

Minutes
Connecticut Judicial Branch
Access to Justice Commission
November 12, 2025

The Access to Justice Commission met on November 12, 2025. The meeting was hybrid with members attending in person in room 4B at 225 Spring Street, Wethersfield, Connecticut and members attending via Microsoft Teams.

Members in attendance: Justice William H. Bright, Jr. (Chair); Judge Walter Spader; Judge Christine Perra Rapillo; Judge Karen DeMeola; Judge Cecil Thomas; Judge Marshall Berger (retired); Attorney Jamey Bell; Attorney Shivangi Bhatia; Attorney Travis Claxton; Mr. Patrick Deak; Deputy Dean Fiona Doherty; Ms. Alejandra Donath; Attorney Tais Ericson; Attorney Sandra Fair; Dean Brian Gallini; Ms. Krista Hess; Ms. Claudia Beth Jalowka; Attorney Song Kim; Ms. Dawn LaValle; Ms. Sandra LugoGines; Attorney Moy Ogilvie; Professor Rachel Reeves; Attorney Rose Ann Rush; Attorney James Shearin; Attorney Jenn Shukla

Absent: Judge Elizabeth Stewart; Attorney Tanya Bovee; Attorney Edward Heath; Attorney Bejamin Nissim

Also in attendance was Attorney Troy Brown, Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Unit; Attorney Angela Schlingheyde, Executive Director of the Connecticut Bar Foundation; Attorney Giovanna Shay, Greater Hartford Legal Aid; Attorney William Pitt, Chief Clerk for Housing Matters; Attorney Rebecca Schmitt, Attorney Damon Goldstein and Ms. Nicole Collins from the Judicial Branch's Court Operations Unit.

The meeting was called to order at 2:01 PM by Justice Bright.

I. Review and Approval of Minutes

A motion was made by Attorney Jamey Bell and seconded by Attorney Jenn Shukla to approve the minutes from the meeting on October 1, 2025. The motion passed with a 23-0 vote with Judge Spader abstaining and five members absent.

II. Presentation of the CT Bar Foundation's Legal Needs Assessment Report

Justice Bright welcomed Attorney Angela Schlingheyde, Executive Director of the Connecticut Bar Foundation. Attorney Schlingheyde was requested by Justice Bright to provide a presentation of the Connecticut Bar Foundation's Legal Needs Assessment and Economic report. Attorney Schlingheyde explained that the purpose of the assessment is to evaluate the current legal needs of low-income populations and to examine the justice system more broadly with respect to access to justice. The report identifies strengths, barriers, and gaps within the system and offers recommendations aimed at addressing access to justice challenges and improving the overall system in Connecticut.

Attorney Schlingheyde began her presentation by providing an overview of the prevalence of legal need among low-income residents. She reported that the Connecticut Bar Foundation conducted a statewide survey and found that approximately 72% of low-income residents have experienced at least one civil legal need. Attorney Schlingheyde reviewed several

graphs illustrating the areas in which these needs most frequently arise, the most common being housing, family, and employment law.

Attorney Schlingheyde pinpointed key strengths within the current system, including that more than 20,700 low-income residents received legal aid services in 2024, a figure that includes services provided to children, individuals with a disability, adults aged 60 years and over, and veterans. Additionally, nearly 187,000 self-represented parties were assisted at the Court Service Centers and Public Information Desks located within the Judicial Branch courthouses. It was also noted that CTLawHelp.org received nearly 678,000 hits during the reporting period.

Attorney Schlingheyde further reported on barriers identified to accessing justice. She noted that Connecticut's legal aid hotlines remain a vital but heavily strained point of entry due to high call volumes. In 2024, 31,000 calls were disconnected and 25,000 calls came in during hours when the hotlines are not staffed. Survey findings also indicated that more than one-third of low-income individuals were not familiar with legal aid, and one-quarter did not believe they were eligible for assistance. Additionally, over 2,000 individuals were denied services because their income exceeded program eligibility thresholds. Attorney Schlingheyde also observed that matters involving housing and children and families account for approximately 80% of the unmet need for legal aid.

The Connecticut Bar Foundation also conducted an economic impact assessment of civil legal aid. It was reported that civil legal aid provides a significant economic return on investment, and that the assessment showed measurable increases in household income over a five-year period. Civil legal aid generated \$10-\$12.4 million in economic activity, and for every \$1 spent on legal aid, there was an almost \$3 return on the investment.

