

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: March 22, 2022
Contact: Elisa Overall
Executive Director, Colorado Access to Justice Commission
(720) 306-1022
elisa@coloradoaccesstojustice.org



ACCESS TO JUSTICE COMMISSION CONDUCTS 41 “LISTEN & LEARN” SESSSIONS IN ALL OF COLORADO’S 22 JUDICIAL DISTRICTS

A newly released report from the Commission identifies obstacles Coloradans face obtaining help with civil legal matters affecting housing, physical safety, parental rights, mental health and economic security.

DENVER, CO (March 22, 2022) — In an unparalleled effort to hear directly from the people of Colorado about their legal needs, the [Colorado Access to Justice Commission \(ATJC\)](#) conducted a statewide listening tour to better understand the challenges facing those trying to resolve civil legal problems. The ATJC conducted a total of 41 different Listen & Learn sessions, meeting virtually with legal and community service providers in each of Colorado’s 22 judicial districts. The ATJC prepared a comprehensive [Report](#) of its findings and recommendations, which it released today.

Colorado Supreme Court Justice Melissa Hart, who led the sessions, says, “Those of us of who work in and around our civil legal system know that individuals and families regularly deal with important legal matters whose outcomes can have life-altering, and profoundly destabilizing, consequences. These matters involve child custody, divorce, home eviction, protection from domestic violence, and access to essential government benefits, among other things. The Commission’s listening tour revealed that a broad swath of Coloradans encounter significant and sometimes insurmountable barriers when trying to resolve civil legal problems such as these. We know there is work to be done to address these barriers.”

The ATJC conducted the Listen & Learn sessions between March and October 2021. In all, more than 500 Coloradans participated. The listening sessions revealed that, due to the complexity of legal matters and the prohibitive cost of legal help, barriers to access impact Coloradans of all backgrounds and from all walks of life. The most prominent access-to-justice barriers identified by legal and community service providers throughout the state include the following:

- The complexity of the court system
- Distrust and fear of the legal system
- Scarcity of free civil legal aid
- Lack of affordable legal advice
- Underserved rural communities

- Technological challenges
- Language
- Court fees

The sessions highlighted that for particularly vulnerable populations, these barriers can have especially destabilizing and compounding effects on their lives. Vulnerable populations mentioned by participants included aging adults; people with disabilities; people of color; and people experiencing poverty, homelessness, mental health or addiction challenges, language and/or cultural barriers, and domestic violence.

Dick Gast, the Chair of the ATJC, says, “The courts, the bar, and a broad range of legal and community service providers have employed demonstrated solutions to respond to this crisis, but more needs to be done. In a country that prides itself on its commitment to the rule of law, it is essential that all Coloradans have the information, tools, and services necessary to resolve their civil legal problems fairly, quickly, and economically. There are actions that can be taken to improve access to justice across the board, but they require resources and a commitment from all three branches of government, the legal community, and other community service providers. This is a crisis that demands increased advocacy and funding for policies and services that increase access to justice for all Coloradans across the state.”

The Commission’s report makes a number of specific recommendations to address obstacles preventing Coloradans from accessing the civil legal system. It calls on other stakeholders individually and collectively to help bridge the civil justice gap, including:

- General Assembly—Significantly increase legislative funding for Coloradans to access civil legal aid.
- Judicial Department—Ensure the availability of a remote appearance option for certain court proceedings. Even if an option for remote appearance is not required, each judge should make remote appearance an option for certain proceedings.
- Law Schools—Encourage law students to do pro bono work through programs specifically focused on providing legal services to those unable to afford attorneys and to rural Coloradans.
- Lawyers—Dedicate a meaningful portion of volunteer efforts to helping Coloradans in rural communities with few local lawyers.
- Access to Justice Advocates—Collaborate with local community service providers in access-to-justice programs, outreach, and communication campaigns.

“Speaking from the perspective of community service providers, we are eager to play an important role in helping people as they experience these access-to-justice barriers,” says Deb Hamilton, law librarian at the Pike’s Peak Library. “These are complex challenges that will not

be solved by a single person or entity in this justice system. We need to work together as stakeholders to improve access to justice for all.”

“The Commission, too, has no small role to play,” says Elisa Overall, the Executive Director of the ATJC. “We launched this Listen and Learn tour to understand more fully the challenges facing those trying to resolve their civil legal problems. One clear takeaway is that the justice system needs to function more like an ecosystem in order to serve people equitably; many different organizations have a role to play, including the courts, government, nonprofits, and lawyers. But solutions coordinated across organizations have the greatest potential for impactful change. Now that we have clearly identified these barriers, our Commission’s job is to unite leaders in working together to drive systemic innovation and develop lasting solutions.”

About the [Access to Justice Commission](#)

The ATJC is an independent entity comprised of [twenty voting members](#) appointed by organizations committed to the integrity and accessibility of our civil justice system, including the Colorado Supreme Court, the Colorado Bar Association, Colorado’s statewide legal aid programs, and the State’s political branches.

The Commission works to create solutions and support the development of resources so that all Coloradans have the information, tools and services necessary to solve their civil legal problems fairly, quickly, and economically. It coordinates local Access to Justice Committees across the state, it works to increase the scope and effectiveness of pro bono legal services, it promotes rule changes to improve access to the courts and ensure procedural fairness, it works to improve services for unrepresented litigants and non-English-speaking litigants, and it works to increase funding for civil legal aid.