

# The Access to Justice Commission's Focus on the Future

By EMILY A. GIANQUINTO

**T**he Access to Justice Commission ("AJC") was formed by former Chief Justice Chase Rogers in 2011 with a mission to "develop recommendations to help ensure equal access for all people, including low- and moderate-income individuals, people with different physical or developmental abilities, the elderly, limited English proficient individuals, and ethnic, cultural and racial minorities." Since that time, it has been led by judges and comprised of representatives from Connecticut's legal aid community. The AJC is now chaired by Chief Judge William H. Bright, Jr.,\* who agreed to be interviewed for this column about the AJC's focus for the coming years. What follows are edited excerpts of our conversation. Many thanks to Judge Bright for taking the time to do this interview.

**Q: I understand the AJC was a bit quiet until you recently took over as chair. What happened?**

A: The AJC was basically offline for a while. The branch was forced to focus on other immediate priorities when we went into COVID in 2020, so like many commissions and committees, the AJC's work was paused. At that time, then-Justice and now Judge Maria Kahn was chair. When she was elevated to the Second Circuit, Chief Justice Robinson asked me to take over as chair, and I accepted the position. Since then, I've been working to reconstitute the AJC with some new members and to refocus on our mission.

**Q: Who serves on the AJC?**

A: Our members are from the Judicial Branch, the Connecticut Bar Foundation, the CBA, affinity bar associations, law firm leaders, law schools, and the state library system. I'm actually hoping to ex-

pand that list—I was at a national access to justice conference last fall and some states have involved community groups in their commissions. Those community members are typically non-lawyers, often people working with the same populations we are trying to serve and whose work touches on legal issues. I think that's a great idea and want to work on implementing that here because those organizations will give us different perspectives and maybe fresh ideas. Part of the mission of the reconstituted AJC is to try not to duplicate efforts made by our members and by other organizations and to make sure we are rowing in the same direction, so adding community organizations will further that goal.

**Q: When did you get involved with the AJC?**

A: I've been involved since the beginning. When the AJC was formed, I had been chairing the Judicial Branch's pro bono committee, which had formed the prior year. We had done some really good work on the committee, setting up one-stop shopping for lawyers looking to take on pro bono work, making it easy for lawyers to work with legal aid providers, asking bigger firms to focus on pro bono projects targeted to specific needs. We put on a half-day summit at the Legislative Office Building focusing on how pro bono work could fill the gaps in access back in 2011. It included the governor; the chief justice; the chief administrative judges; the general counsel of companies, including UTC, Pfizer, and GE; our state legal aid providers—it was a big event and very well received. After that, Chief Justice Rogers asked me why the branch didn't have an access to justice



Chief Judge William H. Bright, Jr.

commission like several of our sister states. I didn't have an answer. When we started looking into it, we realized we really had all of the component pieces of an access to justice commission. So we created one that incorporated everything we had been doing on pro bono, ADA accessibility issues, limited English proficiency, and support to legal aid providers via fees programs. The AJC began overseeing all of that, and Judge Raymond Norko was our first chair. I continued to lead the pro bono committee until about 2016 or 2017, when I stepped back from that position but remained a member of the AJC.

**Q: The AJC has an ambitious charge given the scope of access issues in our state—how do you plan to focus or prioritize the AJC's work?**

A: When we started out, we needed to determine two things: Where are the needs, and where are the current barriers to access? To do that, we set up four subcommit-

tees. The first is the pro bono subcommittee, which I just discussed. That subcommittee has really historically been focused on implementing the work started with the symposium from more than a decade ago, so it's currently working with a refreshed membership to identify new approaches. They're at the beginning of that process.

We also have a legal aid subcommittee, which is looking at what legal aid groups in our state need and what their clients are telling them are the greatest challenges to accessing the court system. Unfortunately, given the limited resources available, legal aid can only help a small portion of the people who need help in our state, so that subcommittee is working to identify strategies for increasing the impact of that work. Separately, the CT Bar Foundation is doing a needs assessment, and we're hoping to coordinate with CBF on that so the AJC can use that information to figure out how best to support legal aid in the most effective way.

Our self-represented party subcommittee is looking at the challenges self-represented parties face when they appear in court or are trying to figure out the legal process—how can we help them? We have lots of people from the Judicial Branch on this subcommittee because we all see and interact with self-represented parties every day, but we also included some people from outside the court system, because the large number of self-represented parties impacts everyone involved with our judicial system in some way.

The final subcommittee is law libraries/law school subcommittee. We're probably going to be adding the public library system to that group, because those three groups working together can provide significant services and information to help the public access the courts. There are all kinds of different things our libraries and law schools can do, from hosting and staffing law clinics, helping with legal research, providing access to technology, and educational programming.

