

**Access to Justice Commission**  
**Workgroup on Libraries and Access to Justice**  
**January 2014**

The Access to Justice Commission is committed to assessing, developing and supporting projects and programs that expand access for all people. As a Judicial Branch entity with a varied membership representing public and private interests, including the public libraries system, the Commission is in a unique position to further collaborations that will serve the public in ways that benefit all court stakeholders.

Collaboration is one of the Judicial Branch Strategic Plan's five outcome goals, along with increasing access to justice, responding to changing demographics, accountability to all, and improving the delivery of services. With an estimated 7 million in-and-out visits annually to our facilities, the outcome goals are supported by dozens of initiatives designed to help meet those goals.

The Commission was formed in 2011 by Chief Justice Chase T. Rogers as part of the Strategic Plan, to develop ideas that support leveling the justice system's playing field. In October 2012, the Commission, then under the leadership of the Honorable Raymond R. Norko, presented its first Annual Report to Chief Justice Rogers. The Commission had spent the previous year considering the needs of the public, including the increasing numbers of self-represented parties to cases, before making 16 recommendations in the Annual Report.

Specifically, the seventh recommendation says:

- ***Judicial Branch law librarians conduct outreach with public library staff on available Branch resources. The Branch should consider expanding this effort as time and resources allow. Public libraries often serve as the sole resource for Internet access for people without computers or those with limited computer experience and, unlike law libraries, are usually open in the evenings and on weekends. Therefore, a public librarian should be added to the Commission in an effort to facilitate resource sharing and greater access to justice.***

In late 2012, Judge Norko stepped down from the Commission and in February 2013, Judge Elliot N. Solomon and Judge Maria A. Kahn were selected by Chief Justice Rogers to serve as Co-Chairs. A number of changes were made to the Commission membership, including the addition of a public librarian.

Connecticut has a long and proud history of providing access to resources for the public. Indeed, the oldest publicly-funded library in America can be found in Salisbury: The [Scoville Memorial Library](#), which has its roots in a 1771 offer to import books from London, if citizens would pay for the books.

Today, Scoville Memorial Library, though largely funded by private donations, is one of more than 225 public libraries across the state, from Abington to Woodstock. And while the state's larger cities and towns are home to more than one branch, others, like

Salisbury, are served by a single library. According to [a 2012 analysis](#), more than 2,045 people are employed in Connecticut public libraries, and more than 4.9 million books or materials are circulated throughout the library system annually. Additionally, public libraries boast an inventory of more than 4,000 computers available for use by the public.

The Judicial Branch has 12 law libraries spread across 12 Judicial Districts, from Stamford to Litchfield, and Willimantic to New London. There are 17 law librarians and administrators. Additionally, the public is assisted at 13 Court Service Centers and 11 Public Information Desks, by 21 staff members, across the state. Combined, these professionals serve more than 300,000 people annually, by providing legal information; research assistance; information about court rules, procedures and practices; access to research materials, reference guides, and legal materials and resources. Additionally, law libraries and court service centers provide workspace for the public, as well as access to public computers and printers.

As with public libraries, the Judicial Branch takes all comers through its doors and works to provide as much assistance as possible with limited resources. And while the Judicial Branch Law Library Services Unit has, over the years, provided training for public librarians on the legal resources and materials that are available to the public, sustained outreach and training has been stifled by fiscal restraints that have kept staffing numbers low. Under the Strategic Plan, the Branch has increasingly turned towards its external stakeholders to develop creative responses to keeping service levels high, with limited dollars.

The Commission would like to continue its embrace of collaborative efforts to increase access to justice. Therefore, a Workgroup shall be formed to conduct outreach to public librarians and academic librarians with a goal of developing an ongoing program of training, information sharing, and, when possible, resource exchange. The Workgroup shall also work to foster partnerships with legal aid providers and pro bono attorneys, with a possible eye towards utilizing public library space to conduct free legal information and legal assistance programs for the public.

Connecticut's legal aid providers serve only a fraction of those financially eligible for civil legal assistance. Put simply, demand far outstrips the supply of available help. This in turn means that people's legal issues go unresolved, often at great cost to them, such as unreturned rental deposits; special needs children who are underserved by schools and social services; veterans who may be entitled to housing and other assistance, but are unable to navigate the system; and the elderly, who have been scammed and cannot afford legal help to recoup their losses. These are the faces and stories of people who need not only the legal system's assistance, but the community's help.

As the American Library Association noted in its April 2013 report, "[State of the American Library](#)," "*Libraries and library staff continue to respond to the needs of their communities...*" The Access to Justice Commission hopes that public and academic librarians believe that a reciprocal partnership with law librarians and other judicial branch information providers will benefit our larger community.

The Commission has identified a number of readily available tools for the Workgroup to use in developing a plan to create a sustainable, long-term partnership:

- Pro Bono Net's [Libraries and Access to Justice Webinar Series](#)
- [Webjunction.org](#), a public librarian website which has archived extensive materials from a 2010 national conference, *Public Libraries and Access to Justice*. Sponsored by the Self-Represented Litigation Network and the National Center for State Courts, in Cooperation with Legal Services Corporation, with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
- The Maine Justice Action Group's [Lawyers in Libraries program](#), whose motto is, "*Because libraries are at the heart of our communities, and justice is at the heart of our democracy*"
- The American Bar Association's [Resource Center for Access to Justice Initiatives website](#)

Members of the Workgroup on Libraries and Access to Justice should include:

- Judicial Branch Law Librarians
- Court Service Center & Public Information Staff
- Public Librarians from all corners of the state, including representatives of the Connecticut Libraries Association and the Connecticut Library Consortium
- A representative from Southern Connecticut State University, which currently is the only state college to offer a Masters of Library Science Degree
- Representatives from legal aid providers
- Representatives from state bar associations

The Workgroup should strive to meet regularly with a goal of conducting a conference, similar to the 2010 SRLN/NCSC conference, in the summer of 2014 in which all interests are represented, workshops conducted, and collaborations solidified. The Workgroup may establish subcommittees as necessary. All meetings of the Workgroup shall be open to the public, Noticed on the Judicial Branch website, and memorialized in compliance with the state's Freedom of Information Act. A report on the Workgroup's activities shall be submitted to the Commission by the fall of 2014.