Lastly, Attorney Schlingheyde presented the Connecticut Bar Foundation's recommendations for increasing access to justice. These included strengthening hotline capacity and coordination; advancing salary parity, staff retention and mentorship; increasing resources for service delivery; expanding housing crisis response; addressing geographical gaps through regional innovation; expanding service models, including community justice workers and social workers to address justice gaps; modernizing technology and information management; leveraging technology, including artificial intelligence, and CTLawHelp.org to expand service reach; and supporting systemic reform and policy advocacy while building capacity to address a broader range of civil legal issues, which includes strengthening pro bono engagement.

Justice Bright stated that individuals often do not recognize when an issue is legal in nature and inquired whether this was reflected in any of the survey findings. Attorney Schlingheyde confirmed that the surveys indicated this trend and added that untrained individuals may not understand that certain problems can be addressed through the legal system. The Connecticut Bar Foundation is already conducting extensive outreach to address this gap.

Attorney Jenn Shukla inquired whether there is a tentative proposal for expanding service models, including the use of community justice workers and social workers to address justice gaps. Attorney Schlingheyde stated that these efforts are in the preliminary stages and that the first step is to determine what approaches would be most effective in Connecticut. She

noted that there is a significant opportunity to explore the roles of legal practitioners and community justice workers, including considerations related to licensing. Regarding social workers, Attorney Schlingheyde explained that the goal is to enable legal aid providers to offer more services within their organizations so that individuals in crisis can access support without having to go to multiple sources.

Justice Bright asked the members of the Commission to consider the report in terms of both the identified strengths and the existing gaps, and to reflect on potential solutions to address some of the access to justice gaps.

III. Update on the Proposal to Amend the Discovery Rules in Summary Process Matters

At the Commission's October 1st meeting, members continued their discussion regarding the proposal to amend the discovery rules in summary process matters. Since that meeting, Attorney Giovanna Shay met with Judicial Branch staff and, with the assistance of Judge Thomas, developed compromise language concerning the provision of the lease and ledger, and a revised proposal was distributed to the members of the Commission for their review. The revisions to proposed Practice Book Rule Section 13-12B focus on cases alleging nonpayment in summary process matters where either party raises an issue related to financial obligation. It states that, no later than the first court date, the plaintiff shall provide an appearing defendant-tenant with a copy of the most recent written lease, if any, and a copy of their ledger or other accounting of rent, if one exists.

Attorney Bill Pitt stated that the revised proposal allows discovery when necessary to ensure that parties have adequate information to make informed decisions, while leaving discretion with the judges.

Judge Thomas added that Connecticut General Statutes §47-3a(d) requires the provision of the landlord's rental ledger when requested by the tenant, and the proposed revision connects that obligation to the practical impact it has in the courthouse on the first day of mediation. Judge Thomas noted that it also advances access to justice by promoting more informed mediations, which allow both tenants and landlords to reach agreements that they fully understand.

Judge Berger suggested refining the language to ensure that mandatory disclosure is received by the first court appearance and, if applicable, the method of service by which it is provided. Justice Bright responded that this comment may be more appropriately directed to the Rules Committee rather than the Access to Justice Commission. The plaintiff's bar has not yet provided comments to the Rules Committee on the proposal.

Judge Thomas moved, and Attorney Jenn Shukla seconded, to accept the revisions to proposed Practice Book Rule Section 13-12B, Disclosure of Lease and Ledger, as improving access to justice. The motion passed with a 24-0 vote with five members absent. Justice Bright will report on the Commission's action to the Rules Committee.

IV. Discussion of Subcommittees

a. Pro Bono Subcommittee

On behalf of Judge Stewart, Justice Bright provided a brief report regarding the Pro Bono Subcommittee. Justice Bright stated that the listening tour working group is working on arranging a meeting with in-house counsel in the Hartford area to determine their interests in pro bono work and to explore how the Subcommittee may help generate engagement.

