



AVENUES TO JUSTICE:

A SPOTLIGHT ON THE ACCESS TO JUSTICE COMMISSION

BY ANGELA WASHINGTON, ACCESS TO JUSTICE DIRECTOR

Providing availability to legal assistance, without regard to economic status, is the driving principle behind the Nevada Supreme Court Access to Justice Commission. Co-chaired by Justice Michael Douglas and Justice James Hardesty, Nevada's Access to Justice Commission was established in 2006 and joins more than 30 established access to justice initiatives across the country.

“The Access to Justice Commission engages the key players in legal services in this state in an ongoing conversation with each other and with the courts. This dialogue is key to meeting the need for legal services throughout the state. Pro bono lawyers are so important to this effort. By volunteering their expertise and time, pro bono attorneys directly assist individual clients and gain a broader appreciation for how vital legal services are to kids, parents and families.”

— Anne Traum, Associate Dean for Experiential Legal Education, UNLV William S. Boyd School of Law, and member of the Nevada Supreme Court Access to Justice Commission

In the *ABA Judges Journal* article, “Mobilizing Judges, Lawyers, and Communities: State Access to Justice Commissions,”¹ retired Montana Supreme Court Justice Karla M. Gray and ABA State Support Consultant Robert Echols noted that the increasing number of states’ access to justice commissions has been one of the most striking and consequential justice-related developments of the past decade. The mounting efforts and successes of the Access to Justice Commission in this state could be attributed to the growing exposure of the need for legal aid for low-income residents of Nevada, or, perhaps, to concerted efforts to increase pro bono volunteerism among the legal community. Whatever the reason for attention to civil legal aid support may be, it is undeniable that

access to civil legal aid remains the focus of access to justice commissions nationwide. Gray and Echols' outline of the general structure, composition model and focused needs of access to justice commissions are proportionate to the work of Nevada's Access to Justice Commission, as during its nearly 10-year history, the Nevada Access to Justice Commission has delivered tangible, ongoing programs aimed at growing the original focus of all access to justice commissions — insuring that the fundamental right of access to justice is shared by all.

“Being involved in some small but meaningful way in delivering legal services to those most in need at a time when they most need it, is one of the most constructive things lawyers can do to benefit their community.”

— John P. Desmond, Shareholder, Gordon Silver and member of the Nevada Supreme Court Access to Justice Commission

The basic organization of access to justice commissions includes representatives from the judiciary, as well as representatives from the organized bar, civil legal aid providers, law schools, and, in some instances, members of the executive and legislative branches of state government and other civic organizations and groups. In addition to Supreme Court Justice co-chairs, Nevada's Access to Justice Commission is comprised of district court judges, a limited jurisdiction judge, a UNLV Boyd Law School representative, members from the organized bar, members from Clark County and Washoe County Bar Associations, a public law attorney and civil legal aid providers. Rural community representation plays an extremely important part in the makeup of the commission, in addition to other at-large positions and the representative student position from the UNLV Boyd Law School's Public Interest Law Association. All of the representatives, as well as other laypersons, including the commission's public relations representative, provide various perspectives and ensure that most, if not all, access to justice areas of concern are addressed.

A regular and consistent aspect of most access to justice commissions is the effort to increase collaboration and coordination among legal aid providers. Nevada recognizes the tremendous importance of civil legal aid providers and the role that each plays in moving toward ensuring that all low-income residents have access to civil legal assistance. In Nevada, it is not uncommon for civil legal aid providers to see thousands of low-income clients over just a six-month period. Moreover, these organizations provide assistance with many areas of the law, including: consumer law, domestic violence, immigration, senior law, housing, tenants' rights, government benefits, child advocacy, veteran's affairs and family law, just to name a few. As civil legal aid organizations in Nevada tirelessly work to devise ways to get services to those in need, they regularly collaborate and coordinate, as separate subgroups of the commission, to develop plans for

providing legal services. In addition to regular partnering on CLEs and other events, board presidents and executive directors of Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada, Nevada Legal Services, Volunteer Attorneys for Rural Nevadans (VARN), Southern Nevada Senior Law Program and Washoe Legal Services have recently devoted even more time to participate in legal service provider summits. The summits afford opportunities for the organizations to investigate, plan and implement even more strategies for legal aid services across the state.

“Courts throughout Nevada are seeing an ever-increasing number of unrepresented litigants. Making sure that each of these individuals has access to our courts is critically important. Self-help centers and legal aid services fulfill a very important role in meeting the needs of unrepresented litigants. In addition to the work being done by self-help centers and legal aid providers, dedicated professionals who provide pro bono services are essential to ensuring everyone has access to the justice system. Many in our profession have given generously of their time to provide pro bono services at a time when these individuals are most vulnerable. Pro bono service not only assists those who are being represented, but also promotes the rule of law by guaranteeing that everyone, even those in challenging circumstances, have access to the justice system.”

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HONOR ROLL



The State Bar of Nevada Board of Governors and the Access to Justice Commission extend a special thanks to the following attorneys who generously accepted cases in June 2014, through the Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada, Washoe Legal Services, Nevada Legal Services, Volunteer Attorneys for Rural Nevadans and Southern Nevada Senior Law Program.

