



# COLORADO ACCESS TO JUSTICE COMMISSION

Strategic Vision Report  
2023-2024

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# The mission of the Colorado Access to Justice Commission is to expand **access, quality, and fairness** in the justice system for all Coloradans.

Since 2003, the Colorado Access to Justice Commission (“Commission” or “ATJC”) has collaborated with organizations concerned about the gap in access to justice in Colorado to develop and support a range of tools to address it. The ATJC serves as “the hub” of the many stakeholders working to improve access to justice in Colorado. These partners include legal aid providers, the Judicial Department, the Colorado Bar Association (CBA), and attorney advocates, as well as allied organizations outside the legal field like social service providers and libraries. Together, leaders from these organizations work on ATJC committees to coordinate and expand the range of cutting-edge and tried-and-true solutions for Coloradans in need.

## The Commission’s Focus

The Commission focuses on civil matters. Civil matters are all those that fall outside of criminal law. Civil matters affect virtually every aspect of our lives.

### Civil Matters Include Issues Like:

- ▶ Housing
- ▶ Divorce
- ▶ Child custody
- ▶ Consumer Debt
- ▶ Employment
- ▶ Health access
- ▶ Education
- ▶ Discrimination
- ▶ Public benefits
- ▶ Wills
- ▶ Immigration
- ▶ Civil rights





# The Commission's Vision

We envision a justice system where:

- ▶ Everyone knows and understands their legal rights.
- ▶ Everyone knows and understands how to protect those legal rights.
- ▶ Everyone is able to obtain competent legal representation regardless of income or financial status.
- ▶ The system provides fair and just processes and outcomes.

*We envision a justice system that affords everyone an equal opportunity to solve their legal problems and protects their legal rights, including those who are underserved, marginalized, and oppressed.*

## Everyone deserves this vision of justice. To achieve it, the Commission works to:

- ▶ Bring leaders from diverse sectors together to implement solutions to address statewide issues that impede access to justice, thereby supporting an ecosystem of access to justice work being done statewide.
- ▶ Create practical solutions for those who lack the information, tools, and services necessary to resolve their civil legal problems fairly, quickly, and economically.
- ▶ Act as leaders to inform, unite, engage, and inspire lawyers, advocates, community members, and other stakeholders.
- ▶ Use our platform to elevate understanding of and commitment to access to justice in Colorado.
- ▶ Advocate for needed changes to laws, practices, and policies in Colorado.



# The Reality

Despite this vision, on any given day, thousands of Coloradans face unresolved civil legal problems that have devastating personal consequences and create significant and costly societal problems. Coloradans face daunting barriers to civil justice, including the complexity of legal matters and the often-prohibitive cost of legal assistance.

For particularly vulnerable and marginalized populations, these barriers are felt even more harshly, resulting in especially destabilizing and compounding effects on their lives. The impacts can include being evicted; losing access to income and resources

necessary for food, medicine, and education; or being unable to secure protection from domestic violence. The problem is even more acute in many rural parts of Colorado where there is a significant lack of lawyers and other legal resources.

## The most prominent access-to-justice barriers in Colorado include:

- ▶ The complexity of the court system
- ▶ Distrust and fear of the legal system
- ▶ Structural poverty and structural racism
- ▶ Scarcity of free and low-cost legal services
- ▶ Lack of affordable legal advice
- ▶ Underserved rural communities
- ▶ Technology challenges
- ▶ Language differences
- ▶ Court fees and other financial challenges

# 92%

Nationally, 92% of low-income households receive little or no help resolving their legal problems. Nearly 75% of these households experienced at least one legal problem in the past year.

# 0.66

Colorado has a total of just 0.66 legal aid attorneys for every 10,000 eligible residents, second-to-last among western states.

# \$95M

By some estimates, Colorado's unmet need for legal aid funding is over \$95 million each year.

# 75%

In Colorado, 75% of those appearing in family law cases are without an attorney.

# A Strategic Action Plan for Impact

In 2021, the Commission conducted a statewide listening tour of each of the state's 22 judicial districts. After conversations with over 500 Coloradans and stakeholders, the Commission issued a report on Colorado's alarming justice gap. Building on that report, the Commission developed a set of four strategic objectives to achieve the vision of justice for all Coloradans:

## 1. Statewide Online Legal Help Portal

- ▶ Develop an accessible online portal that is the "go to" website for effectively connecting those needing legal help with the appropriate legal resources.

## 2. Expanding Legal Services in Underserved Rural Areas

- ▶ Implement a strategy to encourage the continued, permanent use of remote proceedings by trial and appellate courts, when appropriate.
- ▶ Implement a strategy to encourage attorneys to practice in rural areas with few or no lawyers.

## 3. Funding

- ▶ Develop and execute strategies to obtain sustained, reliable funding for the Commission and resources needed to carry out its mission.
- ▶ Develop and execute strategies to substantially increase funding for free civil legal services for indigent Coloradans by the State of Colorado, localities, and foundations.

