

*Montana Supreme Court*

*Access to Justice  
Commission*

## Access to Justice Forum Series 2015-2016

### ADDRESSING MONTANA'S JUSTICE GAP

#### Access to Justice

Access to justice refers to improving and expanding opportunities for low and moderate income people to seek assistance in Montana's courts with legal processes that enforce, restore or protect private and personal rights to ensure that our justice system is truly available to all.

#### Access to Justice Commission

The Montana Supreme Court established the [18-member](#) Access to Justice Commission in a 2012 [Order](#). The Commission's purpose, in part, is to assess the legal needs of low- and moderate-income Montanans and the extent to which those needs are going unmet, and to coordinate efforts to better meet those needs. The Commission [reports biennially](#) to the Court.

#### Montanans Living in Poverty

Almost 150,000 Montanans (about 15 percent) live at or below the poverty level. Tens of thousands more exist barely above the poverty line and many have acute legal needs. Often, the security and services of our legal system are lost to most living in poverty only because they cannot obtain services to protect their legal interests. The problem is compounded when unmet legal needs contribute to the cycle of poverty.

#### The Forum Series

The Access to Justice Forums are a series of regional discussions among community programs and justice leaders about the successes and challenges in securing equal access to the civil legal system for all Montanans and how those issues impact communities in which we live.

Unmet legal needs of Montanans can affect many areas of their lives and so too the programs and services they utilize. A community problem requires a community solution.

A legal needs study conducted in 2010 found half of low-income Montanans had at least one civil legal problem and more than three-fourths were unable to address their problem. [Updated studies and reports](#) commissioned by the Access to Justice Commission and Montana AAA Legal Services, Inc., provide a roadmap to narrowing Montana's justice gap. The Access to Justice Forum Series is intended to further explore solutions and services to fill these gaps.

#### Forum Purpose and Results

The purpose of the forum series is to:

1. Gather information regarding the extent to which civil legal needs of low-income people are being met; identify major challenges in accessing services or in the delivery of justice statewide and within individual communities.
2. Build awareness of the importance of access to justice in the general and legal populations.
3. Promote pro bono legal services, volunteerism, and support of organizations that provide access to justice.
4. Advocate for adequate levels of funding and supportive policies and laws and educate the courts about the needs of the unrepresented.
5. Educate litigants, service organizations and the general population about the limits and challenges of the courts regarding the unrepresented.

The Commission will compile and publish a final report of the Forum Series that will be submitted to the Montana Supreme Court and will be used to inform the Commission's work and recommendations to the Court, the Montana Legislature, governmental entities, and the State Bar.

#### Why Should You Attend?

The Access to Justice Forum Series will

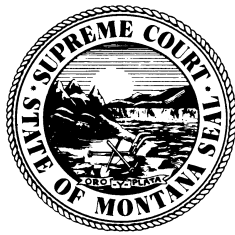
bring together a broad spectrum of community members into a single room for a single purpose: to learn more about access to justice for all Montanans and to advance toward the goal of justice for all. You should attend if you are involved in community programs and organizations or government and legal-related professions and services, or if you work with or know low-income Montanans who face barriers to accessing our legal system. You will learn how access to justice impacts you, your community, and your organization, and you will come away with an understanding of how you can be part of a bigger plan in addressing unmet legal needs.

#### Speakers and Locations

The Forum discussions will take place in seven different locations across Montana beginning in Kalispell in October 2015 and conclude in Helena in Fall 2016. Speakers may include representatives from the private bar; non-profit or other organizations that provide legal or other assistance to low-income Montanans; people or organizations that have been helped by these services; advocates for the disabled, the elderly, or survivors of domestic violence; the judiciary; community leaders; and legislators. Speakers will share successes, challenges, advances in access to justice in recent years, and inequalities that continue to exist.

#### Listening Panel

Speakers will present to a Listening Panel who will ask questions of the speakers and discuss presentations. This format will not only improve the knowledge of the Listening Panel members, but facilitate the exchange of information between the speakers and their organizations and help focus a community and statewide dialogue.