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Joice Bass
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Adam Bult
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Lorien Cole
Thomas Collins
Neil Colmenares
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Sara Cope
William Coulthard
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Thomas Dillard
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Thomas Fell
Jack Fleeman

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Nancy Harkess
Stephen Harris
Richard Holley
Rick Hsu
Christopher Humes
Greg Ivie
Gregory Jensen
Kory Kaplan
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John Krieger
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Christopher Mathews
Colleen McCarty
Katie McConnell
Ian McGinn
Michael McKelleb

David Mincin
Todd Moody
Greta Muirhead
John Mulligan
Jason Naimi
Robert Ohlinger-Johnson
John Parris
Sean Patterson
Sara Peacock
Laureen Perez
Michael Phillips
Keith Pickard
Thomas Qualls
Michele Roberts
Holly Roys
Richard Scotti
Jay Shafer
Muriel Skelly
Doreen Spears Hartwell
Kristin Tyler
Gerald Welt
Jill Whitbeck
Adriana White
John White
Meng Zhong
Stephanie Zinna

Attorneys who participated in clinics, Ask-A-Lawyer or Lawyer in the Library programs, or taught pro bono CLEs:

Courtney Anderson
Jeanette Barrick
Travis Barrick
Eunice Beattie
Lauren Berkich
Robert Blau
Robert Bradley
Ryan T. Campbell
Sarah Carrasco
Ebru Cetin
Sarah Chavez
James Claflin
Peter Co
Mitch Cobeaga
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Alison Colvin
Kimberly Cooper
Sara Cope
Richard Cornell
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Jeffrey Friedman
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Calvin Shin
Madelyn Shipman
Jennifer Shomshor
Ian E. Silverberg
W. Kerry Skaggs
Peter Smith
Kenneth Stover
Marybeth Sundstrom
Keith Tierney
Kevin Van Ry
Soraya Veiga
Shay Wells
Connie Westadt
Nicole E. Widdis-Hernandez
Leah R. Wigren
Richard D. Williamson
Karen Winckler
Diana A. Zuccarini

BOLD honors multiple cases accepted and/or sessions conducted within the month.

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— Judge Thomas Stockard, Tenth Judicial District, Churchill County, and member of the Nevada Supreme Court Access to Justice Commission

In Nevada and across the country, access to justice commissions regularly strive to increase attorney pro bono service via increased judicial involvement, development of statewide structures, rule changes, recruitment campaigns, increased recognition for contributions and other means. The focus on increasing attorney pro bono service is undoubtedly evident in Nevada through the involvement of very dedicated members of the judiciary, the welcoming of pro bono presentations at meetings and other events where pro bono services are encouraged, and through other targeted events. The *Say Yes to Pro Bono* initiative, the Speakers Bureau and the newest pro bono volunteer initiative, the ONE Promise Nevada Campaign, have all served as robust volunteer initiatives in Nevada, all having originated from Nevada's Access to Justice Commission. The commission recognizes that the involvement of pro bono volunteers is key to leveling the playing field for those in need of legal services because, in spite of the legal aid organizations' tremendous dedication to providing services to everyone who desperately needs them, there is simply too great a need for these organizations to meet without the assistance of volunteers.

“Access to justice is more than a lofty ideal that refers simply to helping those in need; it is, instead, a decision. It is the decision of every member of the bar to act in spite of his or her own apprehensions and to get involved. True access to justice transforms a notion into an operation and then ultimately, into a movement ... The Access to Justice Commission has, for several years, created avenues that assist lawyers in making the decision to step in and assist. Those avenues are derived from exposure to the issue, serious discussion, ideas and resources that are directed at devising solutions to

issues that plague the legally underserved in this state. A significant part of the solution, however, begins with a lawyer's decision and commitment to make the effort to get engaged in the greater cause.”

— Judge Betsy Gonzalez,
Eighth Judicial District, Clark
County, and member of the
Nevada Supreme Court Access
to Justice Commission

Nevada Supreme Court Rule 15 provides the purpose of the Access to Justice Commission and, inherent in the same, are the notions of collaboration, the creation of volunteer opportunities for attorneys and awareness building for access to justice initiatives. The rule provides for policy and resource development to support civil legal services as well as regular assessments of current and future needs for civil legal services. What may not be expressed in Rule 15, but is certainly clear, is that the ideas, goals and initiatives of the Nevada Supreme Court Access to Justice Commission all point toward building avenues to justice, and that all avenue building requires a dedicated team of architects and builders willing to go the extra mile in the name of access to justice for all.

“Equal justice under law is not merely a caption on the facade of the Supreme Court building; it is perhaps the most inspiring ideal of our society. It is one of the ends for which our entire legal system exists ... it is fundamental that justice should be the same, in substance and availability, without regard to economic status.”

— The late Lewis Powell, Jr., U.S.
Supreme Court Justice

1. Gray, K.M. & Echols R. (2008, Summer). Mobilizing judges, lawyers, and communities: State Access to Justice Commissions. *ABA Judges Journal*, 47(3), 33-37
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