



Michigan  
**Justice for All** Commission

# ANNUAL REPORT

2023 - 2024



## **Notice of Disclaimer:**

The Michigan Supreme Court established the Justice for All Commission by Administrative Order 2021-1 to develop recommendations and projects to expand access to and enhance the quality of the civil justice system in Michigan. The opinions and recommendations contained in this document are those of the Justice for All Commission and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the Michigan Supreme Court or State Court Administrative Office or any affiliated organization of a workgroup member.

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## Message from the Chairs

*A message from Chair, Justice Brian K. Zahra and Vice-Chair, Nora Ryan*



**Chair,  
Justice Brian K. Zahra**  
Michigan Supreme Court



**Vice-Chair,  
Nora Ryan**  
Director, Michigan Legal Help

To the People of Michigan:

Many Michiganders find themselves having to navigate the complex civil legal justice system without the assistance of a lawyer. These cases include debt collection, eviction, or family matters like divorce, child custody or support – all of which significantly impact the lives of those involved. The Justice for All Commission is dedicated to advancing reforms that enable easier access to the civil justice system, particularly for those attempting to navigate the system without the assistance of legal counsel.

Many of the Commission’s committees and workgroups, formed to advance the work identified by our 2019 Task Force Report and Inventory, issued reports and recommendations that focus on discrete access to justice issues. These reports and recommendations range in topics from training for court staff and evaluation of the Michigan civil triage ecosystem, to courthouse modifications to improve court user experience, and regulatory and practice reform. Over the past two years, we have continued to focus on the implementation of many of these recommendations. Notably, this included the formation of an Implementation Steering Committee to refine the details of the proposed regulatory reform pilot program to be presented to the Michigan Supreme Court.

This work would not be possible without the dedication and passion from each volunteer workgroup, committee, and Commission member. We want to extend a sincere thank you and deep appreciation for all your hard work. Change takes time, but the Commission is dedicated to continuing to work together to fulfill our mission of 100 percent access to the civil justice system in Michigan.

## 2024 Commissioners

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**James Bacarella**

*Prosecuting Attorneys Association of Michigan*

**Hon. Margaret Zuzich Bakker**

*Michigan Judges Association*

**Jennifer Bentley**

*Michigan State Bar Foundation*

**Hon. Thomas P. Boyd**

*State Court Administrator*

**Peter Cunningham**

*State Bar of Michigan*

**Erin Frisch**

*Michigan Dept. of Health and Human Services*

**Dan Quick**

*State Bar of Michigan*

**Nicole Huddleston**

*Detroit Justice Center*

**Deborah Hughes**

*Self-Help Centers*

**Senator Jeff Irwin**

*Michigan Senate*

**Carol Jackson**

*Tribal Courts*

**Hon. Lisa Martin**

*Michigan District Judges Association*

**Bonsitu Kitaba**

*State Planning Body*

**Ashley Lowe**

*Legal Services Association of Michigan*

**Marissa Kreutzfeld**

*Deputy Legal Counsel for Governor Whitmer*

**Hon. Mabel Mayfield**

*Michigan Probate Judges Association*

**Bianca McQueen**

*Board Member of Lakeshore Legal Aid*

**Nora Ryan (Vice-Chair)**

*Michigan Legal Help*

**Amy Salminen**

*Michigan Libraries*

**Brittany Schultz**

*Ford Motor Company*

**Yusef Shakur**

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**Kristen Staley**

*Michigan Indigent Defense Commission*

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*Michigan State Housing Development Authority*

**Rep. Penelope Tsernoglou**

*Michigan House of Representatives*

**Sandra Vanderhyde**

*Court Administrators/Probate Registers*

**Hon. Cynthia Ward**

*Association of Black Judges*

**Carmen Wargel**

*Lakeshore Legal Aid*

**Michelle Williams**

*Education Community*

**Justice Brian K. Zahra (Chair)**

*Michigan Supreme Court*

**Lynda Zeller**

*Health Care Community*

## Introduction

The concept of access to justice (ATJ), highlights the need for an equitable justice system no matter one's background or status. In recognition of its importance, the American Bar Association's (ABA) [Resource Center on Access to Justice Initiatives](#), which is part of the ABA's [Standing Committee on Legal Aid and Indigent Defense](#) (SCLAID), focuses on supporting the growth and development of state-based Access to Justice Commissions and collection and analyzing data on the various sources of funding for civil legal aid.

