

A large, light blue graphic of a scale of justice is centered in the background. It features a vertical pillar with a circular top, a horizontal beam, and two pans hanging from the ends. The entire image has a solid blue background.

**CALIFORNIA ACCESS TO
JUSTICE COMMISSION**

**Strategic Plan
2026–2028**

A light blue silhouette of the state of California is positioned in the background, extending from the top left towards the bottom right. The text 'Executive Summary' is overlaid on this map.

Executive Summary

All Californians deserve justice. The California Access to Justice Commission (the Access Commission) envisions a robust civil justice system that is well-integrated and coordinated so that everyone receives effective assistance to resolve their legal issues. Everyone should be able to get prompt access to the information and assistance they need, when and where they need it, in a format and language they can use. We collaborate with some of the most important stakeholders in the state, including the courts, the Legislature, the Governor and the State's executive agencies, the bar, and the public.

We are best able to achieve our vision and goals by collaborating with all stakeholders interested in access to justice. During 2026-2028, the Access Commission will focus on three priority areas:

- **Access to Lawyers:**

- Provide grants to legal aid organizations to improve their infrastructure and create innovative service delivery.
- Administer a Loan Repayment Assistance Program (LRAP) designed to support the recruitment and retention of legal aid staff.
- Support greater use of class action residuals to fund lawyers for low-income and other disadvantaged Californians.
- Support increased funding for legal aid.

- **Access to the Courts:**

- Support the availability of official transcripts of proceedings to litigants who cannot afford to pay for a private court reporter.
- Support increased funding for Self-Help Centers.

- **Access to Other Forms of Help:**

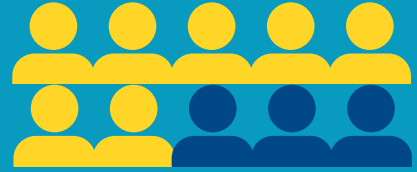
- Co-sponsor the new California Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable (CLAIR), in partnership with the Legal Aid Association of California (LAAC) and the State Bar of California.
- Implement our “Your Life, Your Plan” project to leverage help that County Law Librarians provide for end-of-life planning for seniors and the seriously ill.
- Support the proposal for Community Justice Workers, nonlawyers providing free legal help, supervised by legal aid lawyers.
- Study and promote best new uses of technology to provide a continuum of services with coordinated intake and referral of requests for help.

We invite people to read more about our specific initiatives and join us in this important work to achieve Access to Justice for All Californians.

We welcome comments, suggestions, or offers of assistance on these proposed priorities.



THE NEED



70% of California households have legal problems



There is an **average of 6** legal issues per household



Californians seek help for **18% of their problems**



OUR MISSION

The Access Commission advances access to justice for all Californians by expanding resources, removing barriers, and developing innovations so everyone can effectively and efficiently resolve their civil legal issues. Our full Mission and Vision statement and the statute recognizing our purposes, Government Code Section 68655(b), are in the Appendix.



AFTER 30 YEARS, BOTH THE NEED AND OUR WORK CONTINUE

The Access Commission began its work in 1996, launched by a report, “*And Justice For All.*” It stated: “The overarching goal of the California Commission on Access to Justice will be to provide quality access to justice to *all* Californians.” (*Id.* at page 49).

Over the last 30 years we have worked collaboratively to:

Expand resources and remove barriers to civil justice:

- Established and increased the Equal Access Fund to provide more resources to legal aid organizations serving low-income people and to local courts through partnership grants.
- Called attention to language barriers facing Limited English Proficiency litigants in California courts through a report that helped lead to the Judicial Council’s Language Access Plan.
- Identified the impact that the shortage of certified court reporters in Superior Courts has had on low-income and self-represented litigants being unable to obtain transcripts required to exercise the right to appeal and other procedural rights through an Issue Brief ([available here.](#))

Develop new kinds of help for legal needs:

- Supported the recognition of limited-scope services in California through a report and stakeholder, stakeholder convenings, and a practice handbook , to make lawyers’ help more affordable to modest-means people.
- Created, in partnership with the State Bar of California and grantmakers, legal incubators to train and support lawyers who work to provide more affordable legal services.



