



History, Accomplishments, and Priorities of the California Access to Justice Commission

April 24, 2026

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ACCESS COMMISSION

- The Access to Justice Commission celebrates its 30th anniversary in 2026. In 1996, the Access Commission was established under the auspices of the State Bar of California in response to a report entitled *And Justice For All* (<https://And Justice For All>). The Access Commission is comprised of stakeholders from a broad range of constituencies; It was founded on the central tenet that “[a]dequate functioning of our judicial system is a social responsibility,” with the goal “to ensure the right to civil justice for all Californians.” (*Id.* at xiii.)
- The State Bar provided staff until 2019, when the Access Commission became a California nonprofit public benefit corporation and separated from the Bar due to changes in the Bar’s mission and operations.
- The Access Commission (website: <https://calatj.org/>) has operated as a non-profit public benefit corporation since 2019. In 2023, the Legislature enacted [Government Code sections 68655-68659](#), codifying the Access Commission’s authority, purpose, and structure.
- The Commission’s appointing entities reflect the broad range of access to justice stakeholders. By statute, the Judicial Council has three appointments (currently Justice Gail Ruderman Feuer, Justice Jon Streeter, and Judge Erica Yew), the Governor has two, and the Senate President Pro Tem and Assembly Speaker each has one. Under our Bylaws, the State Bar has two appointments, and other appointing bodies are the Attorney General, California Judges Association, California Lawyers Association, Legal Aid Association of California, Council of California County Law Librarians, California Labor Federation, California Chamber of Commerce, and three others.

OUR STRATEGIC PLAN

The Access Commission has adopted a 2026-2028 Strategic Plan (<https://CalATJ Strategic Plan 2026-2028>) to identify what we expect to be the focus of our work on Access to the Courts, Access to Lawyers, and Access to Other Forms of Help.



OUR WORK ON ACCESS TO THE COURTS

Past accomplishments include:

- Publication of our Language Access Report in 2005 (<https://Language Barriers To Justice in California>), and support for Judicial Council’s 2015 Language Access Plan.
- 2020 Report on Remote Hearings and Access to Justice During COVID-19 and Beyond (<https://Remote Hearings and Access to Justice>) - focused on reducing barriers to SRLs and continuing use of remote proceedings to enhance access to justice.
- 2001 Report on Limited Scope Representation (<https://Limited Scope Legal Assistance>)– a report that led to additions to Rules of Court and Family Law forms in California and influenced acceptance of unbundled services nationwide.
- Encouraged the Judicial Council to establish the Task Force on Self-Represented Litigants, provided input on rules and guidelines, and supported expanded funding of court Self Help Centers.

Current work includes:

- Our 2024 Issue Brief: *Access To the Record of California Trial Court Proceedings* (<https://Access to the Record>).
 - Report highlights challenges for indigent litigants to obtain record of court proceedings; shortage of certified court reporters; and use of alternatives, including electronic reporting.

- We worked with the Judicial Council to obtain data, including a survey focusing on proceedings where no record was produced.
- Continuing work to address other barriers to access to the record:
 - The underfunded Transcript Reimbursement Fund (which does not cover transcripts from electronic recording).
 - Possible improvements to forms and processes for SRLs to obtain a court reporter or transcript.

OUR WORK ON ACCESS TO LAWYERS

Past accomplishments include:

- Advocacy for creation and continuing funding of the Equal Access Fund (<https://Equal Access Fund Report> see page 95) : achieved with Chief Justice George’s leadership. Over \$500 million has been appropriated for California legal aid in the last 20 years, cumulatively.
- Planning and advocacy, with others, for the Shriver Civil Counsel Project, also led by Chief Justice George.
- Advocacy and practice guides for affordable, limited scope legal service to moderate-income clients (e.g. <https://How To Grow Your Practice By Representing Moderate Income Clients In California>)
- Organized the Incubator Project with the State Bar of California to train affordable community lawyers (<https://California Incubator Guide>) – led by Justice Goodwin Liu. After more than ten years, two incubators are still operating.
- Issued seven policy and research papers on Rural Access to Justice (<https://Rural Justice in California Series>)
- Pilot on remote services to rural small businesses from urban lawyers.

- Pilot social media messaging on healthcare problems most people do not recognize as legal issues (<https://Report on Internet Communications to Narrow the Justice Gap>)- to narrow the “Knowledge Gap.”

Current work includes:

- Now in fifth year, selecting and administering \$5 million in infrastructure and innovation grants for legal services programs.
- Based on our report on the crisis in legal aid hiring and retention (<https://Legal Aid Recruitment Retention and Diversity>), we advocated in the Legislature for use of IOLTA and EAF money for a tax-advantaged Loan Repayment Assistance Program. We now administer a Loan Repayment Assistance Program (LRAP) (<https://CalATJ LRAP>)in which 18 legal aid programs have contributed \$850,000 and have nominated over 300 legal aid lawyers and staff to participate in the LRAP.
- Staff and support a statewide Pro Bono Coordinating Committee including more than 35 managers of pro bono programs in California.
- New project to encourage distribution of cy pres fee awards to nonprofit providers of legal help, pursuant to Code of Civil Procedure § 384.
- A new E-Justice Committee is developing intake and referral criteria for possible fixed-fee, limited scope engagements that would make legal services more affordable for modest means litigants and economically viable for lawyers, potentially coordinating with nonprofit organizations’ intake to increase access to services.
- Continuing our support for increased funding for legal aid.

OUR SUPPORT FOR OTHER FORMS OF LEGAL HELP

Past accomplishments include:

- Early support and legislative advocacy for court-based Self-Help Centers.
- Continuing legislative advocacy for civil justice improvements.

- Lawyer Referral Services: Following amendment of Bus. & Prof Code Section 6155 to allow lawyer referrals by nonprofits in partnership with certified Lawyer Referral Services, we gathered information from stakeholders to inform best practices and possible draft amendments to the State Bar Rules.
- With a grant from the California Lawyers Foundation, we undertook initial planning of a pilot program, “Your Life, Your Plan

Current work includes:

- E-Justice Support for Coordinated Intake and Referral Systems to support better matching of types of service – ranging from full no-cost representation to limited scope lawyer advice, nonlawyer community justice workers, or training for SRLs – with the needs and capabilities of people requesting help. We are collaborating with the State Bar’s project on using technology to enhance access to justice.
- Projects to Fill Gaps in California’s Civil Justice System:
 - “Your Life Your Plan”: continued work to ,” to help seniors and critically ill low- and moderate-income people to secure end of life planning documents with referrals from health care providers, information from county law librarians and advice from pro bono and affordable attorneys.
 - Community Justice Workers: provide support for a program to allow legal organizations to extend and expand on their work for the lowest-income Californians using a CJW model.
 - CLAIR: continuing work with the State Bar and Legal Aid Association of California to improve coordination between legal aid and state agencies on the delivery of services.