

Montana Supreme Court Access to Justice Commission
Zoom Video Conference
March 6, 2026 - 10:00 AM - 12:00 PM
Meeting Minutes

Commissioners Present:

Justice Beth Baker, Gretchen Hall, Olivia Riutta, Alison Paul, Lillian Alvernaz, Aimee Grmoljez, Jacob Griffith, Hon. Leslie Halligan, Hon. David Carter, Kekek Stark, and Maggie Weamer

Commissioners Absent:

Hon. Stacie FourStar, Rick Cook, Ed Bartlett, Juli Pierce, Sen. Wendy McKamey, Rep. Alanah Griffith, and Hon. John Kutzman

Others Present:

Katy Lovell, Becky Schupp Watson, Alissa Chambers, Stephanie Marshall, Madiera Zehnder, Megan Dishong, Hon. Katherine Bidegaray, Ann Sheahan, John Mudd, Valerie Falls Down, Ryan Davies, Jami Campbell, Hayden Ramsey, Elise Keenan, Tina Hines, and Sara Wood

Call to Order & Introduction:

Justice Baker called the meeting to order at 10:00 am and asked participants to introduce themselves.

Approval of September 5, 2025, Meeting Minutes:

There were no questions or additions to the December 5, 2025, meeting minutes and they were unanimously approved.

AI Discussion and E-Filing with Ryan Davies (Montana Supreme Court IT):

Ryan Davies discussed the ongoing challenges related to expanding Montana’s e-filing system to self-represented litigants, as well as the potential role of AI and self-help resources in supporting future implementation efforts. He explained that while expanding e-filing to pro se litigants has been a goal for several years, current efforts remain focused on implementing e-filing across Montana courts. About half of the state’s courts currently use e-filing, with many limited jurisdiction courts still not participating. Court participation is optional.

There are several significant barriers to pro se e-filing, including the lack of a unique identifier system for self-represented litigants. Attorneys can access cases through their bar numbers, but pro se litigants do not have a comparable identifier. In addition, Montana’s 192 courts operate on separate databases, creating further logistical and technological issues. Ryan also emphasized staffing and resource limitations. His three-person team currently supports approximately 7,000 attorneys on the e-filing system. Expanding services to individual litigants would substantially increase

demands on the system and staff capacity. He suggested that future implementation efforts may involve a joint task force between the Access to Justice Commission and the Commission on Technology and recommended involving Katy Lovell and the Self-Help Law Center to assist litigants with basic support needs. Contracted services and grant funding to support expanded e-filing access for self-represented litigants could be useful.

Ryan explained that AI is not yet fully reliable for legal applications due to potential inaccuracies, confidentiality concerns, and liability risks. Courts are exploring the possibility of closed AI systems limited to Montana law to assist self-represented litigants with pleadings and navigating court processes. The State Information Technology Services Division (SITSD) recently hired an AI officer to help develop AI policies and procedures. The commission agreed that involving the Judicial Branch Security Officer, Alex Reynolds, and potentially the SITSD AI officer, would be important in evaluating security, confidentiality, and policy concerns related to AI use in the courts.

The group discussed the difference between court-provided AI tools and litigants' independent use of public AI tools. Court-provided tools, such as limited-purpose chatbots, are potentially safer because they can operate within a closed system focused solely on Montana law. Concerns were raised regarding potential state liability if court-provided AI tools provide incorrect guidance, which is a significant factor slowing AI implementation within the courts. Alison Paul shared that MLSA has developed educational resources regarding the risks and limitations of AI tools.

Judge Carter advocated for a more proactive approach to AI development within the courts, noting that self-represented litigants are already using AI tools and that courts risk falling behind if they do not engage more directly with the technology. He suggested beginning with a limited pilot project in a smaller case type, such as with orders of protection, and expanding incrementally based on experience and results. The commission agreed to form an Access to Justice AI working group to further explore these issues. Katy Lovell will coordinate outreach to participants and Justice Baker will contact Alex Reynolds regarding participation, and Justice Shea will be contacted to determine whether the Technology Commission would like to participate.