STRATEGIC PLANNING TO CONTINUE OUR WORK

The Access Commission can achieve meaningful results when our work is focused to maximize our impact. Given the great need and the Commission's limited resources, we choose our priority actions according to the following considerations:

- **Impactful** – meets real-world needs. Leverages the Access Commission's unique role, and does not duplicate what others could do.
- **Achievable** within our staffing and funding limits.
- **Innovative.**
- **Timely** in addressing currently urgent problems.
- **Sustainable.**
- **Results** that are concrete and measurable.

To inform its recommendations, the Strategic Planning Committee asked Access Commission program committees to recommend projects in each of their subject matter areas.

Twenty-eight current and Emeritus members of the Access Commission attended the September 12, 2025 meeting of the full Access Commission to discuss the Strategic Planning Committee's recommendations, including twelve men, sixteen women, and ten people of color. The planning meeting was also attended by thirty-seven guests from a broad range of backgrounds. The discussion involved a deeply experienced group – including judges, career legal aid lawyers and private and government lawyers, law librarians, and a professor, as well as staff members from the Legal Aid Association of California and the Access Commission.

The attendees discussed and ranked the priorities to be assigned to work in three general subject matter areas – Access to Lawyers, Access to the Courts, and Access to Other Forms of Help – and the development of activities and projects in each area.



The Access Commission's Proposed Priority Actions

In this section, we describe actions under our 2023-2025 Strategic Plan that will continue and new actions chosen by the Access Commission as priorities during 2026-2028.

Access to Lawyers

Access to the Courts

Access to Other Forms of Help



Access to Lawyers

A. Increase Resources For Legal Aid

1. Continuing the State-Authorized Grant Programs for Legal Aid Organizations

Infrastructure & Innovation Grants: For the fifth year we are administering a state-funded grant program providing \$4.8 million in funding to address what would otherwise be unfunded needs to support legal aid organizations and initiate or expand new modes of service to low-income Californians, seniors, and disabled persons. Our past grants are described here: [Infrastructure and Innovation Grants](#).

Additional Grant Funding For Vulnerable Populations: In addition, the Access Commission has made grants to assist immigrants and other vulnerable communities, such as LGBTQ+ people, with \$4.8 million in additional funding from the 2024-25 Special Session of the Legislature. Our initial report on this program is here: [Additional Grants](#).

We will continue to seek funding for legal aid grants, and to administer the grant application process, selection, monitoring, and reporting on the grants.

2. Support Increased Funding For Legal Aid

Overall, funding for State Bar grantees increased more than 62 percent between 2019 and 2023, according to the 2024 Justice Gap Study. In 2019, State Bar legal aid grants accounted for 16 percent of the total funding that legal aid organizations received. By 2023, State Bar legal aid grants had increased to 18 percent of total funding. Many of these increases were driven by three developments: temporary funds disbursed to meet acute legal needs during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, high trust account deposit balances, and sustained high interest rates to counter inflation in recent years. As a result, these funding increases may be temporary.

However, federal funding cutbacks to legal aid organizations and the programs that support their clients have been substantial and are likely to continue during the period of this Strategic Plan. For example, the House of Representatives voted to reduce Legal Services Corporation funding by 46% in 2026, although the Senate version proposes a smaller reduction; funding for homelessness prevention has been cut back; and a current proposal would eliminate federal funding for most functions of Protection and Advocacy services – Disability Rights California in this state.

At the state level, Pandemic-era funding for homelessness prevention has largely ended; and reductions in prevailing interest rates will reduce State Bar grants. Nevertheless, the State government's intention to support legal aid organizations and the Californians they serve remain strong.

The Access Commission will continue to advocate for increased public funding, writing letters of support, and meeting with legislators and legislative staff. We will keep in close touch with other supporters of both state and federal funding for legal aid organizations.

3. Encourage Cy Pres Awards To Nonprofit Providers Of Legal Help

Each year, California courts supervise the distribution of millions of dollars in class action residuals – money remaining in a class action payment fund after identified class members have received their shares. These awards, also called cy pres awards, are often made without an understanding by the lawyers and judges involved about reasons to use cy pres awards to support legal aid, and about an applicable California law, Code of Civil Procedure § 384, that directs such distributions to nonprofits including legal aid programs. With the Legal Services Trust Fund Commission and the Legal Aid Association of California, we will work to educate lawyers and judges so that more class action residuals will be distributed according to this law.

