IOWA ACCESS TO JUSTICE

2025 Commission Report

IOWA ACCESS TO JUSTICE

The Iowa Access to Justice Commission serves Iowans by promoting and advancing innovative strategies for ensuring equal access to justice.

The **mission** *of the Iowa Access to Justice Commission is to find solutions that will best serve Iowans who may encounter barriers to or difficulties with fully accessing Iowa's civil justice system.*

Members of the Commission

Members of the Iowa Access to Justice Commission

The Commission contains twenty-seven members (including two liaisons) appointed by the Chief Justice of the Iowa Supreme Court. Commission members represent a diverse mix of expertise and perspectives, including judges, court administrators, corporate attorneys and business leaders, legal aid providers, legislators, medical providers, private practice attorneys, educators, nonprofit service providers, librarians, law school faculty, bar association officers, and technology professionals.

Iowa Supreme Court Justice Matthew McDermott serves as chair of the Commission, and former Iowa Legal Aid Deputy Director Shelley Whitcher serves as vice-chair of the Commission. Timothy Eckley, Assistant Counsel to the Chief Justice, serves as secretary to the Commission.

At the end of the 2024-2025 Commission term, the Commission bid a fond farewell to the following members whose second terms are expiring: Kevin Patrick, Judge Dustria Relph, Carrie Slagle, Rep. Megan Srinivas, M.D., and Shelley Whitcher. The Commission is grateful for the significant contributions these members have made to the Commission over many years.

Commission Members

Susan Barta, Sioux City

Paul Berchenbriter, Cedar Rapids

Maria Brownell, Des Moines

Melissa Cano-Zelaya, Des Moines

Danny Davis, Davenport

Kristin Esche, Johnston

Judge David Faith, Indianola

Daniel Huitink, Pella

Brynne Howard, Des Moines

Erin Lain, Des Moines

Kathleen Law, Des Moines

Justice Matthew McDermott, Chair, Des Moines

Quinn O'Brian, Davenport

Kevin Patrick, Des Moines

Colin Pennycooke, Des Moines

Judge Dustria Relph, Corydon

Amy Rollinger, State Library Liaison

Virginia Sipes, ISBA Liaison

Carrie Slagle, Cedar Rapids

Chantelle Smith, Des Moines

Megan Srinivas, Des Moines

Frank Tenuta, Sioux City

Daniel Van Sant, Des Moines

Carissa Vogel, Iowa City

Michael Wells, Hamburg

Austin Westermann, Des Moines

Shelley Whitcher, Vice-Chair, Council Bluffs

IOWA ACCESS TO JUSTICE

Providing equal justice under the law requires a legal system that is accessible to everyone regardless of their income or personal characteristics. The Iowa Access to Justice Commission seeks to identify the barriers—financial, technological, cultural, and otherwise—that many Iowans face in addressing their legal needs. The Commission works to ensure that every Iowan has the same opportunity to understand, navigate, and benefit from the protection and remedies the law offers.

Commission Values

Commission Values Statement

Change agent

We motivate change, acting with vision and boldness to break down barriers that prevent access to the civil justice system.

Education

We identify barriers and promote solutions impacting access.

Collaboration

We respect all viewpoints and value the diverse perspectives and experiences of our Commission members, partners, and stakeholders, recognizing that all persons should have a voice and deserve to be heard.

Equality of access

We promote equal access to civil justice for all.

Leadership

We seek to lead in ensuring equal access to civil justice by marshalling stakeholders and analyzing outcomes against available data.

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Access to Civil Justice in Iowa

This 2025 Iowa Access to Justice Commission Report highlights the Iowa Access to Justice Commission's ninth year of work toward improving the civil justice climate in the State of Iowa.

The Iowa Supreme Court established the Commission in 2016 upon the recommendation of The Iowa State Bar Association (ISBA) to help address the unmet civil legal needs of Iowans. In the order establishing the Commission, former Iowa Supreme Court Chief Justice Mark Cady wrote:

> The bedrock principle of our court system is that justice should be accessible to all persons. There are, however, longstanding and entrenched barriers to access to justice for too many Iowans. Iowa courts are seeing an increasing number of self-represented litigants . . . . Iowa must do more to assure meaningful and informed access to justice for all persons.

Iowa, like most other states, has more to do to assure meaningful and informed access to justice for all.

Chief Justice Cady's words ring as true today as they did nine years ago. The number of court matters involving self-represented litigants has not subsided. Many challenges remain in building comprehensive access to our civil justice system. Facilitating access to the civil court system for self-represented litigants remains a significant challenge for the Iowa Judicial Branch. Iowa, like most other states, has more to do to assure meaningful and informed access to justice for all.

Commission Work Groups

The Commission focuses its members' expertise, experience, and preferences into six distinct work groups, two task forces, and its executive committee. (For work group, task force, and committee rosters, see Appendix A.) The work groups drive the Commission's innovations and recommendations to the Iowa Supreme Court. The work groups' reports are reviewed and approved by the Commission and are included in this report.

Iowa Judicial Branch Court Navigators Pilot Project

The supreme court established the Iowa Judicial Branch Court Navigators Pilot Project Task Force in February 2024. The court charged the task force with implementing a court navigators pilot project in the Clinton County Courthouse. The task force includes members of the Commission's former Court Navigators Work Group along with additional personnel from the judicial branch. Molly Weber, Counsel to the State Court Administrator, chairs

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the task force. Commission secretary Tim Eckley is an *ex officio* member.

Since its creation, the Court Navigators Task Force has implemented the recommendations from the Commission's 2023 report. In the 2024 Commission report, the Court Navigator Work Group recommended that the judicial branch support the task force with resources to establish and maintain the pilot program and additional navigator sites.

As the Court Navigator Task Force met through the spring and summer of 2024, it became apparent that more resources and expertise would be necessary to launch a successful navigator program.

State Court Administration thereafter began working with the National Center of State Courts (NCSC) on the pilot project. The judicial branch ultimately contracted with NCSC as consultants on the project. With NCSC's help, the task force successfully launched a pilot court navigator program in Clinton County. The pilot (with NCSC's continued assistance) will run through December 2025. (An NCSC Status Report on the Iowa Court Navigator Pilot Project is attached as Appendix B.)

The pilot project includes, among other things, a resource repository for court navigators and a set of training slides for in-person training of new navigators. Additional resources will include an electronic presentation, facilitation guide, and pre-recorded materials for future in-person navigator training.

The Justice Index

There are many ways to measure access to civil justice. One can debate methodologies and areas of focus, but thorough and objective research provides important comparative findings. The National Center for Access to Justice at Fordham Law School maintains the *Justice Index*, "an online, data intensive, ranking system . . . that ranks the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico on the degree to which they have adopted certain best policies for access to justice." The comprehensive report is available here: https://ncaj.org/state-rankings/justice-index.

> In Iowa for 2024, 79% of civil legal matters in Iowa courts, excluding small claims, involve at least one self-represented litigant.

The Justice Index provides in-depth analysis of each state in six categories: consumer debt, attorney access, language access, fines and fees, self-representation, and disability access.

The Justice Index scores states on a 0 to 100 scale. Iowa's overall ranking is 21st, with an overall score of 38.68 out of 100. A score well below 50 is hardly a passing grade. And Iowa lamentably scored well below some of its neighbors, such as Minnesota, Illinois, and Wisconsin (although well ahead of Nebraska, Missouri, and South Dakota).

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If the Justice Index's latest figures for fines and fees data (2022) and consumer debt data (2024) are included, Iowa's overall Justice Index score drops to 34.95 out of 100.

Iowa's best individual scores are for language access at 46.54 (25th overall) and disability access at 40.00 (19th overall).

Iowa self-represented litigant case loads

Stakeholders in the Iowa civil court system have long known that the percentage of cases involving parties without attorney representation are increasing and adding strain to limited court resources.

The Justice Index reports that nationwide "as many as two-thirds of litigants appear in courts without lawyers in important matters like evictions, mortgage foreclosures, debt collection cases, and child custody proceedings." In Iowa, for 2024, holding steady from 2023, *79%* of civil legal matters in Iowa courts, excluding small claims, involve at least one self-represented litigant. Appendix C provides a breakdown of self-represented-litigant figures by case type.

Low-income and homeless Iowans

Iowa Legal Aid reports that low-income Iowans on average have four unmet legal needs. Older, rural, and disaster-surviving low-income Iowans are particularly affected by access to justice challenges. This is often true even at income levels above the poverty line as these vulnerabilities compound barriers to justice.

According to Angie Arthur, executive director of the homelessness planning nonprofit Homeward Iowa and presenter at the March 2025 Commission meeting, almost 17,000 Iowans in 2024 experienced literal homelessness (meaning, for example, that they did not have even temporary access to a friend or relative's couch). This represents a 20% increase of those entering homelessness versus those exiting homelessness during the year.

These and many other Iowans confront technological deficiencies, geographic challenges, limited access to resources, and specialized legal issues that limit their ability to navigate and participate in the civil legal system.

The rural practice challenge

Iowa lags well behind the national average in attorneys per capita. According to the American Bar Association (ABA), nationwide there are on average 3.81 attorneys for every 1,000 residents. In 2024, Iowa had just 2.24 attorneys for every 1,000 residents, ranking 44th nationally.

As of January 2025, 17 of Iowa's 99 counties have between one and five attorneys working full time in private practice. Appendix D to this report provides a color-coded breakdown by county of lawyers practicing full-time.

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In 2024, 56 counties in Iowa were considered "legal deserts," which the ABA defines as having fewer than one lawyer per 1,000 residents. (The National Center for State Courts defines as a legal desert using a different metric: fewer than 0.5 attorneys per 1,000 residents.) This is 14 more counties than in 2018--about a 33% increase in six years. Nearly half of Iowa's counties have 10 or fewer resident attorneys.

But as the Commission's Rural Access Work Group notes, access to justice is measured by more than just the number of attorneys available within a particular geographic space. If none of the attorneys in the area practice family law, for instance, the justice gap for people needing that specialty widens.

As the Rural Access Work Group cautions, we should not "conflate these two phenomena—access to justice means more than access to attorneys, and an attorney might not be the only or best access to justice intervention in a particular situation." Proximity to a lawyer means little if a someone lacks the wherewithal—financial or otherwise—to retain the lawyer.

The dearth of lawyers in most rural counties is not the only barrier. Technological barriers, limited social service providers, and specialized legal needs all impose additional burdens on rural residents accessing legal services.

Allied legal professionals

The Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System (IAALS) has been studying the limited licensure of nonattorneys and other potential regulatory changes around the country that might enhance access to justice.

IAALS has coined the phrase "allied legal professionals" to encapsulate the variety of titles for qualified people entering this practice field. IAALS reported in June 2025 that seven states are operating allied legal professional programs: Arizona, Colorado, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Oregon, Utah, and Washington. A growing number of states are exploring these programs in various forms to address legal access shortfalls.

> Common benefits of the programs include lower costs for clients and competent work product.

The roles and responsibilities of allied legal professionals vary from program to program, but could include providing legal advice, preparing and filing limited legal documents, reviewing documents with a client, communicating with an opposing party, and representing clients at mediations, settlement conferences, and depositions.

Advocates of these programs argue that the programs offer competent

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and critically necessary legal services at relatively lower costs for clients.

Education and regulatory requirements for allied legal professionals vary by state. Requirements might include a paralegal degree or certificate, a bachelor's or associate degree, or a master's-level degree focusing on legal studies. Some programs require the professionals to maintain trust accounts, malpractice insurance, or client security funds.

Attorneys, bar associations, state lawmakers, and state supreme courts have shown varying levels of enthusiasm for these programs. After the California State Bar formed a working group to study a proposed limited licensure program for paraprofessionals there, the state legislature eventually intervened and shut the effort down.. The arguments against these programs often center on a few related concerns: that consumers will receive lower quality services from paraprofessionals than those provided by lawyers, that paraprofessionals will undermine the ability of lawyers to make a living, and that regulators may struggle to effectively oversee this new category of legal service provider.

Despite the roadblocks these programs have faced in some states, overall the allied legal professional movement seems to be growing, with states continuing to test and tailor these programs.

The Commission's Limited Licensure Work Group report provides more information on this topic.

Unbundling or limited scope services

In 2007, the Iowa Supreme Court adopted Iowa Rule of Civil Procedure 1.423, which allows lawyers to provide limited or unbundled legal representation. Limited representation—when at the client's direction, an attorney provides representation for discreet tasks in a legal proceeding—can be an effective access-to-justice tool that tailors the representation to a level the client can afford and avoids the pitfalls of a one-size-fits-all approach. Limited legal representation is indeed limited in Iowa; with rare exceptions, Iowa attorneys have not widely engaged in limited representation. Limited representation cuts down on costs for what otherwise might be a self-represented litigant, while providing legal representation for selected tasks. A lawyer's involvement, even if only on discrete parts of cases, also contributes to more efficient adjudication by courts.

Litigants navigating the court system without legal representation are not always without the means to pay. One estimate suggests that 60% of self-represented litigants could afford to pay for *some* level of legal representation. More widespread limited representation practice could be effective in narrowing the justice gap in both rural and urban areas.

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The judicial branch, bar associations, and judges could better encourage attorneys to explore incorporating limited representation into their practices or pro bono efforts.

Fines and fees and court debt in Iowa

At its June 2025 meeting, the Commission discussed whether it should establish a work group to study the noted problem of unpaid court fines and fees in Iowa and the related effects on access to justice.

Data suggests that the burdens of court-imposed fines and fees are having destabilizing effects that negatively impact that extend beyond the individual and to families and communities. Court debt contributes to housing and food insecurity and unemployment, and subject people to ongoing interactions with the legal system that spiral with continued negative consequences. Critics argue that reliance on fines and fees as a revenue steam imposes outsized burdens on a concentrated population that is disproportionally poorer, nonwhite, politically inactive. Rather than serving as a true tool for justice and public safety, critics argue that the negative consequences of unpaid fines and fees come with minimal upside, as the vast bulk will go uncollected.

The Fines and Fees Justice Center (FFJC) estimates that one in three Americans have been directly impacted by fines or fees related to traffic, criminal, juvenile, or municipal court in the past ten years. Of those, 98% reported that court debt affected their daily lives, 99% of parents had to cut back on at least one essential daily need, and 27% reported housing hardships. The FFJC estimates that 17 million U.S. households with children likely experienced shortfalls in food, housing, healthcare, or other essentials because the parent had to pay court debt.

Iowa has come under criticism in this area. In addressing the Commission in June 2024, Lisa Foster, Co-Executive Director of the FFJC, stated that no other state charges defendants more for court appointed counsel than Iowa does. Yet, in 2012, only 4.2% of indigent defense fees were collected in Iowa. in 2022, the collection rate was just 2%.

According to the FFJC, in 1998, court debt owed to the State of Iowa totaled $150,000,000; by 2021, the figure had climbed to almost $900,000,000 in unpaid debt. It is no secret that most of those responsible for payment will never be able to satisfy the debt.

The FFJC further reports that during the five-year period 2018-2022, Iowa courts imposed $1.159 billion in fines and fees, the fourth highest amount in the country and equal to approximately 8.5% of total state-court-imposed fines and fees in the United States. https://finesandfeesjusticecenter.org/articles/imposing-instability/

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Driver's license suspension is a common punishment for unpaid fines and fees. Over 113,000 Iowans have had their driver's licenses suspended for unpaid court debt and child support. According to the FFJC, people whose licenses are suspended on average lose $12,700 per year in income.

