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### ADVANCING RACE EQUITY IN OUR WORK

Our country has a shameful history of racial injustice and systemic oppression. The devaluation and degradation of Black, Brown, and Indigenous lives in our society has led to unequal treatment and centuries of violence toward people of color. The killing of George Floyd has given rise to a renewed national outcry of frustration, anger, and deep sadness. There is a loud and unified call for overdue change. The Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice ("Commission") adds its voice to the stand against racial injustice and inequality.

We are resolved in our mission to achieve equal, fair, and full access to our civil courts. Our work has particular importance at this time of immense pain and the devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has laid bare our society's inability to protect our most vulnerable and at-risk populations, which are disproportionately Black, Brown, or Indigenous. Their struggles as to healthcare, nutrition, housing, education, and employment have only intensified as a result of the current health and economic crisis. As the pandemic has been unleashed, their legal challenges involving basic human needs have grown, but they are without the means for legal representation. Now more than ever, we must work to remove the barriers to achieving access to our civil justice system for those who cannot afford lawyers, speak limited English, or are otherwise underserved.

At this moment of national reflection and action, we must address the fact that the barriers to accessing our civil justice system are founded not only on poverty but also on racism and other forms of discrimination. The poverty and financial burdens of self-represented litigants and the unequal distribution of resources and assistance are themselves the products of systemic racism. To truly achieve our goals, we must advance race equity in all that we do.

To begin, the members of the Commission and its committees and the Access to Justice Division of the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts will engage in discourse relating to racism, diversity, and inclusion. Our existing community trust work will amplify the voices in Black and Brown communities and in organizations leading the race equity movement so that we may work together to achieve equal protection. Supporting vulnerable populations means not only providing user-friendly court forms and better qualified interpreters, but also examining court policies, rules, and procedures to determine the points of unfairness and inequality and whether they hinder full and unbiased access to the court system. Our explanations to the understanding and treatment of self-represented individuals will go beyond discussions of poverty. Rather we will tell how systemic racism impacts one's trust and ability to navigate the court system and achieve a just result. We will also support and assist the efforts of our partners in the judicial branch in trainings for court staff and judges on implicit bias and deliberative decision-making tools.

We call on every member of the access to justice community to reflect on how we can better achieve our vision of achieving full, fair, and equal access to our civil courts without racism, discrimination, or bias.

Sincerely,

**The Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice Commissioners: Staff:**

- Hon. Mary K. Rochford, Chair
- Carolyn H. Clift
- Linda T. Coberly
- Hon. Thomas M. Harris, Jr.
- Hon. Leonard Murray
- Jennifer T. Nijman
- Hon. Jorge Ortiz
- Hon. Daniel J. Pierce
- Wendy Vaughn
- Andrew M. Weaver
- Tammy R. Weikert

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

- Alison D. Spanner, Assistant Director
- Sophia Akbar
- Noor Alawada
- Kathleen Callahan
- Kathryn Hensley
- Jill Roberts
- Sarah Song
- Hayley Yussman

### ENSURING MEANINGFUL ACCESS TO THE COURTS, A NEW THREE-YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN



In May, the Illinois Supreme Court approved the **Commission's 2020-2023 Strategic Plan**. The Plan details principles, initiatives, and activities for ensuring meaningful access to the Courts. The plan builds on the existing work of the Commission and the growing statewide momentum towards enhancing access to justice and improving the court user experience.

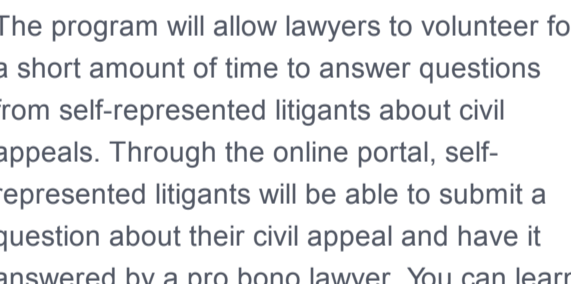
A special thanks to the Commission's Strategic Planning Committee, chaired by Jennifer Nijman, for their advice and guidance in drafting this Plan. We thank all of the hard-working volunteers from across the state who are members of the Commission's committees and subcommittees for their dedication to our initiatives (See pages 49-55 for a list of the volunteers)

This newsletter highlights work that is underway in furtherance of the Plan's mission.

By: Alison Spanner

### DEVELOPING SELF-HELP SERVICES FOR CIVIL APPEALS (STRATEGIC PLAN INITIATIVE #3)

Self-represented litigants in the Illinois Appellate Court face many unique challenges without sufficient resources to assist them through the process. The Commission, Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts, and Public Interest Law Initiative (PILI) are partnering to address this unmet need by developing and implementing a virtual legal clinic model – Illinois Free Legal Answers for Civil Appeals. This will be the first-ever legal help desk for appeals in Illinois and the initiative is expected to launch in September 2020.



The program will allow lawyers to volunteer for a short amount of time to answer questions from self-represented litigants about civil appeals. Through the online portal, self-represented litigants will be able to submit a question about their civil appeal and have it answered by a pro bono lawyer. You can learn more about the program [here](#).

Free Legal Answers is a national initiative of the American Bar Association and operates as a virtual legal advice clinic for civil legal issues across the United States. In Illinois, the program is administered by PILI, who oversees project promotion, recruitment and training of volunteer attorneys, and case management. The intended beneficiaries of this service is lower-income Illinoisans who likely have nowhere else to turn for legal assistance. In 2019 alone, 114 volunteer attorneys logged and answered 1280 questions about civil legal issues at the circuit-court level in Illinois. We are excited to expand this program to offer assistance at the appellate level this fall.