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## Access to Justice Forum Series 2015-2016

### What Organizers and Participants Need to Know

#### Forum Description

The Access to Justice Forum series is an effort of the Montana Supreme Court Access to Justice Commission with the support and assistance of others working within the framework of access to justice efforts. The series of regional public discussions about the need for civil legal services for low and moderate income Montanans will be held in seven different locations across the state beginning in October 2015 in Kalispell and concluding in the Fall of 2016 in Helena.

Each **two-hour** forum will include a “Listening Panel” and “Witnesses”, both of which are by invitation only. Special invitations may be extended to audience members who may assist in raising awareness of access to justice issues or who have specific relations or networks with the ability to advance the series purpose. The Forum is open to the public and at the end of the program there will be approximately 30 minutes for public comment. Each forum will be video-taped or transcribed. The Access to Justice Commission will use the testimony as part of the basis for recommendations to the Supreme Court, the Legislature, and the State Bar of Montana to increase availability of legal assistance in civil matters.

#### Listening Panel

The Commission will issue invitations to 8-12 Listening Panel members who may include, among others, the following:

- Access to Justice program chairs/members
- Supreme Court Justice
- Local members of judiciary
- Montana legislators
- Local Bar leaders/trustees
- Local public officials
- Governor/staff
- Pro bono and access to justice program representatives
- Local community/civic leaders

The Listening Panel seeks testimony

from witnesses providing a variety of services or having specific knowledge regarding unmet legal needs of low and moderate income Montanans. Panel members may make inquiries of witnesses during testimony.

#### Witnesses

Witnesses will provide testimony to the Listening Panel and will be drawn from a wide range of individuals, programs and organizations with compelling evidence and familiarity with access to justice issues. Each witness is limited to five minutes of prepared material with anticipated questions from Panel members. Witness list might include:

- Montana Legal Services representatives
- Pro bono attorneys
- Local judge/court staff
- Programs for disabled and elderly
- Mediation programs
- Domestic violence shelters
- Veterans organizations
- Self-Help programs
- Legislators
- Local area agencies on aging
- Others with access to justice interest

#### Audience

Public participation is encouraged. Particular attendance outreach efforts should be considered for the following:

- Local media
- Lawyers
- Court personnel
- Local and state agencies
- Local non-profits
- Business community
- People seeking services
- Legal service providers
- Local educational institutions—students, staff, board, principals
- State and local bar leaders
- Legislators
- Local law enforcement
- City Council
- County Commissioners
- Tribal leaders

#### Locations, Dates and Contacts

Each Forum in the series is assigned an organizational leader. If you wish to assist with Forum organization in a specific area or have an interest in participating as a witness or panel member, you should contact the designated point person.

##### Kalispell

Wednesday, October 21, 4-6pm  
Flathead Valley Community College  
Arts & Technology Building, Room 139  
777 Grandview Drive  
Contact: Patty Fain, [pfain@mt.gov](mailto:pfain@mt.gov)  
406.794-7824

##### Great Falls

Wednesday, November 18, 4-6pm  
Great Falls College MSU  
Contact: Matt Dale, [madale@mt.gov](mailto:madale@mt.gov)  
406-444-1907

##### Billings

Wednesday, March 16, 2016  
Mansfield Health Education Center  
2900 12th Avenue North  
Contact: Patty Fain, [pfain@mt.gov](mailto:pfain@mt.gov)  
406.794-7824

##### Missoula

Wednesday, April 20, 2016, 4-6pm  
Alexander Blewett III School of Law  
At the University of Montana  
Contact: Lisa Mecklenberg-Jackson  
[LMecklenberg-Jackson@mt.gov](mailto:LMecklenberg-Jackson@mt.gov)

##### Bozeman

Wednesday, May 18, 2016, 4-6pm  
Location: TBA  
Contact: Jennifer Brandon, 582-2165  
[jbrandon@mt.gov](mailto:jbrandon@mt.gov)

##### Butte

Wednesday, September 21, 2016, 4-6pm  
Location: TBA  
Contact: Michele Robinson  
[michele.robinson45@gmail.com](mailto:michele.robinson45@gmail.com)

##### Helena

Wednesday, October 19, 2016, 4-6pm  
Location: TBA  
Contact: Melanie Reynolds, 457-8910  
[mreynolds@lccountymt.gov](mailto:mreynolds@lccountymt.gov)