comes to us with a history of important legal aid work. Among other roles, Lisa previously served as Director of Legal Services for CARPLS and Executive Director of Illinois Legal Aid Online.
- **Jessica Acosta** is one of the Illinois Court Help guides answering calls on the new hotline. She comes to us from the Illinois JusticeCorps program where she served as a fellow in Cook County at the Daley Center.
- **Helen Doig** is the other Illinois Court Help guides answering calls on the new hotline. She comes to us from the 15th Judicial Circuit where she was the Self-Represented Litigant Resource Person creating and disseminating resources and helping self-represented litigants with the court process in five counties.

In addition to new ATJ Division staff, the ATJ Commission also has a new Supreme Court liaison, Justice David K. Overstreet. While we welcome Justice Overstreet, we also remember the lasting legacy of the ATJ Commission's creator, Justice Thomas L. Kilbride. You can read our tribute newsletter [here](#). This is the current list of Commissioners and Staff:

The Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice

Commissioners:

Hon. David K. Overstreet, Sup. Ct. Liaison
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
Andrew M. Weaver
Tammy R. Weikert

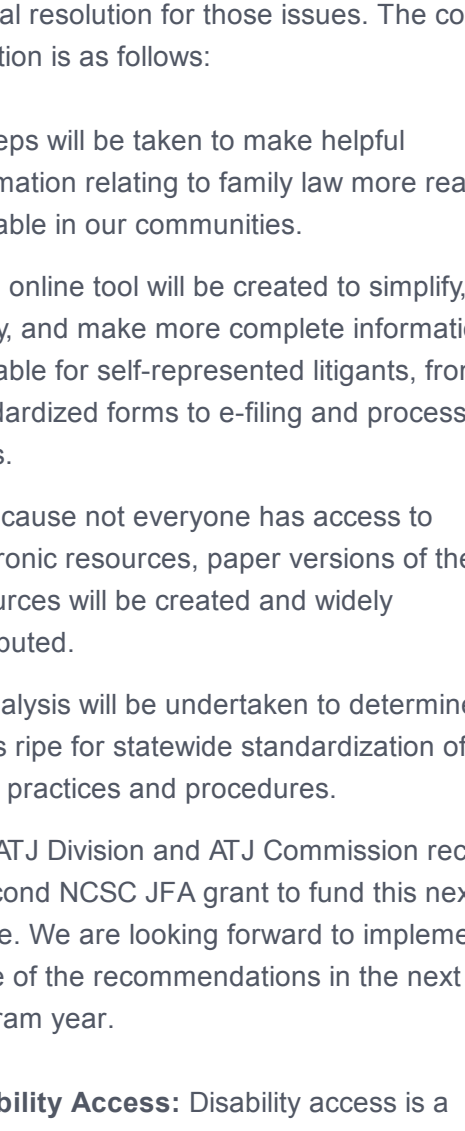
The Access to Justice Division at the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts

Staff:

Alison D. Spanner, Assistant Director
Jessica Acosta
Lisa Colpoys
Helen Doig
Noor Alawawda
Lekisha Gunn
Kathryn Hensley
Israel Putnam
Jill Roberts
Sarah Song
Hayley Yussman

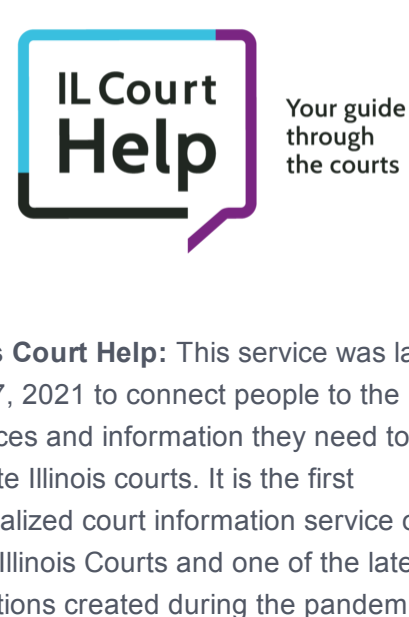
Initiative #1: Identify and promote strategies for removing and reducing barriers to accessing the court system. This includes procedural, financial, logistical, or geographic barriers.