> In 1998, court debt owed to the State of Iowa totaled $150,000,000; in 2021 the figure climbed to almost $900,000,000 in unpaid debt.

The FFJC contends that unpaid court debt limits criminal expungement and other life enhancing opportunities for already disadvantaged populations.

University of Iowa College of Law students, Megan LeBlanc and Kathryn Linehan provided a report to the Commission outlining how other access to justice commissions have approached the issue of fines and fees. Their research suggests that approximately half of the commissions have looked into fines and fees as a barrier to access to justice. Commissions in Nebraska, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, Minnesota, and Georgia have prepared or partnered with stakeholder entities to conduct research on the effects of court fines and fees. Some states, including North and South Carolina and Texas, have offered recommendations to state legislative bodies. Other commissions, including those in Hawaii, Minnesota, New York, Oregon, and Virginia, have highlighted fee waiver programs. Some commissions, most notably New Hampshire, have engaged in outreach activities to highlight existing fee waiver programs. More information from the students' research can be found at Appendix E.

The Iowa State Bar Association

In August 2015, the Iowa Supreme Court asked The Iowa State Bar Association (ISBA) to evaluate whether an access to justice commission should be established in Iowa, like commissions formed at the time in 39 (now 42) other states and the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. The ISBA formed a study group that recommended that the ISBA Board of Governors adopt a resolution supporting establishment of an access to justice commission in Iowa, which the board of governors unanimously approved. Since its founding, the Commission has worked closely with the ISBA, which provides generous support to the Commission including with financial assistance and use of conference facilities for Commission meetings. The ISBA president-elect serves a rotating one-year liaison membership on the Commission.

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Student Research Assistance

At the University of Iowa College of Law, a pro bono project organized by Iowa Law's Citizen Lawyer Program operates under the supervision of Professor Brian Farrell a former Commissioner, Executive Committee member, and current member of several Commission work groups or task forces.

Beyond the This year, the law students presented the following reports to the Commission:

- National Landscape Review: Allied Legal Professional. Appendix F.
- Access to Justice National Landscape Review: Efforts to Reduce Fines and Fees. Appendix G.
- Pro Bono and Continuing Legal Education Initiatives. Appendix H.
- ATJC AI Developments. Appendix I.

The student research reports help inform Commission work group efforts. The law students attend Commission meetings when they are available.

Supreme Court Review

Justice McDermott presented the 2024 Iowa Access to Justice Commission Report to the Iowa Supreme Court during the court's 2024 administrative term meetings in August.

Among other things, the court discussed the Court Navigator Pilot Project in Clinton County; ongoing efforts in other states concerning allied legal professionals; and aspects of the rural access report, including proposed legislation to provide incentives for rural law practices by Representative Brian Lohse. ⚖

Iowa Judicial Branch Building rotunda

Commission Meetings

During the 2024-2025 Commission term, the Commission held its regular quarterly meetings featuring educational programs, work group breakout sessions, and Commission-wide discussions.

First quarterly meeting
The Commission held its first 2024–2025 quarterly meeting on September 20, 2024, at the Iowa Judicial Branch Building. Justice McDermott opened the meeting with a welcome and introductions of Commission members.

Carol Phillips, Executive Director of the Polk County Bar Association and its Volunteer Lawyers Project, and Paul Berchenbriter, Managing Attorney and head of Iowa Legal Aid's Volunteer Lawyers Project presented on "The State of Pro Bono Service in Iowa," highlighting the falling numbers of volunteer attorneys in Iowa and that factors that may be contributing to the trend. The Commission followed up with a brainstorming session on addressing pro bono challenges. This discussion resulted in the creation of a Volunteer Lawyer Task Force, which was chaired by Commission vice-chair Shelley Whitcher.

Justice McDermott discussed the supreme court's consideration of the Commission's 2024 Report.

The Commission agreed to sunset the Court Navigators Work Group with the supreme court's establishment of the Iowa Court Navigator's Pilot Project Task Force.

After presentations from each of the Commission's work groups and related discussion, the meeting concluded with recognition of outgoing State Library Commission liaison Mandy Easter.

Second quarterly meeting
The Commission held its second quarterly meeting December 6, 2024, by video conference.

Justice McDermott relayed highlights from his attendance at the 2024 ABA National Meeting of State ATJ Chairs. Commission member Megan Srinivas presented her thoughts on the upcoming Iowa Legislative session and the prospects of a rural attorney incentive bill. University of Iowa College of Law students Sydney Wagner and Abigail Bylund reported their research findings on the influence of AI on the access to justice landscape. (See Appendix G for their written report.) UI law students Kathryn Linehan and Megan LeBlanc reported their findings on a national survey of access to justice commissions approaches to issues surrounding court fines and fees. (See Appendix D for their written report.)

Each of the Commission work groups and the Commission's Volunteer Lawyers Task Force provided updates on the progress of their various efforts.

The Commission welcomed Margaret Hagan, Executive Director of the Legal Design Lab at Stanford University for her virtual presentation "AI for Access to Justice: Planning for the Future."

Commission Meetings

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Third quarterly meeting

The next Commission meeting was March 7, 2025, at the Iowa Judicial Branch Building. Angie Arthur, Executive Director of Homeward, presented on homelessness in Iowa and the intersections between housing insecurity and access-to-justice limitations.

Commission member Megan Srinivas reported on the 2025 legislative version of rural attorney incentive bill.

Member Colin Pennycooke reported on the Expungement and Employment Clinic with Iowa Legal Aid in which his corporate firm participated.

Commission work groups and the Volunteer Lawyer Task Force met in breakout sessions and each group reported on its progress.

Commission member Danny Davis provided an update on the Court Navigator Pilot Project.

Fourth quarterly meeting

The June 6, 2025 meeting was held at the ISBA headquarters.

Recent Drake Law School graduate Chloe Dinardo presented her honors research project titled "Cultivating Online Legal Education as a Homegrown Solution to Rural Legal Deserts." Her presentation focused on expanding legal education pathways to enable rural Iowans to more easily attend law school as a solution to Iowa's rural legal deserts and rural attorney shortage.

Caitlin Jarzen, Iowa Judicial Branch Director of Governmental Affairs, provided an update on the 2025 legislative session, with a special focus on legislation addressing court administration and access-to-justice issues.

Each Commission work group presented its final 2024–2025 report for the full Commission's approval.

Joseph Schieffer, Founder and CEO of A2J Tech, traveled from Denver to present on strategies developed in many years of work with state access-to-justice commissions and legal services providers that build on technological solutions to improve access to justice. His presentation focused on how Commissions can engage in continuous innovation to improve Access to Justice. Commission

The Commission has scheduled its quarterly meetings for the 2024–2025 year for the following dates and locations:

- Friday, September 19, 2025, in person at the Judicial Branch Building
- Friday, December 5, 2025, via remote technology
- Friday, March 6, 2026, in person at the Judicial Branch Building
- Friday, June 5, 2026, in person at the ISBA headquarters

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member Danny Davis provided an update on the Court Navigator Pilot Project, and Commission Vice-Chair Shelley Whitcher presented the recommendations to the supreme court from the Volunteer Lawyer Task Force. (See the Volunteer Lawyer Task Force report on pages 14-19 *infra*.)

Departing Commission members were recognized: Kathleen Law, Kevin Patrick, Judge Dustria Relph, Carrie Slagle, Rep. Megan Srinivas, M.D., and Shelley Whitcher.

Executive Committee

The Executive Committee oversees the Commission's general operation, progress, and long-term goals. The Executive Committee comprises no less than five and no more than seven Commission members, including the chair and vice-chair of the Commission. The Executive Committee also includes the ISBA president-elect as liaison to the Commission. Other Executive Committee members, including current and past members of the Commission, must be familiar with the Commission's structure, history, and activities. The Executive Committee holds regular monthly meetings. ⚖

Executive Committee Members

Justice Matthew McDermott, Commission Chair
Judge Dustria Relph
Kathleen Law
Megan Srinivas
Mike Wells
Shelley Whitcher, Commission Vice-Chair

Volunteer Lawyers Task Force

The Iowa Access to Justice Commission created the Volunteer Lawyers Task Force (Task Force) after a sobering presentation at the September 2024 Commission meeting regarding the state of pro bono in Iowa. The Commission tasked the group with recognizing common obstacles to pro bono involvement, identifying potential solutions to those barriers, and determining whether a Pro Bono Work Group should be a permanent fixture of the Commission.

The Task Force, made up of private attorneys, corporate attorneys, former and current directors of Iowa's two Volunteer Lawyers Projects, a director at the Office of Professional Regulation, and The Iowa State Bar Association's liaison to the Commission, brings extensive experience in pro bono involvement across various aspects of participation in pro bono representation.

Over the past year, Task Force members discussed barriers to pro bono involvement for different areas of the profession and brainstormed solutions to those barriers—from small tweaks to existing systems to novel, pie-in-the-sky changes.

As further explored below, some recommendations quickly took form and require only minor adjustments, yet they have the potential to significantly impact pro bono involvement. For instance, the group identified a need to improve data collection regarding attorneys' pro bono involvement. Changes to the wording of questions on the annual Iowa Supreme Court Client Security Commission Combined Statement and Questionnaire (Questionnaire) for attorneys, making those questions required, and linking the answers to the responding attorneys so the Iowa Supreme Court can have a better understanding of who is answering would all improve the understanding of the pro bono landscape now and into the future.

Other concepts required research and more thorough development, including reviewing how other states have approached allowing pro bono time to count toward attorneys' required annual Continuing Legal Education (CLE) hours.

The Task Force recommendations are structured in tiers, enabling the supreme court to begin with simpler, readily achievable reforms—the "low-hanging fruit"—before progressing to more complex and resource-intensive changes. This phased approach promotes early success while laying the groundwork for long-term improvements.

II. Recommendations to Iowa Supreme Court

A. Tier 1–Lightest Lift, but Most Impact

1. The Task Force recommends changes to the annual client security combined statement

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and questionnaire regarding attorney pro bono involvement

The Task Force found that questions on pro bono work presented to attorneys on the Questionnaire during the annual reporting process suffer from several shortcomings and are in need of significant revision. The purpose of these questions is to gather accurate data about attorneys' pro bono and other contributions to the legal community. The existing questions, however, fail to achieve this goal due to multiple structural and substantive issues. These deficiencies not only compromise the integrity of the data collected but also impede the broader mission of promoting and supporting access to justice across Iowa.

Several issues with the pro bono questions on the Questionnaire undermine their effectiveness:

a. **Poor data quality**: The questions currently yield unreliable and inconsistent data. Due to ambiguity in language and lack of clarity in definitions, responses are often inaccurate or misrepresentative of actual attorney engagement in pro bono work.

b. **Confusing language**: Many attorneys have expressed confusion about what is being asked or feel the questions lack distinction from one another, resulting in unreliable data. The questions also lack clear connection to the definitions and expectations set out in Iowa Rule of Professional Conduct 32:6.1 concerning voluntary pro bono service.

c. **Skippable questions**: Attorneys are able to bypass the pro bono questions entirely without providing any response. This results in incomplete data and hinders the court's ability to assess statewide attorney participation in pro bono initiatives.

d. **Lack of incentive:** Currently, there is no encouragement or feedback mechanism to reward attorneys who do report hours.

e. **Disconnection from ethical aspirations:** The questions do not meaningfully connect to the intent of rule 32:6.1 of the Iowa Rules of Professional Conduct, which encourages lawyers to aspire to 50 hours of pro bono service annually.

As a result, the data currently collected is of limited utility, and the system misses an opportunity to promote a culture of service within the profession.

The Task Force believes the Questionnaire should serve both practical and aspirational functions: to collect accurate, meaningful data on Iowa attorneys' pro bono service and to

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encourage increased participation in providing legal assistance to those in need. To that end, the Task Force proposes new questions to correct these problems and better align the reporting process to promote access-to-justice goals. The Task Force recommends revisions to the pro bono related questions to provide more accurate reporting and increased attorney pro bono participation. The proposed changes are designed to:

a. **Clarify questions.** The new questions provide clear definitions, directly reflect the expectations of Rule 32:6.1, and eliminate ambiguity in reporting. They more clearly delineate types of qualifying pro bono work, reduced-fee services, and other types of public interest legal work.

b. **Standardize reporting.** The new questions connect data to the responding attorneys and require responses, which provides for more accurate and streamlined reporting.

c. **Encourage participation.**

   - **The "Carrot."** Attorneys who report their pro bono hours will receive a thank-you email from the Office of Professional Regulation or the Iowa Supreme Court, acknowledging and appreciating their contribution, encouraging a culture of appreciation and continued or increased service. Additionally, the questions offer context to encourage attorneys to reflect on their service.

   - **The "Sort-of Stick."** Attorneys who report zero pro bono hours (or below a threshold the court sets) will receive a follow-up email reminding them of the goal set of rule 32:6.1 and providing them with information on how and where they can volunteer. This approach is not punitive, but rather supportive—reminding attorneys of opportunities to contribute and how their time can make a tangible difference.

The proposed revisions to the Questionnaire are in Appendix H. These proposed questions aim to provide clarity, consistency, and actionable data while encouraging more meaningful engagement of attorneys with pro bono and access-to-justice work.

Revising the Questionnaire is not simply a technical update—it is a necessary step in aligning Iowa's legal profession with its ethical aspirations. By improving data quality, increasing clarity, and fostering a culture of service, the proposed changes will help

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ensure that Iowans have better access to the legal assistance they need.

2. The Task Force recommends implementing a marketing campaign

In addition to adopting the proposed revisions to the questionnaire, a robust and coordinated communications strategy is critical to educate and motivate the legal community. A marketing campaign is not merely a supplemental effort—it is a central component of fostering a culture of pro bono service within the Iowa legal community. A well-designed campaign serves several vital functions:

a. **Education and awareness.** Many attorneys are unaware of the full scope and impact of pro bono opportunities available to them. A marketing campaign can clarify what qualifies as pro bono work under rule 32:6.1, highlight existing programs and organizations in need of assistance, and dispel misconceptions that pro bono service must be burdensome or time-consuming.

b. **Cultural integration.** Broad-spectrum messaging—from bar associations, the courts, law schools, and legal employers—can help normalize and elevate pro bono service as an integral part of legal practice. When the message comes from all corners of the profession, it reinforces that access to justice is not a niche concern, but a shared professional responsibility.

c. **Motivation through impact.** Targeted messaging that communicates the real-world impact of pro bono work is essential. Attorneys should understand that one hour of their legal expertise can have a profound ripple effect—transforming lives, stabilizing families, and contributing to stronger communities. Unlike small monetary donations, which may not be sufficient to fund additional staff or services, a single hour of donated time can provide immediate legal relief to someone in crisis.

d. **Recognition and encouragement.** The Task Force recommends that Iowa increase its formal recognition for attorneys who provide significant pro bono legal services, similar to Minnesota's North Star Lawyer program. Publicly recognizing attorneys who report pro bono service reinforces positive behavior and signals that such contributions are valued by the profession. A stronger recognition program can go a long way in building momentum. Minnesota's North Star Lawyer

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initiative by the Minnesota State Bar Association honors attorneys who contribute 50 or more hours of pro bono legal services annually by publicly acknowledging their efforts. In 2023 alone, over 700 Minnesota attorneys were recognized as North Star Lawyers, collectively providing more than 79,800 hours of pro bono service valued at approximately $20 million.

e. **Supportive accountability.** Constructive outreach to those who report zero (or very low) pro bono hours can be framed not as punishment, but as encouragement. By sharing resources, volunteer opportunities, and personal stories of impact, these messages can help bridge the gap between intention and action.

