



California Access to Justice  
Commission

# ANNUAL REPORT 2023

---



# About Us

The California Access to Justice Commission (CalATJ) has been working to increase access to justice for all Californians for nearly 30 years. We do this by expanding resources, removing barriers, and developing innovations so everyone can effectively and efficiently resolve their civil legal issues. A strength of CalATJ is the diversity of its members and its many partnerships with individuals and organizations interested in increasing access to justice. Members include representatives from all three branches of government as well as judges, lawyers, professors, and business, labor, and civic leaders.



# 2023: Our Year in Review



**Senator Durazo shakes hands with  
Executive Director, Jack Londen**

1

This report summarizes important events and developments during 2023. In 2023, CalATJ became the first of the 40 Access to Justice commissions in the United States to be recognized in a state statute, Government Code Sections 68655 – 68659.

2

The California Legislature also authorized and funded CalATJ to administer a Loan Repayment Assistance Program to counter the crisis in hiring and retaining legal aid lawyers in the state.

3

CalATJ continued to select grantees and distribute \$4.8 million annually for Innovation and Infrastructure Grants to legal aid organizations, not limited to IOLTA recipients.

4

Working with the Council of County Law Librarians, CalATJ initiated “Your Life, Your Plan,” which will provide self-help assistance, with the support of pro bono lawyers, to seniors and individuals with serious health conditions referred by health care providers to County Law Librarians. We are grateful for the California Lawyers Foundation’s support of this work.

# A Message from the Chair, Catherine Blakemore

In 2023, the Commission's work addressed critical access to justice issues by increasing access to legal help through our Innovation and Infrastructure grants, creating a loan repayment assistance program to address the crisis of recruiting and retaining legal aid lawyers, and began the development of new ways of providing legal services in collaboration with county law librarians. Each of these efforts and the positive impact they are making are described below. I hope you will take a moment to read about these achievements and the difference they will make to improve access to justice in California.



**Catherine Blakemore, Chair**

Our work is possible because of the dedicated service of our diverse members and the talents of our staff, Jack London, Executive Director, Koleen Biegacki, Director of Administration and Jasmine Kaddoura, Communications and Program Manager.



# Recognition for the Access Commission in California Law

---

On June 30, 2023, the State of California added Sections 68655 – 68659 to the Government Code. This includes four CalATJ goals:

1. To provide ongoing leadership in efforts to achieve full and equal access to justice for all Californians;
2. To identify and promote improved methods of delivering legal help through coordinated efforts among the three branches of government, the public, attorneys, and others in the public and private sectors;
3. To carry out functions designated for the commission in legislation or the annual Budget Act, including, but not limited to, administering grant programs and programs supporting the recruitment and retention of legal aid attorneys;
4. To encourage increases in the resources available to achieve equal access to justice, including funding for legal help for people who cannot afford to pay and donated time and effort by pro bono lawyers and others.

The California Access Commission is the first among 40 states' ATJ entities to be expressly authorized under state law.

# Loan Repayment Assistance Program for Legal Aid

Fighting to meet growing legal needs, legal aid organizations confront a crisis in recruiting and retaining attorneys. New legal aid job openings now stay unfilled for months. Retaining experienced lawyers is, if anything, a bigger problem. Often lawyers report that the number one concern is money, and the amount of student loan payments is a major factor. Over 84% of entry-level candidates and over 75% of all legal aid lawyers have educational debt, with the median amount being between \$125,000 and \$149,000, with typical interest and principal payments of \$8000 per year.

After CalATJ reported on this crisis in 2022, the State Legislature authorized legal aid organizations to use IOLTA and Equal Access Fund (EAF) money for a tax-advantaged LRAP administered by CalATJ with state funds used to administer a tax-advantaged loan repayment assistance program for attorneys working in legal aid.

Combined with the federal public interest loan forgiveness program, it will allow attorneys who work in legal aid for ten years to have their educational loans completely paid and forgiven.

We are grateful for the efforts of **Senator Maria Elena Durazo** and **Assemblymember Gregg Hart** for their supporting the establishment of the LRAP program.



“Student debt loan is a well-documented burden that prevents many law graduates, particularly those from underserved and low-income communities, from entering the public interest field. This dearth of attorneys entering the field expands the justice gap at a moment in time when the need continues to expand. CalATJ’s LRAP is a game changer that will help more graduates enter the field and help bring service to our communities.”