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 final report, titled Access to and Meaningful Participation in Family Court, which can be found online [here](#).



The grant project engaged approximately 230 people. Based on their input, the Advisory Committee identified 20 recommendations for change in family law cases involving children. Some of the recommendations will be addressed in the future by the ATJ Commission. However, some of the recommendations for changes call for more immediate action. For the next phase of the project, the ATJ Division and ATJ Commission will seek to expand self-represented parents' and guardians' understanding of family court practices and policies related to children's issues, and to assist them to better prepare for court proceedings should they seek judicial resolution for those issues. The course of action is as follows:

1. Steps will be taken to make helpful information relating to family law more readily available in our communities.
 2. An online tool will be created to simplify, clarify, and make more complete information available for self-represented litigants, from standardized forms to e-filing and process maps.
 3. Because not everyone has access to electronic resources, paper versions of the resources will be created and widely distributed.
 4. Analysis will be undertaken to determine areas ripe for statewide standardization of court practices and procedures.
- The ATJ Division and ATJ Commission received a second NCSC JFA grant to fund this next phase. We are looking forward to implementing some of the recommendations in the next program year.
- Disability Access:** Disability access is a relatively new pillar of the ATJ Division and intersects with our goals of increasing access to the court system for underserved populations. Many self-represented litigants are without the necessary resources due to longstanding discriminatory practices and economic hardships. They also battle physical limitations, as well as complex trauma and mental health issues. The ATJ Division will focus on increasing awareness of accommodation request procedures, as well as assisting Court Disability Coordinators (CDCs).
- Each county in the state of Illinois has a CDC who serves as the designated point-of-contact for issues related to the American with Disabilities Act (ADA). A recent survey of the CDCs revealed a strong need for additional resources and increased visibility of the CDCs for court patrons. One of the major issues is a lack of awareness around requesting accommodations. Accommodations can be requested orally or in writing by the individual in need.
- So far, the ATJ Division has worked with the Court Services Division to learn about the current process for assisting CDCs with accommodation requests, and with the Attorney General's Disability Rights Bureau to schedule trainings for the CDCs in the Fall. We hope in the next year to create a Disability Access Committee of the ATJ Commission to work on more issues relating to court patrons with disabilities.



Illinois Court Help: This service was launched May 17, 2021 to connect people to the resources and information they need to navigate Illinois courts. It is the first personalized court information service offered by the Illinois Courts and one of the latest innovations created during the pandemic to make legal information more accessible.

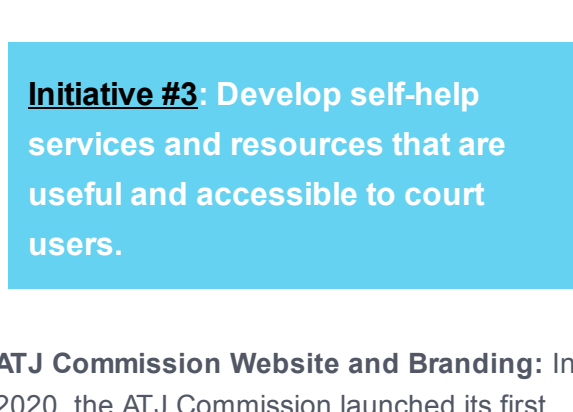
People can call or text 833-411-1121 to connect with a trained court guide who can provide up-to-date Illinois court information and answers to specific questions about the court process. Illinois Court Help guides will also connect people to the resources they need to go to court, from filing forms to accessing legal aid. Initial hours of operation are 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. Monday through Friday, with expanded hours to come over the next few months.