The marketing campaign could be the engine that drives increased participation in pro bono efforts and helps shift the culture of the legal profession in Iowa toward one of more intentional, collective engagement in access to justice work.

B. Tier 2–Not Ready for Prime Time

The recommendations outlined in Tier 2 represent promising ideas with potential to further enhance pro bono engagement and access to justice, but they are not yet ready for implementation. These proposals require additional research, stakeholder input, and logistical planning before they can be fully developed and responsibly adopted. The Task Force recognizes their value and remains committed to continuing exploration of these concepts, refining them through collaboration and feedback.

1. Change to court rules for remote proceedings in pro bono cases

The Task Force is interested in exploring whether expanding the availability of remote proceedings for pro bono attorneys—particularly allowing them to attend hearings remotely that would otherwise require in-person participation—could help increase attorney volunteer engagement in rural areas. Implementing such a change may require amending the Iowa Rules of Remote Procedure in chapter 15 of the Iowa Court Rules, which govern remote appearances in Iowa courts.

2. The Task Force will continue to investigate the potential of approving CLE credit for pro bono representation

Allowing limited pro bono service hours to count toward an attorney's annual CLE requirements may encourage greater participation in pro bono services. Several other states that have adopted similar measures report that it is well received by attorneys already

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committed to volunteering—a symbolic recognition that reinforces the value of their service.

Under this model, attorneys could receive a capped number of CLE credits for a designated amount of qualifying pro bono work. The exchange would not be one-to-one, ensuring that CLE standards remain rigorous while still offering meaningful acknowledgment of volunteer efforts. The Task Force is also interested in exploring whether pro bono hours could fulfill requirements in specific CLE categories, such as legal ethics, attorney wellness, or diversity and inclusion. Aligning pro bono credit with these specialized areas could provide an additional incentive and encourage broader attorney engagement in access-to-justice efforts.

3. The Task Force will explore a centralized pro bono portal to increase attorney engagement

The Task Force will explore the potential of using a pro bono portal as a tool to streamline and enhance volunteer engagement. A centralized, user-friendly portal would serve as a one-stop shop for attorneys to easily browse and select pro bono opportunities that align with their interests, expertise, and availability—whether that means taking on specific case types, volunteering in particular geographic areas, or participating in clinics and limited representation programs. By providing a single, accessible platform where all pro bono opportunities in Iowa are aggregated, the portal could remove logistical barriers and make it easier for attorneys—regardless of where they are located—to find meaningful ways to contribute. This increased visibility and convenience has the potential to significantly boost participation in pro bono service statewide.

III. Looking forward

The Volunteer Attorney Task Force, a very engaged and motivated group, will continue to meet during the 2025-2026 term of the Iowa Access to Justice Commission to further explore barriers and solutions, as well as the need for a Volunteer Attorney Work Group at the Commission.

Volunteer Lawyer Task Force Members

Paul Berchenbriter
Maria Brownell
Kristin Esche
Karin Gregor
Brynne Howard
Carol Phillips
Virginia Sipes
Jessica Taylor
Austin Westermann
Shelley Whitcher, Chair

I. Community Outreach Overview

The Access to Justice Commission's Community Outreach Work Group aims to identify evidence-based practices and programs that will provide recommendations to the Iowa Supreme Court for improving judicial branch public outreach and reducing barriers to accessing the Iowa court system. The work group for 2024-2025 held meetings approximately every month to discuss first-hand experiences related to difficulties in accessing legal information and resources both at the courthouse and online. The group also researched the barriers that hinder public access to these resources and identified potential solutions to overcome these challenges.

Iowa courts are consistently focused on enhancing legal assistance, ensuring fair treatment for all individuals regardless of their background, and leveraging technology to increase the efficiency of case management. These ongoing improvements are essential, as legal systems must adapt to societal changes, ensure that staff comply with established best practices, and strive to achieve fairness for all Iowans.

Public confidence in the courts is being shaped, in part, by the broader political climate. In August 2024, the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) released a report addressing the "hyper-politicized state of public discourse." https://www.ncsc.org/resources-courts/beyond-civics-education-health-and-wellness-guide-public-trust.

With every part of our civic system being politicized, it has become increasingly difficult to have open discourse on any current affairs issue. State courts are becoming a casualty of this deepening cultural divide. According to the NCSC report, public trust of state courts and their ability to deliver the promise of equal justice for all has been falling. "There is a massive gap between how courts see the services they deliver—and how large segments of the public experience those services." It has become increasingly important to ensure the public understands the nonpartisan, neutral role of the courts. The NCSC report also stated that "Our collective challenge is to remind people of how courts are different— of how they are protectors of rights, guardians of the rule of law, and providers of justice for all."

The court process must not only *be fair* but also have the *appearance of fairness*. Trust and confidence in the courts play a crucial role in ensuring access to justice. When people trust the judicial system, they are more likely to seek legal remedies, cooperate with legal processes, and respect court decisions. Trust and confidence in the courts can be enhanced by ensuring that court procedures are applied transparently and consistently, cases are resolved in a timely manner, and information about court processes and services is easily accessible.

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While the broader cultural context plays a role, an individual's perception of the court system is primarily shaped by their personal experience with it. Therefore, to improve the public trust, courts must prioritize integrity, transparency, and accountability. One approach to reducing negative experiences is by improving the "customer service" aspect of the court systems, including interactions at courthouses, website accessibility, and ease and understanding of court forms. Thus, by removing barriers and helping to improve the public's trust in the court system, we can help improve access to justice.

II. Update from 2024 Commission Report

The work group reviewed the outreach plans of various state Access to Justice Task forces. This review resulted in the development of a framework of guiding principles centered on equity and fairness. While evaluating these programs, services, and materials in comparison to the outreach plans of the Iowa Judicial Branch, we considered common barriers to accessing the courts. These barriers include language, rural residency, age, race, ethnicity, gender, victimization, disability, poverty, housing stability, transportation, and veteran status.

> The work group uses this framework of equity and fairness to assess each barrier and any potential recommendation to the court.

Additionally, the work group:

- Reviewed data provided by Iowa State Court Administrator, Bob Gast, and discussed current practices within the court system.
- Welcomed new members with first-hand experience navigating the court system, recognizing the value of their perspectives in shaping more informed and inclusive recommendations.
- Identified key challenges and established a prioritized list of the most pressing issues for the judicial branch to address.

III. Looking Forward

As the Community Outreach Work Group continues its efforts into 2025 and beyond, it remains deeply committed to identifying and advancing solutions that improve access to justice for all Iowans. The recommendations outlined in this report reflect both observed challenges and potential future opportunities. The goal of the work group is not only to address immediate barriers but also to foster long-term, systemic changes that prioritize equity, transparency, and consistency across the court system. Looking forward, the work group envisions a judiciary that continuously evolves in response to community needs—guided by data, informed by

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lived experiences, and grounded in fairness. By strengthening collaboration across court staff, community partners, and the public, the work group believes Iowa can continue to lead in creating a court system that is accessible, navigable, and trusted by all. The work group stands ready to support the implementation of these recommendations and to serve as an ongoing resource in shaping a more just and inclusive future.

IV. Recommendations to Iowa Supreme Court

Through research, data review, and earnest discussions, the Community Outreach Work Group has developed a clearer vision of where targeted improvements can make the most impact. These recommendations strive to improve court system accessibility, transparency, and efficiency.

1. Establish a statewide task force to ensure a consistent and unified court system

A foundational step in strengthening court system services is establishment of a statewide task force dedicated to creating a more unified and consistent approach. This task force would be responsible for evaluating disparities and identifying opportunities for alignment across counties, both within and between judicial districts. A key part of this initiative includes conducting a comprehensive assessment of courthouses, guided in part by the 2021 Iowa Courthouse Accessibility Report, which the judicial branch's Iowa Accountability Program conducted. This evaluation would address multiple layers of accessibility, including physical accessibility, language access, and the general approachability and responsiveness of courthouse staff. The work group acknowledges that while the county, not the state, maintains courthouses, the judicial branch should make every effort to ensure that courthouses and court services are accessible to everyone.

An accessibility evaluation includes reviewing physical access (e.g., entrances, restrooms, parking), reasonable accommodations (e.g., service animals, interpretation services), digital access (e.g., usability of website and online filing systems), and procedural access (e.g., how easily people can understand and navigate the court process). By creating a consistent and thorough assessment tool, the task force ensures that accessibility is measured uniformly across all districts, identifying both common barriers and unique local challenges.

This also includes language access and communication. The task force can work to expand the availability of interpreters, translated materials, and multilingual signage, as well as improve plain language usage in forms and instructions. By establishing clear standards and guidance, the task force can ensure that non-English speakers

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and people with limited literacy can meaningfully participate in the court process.

To enhance access to justice and ensure court users—particularly self-represented litigants—can navigate complex legal procedures more effectively, the work group recommends the court develop a multi-faceted support system that includes an avenue to provide the court with feedback regarding court forms and user experience (e.g., a tip line) as well as a centralized system to address frequently asked questions and needed resources (e.g., a web page or AI chatbot).

Understanding that the way courthouse staff interact with the public plays a major role in how accessible the court system feels. The task force can improve upon and encourage expansion of existing training on disability awareness, trauma-informed practices, cultural competency, and de-escalation techniques.

An important element of this courthouse assessment involves reviewing and standardizing the forms and processes currently in use across the court system. This includes ensuring that all courthouses are using standard forms, that court and law enforcement coding is standardized, and that court users encounter similar processes and expectations regardless of location. These steps will help reduce confusion for litigants and staff alike, creating a more seamless experience across jurisdictions. Based on the findings of this review, the task force would also develop concrete recommendations for ongoing system improvements.

Using assessment data, the task force can recommend prioritized improvements, such as installing ramps and accessible counters, additional training for staff, enhanced courthouse signage, or improving website usability. By identifying funding opportunities and helping courts prioritize upgrades based on greatest need and impact, the task force ensures that resources are used strategically to remove the most critical access barriers.

Finally, the task force can establish mechanisms for ongoing monitoring and accountability. This might include regular check-ins, progress reports, onsite and phone testing, secret shoppers, and public dashboards to track improvements over time. By institutionalizing accessibility efforts, the task force could ensure that accessibility is not a one-time project, but a sustained commitment embedded in how the court system operates statewide. To support long-term sustainability, the task force should also develop a succession plan to ensure leadership continuity and preserve institutional knowledge as membership changes over time.

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In short, a task force could provide the leadership, coordination, and vision needed to make courthouse accessibility comprehensive, consistent, and continuously improving, ensuring that all individuals, regardless of ability, language, or background, can fully access justice.

2. Provide court personnel additional training

A self-represented litigant's experience with court personnel can make or break their ability to access justice. For many people navigating the legal system without an attorney, the clerk's office is often their first—and sometimes only—point of contact with the court. A positive experience with a clerk who is patient, knowledgeable, and respectful can give self-represented litigants the confidence and clarity they need to move forward. It can help them understand what forms they need, what steps to take next, and how to comply with court procedures, all of which are critical to ensuring their case is heard fairly.

> Understanding that the way courthouse staff interact with the public plays a major role in how accessible the court system feels. The task force can improve upon and encourage expansion of existing training on disability awareness, trauma-informed practices, cultural competency, and de-escalation techniques.

On the other hand, a negative experience with court personnel, such as being dismissed, confused by unclear information, or treated with frustration, can have serious consequences. Self-represented litigants may leave without the information they need, submit incorrect paperwork, or miss critical deadlines, all of which can result in their case being delayed or even dismissed. Worse, a poor experience can leave individuals feeling unwelcome or discouraged, reinforcing the perception that the court system is inaccessible or biased against those who cannot afford legal representation.

Ultimately, the clerk's office is not just an administrative function—it is the front door to justice for thousands of people every year. Ensuring that court personnel are trained, supported, and empowered to engage with self-represented litigants in a clear, helpful, and respectful way is a vital step in building a court system that is truly accessible to all.

To improve court user experiences and ensure more equitable access to justice, it is essential to provide targeted investment in training for court personnel, especially clerks of court. Training should include clarifying the distinction between legal information and legal advice, so that court staff can support the public effectively without overstepping their roles. Additional areas of training should include de-escalation strategies, trauma-informed

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approaches, and general customer service best practices to ensure that all court users feel respected and understood. When court staff are better prepared to assist people from all backgrounds and abilities, courthouses become more welcoming and navigable spaces for everyone.

3. Ensure regular updating of court forms

The judicial branch should establish a consistent process for regularly updating court forms—or, if such a process is already in place, conduct a thorough review to ensure it is comprehensive and effective. A designated team should be responsible for keeping forms current and aligned with changes in law and practice. To ensure effectiveness, all court staff—including clerks and navigators—must be trained on using the most up-to-date and accurate forms. Furthermore, all forms should be reviewed to ensure they are written in clear, plain language that is easy for the public to understand. Accessibility also includes the ability to access interpretation services and accessibility technology, such as screen readers and magnifiers. Together, these efforts will support a court system that is not only more efficient but also more equitable and responsive to the diverse needs of the communities it serves.

4. Paid navigators for the court navigator pilot project

The Community Outreach Work Group has closely followed the development of the Iowa Judicial Branch Court Navigators Pilot Project and is incredibly excited to see it take shape. This initiative has the potential to significantly improve access to justice by guiding individuals through the complexities of the legal system. The work group strongly believes, however, that the court navigator positions should be paid to ensure the program's effectiveness and sustainability.

A 2023 NCSC and Massachusetts Appleseed report detailing key findings from a self-help center survey found that "[a]ll programs should employ at least one permanent staff person to manage the program, provide oversight and continuity, establish protocols and procedures for volunteers, and interface with partner programs and court staff." https://www.ncsc.org/resources-courts/court-based-self-help-centers-national-survey-findings-recommendations-best. A court navigator, similar to a self-help center, provides vital services to the community by assisting those seeking access to justice. Insufficient staffing negatively impacts these types of operation, and survey respondents pointed to turnover as a significant issue. A competitive living allowance, in addition to space for professional growth and development, helps improve retention. See https://www.law.georgetown.edu/tech-

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institute/wp-content/uploads/sites/42/2024/08/Nonlawyer-Navigators-in-State-Courts-Update.pdf, McClymont, Mary E., Georgetown Justice Lab, October 2023. Mary McClymont reports that while sources of revenue to fund navigator programs exist, they can be inconsistent and piecemeal. The AmeriCorps program, a national service program that connects members to a host site to respond to areas of critical need, has been a successful option in other states, according to McClymont. This could be through an AmeriCorps planning grant or where the court itself is the host site for the AmeriCorps member.

For these reasons, the work group strongly recommends that court navigator positions be paid roles. Court navigators play a critical function in improving access to justice by helping individuals navigate the legal system with greater confidence and understanding. Relying solely on volunteers or undercompensated staff could risk program stability, due to high turnover, possible violation of privacy, and inconsistent service delivery, ultimately undermining the impact of this promising initiative. Paid positions would not only ensure accountability and professionalism but also support continuity, program growth, and stronger connections with court personnel and community partners. By investing in court navigators as valued, compensated professionals, the court system could build a sustainable and impactful program that truly meets the needs of those it aims to serve.

Community Outreach Work Group Members

Kimberly Baxter
Melissa Cano-Zelaya
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Virginia Sipes
Jennifer Tibbetts
Shelley Whitcher, chair

A foundational step in strengthening court system services is establishment of a statewide task force dedicated to creating a more unified and consistent approach. This task force would be responsible for evaluating disparities and identifying opportunities for alignment across counties, both within and between judicial districts.

