



Supreme Court of Illinois

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CHIEF JUSTICE KILBRIDE AND THE ILLINOIS SUPREME COURT ANNOUNCE NEW INITIATIVE TO EASE ACCESS TO COURTS

The Illinois Supreme Court announced Wednesday the formation of a commission to remove barriers and increase the ease of interacting with courts by those persons who can't afford lawyers to represent their interests and needs.

It will be known as the Illinois Supreme Court Access to Justice Commission and is made up of 11 persons, seven of whom are appointed by the Supreme Court. The Illinois Bar Foundation, the Chicago Bar Foundation the Lawyers Trust Fund of Illinois and the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation appoint one member each. Those groups are all active in raising and distributing funds to legal aid organizations.

Jeffrey D. Colman, a partner at the Chicago firm of Jenner & Block and long a champion of delivering legal services to those who cannot afford them, has been named chair of the Commission by Chief Justice Thomas L. Kilbride. The Chief Justice presented the proposal to his colleagues on the Court for approval.

“The idea for the Commission was brought to me at the initiative of the Illinois Coalition for Equal Justice to build significant steps throughout the state to improve access to the justice system, particularly for the poor and the vulnerable residents of Illinois,” said Chief Justice Kilbride. “The Coalition for Equal Justice and several other groups have made important strides in ensuring equal access to the justice system, but the Supreme Court believes much more remains to be done.”

The Supreme Court charged the Commission on Access to Justice with promoting, facilitating and enhancing equal access to justice with an emphasis on access to the Illinois civil courts and administrative agencies for all people, particularly the poor and vulnerable.

“The purpose is to make access to justice a high priority for everyone in the legal system,” said Chief Justice Kilbride. “This includes judges, clerks, attorneys, other court personnel and even our law schools.”

The Commission is intended to complement and collaborate with those other entities in Illinois already addressing access to justice issues.

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“The idea behind the Commission and the reason we brought it to the attention of the Chief Justice is to propose innovative projects that will make the civil justice system more user-friendly and accessible for the growing number of people who are coming to the courts without lawyers,” said Joseph A. Dailing, executive director of the Coalition for Equal Justice.

Issues arising from family law – such as divorce, adoption, custody and visitation; consumer and debtor law; housing and issues between landlord and tenant; sticky issues surrounding wills and estates often bring into the legal orbit persons without the resources to hire attorneys and not equipped to face the sometimes daunting processes of the courthouse, Mr. Dailing explained.

Mr. Colman, the chairman, agreed. “The goal of the commission will be to propose measures to improve access to justice and to remove barriers, whether they be language or formalistic, so that people may access the courts in a meaningful way,” Mr. Colman said. “It is intended that the commission will build on the toil of a number of the groups that have been working to improve access to the Illinois courts. These efforts have been productive, but with the formal authority of the Illinois Supreme Court we expect a more coordinated, statewide approach in moving forward.”

To emphasize its importance, the rules creating the Commission and authorizing its membership, duties and administration are compiled in a new Article X of the Supreme Court Rules.

Included among the tasks that the Commission may undertake are:

- Creating standardized forms for simpler civil legal programs and basic procedural functions that courts would be required to accept to ease the difficulty of those representing themselves;
- Addressing the issue of accessibility to the courts in rural areas where travel may be long and public transportation lacking;
- Encouraging means by which individuals can find proper and affordable legal representation;
- Assuring that legal self-help centers where they now exist in Illinois counties remain effective and accessible;
- Expanding social work and social services in the court system for the purposes of addressing access to justice for individuals with special needs;
- Working with law schools in the development and furtherance of court-based programs that enhance equal access to justice.

Similar commissions have been established in 26 other states as well as Washington, D.C., said Mr. Dailing. Its creation in Illinois has been endorsed by the Illinois State Bar Association, the Chicago Bar Association and the Illinois Judges Association.

The initial costs of the Commission are expected to be minimal.

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Mr. Dailing will volunteer his services as staff support, and the Chicago Bar Foundation also will lend a member of its staff on a part-time basis. The Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts will provide in-kind support for supplies, mailings and meeting space as well as other administrative support.

Commission members also serve as volunteers.