Illinois Court Help guides provide information such as step-by-step instructions on how to file court documents and explain how to appear in court on Zoom. Users will also be able to access one set of easy-to-read forms that can be used in any Illinois court. Additionally, lawyers who practice in multiple Illinois counties can find courthouse information. The new service will not provide legal advice but allows for guides to connect people to legal aid and other community services.

More information on Illinois Court Help can be found by going to [ilcourthelp.gov](#).

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.

To fulfill a major goal of the Illinois Judicial Conference's strategic agenda and the ATJ Commission's Strategic Plan, we created the Court Navigator Network (Network) which includes members of Illinois JusticeCorps and the Self-Represented Litigant Coordinators. The Network launched in August 2020 with at least one named representative from each of the 24 Judicial Circuits and active participation from 22 of the circuits. This Network of clerks and court staff based in courthouses throughout the state of Illinois serves as a bridge to develop new resources and establish programs for assisting self-represented litigants, particularly in light of the realities of COVID-19.

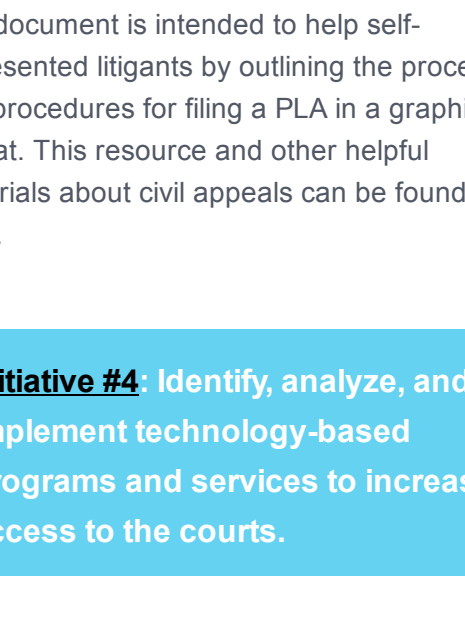


Click [here](#) to read about all the Network participants, including JusticeCorps fellows and Self-Represented Coordinator grant recipients. In August 2020, the Network met via Zoom for orientation which covered topics such as information vs. legal advice, implicit bias, and surviving and thriving during crisis. The Network continued to receive training throughout the year and had opportunities to collaborate and share resources with their cohorts across the state about helping self-represented litigants.

The **Requests for Proposals** is currently posted for participants for the next grant year of August 1, 2021 through July 31, 2022. Applications for grant funds and notifications of interest in the Network are due on June 30, 2021. For the next program year, we hope to increase active participation in the Network, as well as add members from the Appellate Courts.

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

ATJ Commission Website and Branding: In 2020, the ATJ Commission launched its first website, [atjil.org](#), and a new brand. This is a first step in a targeted effort to ensure our resources reach those who most need them: court users and court stakeholders. Each group will find tailored resources throughout the website.



Please add [atjil.org](#) to your lists of resources geared towards self-represented litigants. Feel free to share, repost, and be in touch with any questions. We are always looking to improve and seek your feedback. At the present moment, many links on the site will bring you back to content on the Illinois Courts website, but expect more changes and modifications as our roll-out continues.

Check out the [new website](#) and look for materials with our logo!

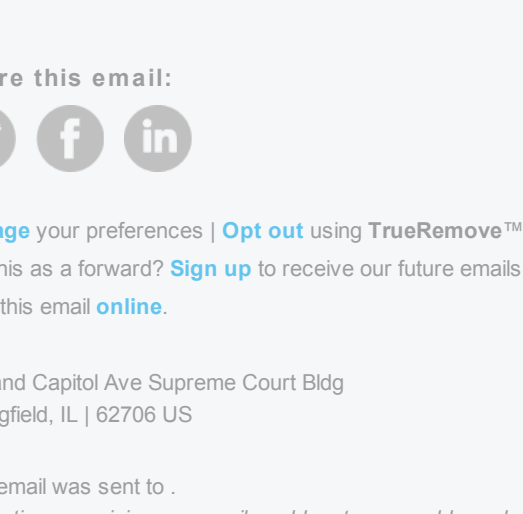
Appellate Program:

Self-represented litigants in the Illinois Appellate Court face many unique challenges and lack sufficient resources to assist them through the process. The ATJ Commission, the AOIC, and the Public Interest Law Initiative (PILI) partnered to address this unmet need by launching a virtual legal clinic model in September 2020 – Illinois Free Legal Answers for Civil Appeals. To date, 73 questions have been submitted by self-represented litigants, which were answered by 22 volunteer attorneys. Litigants can converse with pro bono attorneys as often as necessary until the question is answered to their satisfaction. Of note, data for this period also includes 206 total replies from attorneys and 186 additional replies from self-represented litigants. You can read more about the program [here](#).

The ATJ Division also collaborated with the Clerk of the Supreme Court to develop a one-page **overview** for filing a Petition for Leave to Appeal (PLA) with the Illinois Supreme Court. The document is intended to help self-represented litigants by outlining the processes and procedures for filing a PLA in a graphical format. This resource and other helpful materials about civil appeals can be found [here](#).

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

This past year has reminded us of the importance of technology as our courts efficiently and effectively leverage it to increase access during a global public health crisis. **Remote court appearances** are an important example of this technological leverage. Since the Supreme Court adopted the proposed rule changes and policy submitted by the ATJ Commission's Remote Appearance Committee, courts relied almost exclusively on remote appearance technology to remain open. From remote jury selection to Zoom kiosks in courthouses, the courts and the public alike have adjusted swiftly and effectively to this new technology. Early reports indicate that many court participants never want to go back to costly and inefficient in-person appearances, and that court accessibility is improving, particularly for those litigants historically shut out of court processes.



The ATJ Commission has continued to promote and support remote appearances by [distributing guidance, FAQs, and instructional materials](#). The ATJ Commission also collaborated with the Illinois Judicial College's Committee on Judicial Education to present a webinar titled Remote Appearances with Self-Represented Litigants. There were nearly 150 attendees, and several followed up with requests for a second training. The ATJ Division has also presented on the expansion of remote appearances to a variety of groups, including public librarians and the Cook County Pro Se Advisory Committee.

Initiative #4 continued

To more closely study the impact of remote appearances on low-income and rural communities, the ATJ Commission is working with the First Judicial Circuit and Land of Lincoln Legal Aid to launch a remote appearance pilot program that aims to permit Land of Lincoln attorneys to appear remotely and provide free legal services to more low-income residents in this rural and geographically dispersed Circuit. The pilot program expects to go live as soon as the remote appearance technology is installed. The ATJ Commission will collect both qualitative and quantitative data throughout the pilot program with the hopes of learning more about the benefits of remote appearances and, if appropriate, replicating the pilot in other areas of the state.

Electronic filing (efiling) played a significant role this past year. However, although efiling has been mandatory since 2018, the pandemic revealed that efiling is still tremendously confusing and difficult for many users, particularly self-represented litigants. Court navigators, help desks staff, and electronic filing service providers have reported that the number and length of support calls have increased significantly during the pandemic. This increase is likely attributed to the loss of in-person support for efiling at the court houses and clerks' offices. As a result, the ATJ Commission proposed an additional efiling exemption for those self-represented litigants who attempted to efile but could not complete the process due to a lack of technical support. The Supreme Court adopted this exemption in August of 2020 by amending Supreme Court **Rule 9**.

However, the new exemption does not solve the underlying problem with efiling and how unfriendly it is to self-represented litigants. Therefore, the ATJ Division, along with long-time partners at Illinois Legal Aid Online and the Lawyers' Trust Fund, began to explore more systemic opportunities to provide a self-represented litigant centered efiling experience. This ongoing work dovetailed with the JFA Grant recommendations described above, and the ATJ Commission will be considering the development of a self-represented litigant-centered efiling tool for family cases. We have retained a well-respected technology consultant to assist us in this plan to create a new efiling experience and look forward to sharing our progress.