B. Expand The Loan Repayment Assistance Program

Legal aid organizations face a crisis in hiring and keeping legal aid lawyers because of low compensation and high student debt. To meet the crisis, the Legislature authorized legal aid programs to use Interest on Lawyers Trust Account and Equal Access Funds for a Loan Repayment Assistance Program (LRAP) administered by the Access Commission. Loan Repayment Assistance reimburses participating legal aid lawyers for all or part of their monthly payments on student loans.

We have made hundreds of LRAP distributions to participants from fourteen legal aid organizations, with over \$700,000 in contributions for this purpose funded from State Bar funds and other sources. The distributions are designed to be tax-free to the recipients based on their continued employment in legal aid.

The need for the LRAP is spiking because of federal policy changes. Interest rates and minimum payments on federal student loans are increasing. The Department of Education has announced changes to Public Interest Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) to narrow its availability. These developments will make it even more important for legal aid lawyers and staff to be able to receive LRAP distributions in the future. Loan forgiveness – which discharges a student loan all at once – is different from LRAP. However, if loan repayment assistance continues after the time when loan forgiveness would previously have been granted, LRAP can remedy the impact of reduced federal PSLF.



Access to the Courts

A. Official Transcripts Of Hearings And Trials Must Be Available To All

We released a report in November 2024 about the current challenges California litigants face because too few court reporters are employed by trial courts. One million Superior Court hearings a year are conducted without providing an official transcript. The report described the rights and interests at stake, the harms this causes, and options for addressing it.

A bill, AB 882, was introduced in the Legislature to address the need of people who cannot afford to pay for access to transcripts, subject to some requirements and limitations. The Access Commission sent a letter supporting the proposed expansion of electronic reporting but expressing concerns about the impact of the requirements and limitations of the bill. It has become a two-year bill, and the Supreme Court may issue a decision in the pending writ proceeding before the bill receives further consideration in the Legislature.

The Access Commission looks forward to improvements that provide access to transcripts of civil proceedings to all litigants who cannot afford to pay for a private court reporter as a result of either legislation or the pending writ proceeding. As our 2024 report stated, we hope the changes to implement a solution will take into account the views of litigants, their lawyers, courts, court reporters, and other stakeholders. (This was ranked as a high priority action during the September 12, 2025 Commission meeting.) We look forward to working with others toward that outcome.

Achieving that goal fully will require other steps that received a moderate priority ranking. Depending on what the Supreme Court decides, and subject to other priorities, we will consider advocacy to:

1. Overcome Reliance On An Underfunded Transcript Reimbursement Fund

Today litigants must pay a per-page fee for an official transcript, regardless of whether the proceeding is transcribed by a certified court reporter (CSR, or “certified shorthand reporter”) or a transcription service (for an electronic recording). The Transcript Reimbursement Fund (Bus. & Prof. Code, §§ 8030.1–8030.9) provides funding for indigent litigants with a fee waiver, but payment from this fund is limited to \$1,500 per case (Id., § 8030.6) and the fund is typically exhausted well before the end of a fiscal year. In addition, section 8030.6(a) only funds transcripts prepared by CSRs. If electronic recording is expanded (through the writ proceeding or legislation), the Access Commission will support changes so that all litigants can obtain transcripts from court hearings (regardless of how they are transcribed.) Changes could include sufficient funding for the Transcript Reimbursement Fund, without a per-case limit, or a reduction or waiver of fees imposed by the courts for transcripts prepared from electronic recording.

2. Seek Changes To Judicial Council Forms

Although an indigent litigant has a right to a court-employed CSR (although often not available), the procedure for obtaining a CSR is difficult to navigate. The standard fee-waiver form (Form FW-001) does not provide a means for an indigent litigant to request a CSR. Instead, a litigant must obtain a fee waiver and file a separate request for a CSR (Form FW-020) 10 days prior to each hearing for which the litigant requests a CSR. Most self-represented litigants will not be aware that they must request a CSR to have a transcript of the hearing, and the superior courts do not always explain this online. If the Supreme Court and/or the Legislature grant additional access to official transcripts, the Access Commission will work with other stakeholders to support modification of the fee waiver form to enable parties to request a court-provided official transcript (or at least inform the litigant the separate form is required).