## 4. Communications

- ▶ Draw attention to and foster understanding of the importance of access to justice.
- ▶ Promote the recommended solutions identified as a result of the Commission's Listen and Learn Tour—among our access to justice partners, key constituencies, decisionmakers, and the public.





# 1. Statewide Online Legal Help Portal

Coloradans with civil legal problems often turn first to the internet where they encounter an overwhelming and confusing array of legal help sites and face the daunting task of identifying which site has the right information and help for them. The ATJC is developing one readily accessible online portal that will be Colorado's "go to" website to connect those needing legal help with the appropriate legal resources.

## Key Portal Strategies Include:

- ▶ Researching existing portals and conducting user testing to identify the most effective features and user-centered design;
- ▶ Establishing sustained funding streams for the site build and maintenance;
- ▶ Creating a professional, accessible portal design;
- ▶ Launching an outreach and marketing strategy once the portal is complete.

The portal will help reduce barriers for those seeking legal help, including those who have traditionally been unable to access it, and empower them to resolve their legal problems. It will also help lawyers provide free and reduced fee services.



# 2. Increasing Legal Services Available to Rural Colorado

One of the lessons learned from the pandemic is that remote proceedings are a valuable tool to increase participation by self-represented litigants and to increase lawyers' ability to provide representation, particularly in underserved rural areas of the state. The ATJC has developed a strategic approach to encourage the use of remote proceedings by trial and appellate courts in appropriate matters, while also increasing the availability of lawyers in rural Colorado.

## Key rural strategies include:

- ▶ Gathering data from in the state and outside Colorado, showing the value of remote proceedings when appropriate;
- ▶ Drafting a report advocating for the necessity and value of remote proceedings. Educating legislators about the benefits of access to remote proceedings;
- ▶ Launching an implementation strategy with the release of the report;
- ▶ Increasing lawyer availability for people needing help in underserved rural areas.

Increased use of remote proceedings will give more Coloradans the access to justice they deserve, reduce the number of failures to appear and increase participation, raise the people's faith in our justice system, and improve the system's operation.





More Coloradans will have the opportunity to flourish with a well-funded Commission and increased legal aid funding.



## 3. Funding

Funding for the ATJC is essential to ensure the Commission can continue to meet its goals of access to justice for all Coloradans. Increasing funding for legal aid—and thus the ability of low-income and vulnerable Coloradans to receive legal services for life-altering civil legal matters—is foundational to the ATJC and its mission. The ATJC is implementing strategies to obtain sustained, reliable funding for the ATJC staff and resources needed to carry out its mission, and to substantially increase civil legal aid funding by the State of Colorado, localities, and foundations.

### Key funding strategies include:

- ▶ Seeking legislative funding in collaboration with partners and stakeholders;
- ▶ Diversifying funding sources to include individual donors and foundations;
- ▶ Partnering with all Colorado's legal aid providers to expand much-needed funding for legal aid.

## 4. Communications

Clearly communicating about the importance of access to justice is essential to broadening the understanding of the current civil justice crisis in Colorado, to engage and inspire partners, and to support the development of solutions. The ATJC will foster understanding of the importance of access to justice. It will draw attention to the barriers to access, and the recommended solutions identified as a result of the Commission's Listen and Learn Tour.

### Key communications strategies include:

- ▶ Sharing the findings and recommendations of the Commission's Listen and Learn Tour and facilitating an ongoing dialogue with our access to justice partners, key constituents, decision-makers, and the public;
- ▶ Advocating for greater understanding of access to justice barriers and recommended solutions.

# Call to Action

The 2021 Listen & Learn Tour made clear that there is no shortage of community and legal service providers, judicial department staff, and judges in Colorado who are deeply committed to finding ways to address existing access-to-justice barriers. But it is also clear that we have a long way to go to achieve the Commission's vision and ensure all Coloradans can thrive. The Commission is committed to developing and championing solutions to the barriers that exist alongside our partners throughout the state, but we need your help!

- ▶ **Legislators:** Support legislation that secures and expands funding for civil legal justice to ensure we can deliver on the promise of access to justice and affordable legal services for all Coloradans.
- ▶ **Impacted Community Members:** Share your story with us and others, to help people better understand and empathize with your experiences. This will help illuminate the impact of the crisis and the need for solutions that promote access to justice.
- ▶ **Lawyers:** Advocate for the solutions in the Listen & Learn Report to your colleagues, your bar associations, and beyond. Individually, commit to activities that promote access to justice such as pro bono service and financial contributions to the Commission and legal aid. Become involved with the Commission's work by joining one of our committees, including our local access to justice committees throughout the state.
- ▶ **General Public:** Share the importance of access to justice with your representatives and urge them to vote in support of Commission funding and funding for affordable civil legal services.

## Engage with Us

Visit our website at [coloradoaccesstojustice.org](https://coloradoaccesstojustice.org) and join our mailing list to learn more about upcoming events, to read our reports and strategic action plan, and to stay engaged.

### Acknowledgments

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We are always seeking new partners, allies and volunteers. We also welcome ideas for increasing our impact on access to justice in Colorado. Please reach out to us at:

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