Corporate Involvement

I. Corporate Involvement Overview

The Corporate Involvement Work Group comprises members of the corporate legal community, the pro bono legal community, and the business community. The work group has three current objectives:

- Educate Iowa corporate counsel, business leaders, and industry groups on access to justice issues and how and why to provide access to justice solutions in Iowa.
- Engage business lawyers in pro bono and other access to justice initiatives and track engagement metrics.
- Advocate for access to justice by creating awareness and prioritization among legislative, judicial, nonprofit, and industry groups regarding resources for access to justice.

II. Update from 2024 Commission Report

The work group focused on identifying Iowa based companies with Iowa licensed attorneys.

- **Membership changes:** The group is actively seeking additional members. We are searching for corporate leaders in Iowa, and not just attorneys.
- **Accomplishments**
  - *Attorney education*: The work group leveraged its relationship with the Iowa Chapter of the Association for Corporate Counsel (ACC) to provide accredited CLE presentations on Pro Bono for Corporate Attorneys.
  - *Business education*: The work group identified over a dozen Iowa based businesses whose law departments could benefit from education regarding the Corporate Counsel Pro Bono Playbook.

III. Looking Forward

The work group's attorney education will remain a foundational activity. The work group will continue to collaborate with the Iowa Chapter of the ACC. Additionally, the work group is strengthening its relationship with The Iowa State Bar Association (ISBA). The group is scheduled to deliver its presentation regarding access to justice (with an ethics credit) and why access to justice is important to Iowa at the ISBA Corporate Counsel CLE session later this year. Ideally, the work group would like to record this session (or record a separate session if need be) so that it may potentially be leveraged as part of the "Sort-of Stick" communications shared by the

> The work group continues to believe meaningful progress in access to justice requires business community participation.

Corporate Involvement

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Commission's Volunteer Lawyers Task Force.

Additionally, the work group would like to record a video presentation on how to build a corporate in-house pro bono program accompanied by an updated digital toolkit for Iowa in-house attorneys. This will supplement the work group's in-person work. A recorded training will enable the work group to maximize its reach across the state. Work group members will, of course, remain available as in-person resources.

Investing in access to justice will drive a more stable workforce, increase the available talent pool, decrease friction between employers and employees, improve talent diversity, and reduce strain on social resources.

IV. Recommendations to Iowa Supreme Court

The work group does not have any recommendations for the supreme court for this report. ⚖

Corporate Involvement Work Group Members

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Issac Bracher
Maria Brownell
Kristin Esche, co-chair
Anthony Farrell
Dan Huitink
Norbert Kaut
Dan Kresowik
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Libraries

I. Libraries Overview

The Commission established the Libraries Work Group in 2019, recognizing the unique yet ubiquitous role public libraries play in Iowans' access to information across the state. Iowa boasts 543 public libraries from our smallest towns to our biggest cities. These libraries serve as community gathering places where many Iowans receive everything from free, reliable Internet access to information resources and educational programming. The work understands from Commission discussions and presentations over the course of the last year that the number of people with the need for legal information and representation continues to increase across Iowa. Libraries remain an essential link in the chain between people and access to justice as the connectors of information they have collected and made available to their community.

Libraries remain an essential link in the chain between people and access to justice as the connectors of information they have collected and made available to their community.

Members of the Libraries Work Group met primarily in the fall, working on the Ask-A-Lawyer pilot for the Cady Day of Service with the Cedar Rapids Public Library, Linn County Bar Association, the State Library of Iowa, and the University of Iowa Law Library. This was the last initiative before the long-serving leader of the Libraries Work Group, Mandy Easter, retired from her position as the State Law Librarian of Iowa. State Library leadership changed in November as well and long-term planning has proven challenging with these and other changes impacting libraries. It is our hope to return to regular meetings with the ability to use the varied experience and wisdom of members of the working group to positively impact access to justice efforts for Iowans.

II. Update from the 2024 Commission Report

Members of the work group continue to be involved giving feedback for the maintenance and development of the People's Law Library of Iowa website. The website currently covers eleven content areas: consumer law, insurance law, family law, housing law, guardianships and conservatorships, abuse of older persons and dependent adults, life planning, public benefits, veterans' law, voting law, and work law.

The People's Law Library experienced steady growth in interest and website traffic. From June 1, 2024, to May 31, 2025, the site averaged more than 10,130 visits and over 13,800 page views per month, demonstrating the need for Iowans to be connected to reliable, straightforward information as they navigate the complexities of the legal system. Users continue to find the site through search engines, libraries,

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by being referred from partner organizations, or through trainings.

In April, work group members provided a training on the People's Law Library of Iowa for over 40 staff members at Waypoint in Cedar Rapids, a nonprofit providing housing and domestic violence victim services as well as child care and a survivors' program. Many of the staff already knew of the resource and provided feedback on what might make it even more useful for their clients in stressful situations struggling to take in new information. While the website traffic is an important data point, hearing from real people about how the information assists them in their work and in the lives of Iowans adds meaning to this project.

In October 2024, work group members and staff of the University of Iowa Law Library worked with Linn County Bar Association and the Cedar Rapids Public Library in an Ask-A-Lawyer pilot project to mark the 2024 Cady Day of Service and the American Bar Association's National Celebration of Pro Bono Week. University of Iowa College of Law Professors Brian Farrell and Carissa Vogel led a virtual training for the volunteers a few weeks before the event. Inspired by and building from Louisiana's decade-long award-winning "Lawyers in Libraries" access to justice initiative, University of Iowa Law Library staff created a private resource page for public library staff and attorney volunteers to disseminate information. Work group members and Law Library staff worked together, both in person and virtually, to ease the logistical burden by helping run the event on the ground. Direct assistance by volunteer attorneys served 20 people during the event. The event received positive feedback from those passing through the library all day, with many wishing this event could become a more regular occurrence. Feedback from the patrons included: "This is so helpful for those with limited resources to find a plan of action." "Very thorough and insightful." "Keep being awesome!" Given the need and the success of the collaboration between the library community and local attorneys, the work group hopes to build on this project in the years ahead.

III. Looking Forward

Each of these objectives advance access to justice by providing additional resources to Iowans seeking legal information. The target audience is all Iowans, especially low- and moderate-income people with legal problems. The strategy for realizing these objectives involves collaboration between a variety of existing partnerships and building from those foundations. These efforts will continue throughout the next year and will be assessed through quantitative and qualitative methods. As in the past, success will be measured by increased participation in and greater use of the services promoted. The State Library and University of Iowa Law Library will

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continue to provide the necessary resources in the involvement of staff resources and bear the costs associated with these projects.

- *Offer training for those who provide direct services to their communities*
  One of the most effective ways to amplify the spread of authoritative information lies in educational training for service providers who engage with people at the point of need. Continuing education opportunities support library workers and social service providers to learn and explore more tools and legal information that improve their effectiveness and increase access to justice. The State Library of Iowa and the University of Iowa Law Library will be working together over the summer to bring a virtual continuing education series to public libraries around Iowa from September – November. The trainers are collecting "real life" scenarios to demonstrate how to use legal information resources as well as creating surveys to embed in the programs to ask people about their experiences. This information will be used to help with the direction of presentation and content on the People's Law Library of Iowa as well as future continuing education. In follow-up focus groups at public libraries, which will begin next spring, the trainers plan to assess the effectiveness of the training to inform future plans and resource allocations.

- *Promote significant state and national law-related observances*
  Iowa's librarians and public libraries continue to absorb all law-related programming offered to them. Given the success of the Ask-A-Lawyer event with the Cedar Rapids Public Library and Linn County Bar Association, the work group hopes to find more opportunities for additional events in October. The Cedar Rapids Public Library expressed continuing interest in holding this event and University of Iowa Law Library staff who helped with the event met with staff of the Coralville Public Library about acting as a location in October 2025. The work group plans to build from these successes and awareness through the Iowa Library Association. With resources already built and implementation plans for anyone who wants to put on an event for their communities, those who assisted with this initiative are ready to provide support and advice. Future costs would be handled by local public libraries with logistics and training support

Libraries

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provided by the University of Iowa and the State Library of Iowa for this initiative.

- *Continue established initiatives* The People's Law Library of Iowa website continues to be part of the State Library's FY23 – FY27 Strategic Plan, though the future development trajectory remains unclear. Under the Library Services and Technology Act, the Institute for Museum and Library Services provided funding to the State Library for this project. We do not know what will happen with this funding. In response, the State Library of Iowa and the University of Iowa are developing a new Memorandum of Understanding to provide a flexible framework for planning and funding the People's Law Library of Iowa based on available resources. In the short term, this has meant scaling back on development plans. However, the commitment to providing and preserving legal information while expanding access and understanding remains unchanged.

IV. Recommendations to Iowa Supreme Court

The work group has no specific recommendations for the Iowa Supreme Court's consideration at this time, except for the court to continue its support of the Libraries Work Group. The Chair of the work group requests ideas to make funding for the People's Law Library of Iowa sustainable.

Libraries Work Group Members

Mandy Easter
Brynne Howard
Quinn O'Brian
Amy Rollinger
Carrie Slagle
Carissa Vogel, Chair

Given the success of the Ask-A-Lawyer event with the Cedar Rapids Public Library and Linn County Bar Association, the work group hopes to find more opportunities for additional events in October.

Limited Licensure

I. Limited Licensure Overview

Over the past decade, jurisdictions in the Unites States have begun implementing regulatory schemes to allow nonlawyer legal professionals to deliver specific legal services in certain areas of the law. Various titles are used for these professionals in the eight states where programs currently exist, with the term "allied legal professionals" (ALP) often used to generically describe them collectively. The contours of these programs vary from state to state, but ALPs are generally independent professionals (unlike nonprofit-based community justice workers) who are eligible for licensure following training that requires significantly less cost and time than a law degree.

The Limited Licensure Work Group was established five years ago to study these programs and pass along recommendations regarding potential suitability for Iowa. In its 2022 report, the work group recommended that the Iowa Supreme Court establish a task force to pursue development of a limited licensure pilot program in Iowa. Since making that recommendation, the work group has continued to monitor the growth of ALP programs nationally, review relevant data and scholarship, and engage with stakeholders in Iowa. In the last year, the work group held one meeting via video conference and communicated via email. It was greatly aided by research conducted by student volunteers from the University of Iowa College of Law. Appendix E.

> State supreme courts continue to review the data collected from their initial forays into alternative legal service provider regulation.

II. Update from the 2024 Commission Report

A new report from the Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System (IAALS) released on June 18, 2025, provides a up-to-date and succinct summary of recent developments in the eight states that currently have limited licensure programs (https://iaals.du.edu/sites/default/files/documents/publications/alp_reciprocity.pdf, pp. 3-5). Of particular note since last year's work group report:

- Colorado has established a program with an initial cohort of 62 licensed legal paraprofessionals.
- Michigan is currently developing a limited licensure program.
- Minnesota is nearing the end of their pilot phase with the expectation that their program will become permanent.
- New Hampshire's pilot program has been expanded statewide and extended until 2029.
- While Washington's licensure regime sunset in 2021, already-licensed limited license legal technicians continue to operate

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and efforts exist to reinstate the program.

The primary focus of the full IAALS report is on efforts to increase uniformity and pathways to reciprocity among existing and future ALP programs. The report identifies main components for development of a future reciprocity framework.

As of spring 2025, ALP programs are being explored by at least eight other states: Texas, New Mexico, Indiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, New York, Vermont, and Connecticut.

A recent study by a team at Iowa State University is one of the first to uniformly identify legal deserts in the United States. The study determined eighteen counties in Iowa qualify as legal deserts under the prevailing ABA definition. The full study, published this spring in the South Dakota Law Review, includes recommendations and points out that most state-level policies are not guided by sound data. David Peters, Emma Bartling, & Emily Meyer, *Understanding Rural Legal Deserts to Inform Public Policy: Identifying and Describing Lawyer Gaps in Non-Metropolitan Counties,* 70 S.D. L. Rev. 253 (2025). The study examines a number of policy responses to address legal needs in rural areas, including attorney recruitment and incentive programs, licensed legal paraprofessional programs, and legal education. Notably, the article ultimately recommends licensed legal paraprofessional programs as the best long-term solution for rural legal deserts. Id. at 286-87.

The work group has maintained communication with leaders of The Iowa State Bar Association and others in the profession. The work group understands that the ISBA leaders generally have limited familiarity with limited licensure and the ISBA Board of Governors has not discussed the topic. The work group is willing to help facilitate sharing background information with ISBA leadership and engage in initial discussions if requested by the ISBA or the court.

III. Looking Forward

The work group anticipates that the number of ALPs will continue to grow in states where limited licensure already exists and that additional states will explore and implement such programs. Increased uniformity and potential reciprocity will likely strengthen the ALP model. The work group will closely monitor developments in current and future states permitting limited licensure, particularly Minnesota. In light of growing concern about rural legal deserts in Iowa, the increased publicity related to it and given the conclusions of the ISU study referenced above, the work group is especially interested in the potential for ALPs to address legal need in rural areas since these programs provide an easier path for rural residents to complete educational requirements while

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staying in or connected to their communities.

IV. Recommendations to Iowa Supreme Court

In 2022, the work group recommended establishment of an Iowa Supreme Court task force to explore a pilot program for limited licensure of nonlawyers in specific matters. The work group emphasized that it was not suggesting commitment to adoption of a program but felt a task force would facilitate stakeholder engagement and lead to a concrete proposal for further discussion. Given developments and research since that time, the work group encourages the court to review those 2022 recommendations and revisit the idea of a task force or provide direction to the Commission or this work group on any preferred next steps. The full 2022 recommendation to the court is set forth in Appendix H.

As of spring 2025, ALP programs are being explored by at least eight other states: Texas, New Mexico, Indiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, New York, Vermont, and Connecticut.

Limited Licensure Work Group Members

Bill Boyd
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Kyle Fry
Erin Lain
Bob Oberbillig
Carol Phillips, co-chair
Anjie Shutts, co-chair
Frank Tenuta

Rural Access

I. Rural Access Overview

The Rural Access Work Group is co-chaired by Iowa District Court Judge Dustria Relph and University of Iowa College of Law Professor Brian Farrell. The work group held video conference meetings (April 22 and May 8) and met in person during quarterly Commission meetings, with additional communication via e-mail. Judge Relph joined The Iowa State Bar Association's Rural Practice Committee meeting with Iowa State Legislature Representative Brian Lohse on October 4, 2024, to discuss rural attorney recruitment. Both work group co-chairs met with Representative Lohse on January 9, 2025, to provide insight on potential rural attorney recruitment legislation.

Work group members monitored developments in Iowa and other jurisdictions and participated in several conferences related to the group's mandate. Several members attended an April 2025 CLE presented by Drake Law School students that focused on court debt, limited scope representation, court forms, and limited licensure.

II. Update from the 2024 Commission Report

The work group continues to monitor the decline in the number of rural practitioners in Iowa, examine the factors that lead to this decline, and explore how this impacts rural access to justice. As the work group reported in 2023:

While the work group urges caution not to conflate these two phenomena—access to justice means more than access to attorneys, and an attorney might not be the only or best access to justice intervention in a particular situation—there is relationship between the two.