- Diego Cartagena, Commissioner



# Infrastructure and Innovation Grant Program

For the past three years, CalATJ has administered we are administering a \$4.8 million State-funded grant program providing \$4.8 million in funding to address legal aid organizations' innovation and infrastructure needs. CalATJ received 73 grant applications and successfully funded 48 for grants awarded in 2023. Among these, 26 came from non-IOLTA-funded organizations, with over 45 coming from organizations with budgets under \$5 million. In terms of community impact, 29 grants were dedicated to serving rural communities, 38 to serving immigrants, and 16 involved partnerships with community-based organizations. Infrastructure improvements constituted 69% of the grants, while 31% were allocated for innovative service delivery. [For further details, the reports can be accessed here.](#)

In the latter part of 2023, CalATJ received applications for a third-year grant program totaling \$4,875,000. Out of the 84 received applications, 19 (23%) came from non-IOLTA-funded organizations, while 52 (62%) came from organizations with budgets under \$5 million. The total funding requested by applicants exceeded \$12,600,000, indicating a sustained high demand. Following the review process, the Grants Committee selected 44 applicants for grants commencing on April 1, 2024.



Mobile Pathways used an innovation grant to develop a tool to obtain publicly available Immigration and Naturalization Service information about the status of clients' hearings. They provide this information electronically to immigrants and their attorneys – eliminating hours-long waits on INS telephone information lines.

Mobile Pathways also aggregates the data, on case outcomes, showing, for example, that asylum approval rates for Guatemalan immigrants range from 8% to 70% in California, depending on the INS office involved.

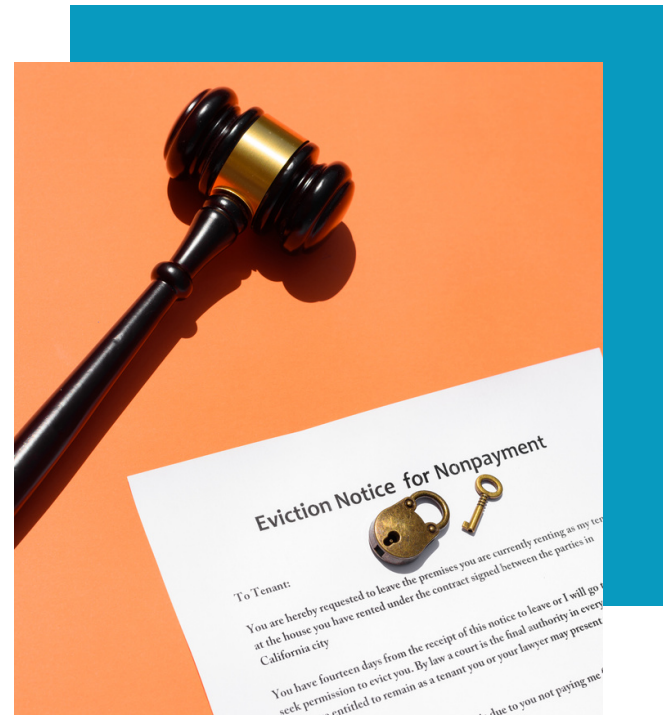
“This recognition by the California Access to Justice Commission is a testament to our vital work that helps all Californians get equal justice in our immigration courts.”

- Jeffrey O'Brien, Executive Director, Mobile Pathways

# Grants for Eviction Assistance in Urban Communities

The California Endowment granted CalATJ \$400,000 to support initiatives aimed at sustaining and improving efforts initiated in response to the legal challenges related to eviction and housing arising from COVID-19 and the conclusion of eviction moratoriums. These grants were awarded to four legal services organizations, each collaborating with community-based organizations in urban areas. Further details can be found in the report. An example of the work includes:

- Centro Legal de la Raza (Centro Legal) launched clinics at the Contra Costa courthouse in Pittsburg. During a time when legal aid organizations have limited capacity for full-scope legal representation, courthouse clinics are a critical stopgap measure for tenants facing eviction. Being on-site allows Centro Legal to reach tenants who may not otherwise have access to legal assistance. Centro Legal helps unrepresented low-income tenants prepare for mandatory settlement conferences to reach resolutions in their interest. It is also able to identify cases for representation in court.