The ABA's Resource Center hosts and facilitates a working group comprised of various state ATJ commission staff. These ATJ Commissions are housed and governed by various stakeholders in the system, including the judiciary, the bar, state funders and non-profit organizations. Each month, Commission staff continue to learn and take inspiration from the efforts of our ATJ colleagues across the country.

In May 2019, the Michigan Supreme Court established the Justice for All Task Force to develop a strategic action plan to ensure 100 percent access to civil justice in Michigan. Through the collaborative efforts of the State Bar of Michigan (SBM), the Michigan State Bar Foundation (MSBF), and the State Court Administrative Office (SCAO), the Task Force coalesced into a workgroup of 18 members spanning various backgrounds and stakeholder groups. The funding and framework for the project was made possible through the National Center for State Courts [Justice for All Initiative](#).

The Task Force's hard work culminated into its [Strategic Plan and Inventory Report](#) which examined the strengths and gaps of Michigan's civil justice system and provided pathways to strengthen the system and promote access. The Task Force also set forth a vision of a civil justice system that provides a safe, trusted, and inclusive experience. This vision is succinctly described through five characteristics which have become the bedrock of the Justice for All Commission's work.

With the overwhelming support of all three branches of government, over the last three years, the framework outlined in the Strategic Plan and Inventory has since come to life through the creation and activities of the Justice for All Commission. While the work is not yet complete, this report examines some of the Commission's work over the last three years to move the needle on access to justice.



## The Commission's Strategic Pillars

Along with the identification of aspirational characteristics of Michigan's civil justice system, the Task Force also outlined four goals, named as Strategic Pillars, to guide the substantive work of the Commission. These pillars are the foundation of the Commission's work and help clarify the path for advancing the mission of providing 100 percent access to the civil justice system. Each pillar plays a crucial role in the transformation of Michigan's civil justice system.

### Service Culture



Pillar 1

### Simplify and Streamline



Pillar 2

### Accessible Resources



Pillar 3

### Collaborative Network



Pillar 4

## Pillar 1, Service Culture

*A service culture is pervasive across the Michigan civil justice system: stakeholders are focused on serving and strengthening their communities.*

Courts do not operate in a silo. The justice system is comprised of various stakeholder groups, and each of them play a critical role in ensuring exceptional service is provided to court users. Enhancing all aspects of the court user experience is imperative to identifying and removing barriers that litigants may encounter when interacting with the civil justice system. Strategic Pillar 1 seeks to enhance the user experience through two human-centered principles critical to the justice system: 1) respect and fairness and 2) stakeholder involvement.

### Outcome Measure 1, Respect & Fairness

»» *People across the state feel respected and treated fairly throughout their interactions with the civil justice system, regardless of the outcome of their case.*

The Commission established the Reimagining Courthouses Workgroup, which was comprised of diverse justice system stakeholders to advance this outcome measure, with a focus on the court user experience. The group synthesized their initial findings and recommendations in their report, [Reimagining Our Courthouses](#). Many of these recommendations take aim at the customer experience inside the courthouse. These

recommendations include, but are not limited to:

- providing technical assistance to trial courts to implement the Welcoming Courthouse Guidelines (also created by the Reimagining Courthouses Workgroup);
- reviewing and updating Michigan Court Security Guidelines to enhance the customer experience inside a Michigan trial court;
- creating a Clerical Error Court Record Correction Form to assist court users in requesting a record be corrected;
- multiple recommendations to enhance and improve various aspects of language access in Michigan trial courts.

## **Outcome Measure 2, Stakeholder Involvement**

» *All stakeholders understand the importance of their role and provide exceptional service to system users.*

This outcome measure uplifts the need for the network of stakeholders to understand how their role in serving the same individuals is critical to enhancing the civil justice system. This understanding also provides a foundation for identifying and building the relevant skills and knowledge needed to perform well in these roles.

### ***Court Personnel Training Standards***

One of the integral stakeholders, and ‘face’ of the courts, are the frontline staff who serve the public every day. Ensuring frontline staff have access to the resources and training to fully understand and perform their role in the judiciary well is important to promoting access to justice. The Justice for All Commission’s Training and Outreach Committee put forth [\*Training Standards for Court Personnel\*](#) to ensure consistency knowledge, skills, and service experience across Michigan’s courts. These recommended standards were adopted as the recommendation of the full Commission. These training standards prioritize key skills and knowledge, which include but are not limited to topics such as customer service, the role of the courts, professionalism, and ethics, and how to provide legal information and not advice.



