

Annual Report 2024: Colorado Access to Justice Commission



**COLORADO
ACCESS TO JUSTICE
COMMISSION**

Access to Justice Commission (ATJC)

Mission

- To expand access, quality, and fairness in the justice system for all Coloradans.
- Focus on addressing the "**Justice Gap**" — the divide between people's legal needs and available resources.

Access to legal resources isn't exclusively a low-income issue; most middle-class individuals can't afford a lawyer, posing a challenge to equal justice under the law.



Justice Gap

Coloradans with legal problems connected to their most basic needs are often left to navigate the exceedingly complex legal system without the help of an attorney.



Housing

- Rental Disputes
- Foreclosure
- Bankruptcy



Financial Security

- Disability
- Unemployment
- Food Cash Assistance



Physical Safety

- Protection Orders
- Family Violence



Family Composition

- Divorce
- Custody
- Adoption
- Parent Incarceration
- Family Separation



Health

- Emergency Medical Services
- Worker's Compensation
- Medicaid/Medicare



What Does the Justice Gap Look Like?

An Example:

Starts with an everyday issue

A single parent takes sick days for their child's health issues. They don't know they are entitled to paid leave and are fired for taking too many days off.

Safety nets are missed

Parent is unemployed and savings quickly become exhausted. Parent can't pay rent and doesn't know they are entitled to safety net benefits like rental assistance and SNAP.

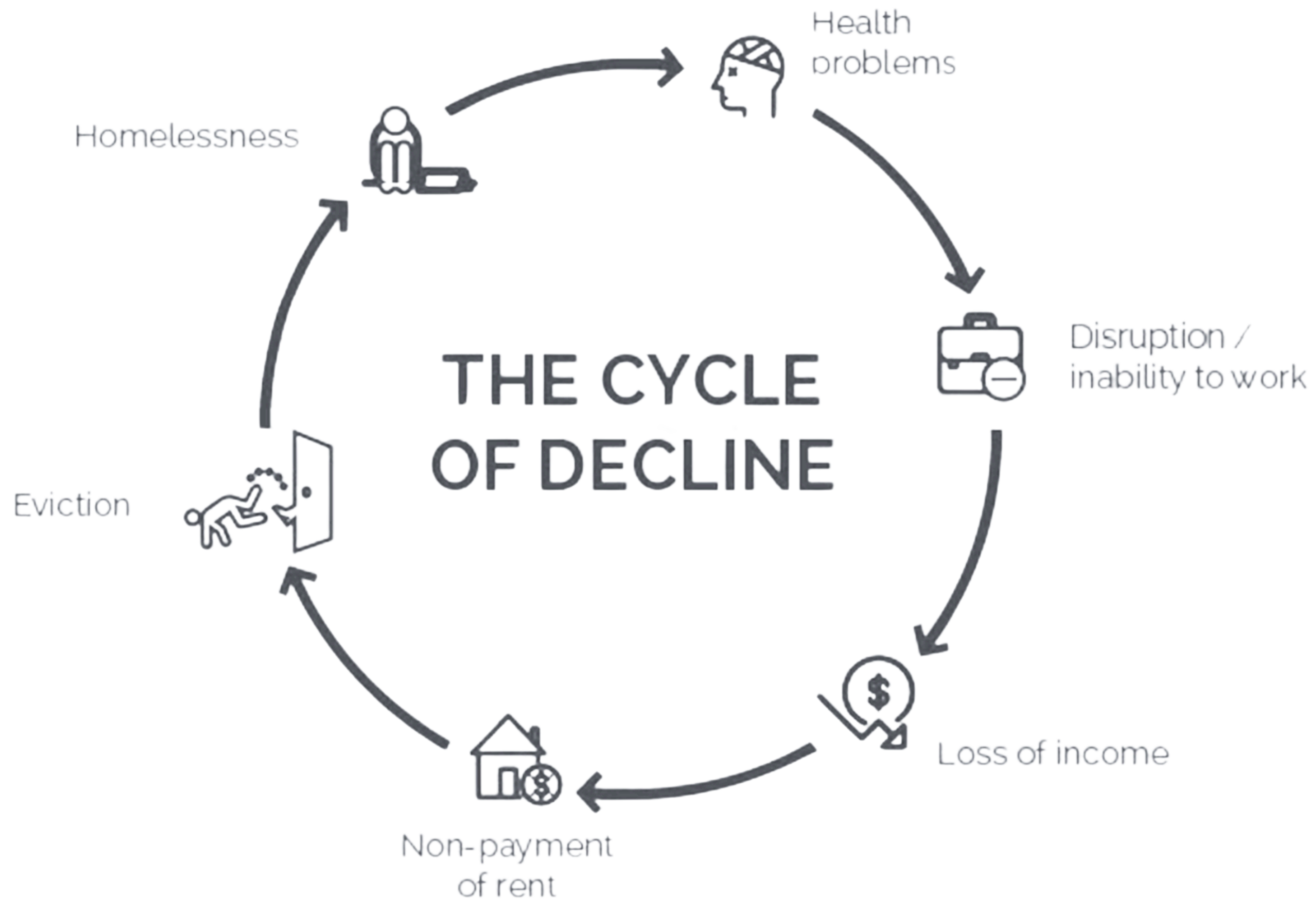
Issues compound and lead to crisis

Family is illegally locked out of their apartment and begin living out of their car. Survival needs now overshadow remaining ability to access help.

