

**Montana Supreme Court Access to Justice Commission**  
**September 5, 2025**  
**Zoom Video Conference**  
**10:00 AM - 12:00 PM**  
**Meeting Minutes**

**Commissioners Present:**

Justice Beth Baker, Alanah Griffith, Gretchen Hall, Olivia Riutta, Ed Bartlett, Alison Paul, Juli Pierce, Lillian Alvernaz, Magaret Weamer, and Aimee Grmoljez

**Commissioners Absent:**

Hon. Stacie FourStar, Hon. Leslie Halligan, Kekek Stark, Jacob Griffith, Hon. David Carter, Rick Cook, and Hon. John Kutzman

**Others Present:**

Katy Lovell, Becky Schupp Watson, Franklin Runge, Brooke Dolan, Alissa Chambers, Madiera Zehnder, Linden Howard-Murphy, Katherine Bidegaray, Sebastian Driver, Kimberly Dudik, Ann Sheahan, Valerie Falls Down, and Morgan Dake

**Call to Order & Introduction:**

Justice Baker called the meeting to order at 10:05 am and asked participants to introduce themselves.

**Approval of June 6, 2025 Meeting Minutes:**

There were no questions or additions to the June 6, 2025 meeting minutes and they were moved and seconded. The minutes were approved.

**Committee Reports:**

**Communication and Outreach**

Katy Lovell provided an update on communication and outreach efforts, including plans to promote the new family law forms, offer training sessions, and expand outreach to judges and court staff. A letter from Dave McAlpin, along with a link to a recorded training, will be sent to all court personnel to introduce the new forms. The committee is also exploring the possibility of publishing an article in the December/January issue of *The Montana Lawyer*.

MLSA and Emma Schmelzer conducted outreach in Eastern Montana, meeting with judges and receiving strong interest and positive feedback about MLSA's work. Madiera Zehnder staffed a table and presented at the Montana Perinatal Association Annual Conference, making several valuable contacts. Reese Loveless will attend the statewide Clerks of Court training in October, where she plans to highlight the fee waiver form, mediation services, and the Family Transition Project.

**Policy and resources:**

Aimee Grmoljez and Justice Baker discussed strategies for educating legislators and diversifying funding sources, with a focus on improving court forms and processes. They emphasized the importance of facilitating discussions with both legislators and judges, as well as strengthening public outreach efforts with the courts and enhancing communication with other branches of government. The committee hopes to spend time over the next year to research possibilities to diversify funding streams, and to pinpoint specific projects in need of support such as ongoing forms work.

**Self-represented litigants:**

Alissa Chambers and Margaret Weamer provided updates on initiatives to increase access for self-represented litigants, including exploring text reminders and standardizing Zoom usage across Montana courts. The group also discussed updating a small estate guide.

**Self-Represented Litigant Forms Update:**

MLSA currently has a contractor working on updates to several family law forms. Because form development is part of the judiciary's responsibilities, the group discussed the need to fund a permanent position within the Judicial Branch dedicated to form creation and management. Updated forms would undergo a formal review process before being posted on the public access website, and the Judicial Branch should serve as the central repository for all official forms.

Katy Lovell, Justice Baker, and Franklin Runge will continue meeting with Dave McAlpine and Judicial Branch Financial Services Director Cathy Pennie throughout the fall to determine the feasibility of a judiciary position focused on forms management. Justice Baker emphasized the importance of establishing clear processes for reviewing and approving new forms, ensuring consistency, and securing adequate funding

**Judicial Meet and Greets Discussion:**

The Commission discussed launching "Justice Discussions," a series of informal, community-based meetings between legislators and judges to strengthen understanding and communication. Inspired by Senator McKamey, the pilot sessions likely will begin in Great Falls and Helena and will focus on local needs and court system performance. Meetings will feature roundtable discussions with judges, court staff and self-help center representatives - intentionally avoiding a lecture format to encourage open dialogue.