### ***Data Awards and Recognition***

The Commission’s Technology and Data Sharing Committee partnered with the SCAO to develop a co-brand data award and recognition program for trial courts to help emphasize their role in achieving justice for all in Michigan. Accurate and timely data reporting is important behind-the-scenes work that is critical to removing barriers to access to justice. Through the analysis of trial court data, identification of trends can

elicit the need for policy changes and enable data driven decision making. The availability of this data is foundational to the implementation of statewide changes in policies and procedures that could significantly impact citizens throughout the state and help ensure they have meaningful access to the civil justice system. Additional details on the awards program are expected to be announced in 2025.

## Pillar 2, Simplify & Streamline

*Simplify and streamline processes, rules, and laws: the civil justice system is easy to navigate, understand, and use to address all legal problems.*

Tackling this goal may be a daunting task, but its importance cannot be emphasized enough. Many civil justice system court users navigate the system without the assistance of a lawyer and the complexities of the civil justice system can be overwhelming. The Task Force identified two key outcome measures to advance Strategic Pillar 2: 1) simplify the complexities of the civil legal system and 2) reduce barriers so individuals can effectively address their legal problem on their own.

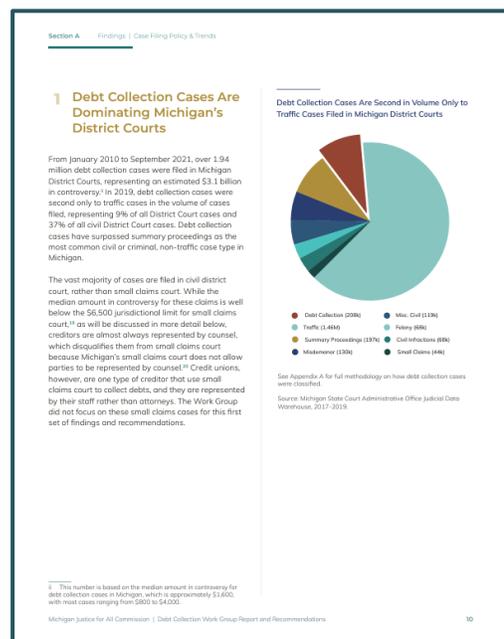
### Outcome Measure 1, Simplify and Streamline

»» *Simplify procedures so that all users—even first-time users—understand processes and their underlying purposes.*

The Commission initially identified two types of proceedings to assess for simplification: consumer debt (debt collection) and summary proceedings (landlord-tenant). These proceedings constitute a significant portion of the civil case filings in the Michigan's district courts. For context, in 2019, debt collection cases accounted for approximately 37 percent of the civil caseload.

### Consumer Debt Proceedings (Debt Collection) Simplification Efforts

The Commission's Debt Collection Workgroup consisted of a dynamic and diverse group of stakeholders working diligently and collaboratively to examine the innerworkings of consumer debt cases and develop recommended reforms. The workgroup's final report, [Advancing Justice for All in Debt Collection Lawsuits](#), was adopted by the Commission in November 2022. Many of the recommendations in the report call for the reform and simplification of court rules or statutes to remove barriers many litigants face. These



recommendations include, but are not limited to, modernization of the service of process rules, strengthening complaint requirements, and revising court forms so that they are more easily understood by court users. Efforts to advance some of the recommendations outlined in the report are underway.

### **Summary Proceedings (Landlord-Tenant) Simplification Efforts**

The Summary Proceedings Workgroup brought together a collaborative and diverse set of stakeholders to address the complexities of landlord-tenant cases. The group began with process mapping a summary proceedings case to help identify possible areas for reform. The workgroup also partnered with The Pew Charitable Trusts to examine and analyze case data to provide data-informed and researched-backed recommendations to various stakeholders in the landlord-tenant space, with the goal of improving the summary proceedings process for all litigants. The workgroup's final report, [\*Improving Evictions in Michigan\*](#), was presented to the Commission in June 2024. The recommendations address three themes: 1) improving case management for landlord-tenant cases, 2) strengthening community partnerships, and 3) improving court data and access to records.

## **Outcome Measure 2, Ability to Address Legal Problems**

»» *When appropriate, people can address their legal problems on their own.*

### **Plain Language Forms Project**

As litigants increasingly find themselves navigating a complex legal system without the assistance of a lawyer, they often need to prepare forms required by the court. These forms can be difficult to understand, prepare, and successfully file with the court. Many court actions require filing of these forms, and improper preparation can impact one's access to the justice system. Individuals without legal assistance who engage with the court system should feel confident and empowered to complete court forms and engage with the system.