Crisis multiplies

CPS becomes involved and child is placed in foster care. Now houseless, parent is 11 times more likely to become incarcerated. Child is 100 times more likely to be arrested by age 26.





Breaking the Cycle of Decline

Legal help is a crucial upstream solution that interrupts cycles of poverty, homelessness, and incarceration, and preventing long-term costs to the state.

The gold standard of legal help is legal aid.



State funding for Legal Aid

- Eviction Legal Defense Fund (ELDF): \$1.1M
- Immigration Legal Defense Fund (ILDF): \$100-\$770K
- Equal Justice Fund (EJF): projected \$2M
- Family Violence Justice Fund (FVJF): \$2.0M

This funding is critical to maintain and grow, as it provides early resolutions that avoid personal hardships and costly societal impacts.



What Do ATJ Solutions Look Like?

A Spectrum:

No Legal Help

Limited Legal Help

Full Representation



Policy

Self-Help Resources

Legal Help Clinics

Pro Bono

Legal Aid



Access to Justice Commission's Work

ATJC prioritizes authentic community and partner engagement to identify challenges and solutions—something no other legal organization does.

- Assess areas of greatest justice gap needs and potential impact of solutions
- Unite stakeholders from diverse sectors to create systemic and local solutions
- Advocate for needed changes to the law, funding, and judicial policies
- Elevate understanding of justice gap needs and solutions to policy makers, funders, and non-legal community partners



ATJC's Key Milestones

- Became a nonprofit and developed a strategic action plan in 2021
- Statewide listening tour in 2021
- Began building a statewide network of legal and non-legal partners in 2021 that is on-going
- Began securing vital programmatic and long-term funding since 2021
- ATJC codified into state law in 2023



2024 Highlights

Equal Justice Fund

- Helped secure \$2M annually for legal aid through court surcharges

Virtual Pro Se Clinics in Rural Colorado

- Launched free monthly legal clinics via Zoom in rural libraries across Colorado

Greater Colorado Law Student Experience

- Paid summer internship embedding law students in underserved rural areas.
- Places 10 students in 5 rural Colorado communities

Received \$100K in state funding

- This is the first year the state legislature has funded the commission's work



Growth & Impact

Convening and Coalition-Building: by serving as the statewide convener to a growing network of legal and non-legal community service providers, we are unlocking capacity to coordinate, leverage, and scale access to justice work.

Law Student Engagement: student participation in our programs provides support for underserved communities and is building novel access-to-justice career tracks.

Virtual Pro Se Clinics: these monthly free legal help clinics are the only legal resource available in each of the communities they serve. The program's reach will multiply as volunteer component is established.

Volunteer Lawyers

Each year, ally lawyers volunteer between 1,000 and 2,000 hours to the ATJC.



Coming in 2025

Listening Tour 2025

- Led by Justice Melissa Hart and the ATJC Executive Director, this tour will identify new and ongoing priority areas of justice gap need and solutions
- Will include dozens of small virtual meetings, engage hundreds of stakeholders, and shape the direction of access-to-justice work for the ATJC and coalition partners

Statewide Pro Bono Support Center

- Centralized support for dozens of pro bono initiatives across Colorado
- Clearing house for lawyers and Coloradans needing free legal help



Coming in 2025 (Cont.)

Rural Legal Resources Project

- Focused on addressing legal deserts in Southeastern Colorado
- In partnership with local community service organizations
- Will create “legal first aid” certification programs with existing community leaders to overcome extreme shortages of lawyer help

Statewide Legal Help Website

- In partnership with Colorado Legal Services
- Public launch by end of 2025, expected to assist over 5,000 users/month
- Legal topics for initial iteration: Housing, Family, Money



Coming in 2025 (Cont.)

Equal Justice Fund (EJF) Administration: ATJC will work with the EJF board to administer grants to legal aid organizations (projected \$2M)

- 3 of 7 board members appointed by the Commission (per statute); all three are individuals of color engaged in anti-poverty work
- Board officially formed on January 1st
- Commission will be advocating for formulaic funding distribution (similar to Eviction Legal Defense Fund and Family Violence Justice Fund) to ensure stable annual funding and reduce competition for resources for legal aid organizations

Next Steps: Development of distribution plan and guidelines



Investment in ATJC

ATJC is accomplishing all of this with just four staff members, supported largely through private and federal grant funding. Colorado now provides \$100,000 annually to support the ATJC.





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