Partner with the Chicago firm of Jenner and Block, Mr. Colman has focused his 38 year career on complex civil and criminal litigation at the trial and appellate levels. He has been active in a number of programs designed to increase access to justice, has served as President of the Chicago Bar Foundation, and previously served the Illinois Supreme Court as Chairman of its Committee on Post-Conviction Review of Death Sentences and as a member of the Court's Committee on Pattern Jury Instructions in Criminal Cases.

Other members of the Commission are:

Illinois Appellate Court Justice Mary K. Rochford, First Judicial District, Chicago. Appellate Justice Rochford has been a judge since 1991, first serving as an associate judge in Cook County. She is a member of the Board of Managers for the Chicago Bar Association and a member of the Women's Bar Association of Illinois. Illinois Judges Association and the Illinois State Bar Association;

Chief Judge Michael J. Sullivan, 22nd Judicial Circuit, McHenry County Courthouse, Woodstock. Chief Judge Sullivan has been a judge since 1976, when he joined the 19th Judicial Circuit as an associate judge. He has served as chief judge in the 22nd Circuit since December 2006. He is a member of the Chicago, McHenry County, and Illinois State Bar Associations;

Circuit Judge Daniel J. Pierce, Cook County Circuit Court, Chicago. Judge Pierce serves as supervising judge of the Cook County Law Division. He served on the U.S. Senate Judicial Nominating Committee for the Northern District of Illinois from 1993-1996. Judge Pierce also served on the Supreme Court Committee on Character and Fitness for 12 years;

Circuit Judge Debra B. Walker, Cook County Circuit Court – Domestic Relations Division, Chicago. Judge Walker is a certified public accountant. She is vice-chair of the Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism and president-elect of the Illinois Bar Foundation. Judge Walker was awarded the 2012 Mary Heftel Hooton Award from the Women's Bar Association of Illinois;

Associate Judge Leonard Murray, Cook County Circuit Court, Chicago. He has served as a board member for the "Reach Out and Read" program and for the Omega Associates program for developing low-income housing. Judge Murray is also founder of the Ace Organization, which sends low-income children on trips to Africa. Judge Murray had also served as member of the Special Supreme Court Committee on Pro Bono Publico Legal Service;

Kelly Cheesman, Knox County Circuit Court Clerk, Galesburg. Ms. Cheesman has served in the Clerk's office since 1981 and was first elected as Knox County Circuit Court Clerk in 2000 and was last re-elected to that office in 2008;

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Michael A. Fiello, managing attorney, Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation, Inc., Carbondale. Mr. Fiello manages a seven attorney office serving 23 counties in addition to representing clients in civil cases. He is the co-founder of the Welfare Rights Clinic in Champaign, board member of Food Works since 2009 and its secretary since 2011, as well as serving as board member of the Neighborhood Co-op Grocery Store from 2001 to 2008;

Timothy W. Kelly, founder and partner, Kelly Law Offices, concentrating on litigation, Bloomington. Mr. Kelly is a member of the Illinois State Bar Association, member of the board of managers for the American Trial Lawyers Association, member of the McLean County Inns of Court, and the McLean County and Chicago Bar Associations. He is a fellow with the Illinois Bar Foundation and a former staff attorney with Prairie State Legal Services. Mr. Kelly also served as McLean County assistant public defender.

Jennifer T. Nijman, partner, Nijman Franzetti LLP, with a concentration in environmental law and litigation, Chicago. Ms. Nijman, a former president of the Chicago Bar Association, was partner and chair of the environmental practice group at Winston & Strawn. She was given the CBA's Alta May Hulett Award for highest standards of professional ethics and excellence in 2001. She also received the Lawyers Trust Fund of Illinois award for leadership in the Cause of Equal Access to Justice in 2005.

Michael A. Pope, partner, McDermott Will and Emery, Chicago. Mr. Pope heads the firm's international product liability practice group. For two years, he headed the Lawyers Trust Fund of Illinois, the state's IOLTA funder. Mr. Pope later founded the Coordinated Advice and Referral Program for Legal Services (CARPLS), which provides telephone referral assistance to legal service providers in Cook County. Recently, he formed the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation and served as its first president.

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