Regarding the implementation efforts related to the website, Justice Bright reported that the second working group will convene to consider how the group should devote its time, including whether to work on the existing website, which is not widely known, or to explore alternative methods for promoting pro bono initiatives. Justice Bright added that Statewide Legal Services has begun discussions with Paladin, an organization that supports pro bono work in several states, about revamping CTProBono.org. If the project goes forward, the link to the CTProBono.org website would direct users to the Paladin platform, which would help connect interested providers with identified areas of need.

b. Self-Represented/Access Issues Subcommittee

No business was brought before the Commission.

c. Law Libraries/Law Schools Subcommittee

In his last update to the Commission, Judge Spader reported the Law Libraries/Law Schools Subcommittee was seeking law student volunteers to help develop a web series for the Judicial Branch website to assist individuals with restraining order applications and navigating the courthouse process. Several law students from Quinnipiac and Yale have expressed interest, and the first meeting with the students is scheduled to be held next week. The hope is that a product can be developed by the end of the Spring semester.

Krista Hess reported that, in collaboration with the law librarians, a tutorial of slides has been developed for use by public librarians to assist self-represented parties by outlining the services and resources available in the courthouses. This tutorial can be accessed in public libraries so that, when individuals come to the courthouse, they have a point of contact and a basic understanding of where to go. It also serves as a resource for the courts to refer individuals with legal questions. A practice run of the presentation was conducted to determine its length, and an updated version will be prepared for the Commission's review.

d. Legal Aid Subcommittee

Judge Thomas reminded the members of the Commission that the Legal Aid Subcommittee has been focusing on four priority areas with eviction diversion being their primary focus. The Subcommittee has partnered with the Self-Represented/Access Issues Subcommittee to explore the possibility of navigators assisting in the eviction process. Efforts have been aligned to connect available eviction prevention resources with the court process.

It was noted that the new Department of Housing Eviction Prevention Fund may be a helpful resource. The Subcommittee plans include meeting with representatives from the Department of Housing regarding the Eviction Prevention Fund and consulting with the National Center for State Courts for assistance on eviction diversion strategies. The Subcommittee is also reviewing default rates and considering whether, within existing rules and statutory requirements, additional notices can be issued regarding defaults through the Judicial Branch's Edison system.

V. Report on the National Access to Justice Meeting

Justice Bright reported that he and Attorney Jenn Shukla attended the National Access to Justice meeting held in October. Attorney Shukla reported that Connecticut has been performing well in terms of access to justice initiatives and also highlighted two key items from the meeting worthy of consideration. First, while some states provide phone reminders for court dates, Connecticut currently offers these only for certain criminal cases and for jurors. The Commission may wish to consider exploring the cost and feasibility of expanding phone reminders to civil cases. Second, although Connecticut has strong policies to protect individuals from debt collection, the Commission may want to review enforcement practices to ensure that these policies are applied effectively. Justice Bright added that a study by the National Center for Access to Justice confirmed that Connecticut has robust procedures to ensure third-party debt collectors provide all required documentation. However, in small claims actions, the study found that small claims magistrates do not enforce all of the obligations, which may indicate a training issue that will need to be addressed.

Justice Bright additionally reported three insights from his discussions at the meeting. The first concerns the eviction diversion program. After consulting with a representative from the National Center for State Courts, he noted that TD Bank provides 40 annual grants of \$250,000 and suggested that the Commission could develop a proposal to apply for funding through the National Center for State Courts. The second involves including non-lawyer individuals on the Commission to provide input on access to justice. Washington has members of community-based organizations on their Access to Justice Commission. Justice Bright has begun reaching out to individuals to identify community members who may be interested in serving on the Commission. The last insight is to explore the engagement of justice workers, non-lawyers, and paraprofessionals to assist individuals in navigating the court system.

VI. Future Access to Justice Conference

Judge Rapillo reported that the tentative date for the Access to Justice Conference is November 4, 2026 from 9:00am to 1:00pm at the Legislative Office Building.

Justice Bright reminded the Subcommittee chairs to notify Judge Rapillo of any technical or space needs.

VII. Such Other Matters as may Come Before the Commission

No other matters were brought before the Commission.

VIII. Next Meeting

Justice Bright reported that the dates for the 2026 meetings are to be determined, with meetings most likely scheduled for late-January, April, June and September.

IX. Motion to Adjourn

Judge Thomas moved, Judge Berger seconded, a motion to adjourn the meeting. The Commission approved the motion by a 25-0 vote with four members absent. Justice Bright adjourned the meeting at 3:05 PM.

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