In certain situations, a lack of available local attorneys presents a significant barrier to justice. The concern Chief Justice Christensen noted in her Condition of the Judiciary regarding contract indigent defense attorneys carries over into civil matters: the dwindling number of attorneys who take appointments in mental health or substance abuse proceedings may be unable to fit cases into their workload in a timely manner; attorneys in rural areas may be too busy to take pro bono or low bono clients, including those originating through the Volunteer Lawyers Program; local attorneys may be unavailable to take on "simple" cases like small claims, evictions, or domestic abuse where it would be cost-prohibitive to hire an attorney from another community; and legal advice may not be available to those facing technology, transportation, or financial barriers to using out-of-town attorneys.

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> Limited research and anecdotal information suggest a complex web of factors contribute to the rural attorney shortage and the challenges in recruiting law school graduates to rural practice, including: rural economic decline; indigent defense rates and appointment structure; law student debt load; perception and reality of rural economic, civic, and social opportunities; lack of law school preparation for general practice and validation of rural career choices; and financial expectations of rural attorneys seeking to retire or otherwise bring on a new attorney. Many firm-to-new-associate "matchmaking" efforts have tended to have limited success given these factors.

That year, 2023, the work group supported exploration of an attorney recruitment program specifically tailored to promote access to justice. In 2024, Rep. Brian Lohse introduced a bill creating a rural attorney recruitment program. Work group co-chair Judge Relph joined The Iowa State Bar Association's Rural Practice Committee in meeting with Representative Lohse to discuss rural attorney recruitment and how such a program could be intentionally crafted as a vehicle for access to justice. An amended bill included a requirement that the attorneys benefitting from the program engage in pro bono work, although this language was broad and did not contain metrics to assess compliance. The General Assembly did not approve the bill in 2024.

In early January 2025, the work group co-chairs met with Representative Lohse to share their perspectives and expertise on the relationship between attorney recruitment programs and access to justice. The bill was introduced again in 2025 in a similar form to the final 2024 bill and passed the House but did not pass the Senate. The work group will continue to remain in communication with Representative Lohse and stakeholders about the recruitment program. The work group recognizes that economic development may be an effective "hook" for such a program. ISBA President-Elect Kathy Law (now President) has been meeting with representatives from the Indiana bar association about Indiana's rural attorney initiative.

Work group members continue to monitor developments in other states including South Dakota's Project Rural Practice. Co-chair Brian Farrell will be participating in a panel with Hannah Haksgaard from the University of South Dakota School of Law this summer focused on that state's program.

- *Continued consideration of a limited licensure for legal practitioner program.*

  The work group continues to monitor developments in other jurisdictions. The work group is intrigued with the potential impact of allied legal professional

Continued from page 37

programs in rural areas in particular.

- *Continued engagement with the ISBA's Rural Practice Committee and other actors to emphasize access to justice in rural practice conversations.*

  The work group co-chairs held a telephone meeting with new ISBA Rural Practice Committee chair Ryan Daisy on October 4, 2024. The work group is pleased with the announcement this spring that the ISBA is changing the "Committee" into a "Section." Among other benefits, this will allow lawyers to join the Section and create a list of self-identified rural practice attorneys. The work group is also happy to welcome Mr. Daisy as a new member.

III. Looking Forward

The work group's primary objectives for the coming year include:

- *Continue work toward a rural attorney recruitment program tailored to access to justice.*

  The work group will continue to monitor developments and scholarship on recruitment programs. Anticipating Representative Lohse's bill will be introduced again in 2026, work group members will continue engaging with legislators and bar leaders to educate them about the value of any recruitment program including an explicit access to justice goal, clear requirements for attorneys availing of the program, and metrics to gauge the program's impact.

- *Continued consideration of a limited licensure for legal practitioner program.*

  The work group will continue to liaise with the Limited Licensure Work Group to monitor developments nationally and seek additional data on the efficacy of existing programs and their impact on access to justice in the rural context. The work group notes scholarship suggesting that the easiest way to add a legal professional to a new community is to educate and train a person who hails from that community. A faster and less-expensive pathway to licensing new legal services providers that does not require them to relocate for multiple years of training could have particularly beneficial impacts for underserved rural communities.

- *Engagement with the ISBA's Rural Practice Section and other actors to emphasize access to justice in rural practice conversations.*

  The work group will continue to liaise with ISBA's Rural Practice Section and with law schools.

- *Monitor the court navigator pilot program in Clinton County.*

Continued from page 38

The work group is excited for the Iowa Judicial Branch Court Navigators Pilot Program to begin this summer.

IV. Recommendations to Iowa Supreme Court

The Rural Access Work Group's recommendations to the Iowa Supreme Court are as follows:

- The work group recommends the court continue to engage with stakeholders exploring a rural attorney recruitment program to ensure that any such program includes an explicit access to justice goal, clear requirements for attorneys availing of the program, and metrics to gauge the impact of the program.

- The work group recommends the court actively monitor the development of allied legal professionals programs nationally and examine their potential impact on rural access to justice, encourage other stakeholders such as the ISBA to do the same, and renew consideration of a pilot ALP program in Iowa.

Rural Access Work Group Members

Ryan Daisy
Brian Farrell, co-chair
Katie Hall
Kathleen Law
Dan Mart
Judge Dustria Relph, co-chair
Megan Srinivas
Michael Wells

A faster and less-expensive pathway to licensing new legal services providers that does not require them to relocate for multiple years of training could have particularly beneficial impacts for underserved rural communities.

Veterans

I. Veterans Overview

The Veterans Work Group, meeting online and in person, continues its work identifying the primary unmet legal needs of Iowa's veterans, identifying gaps in legal services and resources and the dissemination of information about them, and supporting the provision of legal services to veterans in need.

According to the Iowa Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA), there are approximately 182,000 veterans in Iowa, or 5.8% of the state's population. Most Iowa veterans are over the age of 55. Their median household income is $61,000, while 6% live in poverty. Eighty percent of veterans own their own home with a quarter living in rural areas. Twenty-two percent report one or more "major problems" in their homes. On the national level, there has been a 25% decrease in the veteran population over the past two decades and by 2040, it is estimated that less than 3% of the U.S. population will be veterans.

II. Update from the 2023 Commission Report

- *Mission and strategy*

The objectives of the work group remain largely the same: (1) identify the veterans struggling to access legal services; (2) identify legal service options available to veterans; (3) encourage efforts to provide legal services to veterans; and (4) support the connection of veterans to available legal services. The work group continued its review and work on its objectives, which included discussions with IDVA, veteran services offices (VSOs), VA accredited attorneys, private attorneys serving veterans, The Iowa State Bar Association and American Bar Association, the University of Iowa College of Law, veterans, and others who serve and support veterans.

The work group also consulted with partners including IDVA, local VSOs, VA accredited attorneys, private attorneys serving veterans, the ISBA, and the ABA, in addition to U.S. Senator Ernst's special assistant on veterans and military affairs, members of the judiciary, and Judge Advocates serving in the Iowa National Guard.

- *Areas of greatest needs for veterans*

Outside of benefits and discharge issues, the areas of greatest need for veterans are eviction and foreclosure, driver license restoration, child support, and outstanding warrants and fines. These have consistently been identified by legal service providers and those who work with veterans as areas of need in addition to employment, debt, and consumer matters.

While the legal issues with which veterans are most often seeking assistance are identifiable, it is less clear what barriers to access exist

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that are specific to veterans compared to the general population.

- *Overlap with other work groups*

There is considerable overlap with the issues other work groups are addressing, including those considering rural issues and outreach efforts. Veterans, like those who have not served, may experience mental health issues that significantly contribute to their legal problems or to the ongoing or escalating nature of these problems. Mental health issues may make it more difficult for them to ask for help. Also, many Iowa veterans are older and may access services or need to access services differently. With a quarter of veterans living in rural areas, the shortage of attorneys in rural areas is an issue. Therefore, a goal in the coming year will be to coordinate with other work groups to find synergies in our respective efforts.

- *Outreach to veterans' stakeholder groups*

Considering the many established programs serving veterans and the access to legal services and other resources veterans are entitled to, the work group continues to reach out to agencies and organizations to better understand what gaps exist and to determine what support the Commission can provide. Veterans are unique in that they can access county level VSOs and there are programs, including the ABA and ISBA Free Legal Answers, which directly serve veterans.

The work group continues to gather information about the numbers of veterans being served, the types of assistance being sought, and the gaps that exist. The work group has confirmed that not only are veterans likely unaware of available resources from these agencies and veterans' organizations, the very agencies and veterans' organizations upon which they rely may not be fully aware of the legal issues and available resources of their constituents.

As a result of the work group's engagement with agencies, organizations, and individuals working in this space, there is now greater discussion and awareness of these issues. The work group continues to seek opportunities to speak with leaders of veteran organizations and have its members speak or otherwise participate as appropriate in meetings of such organizations.

The work group has maintained contact with the office of the Iowa National Guard Staff Judge Advocate, who has previously expressed an interest in working with the Commission to identify current and retired JAG attorneys who can provide pro bono legal assistance to veterans, bolstering the services made available through Iowa Legal Aid, the ISBA and ABA, volunteer attorneys, and others.

Continued from page 41

III. Looking forward

- *Identify the veterans struggling to access legal services*

The work group will continue to work with our partners, including IDVA and the VSOs, to better identify veterans who face challenges accessing legal assistance. The work group will continue to engage with the Iowa Commission on Veterans Affairs to discuss this Commission's work, and the work group anticipates that greater collaboration with IDVA's staff and the VSOs will result. The work group will continue discussions with VSOs on how best to communicate with and support their staff and the veterans they serve.

The work group will also continue to collaborate with legal service providers and the ABA and ISBA to track reported needs and identify areas in which access to and awareness of resources can be improved. Further, the work group will continue discussions with the judicial branch and agencies and organizations to identify opportunities for gathering additional data regarding access to the legal system and any barriers to access.

Lastly, the work group will continue its internal discussions regarding applicable underlying systemic issues that may be impacting the ability of veterans to access the legal system. The work group will further consider whether these efforts should expand to include all who serve or have served including those actively serving, separated, or retired, and members of the Iowa National Guard and the Reserves.

- *Identify legal service options available to veterans*

The work group will continue to review legal service options and inventory those resources. The work group can share the inventory with veteran and service provider partners regarding gaps and strengths in the system.

- *Encourage efforts to provide legal services to veterans*

The work group, with its veteran and service provider partners, will continue to encourage and support volunteer efforts including, potentially, the creation of a network of attorneys to provide volunteer legal services across the state. The work group will engage volunteer-based programs to encourage development of new or more robust programs.

- *Support the connection of veterans to available legal services*

The work group will explore opportunities for collaboration with the Community Outreach and Rural Access Work Groups. The Community Outreach Work Group is ideally positioned to identify

Continued from page 42

systemic access issues that similarly affect both veterans and nonveterans. Together, the work groups can identify ways to assist agencies and organizations that provide support to veterans. This should also help identify how the judicial branch can better support access to the court system and its resources for veterans.

Collaboration with the Rural Access Work Group is essential as well. Given that a quarter of veterans live in rural areas of the state, the work group will collaborate with the Rural Access Work Group to find ways in which veteran support agencies and organizations can alleviate access issues for veterans and, potentially, nonveterans as well.

The work group will continue discussions with the ISBA and ABA and other volunteer programs to explore ways in which the Commission can support their work on behalf of veterans. The continued development of relationships with IDVA and the VSOs are aimed at increasing support for existing programs serving veterans and solidly establishing connections between veterans and those programs.

IV. Recommendations to Iowa Supreme Court

The work group does not have specific recommendations for the court. For this next year the work group will continue its work gathering information and lead discussions so that: (1) the Commission is educating others on access to justice issues and supporting those who are serving veterans in need; and (2) the Commission is positioned to make recommendations for effective systemic change, which will enhance access to justice for veterans.

Veterans Work Group Members

Susan Barta
Daphney Daniel
Judge David Faith
Judge Kevin McKeever
Daniel Van Sant

Recommendations to Court

The Commission highlights certain recommendations for the supreme court's consideration as well as Commission efforts and activities for the next year.

Volunteer Lawyer Task Force

- For better tracking and encouragement of attorneys' pro bone hours, the task force recommends revamping two questions on the Iowa Supreme Court Client Security Commission Combined Statement and Questionnaire. Pp. 14-17.
- The task force recommends a robust and coordinated communications strategy to educate and motivate the legal community to do more pro bono work. Pp. 17-18.

Community Outreach Work Group

- Establish a statewide task force to conduct a comprehensive accessibility and access to justice evaluation of all courthouses. Pp. 21-23.
- Provide court personnel with additional and robust training in providing quality service to self-represented litigants. P. 23.
- Provide resources necessary to maintain regular updating of court forms. P.24.
- Provide paid court navigators for expansion of the court navigator pilot program. Pp. 24-25.

Libraries Work Group

- Submit any suggestions for ongoing funding of the People's Law Library of Iowa. P. 32.

Limited Licensure Work Group

- Establish a supreme court task force to explore a pilot program for limited licensure of nonlawyers in specific legal matters. P.35; App. I.

Rural Access Work Group

- The work group recommends that the court continue to engage with stakeholders exploring an attorney recruitment program to ensure that any such program includes explicit access to justice goals, clear requirements for attorneys availing of the program, and metrics to gauge the impact of the program. P. 38.
- The work group recommends that the court actively monitor the development of allied legal professional programs nationally and examine their potential impact on rural access to justice, encourage other stakeholders such as the state bar to do the same, and renew consideration of a pilot program in Iowa. P.38.

Conclusion

The Iowa Access to Justice Commission's ninth annual report describes its continuing work to address persistent barriers to civil justice that many Iowans continue to confront. By fostering collaboration among legal professionals, policymakers, and community organizations, the Commission continues in its efforts to develop innovative strategies to help ensure that justice is accessible to all Iowans, regardless of their income, residence, or other personal characteristics.

Stakeholders and courts across the country have recognized that Americans struggling with barriers to access the court system include not only those living below the poverty line (and thus potentially eligible for legal aid services) but many people in the middle class who can pay for some, but not all, of the legal representation necessary to address their needs.

The supreme court's adoption of the Commission's recommendation to establish a court navigator program in Clinton County provides a special opportunity to augment judicial branch services for court users, and particularly self-represented litigants. With assistance from the National Center of State Courts, the task force has put in place a strong foundation for building out navigator services statewide.

The limited licensure (or "allied legal professional") movement continues to advance in other states. The promise of addressing court access needs in discreet areas (particularly family law and housing) is undeniable, and the Commission will continue to monitor and encourage attention to this developing area.

The Commission's Corporate Involvement Work Group has generated significant interest by corporate counsel in pro bono activities, in part by informing business leaders that many of their own employees would struggle to afford an attorney to assist with their own legal needs.

The practice of unbundling or limited-scope representation could play a larger role in reducing barriers and narrowing the justice gap in Iowa. Efforts to encourage more attorneys to embrace the practice might similarly have significant access-to-justice benefits for Iowans.

And finally, the negative consequences from unpaid court fines and fees should no longer be ignored. The current approach entangles people in a cycle of prolonged court involvement that extends far beyond a typical criminal case. People unable to pay face escalating penalties, including additional fees, drivers' license suspensions, and even potential arrest—not for new crimes, but for unpaid debt. Unpaid fines and fees often lead to adverse employment, housing, and child custody situations, with ripple effects that extend to families and communities.