B. Funding For Court Self-Help Centers

Over twenty-years ago, the Access Commission supported the initiative to provide Self-Help Centers in every Superior Court. We will continue to actively support its efforts to obtain additional funding to improve the valuable services that the Self-Help Centers provide on-site at the courts and online.



Access to Other Forms of Help

Steps Toward Achieving A Continuum of Services

Representation by a lawyer can be required for equal access to justice in circumstances such as disputes in court against other represented litigants. There are not, however, enough lawyers – nor is a lawyer always required – to respond to every legal problem. The Access Commission has been committed from its inception to building a system that would provide a continuum of services. This requires coordination among different service providers – alternative providers of the same type of services and providers of different types of services. A continuum also requires developing and expanding other types of service to fill gaps in the current system. Our proposed work during 2026-2028 includes both coordination and gap-filling.

A. E-Justice – Support Coordinated Intake And Referral Systems

Intake and referral systems shared among multiple providers of legal help make it easier for people seeking civil legal help to find the right services without having to start over with every organization; improve the efficiency of intake for service providers; and facilitate the implementation of a continuum of services.

One option is to participate in the creation of new coordinated intake and referral systems, such as the one being created in Orange County. This could lead the E-Justice Committee to participate in the design and implementation of a coordinated intake and referral system.

Second, the Access Commission might gather insights from many sources and create and publish a concrete roadmap document to guide providers about how to create intake and referral systems consistent with offering a continuum of services. The sources would include technology experts, vendors, and the sponsors of efforts – some successful and others who failed, but learned valuable lessons – in Maryland, New Mexico, Michigan, Missouri, British Columbia, and other places.

B. Fill Gaps In California’s Civil Justice Services

1. Community Justice Workers

In July 2024, LAAC convened a working group of leaders from California’s legal aid community to explore the potential for a Community Justice Worker Project (CJW) proposal to allow nonlawyers to provide defined, free legal services under supervision of legal aid lawyers. In March, 2025, the Access Commission heard a presentation on the proposal of that working group to pursue a CJW program for California. The proposal:

[D]escribes a framework for California legal aid organizations seeking to certify individual Community Justice Workers who will serve under the supervision of their attorneys. This is not a proposal for specific projects; rather, it is a proposal for an authorization from either or both of the California Supreme Court and the California Legislature authorizing an oversight framework for a California CJW program in which legal aid organizations across the state can choose to participate. [See the proposal here.](#)

Quite recently, the American Bar Association’s House of Delegates adopted a resolution approving the implementation of community justice worker programs in the states ([ABA 2025 CJW Resolution](#)); and the Conference of Chief Justices and Conference of State Court Administrators issued a white paper describing the reasons for allowing “Authorized Justice Workers” to provide legal help ([CCJ White Paper](#)). The Access Commission will use these endorsements in its advocacy for the CJW proposal in California.

2. California Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable (CLAIR)

Inspired by the Federal Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable, the State Bar of California, and the Legal Aid Association of California, and the California Access Commission held a convening of officials of California agencies on ways they can leverage civil legal aid to enhance outcomes in the services they provide to the public. The convening focused on the specific topics of homelessness, mental health, immigration, and consumer protection. Attendees discussed how legal aid can broaden effective, efficient, and equitable access to their programs, as well as potential collaboration opportunities. A session focusing on legal problems in housing, and services by agencies and legal aid, was held on August 28 and attended by representatives of seven state agencies. We look forward to continuing the communications among state agencies and legal aid providers, with our State Bar and LAAC partners.

3. “Your Life, Your Plan”

With a grant from the California Lawyers Foundation, we have developed a project, “Your Life, Your Plan,” to connect individuals with serious health conditions referred by health care providers to County Law Librarians, and then to pro bono and affordable lawyers to locate and complete the following documents (as needed): Advance Healthcare Directive, Psychiatric Advance Directive, Statutory Will, Simple Revocable Trust, Power of Attorney. This project is intended to serve as an example of how to leverage existing self-help resources (the statewide network of public law librarians) with legal advice (pro bono and affordable lawyers) to expand service to those who cannot access full representation. The Access Commission recommended the continuation and expansion of this project, if feasible and appropriate funding is available, including the statewide roll-out of the project.