The Commission has identified the review and revision of the Michigan SCAO court forms as a high priority, with a particular focus on plain language and design elements. With the assistance of the National Center for State Courts and Transcend Translations LLC, the Commission has begun a multi-year project to transform the SCAO-approved forms.

A key component to the forms project includes gathering the experience and opinions of individuals using the forms. User testing is a critical component to the design process to ensure that the forms are user centered. This will help create forms that are accessible and understandable by those who use them most. In addition, the forms project is emphasizing training staff on plain language principles and techniques.

In 2024, the JFA Forms Committee prepared a [\*report and set of recommendations\*](#) to modify and update the internal SCAO forms process. Developed in a collaborative effort between the SCAO Team staff, stakeholders, and with assistance from the NCSC, the Committee's recommendations focused on how the SCAO forms development

process could be more efficient, effective, and enhance the accessibility and understandability of the forms.

## Pillar 3, Accessible Resources

*People can get what they need when they need it to resolve their problems: a spectrum of easy-to-access affordable legal resources to match individual needs is available to everyone.*

A critical piece of the puzzle when it comes to increasing access to justice is ensuring that those who encounter legal problems have multiple avenues to accessing legal assistance. Four outcome measures were identified to provide pathways to enhancing Michigan residents' ability to access legal resources. The roadmap includes improving how users get referred to services, enhancing the continuum of services, exploring the use of allied professionals to assist in providing legal advice, and the expansion of self-help centers.

### Outcome Measure 1, Triage & Referral

»» *A robust statewide triage and referral system connects people to the right resources for their problems.*

To ensure that individuals can navigate the legal system, a robust and effective triage and referral ecosystem is essential. In Michigan, the triage and referral ecosystem consist of those organizations that engage with individuals seeking legal information, assistance, or representation. Organizations like Michigan Legal Help (MLH), legal self-help centers, Counsel and Advocacy Law Line (CALL), legal aid services, and others are crucial to helping people understand their legal needs and how to proceed, as well as getting them connected to service providers.

The Commission established a Triage and Referral Workgroup, who partnered with national consultant, Stout Risius Ross LCC (Stout), to map the triage and referral ecosystem and make recommendations for enhancing the system. The Workgroup's final report, [\*Independent Evaluation of Michigan's Intake and Referral Ecosystem for Civil Legal Needs\*](#), outlines actionable steps to bolster the triage and referral system. The Commission and its partners are actively working on putting the report into action, including the development of a framework for the ongoing evaluation of the needs and performance of the triage and referral ecosystem.

### Outcome Measure 2, Continuum of Services

»» *People can access the level of assistance needed to resolve their legal problems through an expanded continuum of services.*

Not all legal problems require the full representation of an attorney, and sometimes litigants would prefer and are able to solve their legal issue on their own. This reality highlights the need for a continuum of legal services that is available to the public.

### **Social Return on Legal Aid Investment Study**

To assess the value and the importance of legal aid services more deeply, the Commission’s Resource Committee partnered with Community Services Analysis LLC (CSACO) to conduct a social return on investment study. The report, [Michigan’s Legal Aid Organizations Social Economic Impact and Social Return on Funding Investment](#), indicated an astonishing 669 percent social return on investment of legal aid funding in Michigan. This means that for every \$1 invested in civil legal aid services, Michigan received a \$6.69 return. This study helps illuminate the positive impact that investing in legal aid services can have on the community. The Commission plans update this study in 2025.

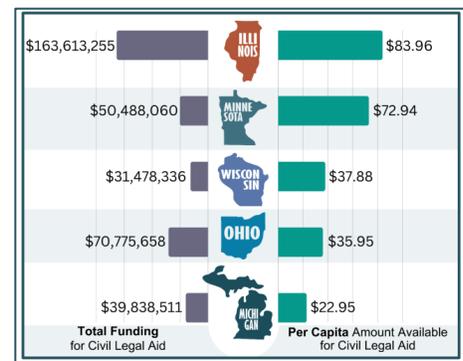
**669%**  
Social Return on Investment



### **Legal Aid Funding in Michigan**

One of the specific priorities identified for the Commission to focus on is increasing funding for civil legal aid. The Resource Committee tackled this issue head on and produced a set of recommendations, which was adopted by the Commission in December 2023. The report, [Civil Legal Aid Funding in Michigan](#), emphasizes the important role legal aid offices play to increase access to justice. The report compares Michigan’s civil legal aid funding to other Great Lakes states, which revealed that Michigan’s per capita funding for legal aid is significantly lower than surrounding states (right). The report sets forth recommendations to address this disparity and increase funding for civil legal aid.