Appendices

Appendix A
Iowa Access to Justice Commission Work Group and Task Force Rosters, July 2025

Appendix B
National Center for State Courts "Iowa Court Navigator Pilot Project Status Report"

Appendix C
Iowa Statewide Self-Represented Litigant Data FY 20424

Appendix D
Color-coded-by-county map of Iowa shows numbers of attorneys in full-time practice in each Iowa county

Appendix E
Student research report: "Access to Justice National Landscape Review: Efforts to Reduce Fines and Fees"

Appendix F
Student research report: "Pro Bono and Continuing Legal Education Initiatives"

Appendix G
Student research report: "National Landscape Review: Allied Legal Professional"

Appendix H
Student research report: "ATJC AI Developments"

Appendix I
Proposed revisions to the annual Iowa Supreme Court Client Security Commission Combined Statement and Questionnaire (Questionnaire) for attorneys

Appendix J
Recommendation from the Iowa Access to Justice Commission Limited Licensure Work Group. *Iowa Access to Justice Commission 2022 Report*, pp. 20-22

Appendix A

Iowa Access to Justice Commission July 2025

Work Group and Task Force rosters, 2024-2025 (*non-Commission member) (LCommission liaison)

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Appendix B

Iowa Court Navigator Pilot Project
STATUS REPORT

Submitted: June 15, 2025

Project Activities

Over the course of the last few months, the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) has continued to make progress on the Iowa Judicial Branch's (IJB) Court Navigator Pilot Program. Activities completed between March 20 – June 15 have included the following:

- NCSC conducted pre-pilot surveys with judicial officers and court staff to help support the development of training materials and support resources for navigators. Pre-pilot survey results were also provided to the IJB staff for review and discussion.
- NCSC and the IJB continued to meet every two weeks throughout this time to review the project plan and implementation steps for the initial launch of the pilot. NCSC also developed a project checklist to support tracking processes.
- During this time, NCSC also developed materials to support the initial recruitment of volunteer navigators and sent materials to the University of Iowa (Human Rights Certificate program); Clinton County Community College; and Northeast Community College. The IJB staff also provided information to St. Ambrose University.
- NCSC conducted meetings with three recruited volunteers from the University of Iowa and with the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) of Clinton County, which resulted in the IJB signing an MOU with RSVP for potential volunteer partnerships in the future.
- NCSC developed initial materials to train the first cohort of volunteer court navigators and traveled to Clinton to deliver a live training for the first three volunteers on May 28, 2025. The training included an overview of the Iowa Judicial Branch and the Clinton County Courthouse; a review of the roles and responsibilities of court navigators; information on the case types covered by the volunteer court navigator program; and content related to legal advice vs. legal information. The in-person training also included hands-on practice with e-filing and a tour of the courthouse.

The first three court navigators began their volunteer terms the week of June 2, 2025. Volunteers are currently covering shifts from 9:00 AM – 3:00 PM on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays.

NCSC has provided additional materials to support the navigators with their volunteer activities. Materials include an online repository of resources, an intake survey for court users, data collection processes for the court navigator sessions, and a court user satisfaction survey.

Materials provided during this period include:

- Project Implementation Task List
- Court Navigator Recruitment Materials (flyers and information sheets)
- Repository of Resources for Court Navigators
- Pre-Pilot Surveys (for judges and court personnel)

- Court User Acknowledgement Form
- Training PowerPoint Slides (used for live training)
- Court User Intake Survey
- Data Collection Process
- Court User Satisfaction Survey

Relationship of Project Activities to the Proposed Schedule

NCSC is continuing to complete work in accordance with the project plan and timeline. NCSC does not expect any delays to substantive work included in this contract.

Significant Problem Areas

None.

Upcoming Activities

In the next month (by July 30), NCSC is planning to complete the following activities:

- NCSC will incorporate any feedback provided by the IJB staff and the Task Force to finalize court navigator training materials and record training modules to be used for future training sessions.
- NCSC will develop a training facilitation guide for future use.
- NCSC will continue to compile and organize available resources (forms, documents, videos) and referral sources that court navigators can use as references for self-represented litigants. NCSC will also develop resources to complement existing documents and forms.
- NCSC will hold periodic meetings with the first cohort of volunteer navigators to gain feedback on additional resources that can support the role.
- NCSC will develop community outreach materials, including flyers and brochures that can be used to notify the public of the free services available.
- NCSC will continue recruitment efforts to assist with finding volunteers for future months.

NCSC will continue to meet with the Judicial Branch staff throughout this time and will develop additional pilot resources based on the suggestions and recommendations from the first cohort of court navigators, the IJB staff, and Task Force members.

Iowa Statewide SRL Data FY 2024

Appendix C

Case type total	Total	Attny for both parties	Attny for both %	Plaintiff SRL	Plaintiff SRL %	Defendant SRL	Defendant SRL %	Both party SRL	Both party SRL %	At least one SRL	At least one SRL
Divorce	**9309**	3044	33%	178	2%	2991	32%	3096	33%	6265	67%
Civil Infraction	**7022**	166	2%	12	0%	5971	85%	873	12%	6856	98%
Civil	**2187**	473	22%	156	7%	864	40%	694	32%	1714	78%
Domestic Abuse	**5571**	517	9%	616	11%	291	5%	4147	74%	5054	91%
Domestic Relations	**6684**	855	13%	246	4%	816	12%	4767	71%	5829	87%
Elder Abuse	**263**	9	3%	31	12%	13	5%	210	80%	254	97%
Civil Equity	**4232**	2239	53%	11	0%	1961	46%	21	0%	1083	47%
Civil Law	**13628**	3819	28%	53	0%	9668	71%	88	1%	9809	72%
Lien	**376**	0	0%	4	1%	0	0%	372	99%	376	100%
Post Conviction	**807**	551	68%	215	275%	20	2%	21	3%	256	32%
Sexual Abuse	**320**	32	10%	58	18%	37	12%	193	60%	288	90%
Seized Property	**1183**	17	1%	67	6%	146	12%	953	81%	1166	99%
Total Cases	**50429**	**10679**	**21%**	**1573**	**3%**	**22495**	**45%**	**15682**	**31%**	**39750**	**79%**

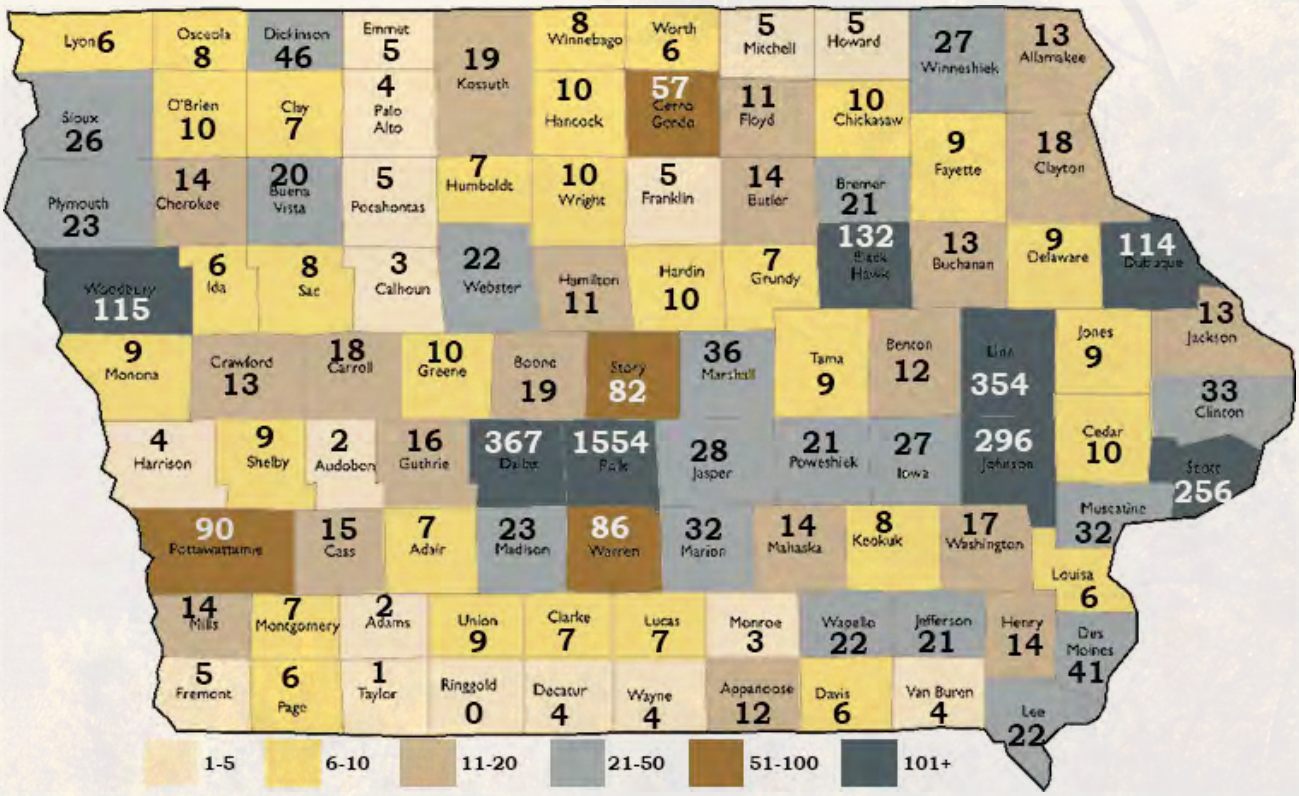
Case type total	Total	Attny for both parties	Attny for both %	Plaintiff SRL	Plaintiff SRL %	Defendant SRL	Defendant SRL %	Both party SRL	Both party SRL %	At least one SRL	At least one SRL
Small Claim	79533	2124	3%	915	1%	49980	63%	26514	33%	77409	97%

Appendix D

Iowa Attorney Numbers by County

Excerpted from Iowa Courts Annual Report FY 2024, p.12

Number of full-time attorneys by county, January 2025



According to the National Center for State Courts, a legal desert is an attorney shortage in a rural community where there are few-to-no options for legal representation. Iowa has several counties that fit that definition. As of January 2025, there are 17 counties with five or fewer private practice attorneys and 31 with between six and ten. Nearly 50% of Iowa counties have ten or fewer attorneys assisting Iowans with their legal needs.

Percentage of cases with at least one self-represented litigant by selected case types

Domestic Relations	Divorce	Civil Law	Domestic Abuse
6,684 cases	9,309 cases	13,628 cases	5,571 cases
87%	67%	72%	91%

Appendix E

Access to Justice National Landscape Review: Efforts to Reduce Fines and Fees*

Overview

The Fines and Fees Justice Center (FFJC) offers national-level research and evaluates immediate access to justice needs and emerging trends. FFJC asserts that criminal fines and fees create barriers to accessing justice, particularly for low-to-moderate income households who are financially constrained and are simultaneously struggling to afford necessities such a food, housing, and healthcare. The National Center for Access to Justice ranked Iowa 21st, in its overall Justice Index and 28th in its Fines and Fees Index. Iowa Access to Justice 2024 Commission Report identified fines and fees as a relevant access to justice issue for Iowans. Research below further indicates that there is an immediate need to implement strategies and interventions in Iowa that mitigate the adverse impacts of civil fines and fees, particularly for those who are low-to-moderate income.

In our analysis of existing Access to Justice Commissions and similarly situated entities, we have identified strategies some commissions have taken including (1) authorizing research evaluating state landscape or against national trends (2) offering best practice and recommendations on preferred interventions to state legislatures like judicial rule changes and (3) assisting with outreach to promote relevant programs offered by other actors like judicial fee-wavier program and statutory fee-waiver programs.

Evaluating the Issues: Iowa's Fines and Fees Landscape

Iowa has a reputation of being "unusually aggressive" in its fines and fees practices. As of 2021, Iowans owed an estimated $900,000,000 in court debt. This represents an approximately 600% increase from Iowan's estimated court debt of $150,000,000 in 1998 (cite FFJC). For context, the entire Fiscal Year 2021 Iowa Judicial Branch budget was $181,023,737. Addressing the commission in June 2024, Lisa Foster, Co-Executive Director of the FFJC, "stated that no other state charges defendants more for court appointed council than Iowa does." (p. 4)

Iowa, like many states, implements various civil fines and fees. This includes but is not limited to filing fees and processing fees as well as punitive fines and fees for infractions, citations, tickets, and late payments. The Iowa Legislature sets the amounts for civil fines fees and defers to the Iowa Judicial Branch to execute them. Iowans are expected to pay court debt within 30 days of receiving the order. Late payment implicating statutory prescribed fees and transferring debt collection duties either to a county attorney or to the Central Collections Unit of the Iowa Department of Revenue (who do not charge interest), or to a private debt collector that can

*Authors: University of Iowa College of Law students Megan LeBlanc and Kathryn Linehan volunteering through a pro bono project organized by Iowa Law's Citizen Lawyer Program under the supervision of Professor Brian Farrell. Any views expressed in this report do not reflect the position of the Iowa Access to Justice Commission, Commission members, any of its work groups or work group members, or of the University of Iowa College of Law or its employees.

charge up to 25% interest. Iowa law "allows the judicial branch to contract with private debt collectors for collection of debt owed to the State of Iowa."

Previously, the Iowa Department of Revenue implemented a court debt amnesty program, only requiring 50% payment. However, this statuary program and others have not been enacted since 2010. As of October 2024, Iowans may apply for an "Application to Defer Payment Costs" also called a fee waiver, an income-based program. (CT)

The 2024 Commission Report's and FFJC's analysis indicates short-term and long-term implications of court fines and fees on Iowans quality of life. Driver's license suspension is a common punishment for failure to pay court fines and fees, including those for unpaid court debt and child support (p.4). Particularly for Iowans who have been incarcerated, unpaid court debt limits expungement opportunities (p. 5)

Efforts by State Commissions and Similarly Situated Agencies

This analysis is limited to the forty-two (42) State and Territory Access to Justice Commissions and similarly situated agencies across the United States who share their materials publicly via their websites. For the purposes of this memo, these entities will be referred to as Access to Justice Commissions.

Across the country, approximately half (20) of commissions explicitly mention fines and fees as a barrier to accessing justice while a slightly majority (22) did not mention fines and fees as a barrier. However, it is important to note that commissions may not mention it in their marketing materials but may be discussing these issues internally.

Access to Justice Commissions are primarily responding to the issue of fines and fees in their communities by: (1) commissioning or producing research on impacts of fines and fees (2) making recommendations to or endorsements of legislative statutory programs and (3) outreach activities to elevate judicial initiatives. Occasionally, Access to Justice Commission like New York, Virigina and South Carolina have engaged in multiple strategies.

(1) Research on the Impacts of Fines and Fees

Access to Justice Commissions in Nebraska, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, Minnesota and Georgia have prepared or partnered with entities to complete research on statewide and issue-specific impacts of fines and fees. Examples of research products include the South Carolina Statewide Civil Legal Needs Assessment, The High Cost of "Justice": A Snapshot of Juvenile Court Fines and Fees in Michigan, and Illinois Court Assessments: Finding and Recommendations for Addressing Barries to Access to Justice and Additional Issues Associated with Fees and Other Court Costs in Civil, Criminal, and Traffic Proceedings.

Research has been completed in partnerships with entities like the North Carolina Pro Bono Research Center, the New Hampshire Fees and Fines Task Force as well as Bar Associations,

legislatures, and nonprofits. In review, it appears that research is being used to inform future action like recommendations or endorsements of legislative statutory programs.

(2) Recommendations or Endorsements of Legislative Statutory Programs

Access to Justice Commissions have made recommendations to legislative bodies on statutory programs and have endorsed existing legislative programs.