Lastly, **online dispute resolution (ODR)** is another technology-based tool that courts are utilizing to increase access and meet public demands for more remote court services. The ATJ Commission's inaugural ODR grant program kicked off in July 2020. As a result, four jurisdictions are currently planning and/or developing ODR programs in their courthouses. The grantees have been engaging stakeholders, researching vendors, and interviewing end users to design ODR programs that will be practical and user friendly. The ATJ Division is also working with other divisions of the AOIC to establish a method for collecting and analyzing ODR data in order to improve and expand ODR programs in the state. The ATJ Commission wishes to continue this innovative work. The **Request for Proposals** for ODR grant funds is currently posted and the application deadline is June 30, 2021.

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

In 2019, the Community Trust Committee chose Lee County as the location to replicate the town halls that it held in south suburban Cook County. The committee hoped that the town hall meetings in a rural area of the state would provide an opportunity to hear from the community about their perceptions of the court system. An initial organizational meeting was held in Lee County in February 2020. However due to the pandemic, our court partners in Lee County later requested that we wait until the next program year to proceed with our plans.

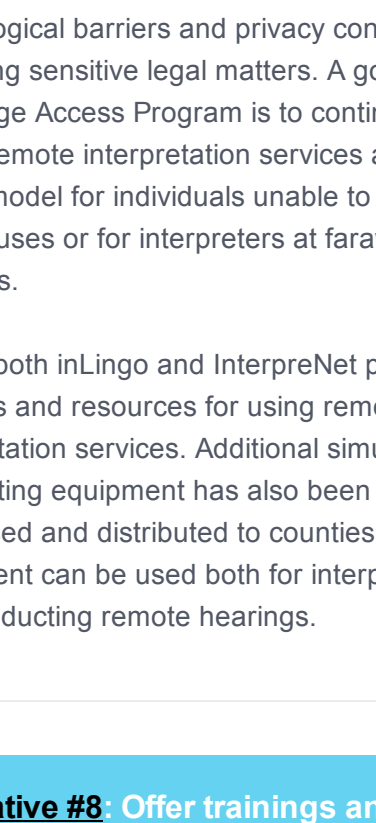
Although the pandemic has delayed our timeline, the Community Trust Committee will continue the work started in the South Suburbs of Cook County and hopes to schedule a professionalism and civility training in collaboration with the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism at the Sixth District courthouse. Moreover, as the pandemic abates, it will begin working with Lee County to convene townhalls.

Additionally, the Community Trust Committee has provided training on information vs. legal advice, e-filing, remote appearances, IL Court Help and more to the Effingham Public Library, Illinois Library Association, and the Illinois Heartland Library Association.

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.

On March 26, 2021, the Supreme Court, at the request of the Illinois Judicial Conference and the ATJ Commission, amended Rule 10-101 effective September 1, 2021. The Rule mandates the development and acceptance of standardized court forms to enhance access to justice throughout Illinois. The most significant change to **Rule 10-101** is the new requirement that all courts promote and encourage the use of approved standardized forms. And the amendments prohibit the maintenance, creation, or dissemination of alternate court forms for legal remedies covered by existing standardized forms.

The amendments will offer a significant boost for access to and usage of the plain language legal documents that have been steadily assisting self-represented litigants in pursuing efficient legal remedies for the past decade.



Since the amendments were announced, ATJ Division staff have been supporting the courts in preparing for the transition through the creation of written materials, in-person and remote presentations at zone meetings throughout the state, and the development of both digital and printed promotional materials.

- Additionally, Forms Committee and Subcommittee members fulfilled the Illinois Judicial Conference's agenda item requiring the development and publishing of certain form suites. Since July 1, 2020, the Forms Committee approved and published the following forms suites:
- Agreed Orders in Evictions Case
 - Eviction Complaint suit
 - Revisions to the Eviction Order
 - Small Claims Complaint
 - Civil Asset Forfeiture suite including a *Hardship Motion and Answer to Complaint for Forfeiture*
 - Motion to Appoint Special Process Server suite
 - Revisions to the Circuit Court, Appellate Court, and Supreme Court *Certification for Exemption from E-Filing form* consistent with amended Illinois Supreme Court Rule 9.