Centro Legal represented “a 70-year-old, longtime Oakland tenant living with disabilities. Centro Legal’s attorney successfully obtained dismissal of an eviction action and then represented his client at an administrative hearing which resulted in the reinstatement of his housing voucher ensuring his housing stability.

# Your Life, Your Plan



“Every day, families struggle with avoidable emergencies and capable individuals’ wishes are not respected because no legal plan was created in advance. Most simply lacked access to the necessary legal support to properly plan for their healthcare needs and protect their loved ones and dependents. Your Life, Your Plan will offer that access, allowing those without the resources to hire an attorney, especially seniors and those with health risks, to get assistance from law librarians and attorneys, create legal documents they need and get their legal questions answered.”

*- Sandra Levin, Commissioner*

## A Pilot Program for County Law Librarians to Assist Seniors and Infirm Patrons and Refer Them to Pro Bono Lawyers

With a grant from the California Lawyers Foundation, we are working with a diverse coalition interested in connecting seniors and individuals with serious health conditions referred by health care providers to county law librarians and pro bono lawyers to complete the following documents (as needed): Advance Healthcare Directive, Psychiatric Advance Directive, Statutory Will, Simple Revocable Trust, and Power of Attorney.

The project leverages County Law Librarians’ experience, knowledge, and availability. CalATJ is creating an online platform so that the Librarians can provide resources for self-help work by patrons who are referred by healthcare provider partners, then connect the patrons with pro bono lawyers for a limited-scope review of the patrons’ work. In addition, patrons will be screened at the outset for urgent circumstances, such as a terminal illness or serious upcoming surgery, to make a referral to a lawyer to provide immediate services.

The pilot version of the project will operate in Los Angeles and Stanislaus Counties.

# Remote Services by Urban Pro Bono Lawyers for Rural Small Business Clients



California's justice gap is most significant in rural parts of the state. In 2023 we completed a working, pilot-scale pro bono project focused on providing legal advice to small business start-ups created by low- and moderate-income people to learn how to use remote communications technology to connect urban lawyers with rural clients. CalATJ partnered with Start Small Think Big (SSTB), a national provider of pro bono legal services to low-income entrepreneurs with a California office in Oakland. SSTB delivers almost all its pro bono services using a digital application and virtual meetings between clients and their pro bono lawyers. This made it feasible to construct a working program on the urban end of the hoped-for pipeline of services.

On the rural end of the pipeline, we learned that effective recruitment and communications depended on having paid staff who live or work in rural areas and can help make and maintain communications. We engaged staff at the Central Valley Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in Stanislaus County to recruit participants, assist them through the application process, and provide translation services. (We are grateful to the California Chamber of Commerce for its help in reaching local chambers, including CVHCC, in rural areas.)

The outcome of this pilot was a report about lessons learned for future efforts. [The report can be found here.](#)



## Access to Justice Services Funded by the State Bar of California

---

CalATJ continued providing services under contract with the State Bar of California to support of its access to justice agenda. In 2023, CalATJ provided deliverables including convening, with the Judicial Council and the State Bar of California, a meeting of legal aid organization leaders in October 2023 to plan and discuss innovative ideas for serving unmet legal needs and hiring and retaining a diverse legal aid work force in California. Dean Erwin Chemerinsky spoke on the implications of the Supreme Court's decision in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, 600 U.S. 181 (2023).



## Issue Brief:

# Civil Right To Counsel In Eviction Cases

The Access Commission, observing the surge in eviction cases following the expiration of COVID-19 moratoriums and the significant proportion where either one or both parties lack legal representation, published a paper emphasizing the necessity of publicly-funded legal aid for litigants. This includes tenants and certain landlords who cannot afford legal representation. [The report can be found here.](#)



# Thank You!

## *Learn more about the Access Commission*

Learn more about our work and sign up for our newsletter at [CalATJ.org](https://CalATJ.org). Learn about our many [Committees](#) and consider joining or [supporting our work here](#).

---

### California Access to Justice Commission



*For any questions, feedback,  
or further inquiries, please don't  
hesitate to reach out to us.*

Phone Number  
**(510) 629-1264**

Website  
**[www.CalATJ.org](https://www.CalATJ.org)**

E-mail  
**[info@CalATJ.org](mailto:info@CalATJ.org)**