This strategy is the most common with Texas, South Carolina, and North Carolina appearing to offer direct recommendations to the legislature about the need for fine and fee waiver programs and New York, Virginia, Minnesota, Hawaii and Oregon highlighting existing fee waiver programs. Fee waiver programs appear to target specific populations, like low-income community members, or specific legal issues, such as minor traffic violations.

(3) Outreach Activities to Elevate Judicial Initiatives

Access to Justice Commissions have leveraged visibility through their ties to State Supreme Courts to engage in outreach activities that elevate existing, judicial initiatives.

Outreach activities being used to elevate judicial initiatives include preparing marketing materials such as flyers for existing fee-waiver programs and sharing program promotional materials on Access to Justice Commission platforms like websites. Similar outreach strategies used for fee waiver programs are also used for court navigator programs and pro-se assistance programs.

This strategy is the least common of the three with activities primarily completed by the New Hampshire Access to Justice Commission, whose outreach materials primarily focus on fee-waver programs, and the Oklahoma Access to Justice Commission and Virginia Access to Justice Commission, whose materials appear to cross share from existing programs on their website. Hawaii also mentions an legal services initiative the help people with unpaid fines convert unpaid fines into community service obligations.

Efforts by Entities Outside of Access to Justice Commissions

Outside of the work of Access to Justice Commissions overviewed above, other entities most concerned with the issues of fines and fees include legislative research bodies and nonprofit entities conducting research for legislative recommendations.

(1) Legislative Research Bodies

In California, for example, their Committee on Revision of the Penal Code was established in 2020 to recommend statutory reforms to the state legislature. In June 2023, the Legislative Analyst's Office published a report titled "Overview of Criminal Fine and Fee System and Notable Related Actions" addressed to the Committee. Illinois had a similar task force. The Court Fee Task Force was created by the Access to Justice Act with bipartisan representation from all three branches of Illinois government. The task force was comprised of judges, retired

judges, legislators, circuit clerks and members of the private bar. It submitted a report to the Illinois General Assembly and Supreme Court in 2016, which included its research findings and legislative recommendations.

Nevada's Access to Justice Commission is considering how to reconcile their unique fines and fees allocation structure which directs revenue generated from fines and fees towards funding legal aid organizations in the state. Their commission is carefully considering changes with Nevada's Coalition of Legal Service Providers.

In 2023, New Mexico passed legislation developed in conjunction with the ideology of the New Mexico Supreme Court which "eliminates the post-adjudication and bench warrant fees that have recently become the subject of a national movement to end the criminalization of poverty." The bill also expanded options for replacing fines and fees with community service. In its press release, Chief Justice of the New Mexico Supreme Court, Shannon Bacon, stated "The elimination of fee funding is a national best practice, which promotes budget transparency and eliminates the unjust practice of paying for government functions on the backs of those who can least afford it."

The Oregon legislature acted to stop driver's license suspensions when they were based only on unpaid fines from minor traffic violations. Unfortunately, old fines and suspensions were not forgiven. That disproportionately harmed low-income Oregonians, and legal aid advocated to have old fines and fees forgiven as well. In December 2022, Governor Kate Brown agreed with legal aid and 7,000 Oregonians now have the opportunity to get their licenses back. https://annualreport.cej-oregon.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Annual-Report-FINAL-6.26.23-B-sans-crops.pdf

(2) Nonprofit Organizations and Legal Services

Fines and Fees Justice Center does research and advocacy work. In Delaware, a coalition of advocacy members, the DE Campaign to End Debtor's Prison, pushes for reform of the court fines and fees system and seeking to eliminate poverty. The ACLU in multiple states also does research on fines and fees and advocates for more equitable practices.

In Minnesota, Pro Bono attorneys are assisting clients navigate the complicated process of resolving unpaid fines and fees in order to obtain a valid driver's license. Additionally, after the Oregon legislature acted to stop driver's license suspensions when they were based only on unpaid fines from minor traffic violations, Legal Aid in Oregon also played a large role in advocating for old fines and suspensions to be forgiven as well in order for low-income Oregonians to have the opportunity to get their licenses back, according to the Oregon ATJ's 2023 annual report.

Conclusion

In conclusion, fines and fees are a significant, immediate barrier to access to justice in Iowa. Failure to intentionally intervene will lead to ongoing, institutionalized exclusions of including Iowans who are low-income. Because vulnerable populations are also more likely to have low-incomes, this issue also likely adversely impacts adults with disabilities, those who are housing insecure, seniors, those who have previously been incarcerated.

The Access to Justice Commission can have a role in planning research into the recommendations that national research non-profits have made. For example, the Fines and Fees Justice Center recommends that Iowa (1) eliminate driver's license suspension, juvenile fees, and indigent counsel fees; (2) change Iowa's recent presumption that defendants have an ability to pay to an ability to pay with mandated hearing to determine ability to pay at sentencing and (3) develop clear standards for assessing fines and fees to alleviate disparities in the outcome of cases" (p. 5). Because research has already been completed on Iowa's access to justice landscape, further research on the efficacy of any of these strategies could be an important step about the project impacts of specific interventions in Iowa and administrative feasibility, whether it is conducted by the Iowa ATJ Commission or by another group that ATJ can delegate this task to. The ATJ Commission can also have a role in promoting the income-based fee waivers, which aligns with ATJ's mission of making court forms and processes clear and understandable for pro-se defendants. ATJ should include formalize action items by the end of the 2024 – 2025 term to ensure active steps to serve Iowans by promoting and advancing innovative strategies for ensuring equal access to justice.

Appendix F

Pro Bono and Continuing Legal Education Initiatives*

States That Allow Pro Bono Work for CLE Credit:

Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Utah, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming

States That Do Not Allow Pro Bono Work for CLE Credit:

Alaska, California, Connecticut, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Jersey, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Vermont, Virginia,

Examples of what is allowed in some states:

- Minnesota: One CLE credit for every 1 hour of pro bono work capped at 6 CLE hours every 3 years
- West Virginia: One CLE for every 3 hours of pro bono work and has approved organizations
- Wisconsin: One CLE hour for every 5 hours of pro bono work capped at 5 hours a year
- Wyoming: One CLE hour for every 5 hours of pro bono work capped at 3 hours per year

Facts and Statistics

- New York is the only state that requires 50 hours of pro bono work for bar admission
- Florida's Rule 4-6.1 of Florida Rules of Professional Conduct created a membership professional responsibility to provide pro bono service and must annually report any of this work. But this only establishes what bar members should strive to do, there is no penalty for not providing pro bono services.
    - California, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nevada New Mexico, and New York have similar rules set in the professional conduct rules requiring bar members to report their pro bono hours (highlighted states do not allow for pro bono work to count towards CLE).

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Appendix G

National Landscape Review: Allied Legal Professional

Student research report*

As of April 2025, there are seven states with allied legal professional (ALP)[1] programs: Washington, Oregon, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, Minnesota, and New Hampshire. Most states limit ALPs to specific practice areas such as family law, debt collection and landlord tenant. Each state explicitly requires or limits certain ALP roles, such as informing their client that they are not an attorney, and states with permanent programs allow ALPs to prepare, sign and file pleadings.

Rural Impact of ALP programs

There is limited data on the existence of ALPs practicing in rural areas. Anecdotally, Colorado does have ALPs practicing in communities like Pueblo, which are less urban than Denver and Boulder. States like Colorado, Utah, and Arizona are actively having discussions about the potential for ALPs to support legal access in rural communities.

Arizona's program has the most expansive certification partnership with higher education institutions, which include community colleges. This is viewed as an important entry point for rural communities, as prospective ALPs can remain in their rural communities to attend local higher education institutions or attend virtual or hybrid classes rather than moving to urban areas. This can potentially allow them to graduate with less debt,.

Recognizing broader barriers to legal practice in rural communities, ALP programs are discussing incentive programs to support practitioners moving to and remaining in rural communities.[2]

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[1] ALP is the generic term used by the Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System to refer to "legal service providers who are not licensed attorneys" but can "offer legal advice in limited situations and certain case types." These programs go by a variety of names such as "limited license legal technicians" in Washington, "licensed paralegal" in Oregon, or "licensed legal paraprofessional" in Colorado.
https://iaals.du.edu/sites/default/files/documents/publications/alp_national_framework.pdf

[2] https://iaals.du.edu/projects/allied-legal-professionals/knowledge-center

States with Active ALP Programs

Arizona

In 2019, the Task Force on the Delivery of Legal Services created the Limited License Legal Practitioner (LLP) to provide limited legal services.[3] This proposal eventually became the Legal Paraprofessionals Program (LP) and was implemented in ACJA § 7-210.[4]

With the passage of AZ Code of Judicial Administration Section 7-211, the state's permanently codified Community-Based Justice Worker programs.[5] The 2019 Access to Justice Task Force recommendation and approval of LLA planted the seeds for Section 7-211, uniquely positioning Arizona as now the 1st and only state to authorize community-based justice workers at both Community-Based Organizations + Legal Services Organizations. This important win is the result of nearly a year of advocacy by i4J team and over half a decade of intentional legal service innovation, dating back to the first launch of the Licensed Legal Advocate (LLA) program in 2020. To learn more about how AZ and i4J are leading the charge to green legal deserts:

- Read the Administrative Order authorizing Section 7-211
- Read the AZ Admin. Office of the Courts' recent News Release
- Watch the AZ Admin. Office of the Courts' AI-Reporter Briefing
- And explore i4J's Fact Sheet on the new Section 7-211

In Arizona, an LP is able to prepare and sign legal documents, provide specific advice or recommendations, draft and file documents, appear before a court or tribunal, and negotiate on behalf of a client. Their areas of practice are limited to Family Law, Administrative Law, Limited Jurisdiction Civil Law, Criminal Law, and Juvenile Dependency Law. Arizona is the only state with a permanent program that allows ALPs to provide full in-court representation. Once someone becomes an LP, they become affiliate members of the State Bar of Arizona and are subject to complaints and follow complaint procedures like lawyers.[6]

[3] https://www.azcourts.gov/Portals/74/LSTF/Report/LSTFReportRecommendationsRED10042019.pdf

[4] ACJA § 7-210.

[5] Information provided by Stacy Rupprecht Jane, Director, Innovation for Justice.

To become an LLP, an individual must have experience or education before applying.[7] Once they've applied, they take an exam, but each practice area has its own exam. If someone wants to become an LLP in Administrative Law, they need to take the Administrative Law exam. If they want to also work on Criminal Law issues, they would need to take that exam as well. LLP exams are offered two to three times a month.[8] The Arizona program has most successful in reaching a number of schools including state and community colleges.

Colorado

Program Rules

LLPS must meet all education and admission materials and stay in good standing by registering and paying annual fees to the Clerk of the Supreme Court of Colorado. The scope of practice of LLPs would be limited to uncomplicated domestic relations matters. For example, LLPs cannot work on complex legal issues involving corporations, and are required to direct clients to lawyers for issues outside of their scope.[9] In the field, LLPs can engage in this limited practice either with a law firm or with their own legal paraprofessional firm.[10]

Program Oversight

LLPs are responsible for meeting all licensing requirements and deadlines set by the Clerk of the Supreme Court of Colorado.

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[6] https://www.azcourts.gov/cld/Legal-Paraprofessional

[7] *Id.*

[8] https://www.azcourts.gov/cld/Legal-Paraprofessional/Exam-Information

[9] https://www.coloradolegalregulation.com/wp-content/uploads/PDF/AboutUs/PALS/PALSprelimrept%20Final%20as%20amended%20by%20Advisory% 20Comm%205-21-21.pdf

[10] *Id.*

LLP are supervised by a permanent office, the Office of LLP Admissions. This office is responsible for: (a) the filing and processing of all applications for admission and certifications to practice law in Colorado; (b) the administration of the Colorado bar examination and LLP examinations; (c) the investigation of all applicants' character and fitness; and (d) the certification to the Supreme Court of applicants' qualifications to practice law in Colorado. The Attorney Regulation Counsel shall administer all LLP admission functions as part of a budget approved by the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court exercises jurisdiction over all matters involving the licensing and regulation of those persons who practice law in Colorado. Accordingly, the Supreme Court has adopted the following rules governing admission to the practice of law by licensed legal paraprofessionals (LLPs) in Colorado. The LLP Committee serves as a permanent committee of the Supreme Court. Its duties include offering procedural guidance, comments on substantive legal issues, and regulatory recommendations.

Educational, Testing and Good Standing Requirements

All Colorado LLP applicants must also demonstrate completion of 1,500 hours of substantive law-related practical experience, including 500 hours of experience in Colorado family law, within the three years immediately preceding the date of submitting the LLP application.

Colorado has experienced some barriers securing higher education institutions to participate in the program, as university and colleges express concerns with financial investment (of staff, facilities, and launch of new programs).

Educational requirements include taking LLP specific course work on relevant ethical dilemmas and related legal theory and practice areas. LLP coursework was anticipated to be hosted through community colleges and Masters of Legal studies programs. The LLP Committee created standardized learning objectives and outcomes to streamline LLP education statewide.[11] LLP coursework in Colorado focuses on family law. Once coursework is completed, LLPs must pass a character and fitness review and professional conduct exam. In addition, LLPs must take family law examination.

Having completed relevant examinations, LLPs must then complete an application form with the Office of LLP admissions. In addition to program specific materials, applicant must have one of the following: (a) a J.D. degree from an accredited law school (b) an associate's degree in paralegal studies

from an accredited school; (c) a bachelor's degree in paralegal studies from an accredited school; (d) a bachelor's degree in any subject from an accredited school that includes either a paralegal certificate or 15 hours of paralegal studies from an accredited school; or (e) a first professional law degree from a law school in a country other than the United States with an LL.M. qualifying such applicant to sit for the Colorado bar examination under C.R.C.P. 204.3.

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11 https://www.courts.state.co.us/userfiles/file/Court_Probation/Supreme_Court/Rule_Changes/PALS%20att achment%201.pdf

Applicants with substantive law-related experience, which is defined as an equivalent of one full- time year focused on Colorado family law, during the five years immediately preceding the date of filing the application may also qualify. LLPs must then make an Oath of Admission and receive a Certificate of Admission from the Clerk of the Supreme Court of Colorado. LLPs must pay an annual registration fee with the Clerk of Supreme Court. In their first three years of practice, LLPs must complete 30 hours of CLEs. [12]

The passage rate for the November 2024 LLP Examination was 83%. Of the 35 test takers, 32 were first-time test takers.[13] Because LLP candidates are permitted to retest, it does not appear that there is a firm timeline for participation in the program.[14] It appears that some people taking the exam are paralegals who have added another certification. Others appear to be new members of the legal industry, but most identified have at least a Bachelor's degree.

Minnesota

Minnesota has implemented a Legal Paraprofessional Program (LLP) "to increase access to legal representation in case types where one or both parties typically appear without legal representation."[15] The Minnesota Supreme Court modified court rules and the program was authorized in January of 2025.[16] As a pilot program, they allows their ALPs to provide full in- court representation. However, ALPs are currently required to have attorney supervision. [17]

LLPs appear in Minnesota under Supervised Practice Rule 12, which sets out which areas of law LLPs can work in, what their specific duties are, and the limits on their duties.[18] To become an LLP, the individual must have an Associate's or Bachelor's in paralegal studies, a paralegal certificate in addition to any Associate's or Bachelor's, a J.D., or a high school diploma with 5 years of paralegal experience. LLPs are also required to complete 10 CLEs every two years.[19]

The Minnesota Judicial Branch maintains a roster of LLPs. Minnesota LLPs appear to be concentrated in more populated areas, but they do have a small presence in less populated areas.[20] Interestingly, some LLPs are working for groups like Legal Assistance of Olmsted County or Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services.