Midwestern State Comparison  
Per Capita Funding for Legal Aid (2020)



### **Outcome Measure 3, Allied Professionals**

»» *Some services related to addressing legal problems are delivered by allied professionals at affordable prices.*

A significant barrier to access to justice for many individuals is the ability to obtain legal representation. Many individuals are financially unable to hire an attorney, and those who qualify for legal aid services are often met with the lack of availability of services. The Task Force identified the study and identification of new and innovative business models and service as a critical component to expanding the available continuum of legal services. The Commission formed the Regulatory and Practice Reform Committee to address this challenge. The Committee focused its initial efforts

on proposing reforms to enable the use of non-attorney allied professionals to deliver limited legal services and help close the justice gap. The Committee's final report, [Report and Recommendations on Increased Access to Justice Through Paralegal and Associated Professionals Pilots Program](#), outlines two potential pilot program proposals to test regulatory reform in Michigan.

An Implementation Steering Committee has been established to begin refining the details of a proposed pilot program. The Committee is working towards a target completion and proposal date of February 2026.

### **Outcome Measure 4, Legal Self-Help Centers**

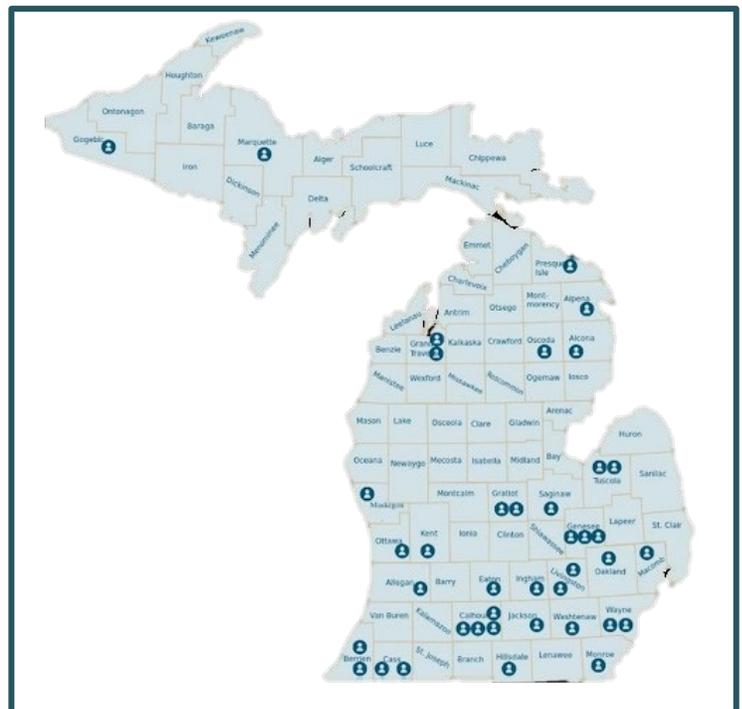
»» *Legal self-help services exist in every county and are available in many courthouses where people can access legal self-help materials and, in most cases, in-person assistance.*

Not all litigants who have a legal problem need, want, or are able to obtain the assistance of a lawyer. These individuals navigating the system should be equipped with the tools to help themselves. The Task Force emphasized the importance of expanding legal self-help services across Michigan to ensure people have access to valuable self-representation resources to help close the civil justice gap.

#### ***Legal Self-Help Center Guidelines and Alliance***

Legal self-help centers are a critical part of the network of the civil justice system stakeholders and play a vital role in the continuum of services to meet legal needs. Unlike other states, legal self-help centers in Michigan are not centrally operated by the court system. Instead, centers are independently operated by trial courts, local libraries, and other community organizations who often partner with MLH for training and resources. The Commission established a Self-Help Center Workgroup, which was tasked with creating a set of guidelines to promote a consistent experience among legal self-help centers users around the state. With a focus on effective and compassionate delivery of service, the aim is to standardize program services and operations for legal self-help centers.