4. Lawyer Referral Service/ Nonprofit Collaborations

Following the Legislature’s amendment of Bus. & Prof. Code Section 6155 to allow lawyer referrals by nonprofits in partnerships with certified Lawyer Referral Services, subject to State Bar regulations, the Access Commission gathered information for the State Bar from stakeholders including LRS operators, legal aid organizations, bar associations, lawyers who take referrals from an LRS and legal aid organizations, and low- and moderate-income persons who seek lawyer referrals. We provided proposed amendments to the State Bar’s regulations, and a report suggesting ways to enhance the contributions of lawyer referral services to access to justice working in collaboration with local nonprofits. Many of the recommendations in the report (which also contains portions under consideration by the State Bar) can be found here: [LRSs and Access to Justice](#). We will continue to assist the State Bar in seeking the Supreme Court’s approval of the regulations. Subject to the availability of our staff, we will work toward implementation of the suggestions in our report.

5. Support Increased Funding For County Law Libraries

County Law Libraries are helping centers and have become a legal safety net for the public when they face a legal problem and have not found or cannot afford other help. Civil court filing fees, which provide funding for County Law Libraries throughout the state, have declined substantially. But the need has not declined. Other funding must increase and stabilize. (Although cy pres awards are listed above under “Access to Lawyers,” such awards can be a source of funding for County Law Libraries.)

C. Promote Public Policy That Supports Access To Justice

A core function of the Access Commission has always been to make its support or concerns known when proposed Judicial Council or State Bar rules or forms or proposed legislation could affect access to civil justice in California. That will continue, with the involvement of staff and under the supervision of the Public Policy Committee or another committee of the Access Commission.

STRENGTHENING THE ACCESS COMMISSION AS AN ORGANIZATION

A. Recognize The Limits On Our Funding, And Seek To Increase It

To continue our current level of work with paid staff and to expand our work to include other goals or objectives will require additional multi-year core funding to cover our operating costs. We are pursuing that level of funding. Our activities and projects are worthy of grant funding, which we are developing the staff capacity to pursue. We will also seek opportunities to obtain unrestricted gifts for our core operating expenses.

B. Strengthen Our Relationships With Access To Justice Partners

A founding idea of the Access Commission is that achieving a fair and equal justice system requires many sectors of our State to collaborate. That is why the appointing entities include the Governor, the State Senate, State Assembly, Judicial Council, as well as the California Judges Association, the California Lawyers Association, the Legal Aid Association of California, the Consumer Attorneys of California, the California Chamber of Commerce, the California Labor Federation, the Council of County Law Librarians, the League of Women Voters, and the California Council of Churches. It is important to establish and maintain strong and substantive relations with our stakeholders. We will seek regular and meaningful contacts with stakeholders in California's civil justice system. We will seek opportunities to listen and report to our stakeholders, and we will provide staff support to the Commissioners in maintaining their ties with appointing entities.

CONCLUSION

We appreciate the valuable contributions of current and Emeritus Commissioners and other stakeholders and volunteers to this proposed 2026-2028 Strategic Plan. Because of the enormous challenges we face as a community seeking to achieve genuinely equal access to justice, it is imperative that we focus our efforts on the highest priorities that will have the maximum impact. That is why we have established the priority-setting criteria described in this report, and why the Commission seeks the input of others who share our vision and our commitment to justice. We look forward to receiving input on these proposed priorities from all who are interested, along with suggestions on how we can pursue joint efforts toward these goals.

