



Annual Report 2024



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*Incoming Chair

STAFF



Elisa (Emo) Overall
Executive Director



Jason Roberts
Director of Rural
Legal Resources



Brett Landis
Director of
Pro Bono Resources



Eileen Webster
Legal Facilitator,
Virtual Pro-Se Clinic

MISSION

To expand access, quality, and fairness in the justice system for all Coloradans.

We work to address the Justice Gap.

The Justice Gap is the divide between people's everyday legal needs and the resources available for them to meet those needs. When left unaddressed, everyday legal issues directly threaten the most basic of human necessities like housing, family, food security, job security, safety, healthcare, and immigration status.

We do this by:

- Assessing the areas of greatest need and potential impact
- Uniting stakeholders from diverse sectors to create systemic and local solutions
- Advocating for needed changes to laws, funding, and policies
- Elevating understanding of and commitment to equal justice for all

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends,

I love gardening. Relative to cooking or baking, gardening is something I actually enjoy and includes little risk of setting fire to our home. Over the years I've learned that—especially in Colorado—a perennial garden will not spring to life by tossing some seeds onto a patch of land. Rather, a garden's longevity depends on research, preparation, and time.

As I reflect on the past three years since our Commission became a nonprofit, this feels like a most apt analogy. In 2021, we completed a statewide listening tour and published findings in a Report & Recommendations. We then developed a strategic action plan while continuously building a statewide network of legal and non-legal partners. We identified and plotted out key projects to advance the goals in our strategic plan. And we secured vital programmatic and long-term funding streams towards those ends. Finally, in 2023 the Commission was codified into state law.

That's why it is with great excitement that I present to you this year's annual report, themed Planting Seeds. 2024 was truly pivotal for the Commission as we have assumed responsibility for programs designed to empower underserved communities and provide vital legal resources. Each initiative is a seed planted, nurtured by our dedicated team, volunteers, and, most importantly, our passionate supporters like you. Together, we are creating a healthy and sustainable ecosystem of equity, empowerment, and justice for all.

This report highlights those burgeoning initiatives and the stories of those positively impacted by our work. Looking ahead, we are committed to cultivating these initiatives further, exploring new opportunities, and adapting to the evolving needs of our community.

Across Colorado there are many beautiful private gardens where guests can visit and take in their serenity. But my vision is that ours resemble a community garden. One that we collectively steer, sustain, and serve long into the future.

Thank you for being an integral part of our journey. With this sturdy grounding, let us continue to plant seeds of change and help them grow.



SEEDS OF CHANGE

With gratitude,

Elisa Overall
Executive Director
Colorado Access to Justice Commission

DRIVING POLICY REFORM AND INNOVATION

The Commission is driving change within and outside the legal system. This includes funding advocacy, systems change, and investing in scalable solutions.

FUNDING FOR LEGAL AID

EQUAL JUSTICE FUND

The Commission partnered with a coalition of legal aid providers to pass legislation expected to bring in 2 million new dollars a year for legal aid annually. This will provide lifelines for hundreds of Coloradans each year, including clients of Colorado Legal Services (CLS), the state's largest legal aid provider. These dollars will help stabilize Colorado's most vulnerable individuals and families for whom unresolved legal issues can have devastating lifelong outcomes and can even impact future generations.



Colorado Legal Services (CLS) helped one senior woman living on a fixed income to defend herself against foreclosure when a finance company unfairly placed a lien against her home. CLS helped her fight the lien and negotiate a fair settlement that she could afford.

COST-EFFECTIVE SOLUTIONS WITH LONG-TERM IMPACTS

STATEWIDE LEGAL HELP WEBSITE

The Commission invests in solutions that prevent legal issues from escalating into far more serious problems. By ensuring individuals can resolve their legal issues efficiently, the Commission's work serves to promote economic stability, alleviate poverty, and reduce strain on the judicial system.

For example, the Commission is partnering with CLS to develop an online resource that will provide answers to common legal questions Coloradans face. Everyday people will soon have the tools they need to protect their families, their homes, and their livelihoods. This cost-effective approach also reduces the burden on state courts, and its impact can be easily scaled with modest future investment.



ENHANCING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE AND EMPOWERMENT

This year the Commission has taken on programs that increase legal supports and legal literacy in Colorado's rural legal deserts. Because these communities experience extreme scarcity in other essential resources such as housing, employment, and childcare, free legal help can have an outsized impact helping local individuals and economies to thrive.

VIRTUAL PRO SE CLINIC¹

In partnership with the Colorado Lawyers Committee, the Commission re-launched a statewide program that provides free monthly legal help clinics via zoom in communities across rural Colorado. People sign up through their local libraries to receive legal advice from an attorney for free. Since the project launched in August, monthly clinics have been established in each of 16 rural libraries, and new rural libraries are being added monthly.