In addition to the creation of the guidelines, a newly formed [Self-Help Center Alliance](#), hosted by MLH, was established. This Alliance will serve as a supportive professional network for legal self-help centers in Michigan. With the support of the Commission, the



Alliance held its second annual convening October 2024. In 2024, the Alliance also welcomed its first set of advisory board members who will help the Alliance provide guidance, support, and advocacy for self-help services in Michigan.

### **Legal Self-Help Center Grant Program**

With support from the Michigan legislative and executive branches, the SCAO established a legal self-help center grant program to expand legal self-help center services throughout Michigan. Since launching the program in 2023, nearly \$1.5 million has been awarded to grantees and invested in self-help services across Michigan. In addition to supporting the services of established self-help centers, the grant program has aided the opening of 12 new centers.

### **Remote Virtual Navigators**

Through a partnership with MLH, the Commission supported the expansion of self-help center services through the funding of the Remote Virtual Navigator pilot program. The pilot program provides virtual one-on-one self-help navigator services at computer kiosks in existing unstaffed self-help centers. Additionally, the program has provided aid to support and facilitate the growth of previously unstaffed self-help centers, which successfully transitioned to staffed centers to meet community demand.

## **Pillar 4, Collaborative Network**

*An inclusive collaborative network of diverse partners works together to solve problems: the civil justice system effectively works with and integrates local resources and community partners.*

When faced with a challenge, individuals may not understand they have a legal issue that needs to be addressed. Individuals will often rely on trusted community organizations to seek assistance with the challenges they face. These community-based organizations are the foundation to a collaborative network that, if interconnected and working toward the same goal, can meaningfully advance access to justice in Michigan. This community network can help shift from a reactionary approach to addressing legal issues to one that uses early interventions to empower and educate those who interact with the system.

### **Outcome Measure 1, Early Intervention**

»» *People can lessen the severity of their legal problems through education and early intervention as a result of traditional civil legal system stakeholders' engagement with community partners.*

### **Community Justice Partner Program**

Expanding the network of legal self-help assistance is critical for individuals to access early interventions and receive information regarding their legal problems. In addition to expanding legal self-help centers, the Commission is currently working with MLH to design a pilot program to engage and train volunteer community organizations to help

individuals identify legal programs and access community resources. With the programmatic help from Legal Link, the Community Justice Partner program is expected to launch in 2025 and serve as a legal first-aid program.

### **Outcome Measure 2, Work Collectively**

»» *All partners in the civil justice system work collectively to improve access to justice for everyone in Michigan.*

Collaboration is one of the five key characteristics of the civil justice system envisioned by the Justice for All Task Force. Closing the civil justice gap is a challenge that is complex and requires a sustained effort. The inclusion and active participation of a diverse collection of civil justice system stakeholders is critical to the work of the Commission. Each member of the Commission and its varied workgroups brings a unique and invaluable experience that help inform each recommendation. Members, both past and present, also have been ambassadors for the Commission and its effort to advance access to justice in Michigan.

#### ***Legal Aid and Court Data Sharing Project***

One of the collaborative projects that the Commission is actively pursuing is a data sharing project to connect legal aid provider and court data to examine the relationship between the various levels of legal assistance from legal aid (brief advice vs. full representation) and case outcomes for landlord-tenant case types. Expected in early 2025, the results from this cutting-edge project have the potential provide significant insights for the civil legal community and is an example that highlights the dedication of the Commission's stakeholders to work collaboratively.

#### ***Partnering with Michigan Legal Help***

Created by the Michigan Supreme Court, the Commission is a collective effort between the SCAO, the MSBF, and the SBM. Another critical partner in this work is MLH. MLH has been a key partner in expanding access to legal self-help centers, through providing statewide coordination, technical assistance, remote legal navigator services, and advancing the new Self-Help Center Alliance. MLH has also been critical to the Commission's plain language forms project by facilitating community user testing. Court user perspective and experience is a critical part of ensuring those who will use the forms have full and meaningful access to the system by the form.

## **Conclusion**

2023 and 2024 were productive years for the Commission. Many projects concluded through final reports and recommendations, while other projects continued, and new ones began. Through the hard work and dedication of each Commissioner, as well as the committee and workgroup members, the Commission continues to make steady progress. Each person was willing to tackle difficult questions, collaborate with fellow stakeholders, and provide holistic solutions to spearhead the problems presented. The Justice for All Commission is committed to making an impact and ensuring Michigan's judicial system in which all individuals have access to justice.