By: Kathryn Hensley

### PROMOTING THE USE OF STANDARDIZED, PLAIN-LANGUAGE LEGAL FORMS STATEWIDE (STRATEGIC PLAN INITIATIVE #6)

We are pleased to share that we have published the *Affidavit – Supporting Documents Not Attached to Eviction Complaint*, [available here](#), concurrent with the Court's approval of the new Illinois Supreme Court **Rule 139**. The newly approved Rule requires an eviction plaintiff to attach a Notice, Demand, affidavit or proof of service, or a Lease. The new Rule now makes the Eviction Act consistent with Section 2-206 of the Illinois Code of Civil Procedure, which requires the attachment of a written instrument on which a claim is based.

By: Kathleen Callahan

### USING COURT NAVIGATORS TO IMPROVE THE SELF-REPRESENTED LITIGANTS' COURT EXPERIENCE (STRATEGIC PLAN INITIATIVE #2)

Court navigators" are trained to provide legal information and procedural guidance to court users, but do not provide legal advice or representation. In Illinois, navigators may be members of the Illinois JusticeCorps program, the Commission's Self-Represented Litigant Coordinators grant program, or court volunteers. In other cases, a navigator may be a staff person, such as a circuit clerk, law clerk, law librarian, or self-help center employee. In addition, navigators ensure that new policies and resources designed to assist court patrons are shared and implemented at the local level.

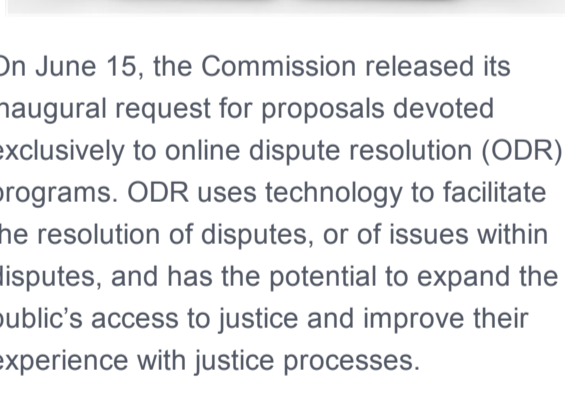


This year's Self-Represented Litigant Coordinator Grant program provides an avenue to ask for funds or just to participate in the Court Navigator Network. Over the past three years, Self-Represented Litigant Coordinators have used grant funds to develop a range of innovative projects. For the upcoming fourth year of the program, proposals which establish or redesign programs to meet the issues faced by self-represented litigants in light of the COVID-19 pandemic will be prioritized. Projects for this program year could include telephone or online chat services, developing Guide & File automated interviews to complete forms and seamlessly e-file, helping self-represented litigants with appearing remotely for court dates, or providing safe and socially distant in-person services.

There was a soft-launch of the Court Navigator Network with Illinois JusticeCorps, Self-Represented Litigant Coordinators, and other court staff from 22 of the 24 judicial circuits on May 22, 2020 with a Zoom call about reopening the courts and self-represented services. We are confident that through the RFP process, we will easily meet the goal of having a representative in the Network from all judicial circuits. Stay tuned for the announcement of the grant recipients at the end of July. Orientation training will take place the week of August 17, 2020.

By: Jill Roberts

### SUPPORTING PILOT ONLINE DISPUTE RESOLUTION PROGRAMS AND EVALUATING THEIR EFFECTIVENESS, BENEFITS, AND PITFALLS THROUGH THE CREATION OF A GRANT PROGRAM (STRATEGIC PLAN INITIATIVE #4)



On June 15, the Commission released its inaugural request for proposals devoted exclusively to online dispute resolution (ODR) programs. ODR uses technology to facilitate the resolution of disputes, or of issues within disputes, and has the potential to expand the public's access to justice and improve their experience with justice processes.

Early adopters of ODR have overwhelmingly concluded that ODR has increased litigant participation, reduced default rates, and freed valuable court resources. In light of the persistent need for remote tools that allow court patrons to easily access the courts and resolve their disputes and the public health and safety challenges presented by COVID-19, the Commission seeks to expand the use of ODR and fund the initiation of diverse and innovative ODR programs throughout the state.

The Commissions recognizes that implementing a successful ODR program is no easy task. Accordingly, the selection committee will consider proposals in their infancy, seeking assistance and guidance in creating and designing an ODR program (Planning Phase), as well as launching a specific ODR program that has already been identified and planned (Execution Phase).

By: Sarah Song

### ENCOURAGING INTERPRETERS AND JUDGES TO USE TECHNOLOGY TO PROVIDE LANGUAGE ACCESS DURING THE PANDEMIC (STRATEGIC PLAN INITIATIVE #7)

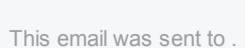
The Strategic Plan highlights the need to continue promoting usage of the AOIC Court Interpreter Registry and improve access to remote interpreters across the state, and also promote training around video remote interpreting. Given the unique challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing access to interpreters in the present environment requires a multifaceted approach.

First, the ATJ Division, AOIC published an **Illinois Courts Connect article** offering guidance on how to maintain social distance while ensuring language access. Second, it created a webinar in conjunction with the Illinois Judicial College on best practices with hiring and using remote interpreters. The webinar was recorded and is available for future viewing on the **Illinois Judicial College website**. Third, simultaneous interpreting equipment is being purchased for local courts to assist interpreters and court users with maintaining social distance when accessing the court in person. Additional video remote interpreting equipment will also be delivered to nine counties, and existing equipment in six counties will be updated. This equipment can be used both for interpreting and for conducting remote hearings in general. The ATJ Division is also administering two online skills building trainings for interpreters preparing for the certification exam, and both courses will discuss best practices on providing remote interpreting services.

By: Sophia Akbar

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