GREATER COLORADO LAW STUDENT EXPERIENCE

This program brings law students eager to provide legal help to numerous Colorado communities in need of more lawyers. This summer internship program is designed to embed students in each community and build pathways to eventual careers. This year, the program drew national interest, with 65 applicants from 17 different law schools. Pairs of law students were warmly received by local legal communities and assisted government and nonprofit organizations.

RURAL LEGAL RESOURCES PROJECT

This year marked the launch of a long-awaited federal grant funded program to drive innovative legal resources to Colorado's driest rural legal deserts. This work has initially focused in Southeastern Colorado, building stakeholder networks with the region's legal and non-legal organizations and learning about the context and extent of legal needs. This has allowed us to finalize strategic plan leveraging existing resources to overcome the extreme scarcity of lawyers.

“ ADDRESSING THE JUSTICE GAP IS A NECESSARY FIRST STEP IN GIVING MEANING TO OUR COMMITMENT TO ‘EQUAL JUSTICE UNDER THE LAW’.

- Justice Melissa Hart, Colorado Supreme Court

¹We are deeply indebted to Ric Morgan, who powered this free legal help clinic until his untimely passing in 2024. This program is but one demonstration of the outsized impact Mr. Morgan had across Colorado for nearly twenty years.

RURAL COLORADO'S GREAT NEED FOR LEGAL HELP

60%
of Colorado's land area is a legal desert



53% of Colorado's counties have 10 or fewer attorneys available to help with civil legal needs.



90% of attorneys in Colorado live in the I-25 corridor between Colorado Springs and Fort Collins.



COMING IN 2025

Each of the burgeoning initiatives in this report will evolve and grow next year and in years to come. Here is what else we are looking forward to in 2025:

Opening up a Statewide Pro Bono Resource Center - The Commission will create and open the virtual doors of a statewide support and resource center for pro bono initiatives. On any given day, dozens of programs engage attorneys in volunteering their expertise to change lives and help fill the justice gap. The new center will build scalable support mechanisms for these programs so they can mobilize eager attorneys and leverage resources to more effectively fill the justice gap.

Administering the newly created Equal Justice Fund - The successful passage of HB24-1286 resulted in the creation of a new state funding mechanism for legal aid based on modest court surcharges. The fund—estimated to bring in \$2M per year—will be directed by a newly formed Equal Justice Authority Board, and the Commission will oversee the distribution of annual cash grants to qualifying Colorado nonprofit legal aid organizations.

Needs Assessment - Under the steadfast leadership of Colorado Supreme Court Justice Melissa Hart, the Commission will embark on another listening tour to assess the needs of Coloradans across the state. This tour will allow the Commission to learn first-hand about areas of significant need and to continue building partnerships to advance our mutually supportive work.

GROWTH BY THE NUMBERS

After years of laying a foundation, 2024 saw phenomenal new growth for the Commission. It has assumed leadership for new programs, planned for other high-priority programs, and helped expand the pool of resources for legal aid across Colorado: all sewing seeds for a more equitable justice system across the state.



11 monthly

Virtual Pro-Se Clinics

\$2 million in new funding
for legal aid through the Equal Justice Fund

10 law students

in 5 rural Colorado communities as part of the
Greater Colorado Law Student Experience

LAW STUDENT HOURS

820%

Increase over 2023



3296 LAW STUDENT HOURS

Spent studying and advancing access to justice
as interns with the Commission and the Greater
Colorado Law Student Experience in 2024

STAFF GROWTH



**3 NEW STAFF
MEMBERS
HIRED IN 2024:**

- Director, Rural Legal Services
- Legal Facilitator, Virtual Pro-Se Clinic
- Director, Pro Bono Resource Center

STAFF HOURS

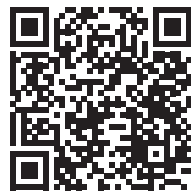
270%

More Commission staff hours
in 2024 devoted to creating
greater access to justice in
Colorado than in 2023



ENGAGE WITH US

<https://www.coloradoaccesstojustice.org/engage-with-us>



We are deeply grateful for the many volunteers, partner organizations, and funders without whom our work would not be possible. These include individual donors; the Colorado Bar Association and many Sections such as Business Law, Family Law, Real Estate, Trusts & Estates; the Colorado Bar Foundation; the Colorado Hispanic Bar Association; Colorado Lawyer Trust Account Foundation; Colorado Legal Services; Larimer County Bar Association; University of Colorado Law School; University of Denver Law School; and the United States Department of Justice.