THANKS TO OUR PARTICIPANTS

CURRENT AND EMERITUS COMMISSIONERS WHO PARTICIPATED ON SEPTEMBER 12, 2025:

Judge Lucy Armendariz	Prof. James Meeker (Retired)
Catherine J. Blakemore	Crystal Miller-O'Brien
Diego Cartagena	Jose Padilla
Justice Gail Ruderman Feuer	Pablo Ramirez
Judge Rosa M. Fregoso	Justice Ron Robie
David Daniels	Judge Kristin Rosi
Judge Timothy Dillon	Toby Rothschild
Leora Gershenzon	Panida M. Rzonca
Amos E. Hartston	Janice Schmidt
Janis R. Hirohama	Tessie Solorzano
Judge Lisa Jaskol	Justice Jon Streeter
Judge Mark A. Juhas	Justice Laurie Zelon (Retired)
Judge Victoria Kolakowski	Pablo Ramirez
Jonathan Libby	Justice Ron Robie
Sandra Levin	

STAFF:

Koleen Biegacki, Jasmine Kaddoura, Jessica Rodriguez, Jack Londen

MEMBERS OF OUR STRATEGIC PLANNING COMMITTEE:

Judge Timothy Dillon and Amos Hartston, Co-Chairs	Judge Mark Juhas
Catherine Blakemore	Sandra Levin
Salena Copeland	Crystal Miller-O'Brien
Mary Lavery Flynn	Justice Ron Robie
Justice Gail Ruderman Feuer	Tessie Solorzano
Judge Rosa Fregoso	Justice Jon Streeter
	Justice Laurie Zelon

APPENDIX

OUR VISION AND GOALS

All Californians deserve justice. We envision a robust civil justice system that is well integrated and coordinated so that everyone receives effective assistance to resolve their legal issues. Everyone should be able to get prompt access to the information and assistance they need, when and where they need it, in a format and language they can use. We collaborate with some of the most important stakeholders in the state, including the courts, the bar, the public, and the other branches of government, to achieve the following goals:

Creating A Continuum of Services

To address the full scope and span of legal needs in California, we are helping create an integrated, coordinated range of services to help every Californian understand their rights and obligations, gain ready access to effective legal services, and obtain an appropriate remedy when faced with a legal problem. Those services must also address legal needs in and out of civil courts and administrative agencies as well as the impact that related issues in the criminal justice system, including the imposition of excessive fines and fees, have on individuals and communities. We are helping build a justice system that incorporates high quality information and screening to identify individuals' needs and align them with the help they need.

Improving Existing Systems

We identify needs, gaps, and barriers to access, especially for low and middle-income Californians. We advocate for innovative solutions to provide better access and information, including expanded language access, lay-friendly forms and processes, simplified rules and procedures, court navigators and self-help centers, and resources for those who cannot afford representation. We support and fund enhanced services for indigent communities and self-represented individuals.

Expanding Representation

We promote access to legal aid for those with low income and low-cost legal services for individuals with modest means. We support funding for the chronically underfunded legal aid delivery system and efforts to create and sustain a right to counsel for indigent litigants in appropriate civil cases. We encourage private attorneys, paralegals, and others to offer pro bono, reduced rates, and limited scope legal assistance. We collaborate with partners to strengthen the infrastructure and improve the delivery of legal aid.

APPENDIX (CONT.)

Promoting Public Awareness and Trust

We recognize that expanded services will only be truly effective if individuals understand their legal needs, know what services are available and how to access those services, and trust that the justice system can, in fact, deliver justice. We therefore support and promote making information available in more locations and languages, improving the effectiveness of referrals, and making the public aware that civil legal help is available.

CALIFORNIA GOVERNMENT CODE SECTION 68655:

(a) The California Access to Justice Commission (commission), a nonprofit public benefit corporation is authorized to receive funding as appropriated by the legislature.

(b) The purposes for which the commission may receive and use funding shall include any or all of the following:

1. To provide ongoing leadership in efforts to achieve full and equal access to justice for all Californians, including indigent and moderate-means Californians, immigrants, children and families, seniors, persons with disabilities, persons in rural areas, veterans, and others currently unable to meet their legal needs.
2. To identify and promote improved methods of delivering legal help through coordinated efforts among the three branches of government, the public, attorneys, and others in the public and private sectors.
3. To carry out functions designated for the commission in legislation or the annual Budget Act, including, but not limited to, administering grant programs and programs supporting the recruitment and retention of legal aid attorneys.
4. To encourage increases in the resources available to achieve equal access to justice, including funding for legal help for people who cannot afford to pay, and donated time and effort by pro bono lawyers and others.

Contact



You can reach us for any questions or comments.

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