[12] https://www.courts.state.co.us/userfiles/file/Court_Probation/Supreme_Court/Rule_Changes/PALS%20attachment%201.pdf

[13] https://www.coloradolegalregulation.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Colorado-Nov-2024-LLP-Exam- Statistics.pdf

[14] https://www.coloradolegalregulation.com/future-lawyers/llpexamination/

[15] https://www.mncourts.gov/Help-Topics/Legal-Paraprofessionals-Pilot-Project.aspx

[16] https://www.mncourts.gov/mncourtsgov/media/Appellate/Supreme%20Court/Administrative-Order-Amending-Rules-Governing-Legal-Paraprofessional-Pilot-Project.pdf

[17] https://iaals.du.edu/projects/allied-legal-professionals/knowledge-center

[18] https://ble.mn.gov/supervised-practice/supervised-practice-rules/#12

[19] *Id.*

[20] https://www.mncourts.gov/mncourtsgov/media/Appellate/Supreme%20Court/LPP-Roster-of-Approved- Legal-Paraprofessionals.pdf

New Hampshire
New Hampshire is the nations smallest program based on the number of ALPs. Program went to the state legislature first, were other states have alternatively gone through the state supreme courts or bar associations.

As a pilot, the legislature approved the program to begin in 2023 and was limited to select jurisdiction. New Hampshire has run a two year pilot, 2023-2025, and has elected to extend the program to 2029 and expand to all jurisdictions in the state.Only state that has an income eligibility limit for clients 300% of poverty income. Here, ALPs do not have their own licensure but work under the supervision and license of an attorney. Because of the program structure, there is less information available at this time.[21]

Oregon
In 2023, Oregon created a new legal licensure, Licensed Paralegals (LPs), to perform legal work relating to housing and family law. Individuals must have relevant education or substantive experience before applying.[22] All applicants must have some experience in the relevant legal area prior to applying.[23] In addition, all applicants must complete 20 hours of professional education courses;[24] pass the MPRE with a 75% (10 points less than attorneys);[25] and pass an entry exam and character & fitness review.[26]

After being admitted to practice, LPs have an enumerated list of services they are able to provide in both family and landlord-tenant law.[27] The Oregon rules also explicitly state services outside of LP's license in both practice areas.

Utah
Rule 14-802 provides an exception for Licensed Paralegal Practitioners (LPPs). LLPs are limited to practicing involving: some enumerated family law matters; forcible entry and detainers; and debt collection matters not exceeding the small claims maximum amount.[28]

All applicants must have completed some relevant education or certification and have 1,500 substantive hours within 3 years of applying.[29] Some of those hours must be dedicated to the licensed practice area; hour requirements vary depending on the area.[30] Additionally, applicants

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[21] Anecdotal information provided by Michael Houlberg, Director of Special Projects, IAALS, Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System

[22] RLP §§ 4.2, 4.5 https://www.osbar.org/_docs/rulesregs/RulesforLIcensingParalegals.pdf.
[23] RLP § 4.6 https://www.osbar.org/_docs/rulesregs/RulesforLIcensingParalegals.pdf.
[24] RLP §§ 4.4, https://www.osbar.org/_docs/rulesregs/RulesforLIcensingParalegals.pdf.
[25] RLP § 6.2 https://www.osbar.org/_docs/rulesregs/RulesforLIcensingParalegals.pdf.
[26] *See* RLP § 6.7; 7.1–8.9, https://www.osbar.org/_docs/rulesregs/RulesforLIcensingParalegals.pdf.
[27] RLP §§ 11.1, 11.2 https://www.osbar.org/_docs/rulesregs/RulesforLIcensingParalegals.pdf.
[28] https://legacy.utcourts.gov/rules/view.php?type=ucja&rule=14-802.
[29] https://legacy.utcourts.gov/rules/view.php?type=ucja&rule=15-703.
[30] *Id.*

must pass a professional ethics exam and the LPP exam for each area the applicant desires to be licensed in.[31] Similarly to Colorado, Utah has experienced some barriers securing participation from higher education institutions.[32]

Washington

Started in 2012, Washington had the nation's first ALP program. Enacted by the legislature and advocated for by the state supreme court, the state bar was responsible for day-to-day administration. However, the program has entered a sunsetting phase, where licensed ALPs are permitted to practice but the program is not accepting new licensees. The program has struggled programmatically with recruitment and sustained funding, but prepared a feasibility assessment to identify lessons learned and targeted interventions. There is currently discussion with state and supreme court leadership to reinvest in the program, as one legislative bill is necessary to bring the program back.

The program originally required 3,000 hours of work training before reducing to 1,500 hours for training of experience for licensure. The program focuses on family law. [33]

States Currently Exploring ALP Programs

As of April 2025, three states have reviewed but decided not to move forward with ALP programs: California, Illinois and Florida. California had a dialogue about ALP programs, and the legislature felt that it is their duty what the unauthorized practice of law. Additional information is needed to provided an update on Illinois and Florida.

Additionally, nine states are considering ALP programs including: Texas, New Mexico, Indiana, Michigan, North Carolina, South Carolina, New York, Vermont and Connecticut. In Texas, there are two proposed ALP programs. One was designed by the Supreme Court and has features like income eligibility limits for clients. The Texas state legislature has also created its own bill with a program with different parameters, such as the removal of income eligibility limits for clients. In it's program design, North Carolina was aware that the legislature would need to be involved in changing the authorized practice of law for ALPs and is designing a program concurrently. [34]

[31] *Id.*

[32] Anecdotal information provided by Michael Houlberg, Director of Special Projects, IAALS, Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System

[33] *Id.*

[34] https://iaals.du.edu/projects/allied-legal-professionals/knowledge-center

Appendix H

ATJC AI Developments

Student research report*

Summary: Generally, AI is still in the developing stages within the Access to Justice landscape. One of the biggest developments have been Minnesota's working group on AI establishing a sandbox "to pilot Generative AI applications in areas of acute need, including housing or immigration law."[1] The other significant development has been Utah's legal regulatory sandbox, which allows organizations to apply for permission to offer "innovative legal service methods . . . that would otherwise be considered the unauthorized practice of law."[2] For the most part, many state bar associations and access to justice commissions are in discussion stages at best.

Notable Developments:

Thomson Reuters Unveils AI for Legal Justice Aid Program for Legal Aid Organizations

- Thomson Reuters has unveiled its "Thomson's AI for Legal Justice Aid Program"
    - Provides a subsidized version of CoCounsel, its AI assistant to legal aid organizations along with general AI guidance

Chief Justice Creates Task Force on Use of Generative AI in the California Courts | California Courts Newsroom

- California's Supreme Court created a task force on the use of generative AI in the California court system
    - Interest using generative AI in improving court administration and management, and enhancing research and analysis

https://www.azcourts.gov/cscommittees/Arizona-Steering-Committee-on-Artificial-Intelligence-and-the-Courts

- Arizona has created a steering committee to approach the topic of AI in the court system. The focus is on implementing AI and establishing rules and procedures.

Allied Legal Professional/LLLT Updates

Summary: Much of the landscape remains the same; however, more states are implementing programs or at least exploring various avenues.

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* Authors: University of Iowa College of Law students Abigail Bylund and Sydney Wagner volunteering through a pro bono project organized by Iowa Law's Citizen Lawyer Program under the supervision of Professor Brian Farrell. Any views expressed in this report do not reflect the position of the Iowa Access to Justice Commission, Commission members, any of its work groups or work group members, or of the University of Iowa College of Law or its employees.

[1] Implications of Large Language Models (LLMs) on the Unauthorized Practice of Law (UPL) and Access to Justice.

[2] Information for Interested Applicants – Utah Office of Legal Services Innovation.

Notable Developments:

Interim Recommendations - Commission on Indiana's Legal Future

- Indiana's state bar association will start developing a plan for limited licensure for non-attorneys in 2025
    - The Commission on Indiana's Legal Future recommended decriminalizing the practice of law by allied legal professionals where approved by Supreme Court

The Diverse Landscape of Community-Based Justice Workers | IAALS

- Community-Based Justice Worker Models of legal navigators and administrative representatives
    - Alaska's Community Justice Worker program that helps rural Alaskans in limited legal capacities like receiving denied SNAP benefits
    - South Carolina's provisional approval of the NAACP's housing advocate program providing limited-scope advice in evictions
    - Lawsuits in New York and North Carolina challenging UPL restrictions

Minnesota Supreme Court Order Amending Rules Governing Legal Paraprofessional Pilot Project

- Minnesota adopted the Legal Paraprofessional Pilot Project (LPPP)'s recommendation to make the LPPP a permanent judicial branch program
    - It also decided to allow paraprofessionals to practice in Housing Court in the Fourth District
    - Continue allowing practice in cases involving harassment restraining orders and orders for protection
    - Maintained the attorney supervision requirement
    - Expanded areas of practice to include criminal expungements, consumer debt and student loan debt cases ($15,000 or less), petty misdemeanor cases with the necessary CLP requirements, less-complex probate and estate administration proceedings, proceedings before the Office of Administrative Hearings, and denials of benefits before the Department of Employment and Economic Development/Minnesota Department of Human Services

New Hampshire SB361

- New Hampshire extended its Paraprofessionals pilot program, requiring an interim report in 2025 and a final report by 2029

Appendix I

The Commission's Volunteer Lawyer Task Force recommends changes to questions 20-22 on the annual Iowa Supreme Court Client Security Commission Combined Statement and Questionnaire (Questionnaire) for attorneys, making those questions required, and linking the answers to the responding attorneys.

New question 20: During the last calendar year, did you provide pro bono legal services*****?

____ Yes

____ No / Unsure or do not recall

____ Unable to provide legal services outside of my employment

** Rule 32:6.1 of the Iowa Rules of Professional Conduct provides that every lawyer has a professional responsibility to provide legal services to those unable to pay, and that lawyers should aspire to render at least 50 hours of pro bono publico legal services per year. The comments to rule 32:6.1 provide that qualifying pro bono legal services means legal services provided without fee or expectation of fee to persons of limited means or charitable organizations. Further, rendered services cannot be considered pro bono because an anticipated fee is uncollected.*

If Yes: Who was the client? (*Select person or charitable organization or both and all that apply.*)

____ Person	**Provide total hours for each category.**
____ I assisted an individual with a qualified pro bono case through a nonprofit organization (e.g., accepted a case through a volunteer lawyers project).	Total hours ___
List nonprofit organization(s)	[Text box]
____ I directly assisted an individual with a qualified pro bono case through my practice, agreeing to provide pro bono services before representation began.	Total hours ___
____ Charitable organization ("Charitable organization" includes charitable, religious, civic, community, governmental, and educational organizations that are designed primarily to address the needs of persons of limited means.)	**Provide total hours for each category.**
____ I assisted a charitable organization with a qualified pro bono case through a nonprofit organization (e.g., accepted a case through a volunteer lawyers project).	Total hours ___

List nonprofit organization(s)	[Text box]
____ I directly assisted a charitable organization with a qualified pro bono case through my practice, not through a nonprofit (e.g., charitable group contacted you directly for legal services).	Total hours ___

If No / Unsure or do not recall

If you would like more information about pro bono services in Iowa, click here. (The link sends an email from the Office of Professional Regulation (OPR) to the attorney referring to the IOLTA recipients page, or it sends the attorney to a webpage on OPR's website with contact information for all groups that provide legal services to persons of limited means.)

New question 21: During the last calendar year, please indicate whether you participated in any of the following activities (select all that apply):

A. Provided legal services at a substantially reduced fee to persons of limited means. This includes court appointment work for a reduced fee, but does not include situations where the client does not pay their full bill for legal services.
   ____ Yes Total Hours _____
   ____ No / Unsure or do not recall
   ____ Unable to provide legal services outside of my employment

B. Provided legal services at a substantially reduced fee to charitable organizations (defined as charitable, religious, civic, community, governmental, and educational organizations that are designed primarily to address the needs of persons of limited means).
   ____ Yes Total Hours _____
   ____ No / Unsure or do not recall
   ____ Unable to provide legal services outside of my employment

C. Participated in activities for improving the law, the legal system, or the legal profession (e.g., sat on the board of a legal nonprofit, served on an Iowa Judicial Branch court committee, commission, or task force, judged mock trial, etc.)
   ____ Yes Total Hours _____ Which Activities? [Text Box]
   ____ No / Unsure or do not recall
   ____ Unable to provide legal services outside of my employment

New question 22 (formerly question 20): During the last calendar year, did you contribute financial support to organizations that provide legal services to persons of limited means?

____ Yes
____ No / Unsure or do not recall
____ Decline to answer

Appendix J

Recommendation from the Iowa Access to Justice Commission Limited Licensure Work Group. *Iowa Access to Justice Commission 2022 Report*, pp. 20-22

Development of a limited licensure pilot program in Iowa

The work group has concluded that "next steps" should be taken toward development of a limited license pilot program in Iowa. The work group, however, is not prepared at this time to propose specifics regarding scope or structure of such a program given the limits of its mandate and membership. Therefore, the work group recommends the Iowa Supreme Court take steps to convene stakeholders tasked with drafting a proposal for a limited licensure pilot program of substantive, geographic, and temporal scope by a specific date for the court to review and consider for future implementation. The court's involvement in engaging stakeholders, providing a charge to the group, and setting a clear timeframe would facilitate a successful pilot program effort.

The work group recommends that the court establish a task force that includes members of the work group and additional stakeholders to participate in drafting a proposal using the existing work group as a nucleus. The work group believes that the supreme court's imprimatur will best promote a focused, productive discussion as opposed to the work group or the Commission extending invitations itself. In addition to members of the work group, participants might include representatives from Iowa Legal Aid, the ISBA, an Iowa paralegal instruction program, the Iowa Paralegal Association, the state's law schools, district court judges and magistrates, clerk of court staff, and members of the general public.

The work group recommends that the court charge this new task force to draft a proposal for a pilot program to allow limited licensure of nonlawyers to handle specific matters. The work group recommends that the proposal address the following:

- Geographic scope. For example, the work group sees benefits of a pilot in one larger and one more rural county in the same judicial district.
- Program duration. For example, an initial pilot of one to two years with periodic review and a thorough assessment at the end of the period.
- Supervision. For example, determining whether the program will require attorney supervision and, if so, what liability could attach.
- Scope of practice. For example, most states limit practice areas, and in Iowa, small claims, FED, landlord-tenant, and unemployment, might be good areas for a pilot.
- Necessary Iowa Court Rules changes.
- Regulatory structure. For example, looking at other states and existing Iowa structures, determining which entity should regulate the proposed program.
- Funding. For example, exploring potential grant sources to support a pilot program, such as Interest on Lawyers' Trust Accounts, the ISBA,

private foundations, and industries.

The court should, of course, provide any additional direction or parameters on these points as it sees fit. The work group recommends that the court's charge include a reasonable deadline for submission of the proposal to ensure timely progress.

The new task force should be encouraged to utilize resources and engage with experts through entities such as the National Center for State Courts and the Institute for the Advancement of the American legal System's new Allied Legal Professionals initiative. Similarly, the work group has been in close contact with leaders in Minnesota as their pilot project continues.

The work group emphasizes that it is not suggesting the court commit to the eventual adoption of any program, but it does recommend that the court facilitate development of a concrete proposal that will inform all stakeholders in the near future.