Katy briefly discussed *JusticeBench*, an online initiative from the Stanford Legal Design Lab, that monitors how states are addressing AI implementation. The link shares overviews of various AI projects and tools being used across the country, highlighting legal applications such as verifying case citations, assisting tenants with maintenance requests, and supporting Social Security applications. Katy noted that while these tools may offer significant benefits, concerns related to liability and insurance coverage could slow adoption by courts and organizations.

For more information about AI, the law school in Missoula is holding their annual Intellectual Property Day (IP Day) event on March 27th. The event is open to the public and will cover all things AI.

Reference Only Items:

Justice Baker shared positive news from an article published by The National Jurist recognizing the law student class of 2025 for contributing more than 5.1 million hours of pro bono legal services nationwide, valued at over \$178 million. The Land Use and Natural Resources Clinic at the Alexander Blewett III School of Law was highlighted in the article as an example of impactful student-led legal service work.

The court has set a public meeting for March 24th to discuss several different topics including the Community Justice Worker Program. The meeting will be held in person and on Zoom.

The Annual ABA National Access to Justice meeting will be held in Indianapolis in October. Registration and more details will be available in July.

Access to Justice Programs Report: Katy provided an overview of recent progress within the Self-Help Law Centers, including the hiring of new staff members and visits to both the centers and court-connected sites throughout the state.

The Self-Represented Litigants Committee has developed a policy governing the approval and posting of court forms to the website. A couple forms have already been drafted, approved, and posted to the state website, while additional final drafts are ready for review.

Katy also reported that five of the six AmeriCorps positions for the upcoming year have been filled. Interviews are scheduled for the remaining position, which is expected to be filled by the end of March.

The Family Transition Project continues to see success with a growing caseload. Plans are in place to refill Emma Schmelzer's position later this calendar year. In the meantime, funds from the vacancy are being used to support mediation services.

Katy has been traveling across the state for Community Justice conversations, with several additional meetings scheduled through the end of the year.

MLSA Update: Alison Paul introduced Hayden Ramsey, the new Community Justice Worker Project Coordinator. Hayden has focused on public benefits work, with much of the role involving community outreach and education regarding available public benefits, particularly following the closure of local OPA offices in 2018. Hayden is

specifically trained in public benefits law and serves as a trained Social Security representative.

Jamie Campbell was also introduced as the AmeriCorps Coordinator. Jamie has worked with MLSA in various roles over several years, including assisting with updates to the Economic Impact Report. She reported that recruitment efforts are currently underway and preparations are being made for mid-year training. MLSA has also submitted its third-year continuation grant application for the Fall 2026-Fall 2027 term and expects to receive a response soon.

Alison reported that MLSA received a grant to support domestic violence services in Billings, which will fund the hiring of an attorney and legal assistant in partnership with the new family violence center in Billings. MLSA also received a grant in Kalispell, in partnership with the Abbie Center, to provide a domestic violence attorney in the area.

Finally, Alison shared that MLSA successfully negotiated terms for a new HUD Fair Housing grant and has begun establishing a new fair housing program for Montana.

Karla Gray Award Information: Nominations are now open for the Karla Gray Award, presented annually by the State Bar to honor a Montana judge from any court who has demonstrated dedication to improving access to Montana courts. Ann Sheahan reviewed the award criteria and reminded members to send their nominations to the Montana Justice Foundation by May 15. The submissions will be considered at the June meeting, and the Commission will send nominations to the State Bar President's Committee for final selection.

Upcoming Meeting Dates and Judicial Meet and Greets:

Justice Baker noted the next four meeting dates listed on the agenda, June 5, 2026, September 11, 2026, and December 4, 2026.

Public Comment: No Public Comment. The meeting was adjourned at 11:25 a.m.