These events will be hosted by the Commission and the Chief Justice, held at local courthouses, and will last one to one and a half hours. They will not be public events; the audience is limited to local legislators and participating judicial branch representatives. Discussions will highlight community-specific information, such as court statistics and staffing levels, to give legislators a clear picture of what is happening in their districts and create space for questions about real community

needs. Cory Swanson will attend all sessions, and Access to Justice Commissioners are encouraged to participate.

The Commission agreed to move forward with the project, with Justice Baker and Brooke Dolan planning to identify local legislative champions to help recruit participation. The goal is to begin the series in fall 2025. The commission noted the importance of a compelling “hook,” a justice-focused name, and having the invitation come directly from the Commission and being potentially pitched by a fellow legislator to increase engagement.

### **Montana Justice Foundation Update:**

Alissa Chambers announced a record-breaking year of grants, distributing over \$1.6 million to 22 nonprofits across Montana, including significant funding for civil legal aid and a new project with Partners for Justice.

### **Justice Improvement Committee (JIC) Report:**

Morgan Dake reported strong progress from the Justice Initiatives Committee, noting that the group has re-energized its membership and expanded its reach statewide, though it continues to seek representation from Eastern Montana. The committee has been actively promoting pro bono service through regular Montana Lawyer columns and presentations to local bar associations, with plans to present at the upcoming State Bar meeting and deepen collaboration with Montana Legal Services. Katy Lovell volunteered to continue as JIC’s liaison to the Commission.

### **Access to Justice Commission Report:**

#### **Biennial Report:**

Katy and Alissa are working on the draft report, which will include several new sections to provide a clear introduction to the Commission’s work for those unfamiliar with it. It will feature a history of the Commission and a glossary explaining key terms and acronyms. An overview of IOLTA and its role in expanding access to justice will be included, along with a description of the Commission’s partnerships, how the organizations collaborate, and the roles each plays within the system. The report will also highlight the legal clinics, emphasizing the Montana Justice Foundation’s support in funding them. Additional accomplishments, such as the creation of the Community Justice Worker position, the growth of the Family Transition Project, and Katy’s new role as Access to Justice Program Coordinator will be noted. Commissioners are encouraged to reach out to Katy or Alissa with other accomplishments that should be noted. A draft will be ready for the December meeting.

#### **Pro Bono and Mediation Updates:**

Katy presented updates on two major projects: the Pro Bono Report and the Family Transition Project. For the Pro Bono Report, she outlined plans to make

it more engaging by incorporating narratives and success stories, as well as compiling a list of attorneys interested in pro bono opportunities. Regarding the Family Transition Project, Katy reported that roughly 116 cases have completed mediation; 21 withdrew before mediation began; 7 withdrew during mediation; and 7 were canceled before any activity started. Of the completed cases, 67 reached full agreement and 17 reached partial agreement, while 71 cases remain ongoing. In total, 187 cases have progressed to the assignment stage. She highlighted the program's significant growth, now supported by 17 mediators, 19 attorneys, and 4 child support consultants, and noted the need to reclassify Emma's position due to expanded responsibilities.

### **AmeriCorps Program Growth and Expansion**

Katy expressed gratitude for the support from the Commission and the Montana Supreme Court, which allowed Montana to maintain the AmeriCorps program, with 6 members at self-help law centers. Katy invited the Commission to participate in weekly training and one-on-one conversations with AmeriCorps members interested in their fields.

### **MLSA Update:**

Alison reported that they were awarded 24 AmeriCorps slots this year, two more than in the past, and have filled 22 of them with partners across the state. MLSA is now fully staffed and has hired a Donor Engagement Specialist, who will begin at the end of October, to help strengthen fundraising efforts.

She noted that while current funding is stable, Legal Services Corporation funding may face a 22-40% reduction, with the House proposing a 45% cut and the Senate proposing a 1% increase. Alison also outlined progress on the Community Justice Worker project, which has two components: the Order of Protection Project is moving forward, with a proposal to the Supreme Court for a rule change expected to be filed next week; however, the consumer and housing component is delayed due to unresolved contract issues with the Department of Administration. The State Bar has approved the overall project, and Alison will present it at an upcoming Bar meeting and to the paralegal section.

### **Upcoming Meeting Dates and Public Comment:**

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

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