**Q: How are the subcommittees approaching each of their charges?**

A: I've asked subcommittee members to be as creative as they can to improve access,

whether creating processes that are simpler to help people get into court, looking at hours of operation, or further expanding remote access for different court sessions such as small claims or mediations. We already do a lot with remote access, but can we do more? Should we do more? We're really looking at everything and trying to figure out how we can get people more engaged and, for example, reduce the percentage of people being defaulted for failing to appear. That default number is higher than we'd like it to be in collections and small claims cases, and I think part of the reason for that is people just not knowing what to do when they're served with a complaint. It's a big problem across the country, especially for third-party collections cases. For example, if someone had a JCPenney charge card, but gets notice of a claim filed by another party, and doesn't recognize the claimant, they might ignore the notice thinking it's a scam. Then they get a judgment in the mail and it becomes a bigger problem that could have been avoided if they knew to appear.

**Q: How does the work of each subcommittee mesh together?**

A: Our plan is to have each subcommittee identify the most significant issues before them, gather data, and outline possible solutions, with the goal of rolling out what each subcommittee has developed at an AJC conference. We're targeting spring 2026 for that conference, based on our expectation that about 18 months will give us time to come up with programs, begin implementation, and actually begin to roll them out. When we did the pro bono summits in the past, we did them at the Legislative Office Building, and my hope is that we could do it the same way, so we also need to work around the timing of the legislative session.

**Q: What are the biggest challenges the AJC has identified so far?**

A: We continue to struggle with the increasing numbers of self-represented parties. In recent years in housing matters, well over 90 percent of defendants in eviction cases have no representation. The right to counsel program has helped a bit with those numbers, but that program can't cover everybody, so it continues to be a large percentage of self-represented

parties in cases with significant consequences. In family matters, 80 percent of cases have at least one self-represented party. In the Appellate Court, one-third of our appeals have a self-represented party. Almost every individual collections defendant is self-represented. The judicial system is designed for lawyers, so it's not easy for non-lawyers to navigate. Lessening the burden by providing more legal assistance helps everybody, not just those parties, but the entire court system. There is not a single judge who wouldn't prefer to see a lawyer on both sides in every case, so we are always appreciative of lawyers who are willing to take on pro bono matters or limited scope representations.

**Q: What can CBA members do to support the AJC's work?**

A: A few things. We have a pro bono portal, available at [ctlawhelp.org](http://ctlawhelp.org). Accessing that and looking for pro bono opportunities always helps, and that's for lawyers of all backgrounds and firms of all sizes. Individual lawyers or groups from firms can answer legal questions on the CBA's helpline, CT Free Legal Answers, and staff clinics run by the CBA, the branch, legal aid groups. Lawyers can also just be resources for judges. If you're sitting in court, maybe waiting for your case to be called, and a self-represented party is not understanding something and may be floundering in front of the judge—if you can help explain the process, offer to do so. And, of course, attend the conference in 2026 and join in the initiatives we roll out around that time.

**Q: You've dedicated a lot of your professional and personal efforts to pro bono work. Any closing thoughts on why this work is important?**

There's always the answer that there are just not that many chances to get in court, get on your feet, and represent someone these days, particularly for younger lawyers in larger firms. Pro bono work gives lawyers that opportunity. And because usually judges are very happy with lawyers who are volunteering their time in that way, it also builds your reputation while helping the court system. But the biggest reason for me with the pro bono clients I represented, is that I never had

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12 Submission of The Connecticut Commission on Judicial Compensation by Chief Justice Raheem L. Mullins, November 12, 2024, available at, [https://www.cga.ct.gov/jud/tfs/20201022\\_Commission%20on%20Judicial%20Compensation/20241112/Chief%20](https://www.cga.ct.gov/jud/tfs/20201022_Commission%20on%20Judicial%20Compensation/20241112/Chief%20)

Justice%20Raheem%20Mullins%27%20Report%20to%20the%20Commission%20on%20Judicial%20Compensation.pdf, at p.13.

13 Submission of The Connecticut Commission on Judicial Compensation by Chief Justice Raheem L. Mullins, November 12, 2024,

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more appreciative clients than the pro bono clients and never felt better in representation than with my pro bono clients. Even when the outcome isn't what a client would have preferred, just helping them get through the process adds such value that they truly appreciate the effort. The same is true when I talk to lawyers who represent pro bono clients. You see the impact immediately on your clients' lives, and it sort of renews your faith in the law and helps you see accomplishments quickly versus the cases that can be longer and drawn out.

*\*As of the time of print, Governor Lamont has announced Chief Judge Bright as a nominee for associate justice of the Connecticut Supreme Court. ■*



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