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Montana Supreme Court Access to Justice Commission
June 6, 2025
Zoom Video Conference
10:00 AM - 12:00 PM
Meeting Minutes

Commissioners Present:

Justice Beth Baker, Alanah Griffith, Gretchen Hall, Hon. John Kutzman, Jacob Griffith, Olivia Riutta, Hon. David Carter, Ed Bartlett, Alison Paul, Juli Pierce, Rick Cook, Sen. Wendy McKamey,

Commissioners Absent:

Hon. Stacie FourStar, Hon. Leslie Halligan, Margaret Weamer, Lillian Alvernaz, Kekek Stark, and Aimee Grmoljez

Others Present:

Katy Lovell, Becky Schupp Watson, Franklin Runge, Reese Loveless, John Mudd, Alissa Chambers, Madeira Zehnder, Linden Howard-Murphy, Kimberly Dudik, Megan Dishong, Ann Sheahan, Valerie Falls Down, and Ann Miller (CSKT's Tribal Defender Services)

Call to Order & Introduction:

Justice Baker called the meeting to order at 10:04 am. She welcomed two new commission members: Representative Alanah Griffith and Gretchen Hall. Alanah Griffith will be replacing Senator Laura Smith on the commission. Alanah represents Big Sky, West Yellowstone and Gallatin Gateway. Gretchen Hall is replacing Katy Lovell both on the commission and as the Legal Service Developer with the office of Aging at DPHHS.

Approval of December 2024 and March 2025 Meeting Minutes:

December 2024 and March 2025 minutes. There were no questions or additions. They were moved and seconded. The minutes were approved.

Karla M. Gray Equal Justice Award Nominations:

Ann Sheahan briefly discussed the Karla Gray award process. Two nominees were discussed for the Karla Gray Equal Justice Award, with the Commission voting to forward both candidates to the State Bar's Past President's Committee for consideration. The winners will be announced at the State Bar's annual meeting in Helena in September.

CSKT Tribal Defenders Office - Ann Miller:

Program Director, Ann Miller, described how CSKT's Tribal Defenders Office works to advance access to justice. She described a case study illustrating the office's holistic defense approach, which began in 2011. The case involved a homeless client with

mental health issues and substance use problems who was charged with two drug offenses. Through a collaborative effort involving the bail project, tribal health, and various service providers, the client was able to access treatment, complete an integrated evaluation, and eventually receive mental health services. Despite initial difficulties in accessing care, the client was able to secure an appointment with a primary care provider after her counselor and mental health advocate intervened on her behalf.

Ann Miller described CSKT's public defender services, which include criminal defense, civil assistance, and reentry support for tribal members. She highlighted their successful driver's license restoration program and family defense work, as well as their Flathead Reservation Reentry program, which is currently seeking new funding sources after losing federal support. Ann also detailed their mental health advocacy efforts, including partnerships with Partners for Justice and the University of Montana Clinical Psychology Program, and their operation of the Morning Star permanent supportive housing project in Ronan, which houses 14 individuals with criminal records and substance use issues.

Access to Justice Commission Report:

Katy provided an update on the Family Transition Project, highlighting their communication outreach plan and progress on case mediation. Katy also shared statistics on completed cases. AmeriCorps members have been making sure every judicial district has the correct forms and phone numbers when referring people.

Katy also discussed the Self-Help Law Center's strategic plan, which is pending decisions about the AmeriCorps program's future funding. She expressed hope for continued AmeriCorps funding and noted that Harley, the AmeriCorps lead at MLSA, has been supportive of members. Katy concluded by mentioning new family law forms, upcoming staff training, and ongoing efforts to secure contracts for the Community Justice Worker Grant. Reese Loveless thanked Justice Baker and the entire court for writing a letter of support for the AmeriCorps program.

Alison Paul added that funding for the AmeriCorps program looks like it will remain in place next year thanks to the Governor's Commission on Community Service. They have a formula grant and have agreed to continue funding the program, though some member reductions may be necessary if not fully funded.

Biennial Report:

The Access to Justice Commission is required to report to the court every other year. Plans for the upcoming biennial report will include information from Katy Lovell and Reese Loveless's reports. It will also provide background information about the commission, its strategic plan, its accomplishments and a glossary of terms to help with acronym usage.

Strategic Plan:

The commission was waiting to see what would happen while the legislature was in session, specifically regarding the Family Transition Project funding. The funding was included in House Bill 2, which is pending the Governor's final approval. Regarding the judicial branch, two new judges are set to start in Billings in January.

It was emphasized that the committees need to implement the strategic plan, with a focus on community outreach and coordination with other branches of government. The committees were encouraged to hold at least one meeting over the summer to report back in September on their plans for the coming year.

MLSA Update:

Alison provided updates on Montana Legal Services, noting both positive developments, such as new grant opportunities and HUD funding, and challenges, including potential budget cuts and the recent layoff of five staff members. Despite these challenges, the organization is working to maintain stability and is close to hiring three vacant domestic violence attorney positions.

Alison shared updates about upcoming meetings with Congressional delegation in Washington DC, where she and Madeira will discuss the organization's work with Bruce Spencer's support.

Upcoming Meeting Dates and Public Comment:

Justice Baker noted the next three meeting dates listed on the agenda: September 5, 2025, December 5, 2025, and March 6, 2026.

Final Comments

Franklin reported early discussions with the State Library about creating a package that public libraries throughout Montana could use as programming about access to justice and the court system in general.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:20 a.m.