The Forms Committee also anticipates publishing several additional forms in the coming months, some for the first time, and others amended as a result of annual reviews. These include:

- Agreed Orders in Evictions Case
- Eviction Complaint suit
- Revisions to the Eviction Order

All these forms, and particularly the agreed orders in eviction cases and the cannabis expungement suite, will have a significant impact on the public's ability to advocate for themselves in these types of proceedings. Given the imminent deluge of eviction actions and the ongoing need for public policy support around the relatively new changes in cannabis law, we are proud to contribute to the accessibility and transparency of the state's legal remedies. All forms can be found [here](#).

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 assistance available in the courts.

Language access remains a top priority for the Illinois Supreme Court. During the pandemic, we continued to address the language access needs of court patrons and self-represented litigants. One of our main goals is to increase the number of certified interpreters through test preparation sessions and by seeking partnerships through organizations, such as the Chicago Hearing Society. The test preparation and skills building exercises allow future certified interpreters to understand the nuances of both the written and oral language examinations, build test strategies and increases their confidence and comfort level prior to testing.

So far, four test preparation sessions have been held during evening hours to accommodate work schedules. The four sessions merited high attendance and positive feedback. Additionally, in July 2020, a multi-week Spanish language skill building course took place and in May 2021, we began an 8-week online language neutral skill building program to improve skills for the oral examinations and court interpreting.

Through remote interpretation services by certified and registered interpreters on the AOIC Registry or through private companies, such as InLingo and InterpreNet, the court system has remained accessible to self-represented litigants during the pandemic. The most significant barriers to remote interpretation in the state of Illinois are technological barriers and privacy concerns regarding sensitive legal matters. A goal of our Language Access Program is to continue the use of remote interpretation services as a hybrid model for individuals unable to access courthouses or for interpreters at faraway locations.

Finally, both InLingo and InterpreNet provide trainings and resources for using remote interpretation services. Additional simultaneous interpreting equipment has also been purchased and distributed to counties. This equipment can be used both for interpreting and conducting remote hearings.

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 50 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. Many of the sessions were presented in collaboration with the Illinois Judicial College and the Illinois Association of Court Clerks. Topics have included interpreter skill building, legal information vs. legal advice, e-filing, forms, M.R. 30370 changes to fee waivers, and Illinois Court Help. Nearly all presentations took place virtually.

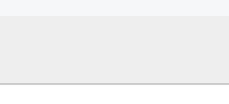
Unfortunately, we did not have the staff capacity to modify the interactive self-represented litigant court experience simulation to a virtual format, but hopefully the simulation will be able to be conducted again in the next fiscal year. Similarly, we decided to forego the Law Student Leaders Access to Justice Summit in early 2021 until we can meet again safely in person.

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.

In October 2020, the CBA/CBF Task Force on the Sustainable Practice of Law & Innovation (Task Force) submitted a final **report** to the Illinois Supreme Court. After initial review, the Court has assigned Recommendation #3-Improve the Rule for Limited Scope Representation to the ATJ Commission. As such, we have established a working group with representatives from the Lawyers Trust Fund, Justice Entrepreneurs Program, PILI, the judiciary, and the bar. This group has met to review the recommended amendments and will make recommendations for the ATJ Commission to submit to the Supreme Court at the end of the summer. Additionally, the ATJ Commission was assigned Recommendations 7-Recognize a New Community Justice Navigator Model to Build Off the Success of Illinois JusticeCorps in the Courts and 8-Create a Hub where the Public Can Find Court Approved Sources for Information and Assistance of the final Task Force report and are currently evaluating possible implementation plans.

For more information, please contact Alison Spanner at aspanner@illinoiscourts.gov

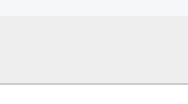
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